Introduction: Institutional Computer-Mediated Troubles Talk

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At the outset of the twenty-first century, troubled selves wander about a contemporary landscape full of actual and virtual institutional sites that entice them to pay a visit in order to make sense of their experience. These sites comprise various therapeutic and counseling settings such as long-term and short-term therapy, hotlines, support groups, as well as the more public radio problem discussions and cyberspace forums.

(Kupferberg & Green, 2005, p. 3)

This special issue of Language@Internet presents a collection of studies focusing on computer-mediated (CM) troubles talk. Troubles talk1 is an institutional discourse genre2 used by interlocutors to present problems and discuss possible solutions with professionals and/or lay others in face-to-face, telephone, and/or computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Buttny, 2004; Buttny & Jensen, 1995; Drew & Heritage, 1992; Edwards, 2007; Edwards & Stokoe, 2007; Gilat, in press; Gilat & Kupferberg, 2010; Gilat & Tobin, 2009; Kupferberg, 2009; Kupferberg & Green, 1998, 2005). Troubles talk is produced in different institutional settings such as law, medicine, therapy, education, and the media (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Gunnarsson, Linell, & Nordberg, 1997; Heritage & Clayman, 2010; Sarangi & Roberts, 1999).

The above profession- and modality-crossing definition of troubles talk is grounded in historical roots. It has been claimed that troubles talk was initiated in Freud's psychoanalysis (Gilat, in press). In an interview conducted in 1982, Michel Foucault, who was interested in exploring discursive practices such as Freud’s psychotherapy, remarked that Freud’s psychotherapy dates from 17th-century confessional practices of the Catholic church. In his later studies on the shaping of the self, Foucault suggests that these technologies of the self in fact have an earlier origin in the routines of monastic life of the Christian Roman Empire of the fourth and fifth centuries (Hutton 1988, p. 121). Kupferberg and Green (2005) note that troubles talk also originated in conversations between laypersons and religious leaders such as rabbis, who would provide answers to questions addressed to them (Levitas, 1989).

Freud was the first psychoanalyst who used the mail service in order to overcome distance limitations that separated him from some of his patients (Gilat, in press). Starting in the 1950s, telephone hotlines operated by trained volunteers offered a new type of mental-aid service. Two characteristics of these hotlines encouraged individuals to seek help in telephone services. First, the client's anonymity in such interactions engendered an emotionally safe environment and promoted openness and self-disclosure. In addition, the ready availability of help was consistent with the need of individuals in crisis for an immediate supportive response (Gilat, in press). Starting in the 1980s, psychotherapists began offering their services on the Internet, via advice forums such as "Dear Uncle Ezra," a free service provided by Cornell University for its students (Gilat, in press). Online self-help groups also flourished from the early days of the internet, including for mental health issues (ABCs of “Internet Therapy”, n.d.).
The articles in the special issue focus on internet troubles communication. In the first section of this introduction, I define pertinent concepts and examine theoretical and methodological issues. In the second section, I summarize the contribution of the collection of articles in this special issue.

**Face-to-Face, Telephone, and Internet Institutional Troubles Talk**

The definition of troubles talk presented above emphasizes the institutional nature of the genre. Institutional discourse is defined as communicative conduct in more specialized social institutions that embodies task- or role-oriented specializations that generally involve a narrowing of the range of conduct (emphasis I.K.) that is generically found in ordinary conversation. The latter thus embodies a diversity and range of combinations of interactional practices that is unmatched elsewhere in the social world. Communicative conduct in institutional environments, by contrast, involves socially imposed and often uncomfortable departures from that range. (Heritage & Clayman, 2010, pp. 12-13, citing Atkinson, 1982)

The narrowing of verbal conduct in institutional troubles talk is brought about by participants' engagement in the very specific discursive tasks of presenting problems and negotiating possible solutions. Importantly, the efficient completion of these institutional tasks requires that coherence be established between the lay individual's discursive contribution and the ensuing negotiation of solutions (Kupferberg & Green, 2005).

