

STAY WITH ME: UNCERTAIN INDICES AND ATTENTIONAL PRESENCE IN CHAT INTERFACES

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ABSTRACT

In this article, Herrie and Sørensen examine the mediation of typing indicators (“...”) in online messaging. Their point of departure is a scene from the contemporary novel *Exciting Times* by Naoise Dolan (2020), in which the ‘dots’ play a prominent role. Their analysis shows how typing indicators, as interface design, mediate the complex communication situation in which they take part: from being mere signals, they have slipped into our emotional lives. From a semiotic perspective (Charles S. Peirce), the authors define typing indicators as *uncertain indices* which through unknowability and suspense establish an attentional presence. In continuation hereof, the authors argue that the acts of writing and waiting in contemporary attentional ecologies (Yves Citton) through the mediation of typing indicators as indicators of attentional presence, could be considered a mode of caring (Bernard Stiegler).

KEYWORDS

Everyday Aesthetics, Attention, Typing Indicators, Chat Interfaces, Uncertain Indices, Care

“Dot, dot, dot. I knew Edith was typing and seeing words form on her side, but they weren’t there on mine, which made them subjunctive: wish or feeling, less than fact. Ellipsis meant absence, nothing in the bell jar, no proof—not a specimen. The dots waved like trills on Chopin’s staves, turn them how you will. She could be typing anything. And she’d caught me, too.”¹

Impatiently waiting for Edith to answer, the protagonist of Naoise Dolan’s *Exciting Times*, Ava, is passing time puzzling over the dancing dots on her phone. Ava is a millennial expat living in Hong Kong, and the dry prose of Dolan depicts her life as an English teacher and romantic partner of first Julian and then Edith. Portrayed by many as a ‘millennial novel,’ the book features familiar tropes such as jealousy, sex, and obsession, and playfully portrays zeitgeist technology as chat interfaces.² In the scene quoted above, Ava is reflecting on the attentional rhythms of online chat communication: to the one awaiting response, the moving ellipsis of three dots lure with its indication of the other’s presence; and to the one typing, they potentially disclose how much time and effort was put into the message. As such, Ava continues: “The texts I’d drafted in our thread were only some of the total, and all the drafts together only showed a fraction of how frequently I thought about her, and I’d composed a few a day. Edith might have caught me every time for all I knew. But if she saw the dots, it meant she was watching.”³

In this article, we analyse the animated ellipsis met in almost every chat interface today.⁴ The technical term of this ellipsis is a *typing indicator*, and its function is to mediate between a sender and a receiver.⁵ In the following, we analyse this complex relationship by viewing it as a *communicative situation* in which it is not possible to focus on either the sender *or* the recipient, precisely because typing indicators mediate between them. We choose to focus on this aspect of online chat communication because typing indicators have not yet been described within semiotics or cultural theory.

As Ava experiences in the quoted scene, the typing indicator indexes much more than a mere keystroke on the sender’s part. When you pause, hesitantly reconsidering your reply, it will be signalled on the other’s screen, and when you write, delete, and rewrite, the dots will appear, disappear, and re-emerge, gesticulating, potentially, your indecisiveness, unwillingness, or doubt. As such, the typing indicator both points to the spatial absence of

the conversational partner and to the immanent temporal delay of digital dialogue. As Ava observes, an inherent drama flows from this unknowability, resulting, at best, in a flirtatious hide-and-seek, and at worst in an anxious reticence. From a *semiotic* perspective, it is uncertain whether the partner is paying attention: the only thing you can know for certain is that her cursor is placed in the joint chat window; the rest is left to the imagination. In this view, it only seems proper that Dolan let her English teaching protagonist describe the dots as grammatically *subjunctive*. Rather than being indicative of a statement of fact (a *realis* mood), they are pointing to something radically potential and unreal (the subjunctive being one of the *irrealis* moods);⁶ that is, to wishes, emotions, possibilities, or actions that have not yet occurred. Finally, this relates to the *emotional* experience incorporated in the encounter with the animated ellipsis. In the mind of Ava, “ellipsis means absence;” of certainty, of proof, and, perhaps, even of air to breathe, with a casual reference to Sylvia Plath’s figure of the bell jar.⁷

