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## **IMPACT 08 – SOCIAL INTERACTION**

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The fifth Impact 08 seminar was run in mid August over the high-speed Access Grid network, with participation from four universities nationwide. Chaired by Donald Matheson of Canterbury University the seminar featured three academics speaking on the impact of ICTs on ‘Social Interaction’.

Mary Allan, a post doctoral Fellow in the Social Science Research Centre at Canterbury University, began with a short presentation on video conferencing and initial results from an investigation of user experience with the technology.

Over the years, video conferencing has been touted as perfect for cutting down on business travel to increasing collaboration and reducing carbon footprints. But, despite the hype, take up has inexplicably been lower than anticipated.

Allan cited a US study which revealed a scant five percent drop in travel through the use of video conferencing. And a recent survey of Access Grid users in New Zealand found strong dissimilarities between video conferencing and face-to-face experience despite 90 percent of respondents acknowledging video conferencing’ potential.

A range of measures are required to improve user experience, says Allan – improved infrastructure, reduced cost, increased user awareness and enhanced system design.

“Simply deploying the technology doesn’t ensure uptake. Users want equipment to be inexpensive and easy to use. And they want to be able to seamlessly switch between different tools allowing for flexible, informal and intuitive communications.”

Sociology PhD student Roslyn Kerr followed with an engaging presentation on Second Life, a 3-D virtual world created by US-based Linden Research.

Second Life and other online virtual worlds allow users to adopt entirely new identities, control multiple avatars or jointly control avatars. They also provide opportunities for new forms of social interaction as “alternative selfhoods to real life,” says Kerr.

The final speaker was Brian Pauling from the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology’s broadcasting school. He maintains that the trinity of digital convergence, IP and mobility are having a dramatic impact on traditional broadcasting, and is likely to have terminal effects in the long term.

ICTs have also changed the nature of television audiences, with declining overall viewership and very pronounced declines of watchers in the 18-29 cohort.

Broadcasters are battling back by adopting online and mobile technologies such as video-on-demand and mobile TV. But, Pauling maintains they are fighting a losing battle and in the long term are only likely to remain viable in respect of programming news and sporting events.

The next Impact 08 seminar is being held on 15 September and will focus on the impact of ICT on community building.