Bublitz (1999) defines coherence as a dynamic context-dependent interactional discursive process that occurs when interlocutors attempt to construct meaning together:

Coherence is not a state but a process, helped along by a host of interacting factors situated on all levels of communication (from prosodic variation to textual organization, from topic progression to knowledge alignment). As a process, coherence is not taken for granted but, depending on situation, genre or text type, rather viewed as being more or less tentative and temporary, continually in need of being checked against new information which may make adaption and updating necessary ... It is also a cooperative achievement because it depends on both the speaker's (or writer's) and the hearer's (or reader's) willingness to negotiate coherence. (pp. 2–3)

Herring's (2010b, n.p.) definition of conversation explicitly foregrounds the centrality of coherence in talk: “Conversation is any exchange of messages between two or more participants, where the messages that follow bear at least minimal relevance (emphasis I.K.) to those that preceded or are otherwise intended as responses.” Herring (2013, p. 248) further emphasizes that “conversational relevance is a type of coherence across turns of talk.”

To explore institutional troubles talk and focus on the successful achievement of coherence or the lack thereof, researchers can examine naturally-occurring (Speer, 2007) discourse in which participants’ verbal behavior is encoded in their turn-taking design, turn completion, and lexical and syntactic repetition (Coates, 1995). *Institutional Conversation Analysis* (ICA) (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Drew and Sorjonen 1997; Heritage 1997; Heritage & Clayman, 2010) is one data-oriented approach that affords such a focus. ICA originated in traditional conversation.
analysis (CA) (Sacks, 1992), whose roots are anchored in phenomenology and ethnomethodology (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

Drew and Heritage (1992) describe two salient features of institutional discourse. First, the turn-by-turn design of institutional talk is goal- and task-oriented (e.g., troubled selves aim at solving their problems, and professionals attempt to provide help). Another feature attributed to institutional discourse is asymmetry—for example, asymmetry is established when the representatives of the institution set the boundaries of the interaction, as in trials and doctor-patient encounters. However, asymmetry does not necessarily mean that that the representatives of the institution control the lay participants' discursive agenda, as critical discourse analysis (CDA) often claims (Thornborrow, 2002).

Methodologically, ICA emphasizes the need to conduct a turn-by-turn investigation in order to find out what characterizes the actual institutional process that takes place in a specific institutional context (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage & Clayman, 2010), rather than making a-priori assumptions regarding the possible characteristics of the process. Such investigation enables the researcher to “get into the black box of social institutions” (Drew & Heritage 1992, p. 5), instead of using traditional sociological means such as questionnaires, structured interviews, ethnographic observation, participants’ commentaries, and self reports “that often lock aspects of the interaction” (Maynard & Heritage, 2005, p. 428) into a set of categories.

An early definition of ICA emphasizes the priority of speech in face-to-face and telephone interactions

within a designated physical setting, for example a hospital, courtroom, or educational establishment, but [the institutional interactions] are by no means restricted to such settings ... Rather, interaction is institutional insofar as participants’ institutional or professional identities are somehow made relevant to the work activities in which they are engaged. (Drew & Heritage 1992, pp. 3-4)

A later definition of ICA generalizes across different institutions and organizations by emphasizing that the approach enables institutional discourse analysts to identify “the unique fingerprint” (Heritage & Clayman, 2010, p. 18) of institutional practices that is manifested in naturally-occurring sequence organization in face-to-face and telephone interaction in institutional processes in various professions such as law, medicine, the media, and psychotherapy (Heritage & Clayman, 2010). It is noteworthy that this definition does not relate to CMC. However, as Kupferberg (2012) argues in her review of Heritage and Clayman’s state of the art book,

[in terms of emerging research, the book’s insights—gleaned from the study of telephone and face-to-face interactions—should now be further examined across modalities. Current research stresses the importance of exploring computer mediated communication (CMC) (Herring 2010b) and self construction (Kupferberg, 2008) in institutions (Cho 2010). These studies suggest that institutional CMC may have idiosyncratic dimensions when compared with face-to-face and telephone interactions that require identification, description and explanation. (p. 245)
Data-oriented ICA has been applied by researchers interested in troubles talk in medicine and psychology. ICA's micro-analytic lens is particularly suitable for research that emphasizes the centrality of the patient's voice in medical research. Inspired by Mishler (1984), Heritage and Maynard (2007) and Heritage and Clayman (2010) analyze medical discourse where

the doctor's medical agenda focuses on biomedical evaluation and treatment, and the patient's lifeworld agenda concentrates on personal fears, anxieties, and other everyday lifeworld circumstances. Implementing the medical agenda, physicians recurrently suppress the patient's concerns, even though they can be important resources for understanding medical problems (Heritage & Maynard, 2007, p. 5).