Our argument falls in two parts. First, we analyse the semiotic mediation of typing indicators, arguing that they produce a kind of relationality that is both based on an openness and—crucially, *at the same time*—on an indexical assurance (or even evidence) of the conversational partner’s virtual presence in the shared chat room. Second, we discuss their relevance in relation to the contemporary attention economy, drawing partly on Yves Citton’s critical conception of the attention industry, and partly on Bernard Stiegler’s ideas of waiting time and anticipation as they relate to processes of individuation.

UNCERTAIN INDICES

Dating back to the dial-up ages, typing indicators were originally developed by Microsoft to notify its users that the person they were speaking to was in fact still on the line. Unstable servers were common and abrupt log offs would cause conversations to get awkward.⁸ Triggered on the first keystroke and repeated as more keystrokes occurred, the original typing indicators were closely connected with the indexicality of instant messaging: if no keystrokes were registered after 10 seconds, the indicator would no longer be displayed. Either you were typing, or you were not.⁹ Today, most chat interfaces have implemented different forms of these indicators.¹⁰ From being mere signals of activity, however, the dancing dots of today’s instant messaging have developed into complex vehicles of communication.

As linguist Deborah Tannen explains, “we need some way of determining when someone else’s turn is over and ours can begin.” She continues: “In speaking, we sense whether others are done—their voices trail off, their intonation goes down, they seem to have finished making a point, they leave a pause to let us know they’re finished.”¹¹ Typing indicators are directed at these confusions, as they help written exchanges take on the tempo of spoken conversation by facilitating turn-taking. Yet, this turn-taking is far from simple or ‘natural.’ Whereas the hesitation in an oral conversation is accompanied by advanced bodily and facial expressions evident to the partners involved—the ‘intonation’ Tannen is describing—the pause indicated semiotically by the animated ellipsis remains open and un-explained. Rather than unambiguously indexing a physical connection to “someone on the line” (as originally intended by the developers at Microsoft), we argue that typing indicators point to a complex communication situation and that they visually retain a suspense.

Drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce’s tripartite concept of the sign, typing indicators may at first glance seem like classical *indices*, that is, sign functions that interrelate with their objects through an actual or imagined causal connection.¹² However, typing indicators do not simply index a transmission of a signal, they also point to a multitude of potentially open outcomes of the conversation they mediate. Often, there is no necessary natural link between the sign and its semiotic object; no direct relation between the dots and the typing action, they point to. The other person’s cursor is ‘there,’ but what is she writing (or deleting)? Why does it take her so much time to compose a response? Typing indicators “mean absence,” as Ava observes in the quotation above and, so, they do not indicate any direct or causal signification process. “She could be typing anything,” Ava says, pointing to the inherent uncertainty of the signification,¹³ that is, to the shifting meaning of the animated dots. In this way, one could argue that the dots represent nothing but pure activity: someone is writing something, or—to be more precise—a cursor is placed in a joint window and at least one key has been pressed. Even if the animated ellipsis is directly pointing to an activity, the relation remains uncertain. As such, the indexicality of the ellipsis differs from standard conceptions of indexical evidence or unambiguous causality.

In Peirce’s model, uncertainty is closer to *symbols* than it is to indexes, i.e., to signs whose interrelation with their semiotic objects are building on conventionality. This is to say that there is no natural likeness (as with the index) or similarity (as with the

icon) between the representamen and the semiotic object but, rather, a set of temporary connotations established by some kind of ‘community’. In this way, one could argue that the interrelations within a sign as the animated ellipsis are more than merely uncertain. The waiting receiver knows that the ellipsis is reluctantly reticent, yet she also realises from previous interactions with chat interfaces that the three dots indicate presence: that the other person is *there*, even though she is spatiotemporally distant. The ellipsis may indicate absence, yet it is perhaps rather an absence of certainty, proof, and fact—as Ava observes in the quoted passage—than it is an absence of attention and concern. Subjunctively pointing to the potential of the text to come, the flickering openness of the animated ellipsis may thus be read as an indication of emotional care: someone is giving their attention to you, either by typing away on their phone or by impatiently waiting for your response. Being a millennial superuser of online chat interfaces, Dolan’s Ava knows the conventional connotations: “if [Edith] saw the dots, it meant she was watching.” Even if all Ava’s time and effort have been disclosed to Edith, her precious attention is still worth it.