Psychologists and discursive psychologists have also used ICA to explore troubles talk (Hepburn & Wiggins, 2007; Peräkylä, Antaki, Vehviläinen, & Leudar, 2008) in order to illuminate ongoing processes in face-to-face therapist-client interactions. Such studies show, for example, how coherence can be established and client's resistance overcome.

Kupferberg and her colleagues (Kupferberg, 2008, 2010; Kupferberg & Green, 2005) emphasize that the boundaries of institutional troubles talk research lie between two poles. The first pole comprises theory-oriented approaches, including Foucault-inspired critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Holshtain & Gubrium, 2000). Researchers exploring troubles talk via a theory-oriented lens come equipped with a-priori theoretical assumptions about the institutional context that they investigate (e.g., CDA assumes that there are relations of power and status that are arbitrary and do not result from universal necessities; Thornborrow 2002, citing Foucault 1977). The second pole comprises the micro-analytic ICA approach presented earlier.

Following Miller (1997), Holstein and Gubrium (2000), and Bamberg (1997, 2004), Kupferberg and Green (Kupferberg, 2008, 2010; Kupferberg & Green, 1998, 2005) developed a positioning analysis for troubles discourse in face-to-face and telephone communication. Discursive positioning (DP) is a social activity that constitutes “a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role” (Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 14). DP is defined as an “event of identification” (Wortham, 2004, p. 166) in which a recognizable dimension of one’s self gets explicitly or implicitly applied to an individual by other interlocutors or the researchers focusing on the interaction. This analysis integrates theory and data-oriented approaches, and it has been adapted to CMC (Kupferberg, 2008).

This positioning analysis is based on the tenet that narrative time is “a back-and-forth movement between the past and the present that furthermore relates to the future, even if it might not always be present” (Brockmeier, 2000, p. 54). Narrative time enables troubled humans to overcome the limitations of chronological time by focusing their talk on the complexities of the troubled past and the possibilities of a better future in the present ongoing conversation (Kupferberg, 2010). In this approach, the researcher should micro-analyze the levels (i.e., present, past, and future) separately in order to extract meaning from each of them, and then construct an interpretive interface at a fourth level, the researchers' level, where the participants' levels are examined, interpreted, and related to theory and practice.

Two features characterize this positioning analysis (Kupferberg, 2010). First, the analysis emphasizes the centrality of the present moment as the workshop in which humans interactionally attempt to reach global coherence, or agreement on the meaning of their past and
future. In addition, the analysis foregrounds the importance of self-displaying, *positioning language resources*—the main building blocks of the discourse levels. For example, pronouns indicate how interlocutors position or locate themselves discursively in relation to others as individuals (*I*) or groups (*we*) (Malone, 1997). Repetition shows that interlocutors wish to emphasize certain points (Buttny & Jensen, 1995).

Specifically, following Bruner's (1997) claim that trouble is "the engine of narrative" and Georgakopoulou's (2007, p. 15) assertion that narrative discourse is "a privileged mode for self-construction," Kupferberg and her colleagues (Kupferberg & Gilat, 2012; Kupferberg & Green, 1998, 2005, 2008; Kupferberg, Green, & Gilat, 2002) show that troubles talk is particularly rich in *personal stories and metaphors* which enhance the efficient presentation of the individual's problems and the ensuing coherent negotiation of solutions with others. The following example (Kupferberg & Green, 2005, pp. 52-53) illustrates how a troubled caller addresses a psychologist in an Israeli radio program titled "The two of us together and each of us alone" by packaging her troubled past experience as a detailed personal story and an organizing metaphor (indicated by italics):

H: “The two of us together and each of us alone.” (addressing the next caller). Good evening. Go ahead, please.

C: This feeling has accompanied me in many situations, but I would like to talk about a specific case. About three years ago, my brother was killed in an accident ((pause)). Now, he was missing for three weeks and ((pause)). They discovered the body, and ((pause)) there was some sort of investigation ((pause)). But that’s not the important part. He was my younger brother, and ((pause)) it happened when I was 30 years old and he was 28, and when we were children we were friends. That is we were very close to each other. *That is, I was, I was really like a mother to him.*

In this example, the caller unfolds her problem via a personal story and several positioning language resources, including a story-internal organizing metaphor that summarizes the essence of the problem (*I was really like a mother to him*). Kupferberg and Green (2005) write that

> [His figurative version of the caller's self summarizes inter- and intrapersonal dimensions and constitutes a succinct version of the caller's feelings, thoughts and behavior in relation to her brother in the narrated past world. The narrative and figurative patterns may have attracted the attention of the psychologist participating in the program, provided him with shared knowledge concerning the caller's problem and facilitated the choice of intervention, despite the limitations characteristic of this speech situation. (p. 55)]

In the following excerpt, the psychologist modifies the caller's guilt-filled metaphor by producing a modified guilt-reducing simile:

> It often happens that when we look back, we have a choice. Do we choose to look back at the last words we said, or is our choice to look at the other things you describe? That's a very courageous relationship which you describe by saying that *you were to some extent like a mother to him*, and brought him up, and you were very good and understanding to him. In other words, what do we really choose to remember? (Kupferberg & Green, 2005, p. 55)
Using the positioning analysis described above, these researchers also defined characteristic features of troubled addicted (Green & Kupferberg, 2000), mentally ill (Kupferberg, Gilat, Dahan, & Doron, 2012, 2013), and suicidal individuals (Kupferberg & Gilat, 2012).

Above it was noted that the definitions of institutional troubles talk formulated when the 20th century drew to a close did not relate to CMC. In contrast, current research stresses the importance of exploring institutional troubles CMC (Kupferberg, 2008, 2010). The various modes of CMC (Herring, 2010a) offer troubled help seekers anonymity, convenience, and a high level of accessibility that transcend time and distance barriers (Gilat, in press). These characteristics enhance the creation of a digital space that provides help to troubled individuals who are reluctant to use professional face-to-face or telephone help, but who do need mental support (Gilat, in press).

One issue that calls for special attention is coherence. Herring (1999, 2013) has shown that in CMC, lack of sequential coherence can be tolerated when e-interactants use the internet for recreational purposes, but this is not the case when their discursive tasks require the establishment of interpersonal coherence, as in the case of troubles talk (Kupferberg & Green, 2005). Previous studies focusing on coherence in task-focused CM troubles talk show that the use of self-revealing personal stories and language resources (Kupferberg, 2008, in press; Kupferberg & Gilat, 2012) such as pronouns, syntactic structures, and metaphors is particularly important given the absence in CMC of body language, facial expressions, and intonation patterns that contribute to meaning-making processes (Herring, 2010a). A focus on language resources and metaphors (Kupferberg, 2008, in press; Kupferberg & Gilat, 2012) enables researchers to estimate where the interlocutors’ mental life is located at a certain point (Chafe, 1994) and enhances the establishment of interpersonal coherence in such CM encounters (Herring, 2013).

In a qualitative study, Kupferberg and Green (2005) used the positioning analysis presented above to explore how troubled selves fare in a hotline cyber forum. The researchers showed how following a CM interaction with "a virtual rescue team" (p. 119), a suicidal adolescent changed his perspective on life—summarized in terms of a metaphorical phrase "The only way to be released from the jaws of life" (p. 107)—and redefined a future landscape abounding in possibilities, where life was conceptualized in terms of a gift (p. 116). The authors contrasted this with the case of another cyber sufferer who avoided narration and with whom the computer-mediated discussion was conducted incoherently and aimlessly without any overt discursive goals or results (pp. 120-126).