ATTENTIONAL PRESENCE

In his 2017 book *The Ecology of Attention* (Pour une Écologie de l’Attention, 2014), Yves Citton contemplates the differences between attention *given* to something or someone and attention *received*: between the time it takes for content to be made, so to speak, and the time it takes for them to be consumed.¹⁴ For Citton, the difference refers primarily to our current state of attentional capitalism, which has produced a condition where the living attention of receivers is being exploited and impoverished by industries and agents of mass communication. In the context of typing indicators studied here, one could similarly argue that the moving ellipses are designed to maintain the interest of users and, hence, that our attention is being ‘milked’ and commodified to feed a flourishing attention economy (73). Yet another perspective related to Citton’s conception of production and reception time is relevant here, and that is the inherent potentiality of individuation. Drawing on the vocabulary of Bernard Stiegler, Citton not only criticizes the undoings of the attention industry but also points to the potential of attention as an opening towards more careful cultures. “[A]ttention,” he writes, “does not only allow us to secure our ‘subsistence’ by avoiding death, and our ‘existence’ by bringing about the emergence of a unique and unprecedented life form

through us.” It also “enables us to acquire a greater ‘consistence’ within the relationships that are woven in us,” he argues, by allowing us to “become ourselves” (172). The problem with the current attention economy, however, is that it obstructs processes of individuation with an overabundant supply of cultural and consumerist goods clogging our perceptive systems with spam (2). One of the solutions, Citton points to towards the end of his book is the potential of waiting time. He argues, that one of the major criticisms that should be addressed to our current communicative regimes is that they do not grant us “*the time of waiting* [le temps de l’attente], the time of *anticipation*,” (173) which, according to Citton, is the time in which our attention is formed. When everything is available, attainable, and accessible, as Hartmut Rosa puts it,¹⁵ it becomes harder to keep paying attention—and, perhaps, to *care*.

In relation to the animated ellipsis and our claim that it points to an ambiguous yet reassuring sense of presence on behalf of the other, precisely the potential of *waiting time* is interesting. In his text “Relational Ecology and the Digital *Pharmakon*,” Stiegler focuses specifically on attention and interrogates its inherent temporality. This resonates with Citton’s waiting time, but in Stiegler’s text, the expectation could be positive as well as negative. This relates to our argument regarding the typing indicators as subjunctive, open, and uncertain indices. The waiting time evoked as well as remediated by them is not necessarily waiting time on a positive note, but rather waiting time related to expectations and hence attention. This attentional presence in the act of waiting might be understood as a way to care. Stiegler argues that although we normally take attention to be a mental capacity for concentration, it is nonetheless a social phenomenon. He points to the etymological meaning of the original Latin *attendere* that both means “to shift one’s attention to” or “to take care:” “The verb form has kept this sense in English: ‘to attend a patient’ means to take care of his or her illness. [...] *Faire attention*, like ‘paying attention’, is in this sense a synonym of taking care (*prendre soin*).”¹⁶ The waiting time or the mode of expectation is in Stiegler’s words some sort of care, as in *I stay with you*. There is hence a certain kind of caretaking related to the act of attending to someone. Despite the complicated character of Ava and Edith’s relationship, the dancing dots on the screen remind them of the fact when they choose to spend time with each other.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the narrative unfolded in Naoise Dolan's *Exciting Times*, the typing indicators evoke and display relations of power, uncertainty, hesitation, and waiting in written chat communication. Reading these typing indicators as both uncertain indices and reassuring symbols of presence, we have tried to understand their relevance in relation to the contemporary attention economy, that is, to a communication industry characterized by an overabundance of cultural and consumerist content. In this perspective, we point to the potentials of attention in a culture precisely lacking time to *attend* [attendre] to something. We argue that spending time with each other—producing texts and waiting for the other to respond—can be seen as a way to engage in a kind of caretaking process. In this way, we see typing indicators as potential remediators of a (spatiotemporally distant and semiotically ambiguous) *presence*, that is, a presence between two people who insist on paying attention to each other.