In another qualitative case study, Gilat and Kupferberg (2010) explored the characteristics of an interactive CM process involving a help seeker in suicidal crisis and a group of trained volunteers. The researchers identified implicit dimensions characteristic of the digital interaction, including the help seeker's discursive preference to shy away from the past world of experience and focus instead on a short-term future and the meaning of death. In response to this discursive conduct, the trained volunteers tried to construct a long-term and meaningful future. The preference of suicidal help-seekers to avoid narration and concentrate on a short term future was also identified, described, and interpreted in a mixed methods study exploring the self-construction of suicidal and non-suicidal troubled selves in a CM forum (Kupferberg & Gilat, 2012).
The discourse of suicidal help seekers has also been explored via a semiotic approach to linguistic analysis (Tobin, 1994) by Gilat and Tobin (2009). Their study of an online support group and personal chats conducted between suicidal individuals and trained volunteers found that suicidal individuals who sought help experienced a conflict between an attraction to death and a perceived connection to life. The semiotic analysis illuminated the attitudes of the suicidal individuals toward life, showing that these individuals perceived life as an obligation that they were forced to fulfill against their will. The authors interpret their findings as an indication that this view of life produces severe emotional distress. These studies show that text-based qualitative analyses can illuminate intriguing aspects of the troubled narrators who seek help via CMC.

Summary of Articles in the Special Issue

The articles collected in this special issue shed light on some of the what's and how's of CM troubles talk. Readers of this collection will become acquainted with the processes that take place, the modes of communication that are conducive to successful interactions, and the participants in troubles talk—both troubled selves and professional and lay others who respond by focusing on emotions, thoughts, and coping in times of trouble.

The articles are grounded in different disciplines (e.g., psychology, CMC studies, discourse analysis, and education), apply diverse methodological lenses (e.g., experimental designs, conversation and positioning analyses, CM discourse analysis, and case studies), and analyze various modes of troubles communication (e.g., forums, blogs, memorials, text and voice-based chats, logs, and email correspondence). Several examine CM processes in which individuals discuss their problems with professionals (Stommel and van der Houwen; Ekberg et al.) and lay others (Kupferberg & Hess) and respond to the painful self-disclosure of others (Bareket-Bojmel). Other articles shed light on how bereaved individuals attempt to cope with the death of their loved ones (Pawelczyk), seek support when a national life-threatening crisis takes place (Gorev et al.), and engage in solving mode-related communication problems in a voice-based chat room (Brandt & Jenks).

The first three articles adopt the micro-analytic lens of CA. Stommel and van der Houwen examine the role of coaches' formulations in text-based chat counseling for people with psychological problems. The authors show that the formulations enhance troubles coach-client communication by organizing the chat sessions as a whole, as well as at the topic level. Coherence-oriented formulations also clarify ambiguity and articulate a particular view of the client’s account, either by formulating a positive aspect of that account or by formulating the problem in terms of feelings.

Also using CA, Ekberg, Barnes, Kessler, Malpass, and Shaw examine how therapists and clients manage the therapeutic relationship in online synchronous psychotherapy logs of communication between therapists and clients. The authors report two practices (i.e., thanking and commiseration) that are means therapists resort to in order to develop rapport and retain control of the therapeutic process.

Brandt and Jenks' study contributes to the special issue by taking a fresh look at the meaning of troubles talk through the empirical examination of the interactional communication troubles that
are characteristic of multi-party voice-based chat rooms in the absence of textual traces of the conversations. Applying CA, these authors demonstrate how online communication troubles unfold, how interactants respond to and overcome these troubles, and how technology is a mediating factor in troubles talk.

Kupferberg and Hess use content analysis and qualitative and quantitative positioning analyses to explore a closed asynchronous forum by individuals with vision impairment and blindness who use an adaptive Braille display technology. The analyses highlight the distinctive daily problems with which forum members cope. In contrast to previous studies, they also show that the forum participants co-constructed solutions as they readily, amicably, humorously, and at times optimistically engaged in social interaction and positioned assertive, stigma-free selves vis-à-vis one another and the public.

Gorev, Vaisman, and Margaliot explore college students’ email correspondence with each other and with their lecturers, as well as student teachers’ responses to written and CM questionnaires, during and after a national war crisis. This case study shows how email correspondence provided active and immediate contact when the crisis began, combined support and academic learning, and enhanced the creation of a supportive learning community.

Pawelczyk’s article differs from the others in that it focuses on individuals' expressions of bereavement that lack an interactional dimension. Pawelczyk investigates the CM setting of online memorials in which bereaved individuals share their memories of loved ones who have passed away and communicate their lived experience of loss. By means of content analysis and CM conversation analysis (Herring, 2004), this qualitative study illuminates the process of coping in terms of the themes as well as the interactional and discursive practices employed by the survivors. The findings are also discussed in terms of their professional relevance to the work of psychotherapists and counselors who help clients process their grief in offline contexts.