- 1 Naoise Dolan, *Exciting Times* (New York: Ecco Press, 2020).
- 2 See, e.g., Xuan Juliana Wang, "In 'Exciting Times,' Echoes of Sally Rooney, but With a Queer Twist," *New York Times*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/books/review/exciting-times-naoise-dolan.html>, or Cecilia Pizzaghi, "Exciting Times: A Millennial Novel about Identity and Idleness," *Hypercritic*, 2020, <https://www.hypercritic.org/read/literature/naoise-dolan-exciting-times-a-millennial-novel-2020-preview/>.
- 3 Dolan, *Exciting Times*.
- 4 On Google Talk, e.g., a prompt says "[Person X] is typing...", on Apple's iChat, a blinking ellipsis emerges, and on Facebook's Messenger, a little bubble with three dancing dots appears. See, e.g., Ulrich Gnewuch, Stefan Morana, Marc T. P. Adam, and Alexander Maedche, "The Chatbot Is Typing ... The Role of Typing Indicators in Human-Chatbot Interaction," *Proceedings of the 17th Annual Pre-ICIS Workshop on HCI Research in MIS*, San Francisco, CA., December 13, 2018.
- 5 See, e.g., David Auerbach, "I Built That 'So-and-So Is Typing' Feature in Chat," *Slate*, February 12, 2014, <https://slate.com/technology/2014/02/typing-indicator-in-chat-i-built-it-and-im-not-sorry.html>, or Georgina Barbari, "What it Really Means when the 'Someone's Typing' Indicator Shows Up," *Considerable*, November 25, 2019, <https://www.considerable.com/home/technology/texting-indicator-bubbles-explained/>.
- 6 Bas Aarts, "Subjunctive," *The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar*, 2. edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199658237.001.0001>.
- 7 In her 1963 book *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath (under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas) portrays the protagonist Esther Greenwood, who describes her life as being suffocated by a bell jar (a scientific device which encloses a space and draws the air out of it). Scholars have argued about the nature of Esther's 'bell jar,' yet disagree about how it should be read. However, when considering Sylvia Plath's own life and death and the semi-biographical character of *The Bell Jar*, it is hard to ignore the theme of mental illness. See, e.g., Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (Tucson: AZ Schaffner Press, 2003).
- 8 Auerbach, "I Built That 'So-and-So Is Typing' Feature in Chat."
- 9 Barbari, "What it Really Means when the 'Someone's Typing' Indicator Shows Up."
- 10 Gnewuch et al., "The Chatbot Is Typing ... The Role of Typing Indicators in Human-Chatbot Interaction."
- 11 Ben Crair, "I Can See You Typing: The Most Awkward Part of Online Chat," *The Statesman*, January 31, 2014, <https://www.newstatesman.com/uncategorized/2014/01/i-can-see-you-typing-most-awkward-part-online-chat>.
- 12 Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volume 2: Elements of Logic*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Charlottesville: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), 2.285.
- 13 Floyd Merrell, "Charles Sanders Peirce's Concept of Sign," in *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics and Linguistics*, ed. Paul Cobley (London and New York: Routledge 2001), 28–39, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203996089>.
- 14 Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 61.
- 15 Hartmut Rosa, "Acceleration and Resonance: An Interview with Hartmut Rosa," interview by Bjørn Schiermer, *E-Special: Four Generations of Critical Theory in Acta Sociologica*, *Acta Sociologica*, 3, 2017.
- 16 Bernard Stiegler, "Relational Ecology and the Digital Pharmakon," *Culture Machine* 13 (2012): 1.