Finally, Bareket-Bojmel presents the point of view of individuals such as those who may have responded to the self-disclosing CM memorials analyzed by Pawelczyk. Using an experimental design, Bareket-Bojmel examines emotional reactions to self-disclosure online in either painful or positive popular blogs. The author shows that participants’ emotional reactions to the painful blogs did not conform to a traditional ‘positive’ versus ‘negative’ affect distinction, but rather expressed distressed anticipation. The author argues that individuals are attracted to painful self-disclosure rather than repelled by it.

An examination of the collection of studies presented in this special issue suggests that the definition of CM troubles talk presented earlier should be broadened and described along a continuum ranging from conversations (Herring, 2010b) between troubled help-seekers and professionals (Stomme and van der Houwen, Ekberg et al.), to conversations among lay individuals themselves (Kupferberg & Hess) in which help-givers may be present (Gorev et al.), to the public soliloquies of troubled humans that attract the interest of others (Pawelczyk; Bareket-Bojmel).

Ekberg et al.'s focus on technological troubles sheds light on the phenomenon of “troubles talk” from a different perspective, complexifying it by interpreting “troubles” in a different sense. The article probes communication problems that often arise when the CM mode of communication is
ephemeral (e.g., in voice-based chat) (Herring, 2004; also see Herring, 2013) and there is no textual trace of what the participants have said. As pointed out above, in CMC produced for recreational purposes, lack of coherence may be tolerated and even cherished (Herring, 1999, 2013). However, in CM troubles talk the establishment of interpersonal coherence is necessary (Kupferberg & Green, 2005). The insights gleaned from the Ekberg et al. article suggest that when the need arises to discuss one's problems and negotiate them with professional or lay others, certain modes of communication such as forums, text-based chats, and email communication may be best suited for troubles communication, since they leave a persistent record which enhances interpersonal coherence. Moreover, some of the articles show discursive practices that enhance the creation of interpersonal coherence (Ekberg et al.; Kupferberg & Hess; Pawelczyk; Stommel and van der Houwen).

Conclusion

This introduction has emphasized how, to a large extent, technology has shaped the history of troubles talk. A discussion of future trends should take into consideration technological developments that are likely to bring about a process of 'devirtualization' (Kupferberg, 2008). In devirtualized computer-assisted troubles talk, visual, audio, and perhaps other sensory contextual resources will be available. Such a development could change technology-assisted communication and make it more similar to face-to-face communication. This, in turn, could facilitate the task of making meaning and achieving interpersonal coherence.

Herring (2013, p. 264) pertinently observes that the introduction of "new communication tools that give more feedback and control over turn taking, threading (formally indicating that a message is a response to a particular prior message), and participant tracking, [are] affordances that should reduce the incidence of disrupted agency and the unintended relevance violations." Future research will show to what extent new technologies will actually enhance interpersonal communication in CM troubles talk, and to what extent mode-specific issues will be overcome.

Notes

1. Several terms have been used to refer to this genre of talk. Labov and Fanshel (1977) and Buttny and Jensen (1995) propose the term problem-talk for talk where lay participants communicate with psychologists about their problems. Another commonly used term is troubles talk (ten Have, 2001). Kupferberg and Green (2005, p. 3) use the term troubled talk in view of the fact that lay participants "are frequently in an acute emotional—if not suicidal—state. As a result, they experience a pressing need to speak or write about their problems." In this introduction, we use the term troubles talk.

2. Following Georgakopoulou (2007, p. 78) we offer an action oriented definition of genre "away from formal classifications as the basis for text-distinctions and with an emphasis on the members' conventionalized expectations about the activities they are engaged in, the roles and relationships typically involved and the organizations systems of those activities."

3. Inspired by CA, discursive psychologists prioritize the study of self-construction in naturally-occurring discourse by examining how participants themselves construct the
meaning of who they are in actual practices performed in discourse, while bracketing off a priori traditional psychological theories (Edwards & Potter, 2005).

**References**

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