The Presentation of Self in Electronic Life: Goffman on the Internet

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Goffman (1956,1973) has described how people negotiate and validate identities in face-to-face encounters and how people establish 'frames' within which to evaluate the meaning of encounters. These ideas have been influential in how sociologists and psychologists see person-to-person encounters. Kendon (1988) gives a useful summary of Goffman's views on social interaction.

Electronic communication (EC) has established a new range of frames of interaction with a developing etiquette. Although apparently more limited and less rich than interactions in which the participants are physically present, it also provides new problems and new opportunities in the presentation of self. There have been exciting discussions about the possible nature of 'electronic selves' (for instance Stone, 1991). This paper is a basic exploration of how the presentation of self is actually taking place in a technically limited, but rapidly spreading, aspect of EC: personal homepages on the World Wide Web.

Between the 50s and the early 80s, Erving Goffman worked to describe the structure of face-to-face interaction and to account for how that structure was involved in the interactive tasks of everyday life. He developed a series of concepts which are useful in describing and understanding interaction, and also showed how the physical nature of interaction settings is involved in people's interactions.

One of things people need to do in their interactions with others is present themselves as an acceptable person: one who is entitled to certain kinds of consideration, who has certain kinds of expertise, who is morally relatively unblemished, and so on. (Goffman has a whole book (1964) in which he considers cases where there are particular problems in making these claims.) People have techniques and resources available to allow them to do this. 'Backstage' preparation can help in presenting an effective 'front', 'expressive resources' can be mobilised, and cooperation from others present in the interaction can often be relied upon to smooth over jagged places and provide opportunities for redeeming gaffes. Goffman sees embarrassment as an important indicator of where people fail to present an acceptable self, and an important motivator. A person wishes to present themself effectively to minimise the embarrassment of a failing presentation, but other participants are also motivated to help the performance by their wish to avoid the embarrassment they feel at its failure. So, most of the time, we interact in a cosy conspiracy in which it appears as if everyone knows what they are talking about, can

remember the names of those who they're talking to, and has an appearance and presence which is pleasant and unexceptionable. In this sense, our 'selves' are presented for the purpose of interacting with others, and are developed and maintained with the cooperation of others through the interaction.

In face-to-face encounters, much information about the self is communicated in ways incidental to the 'main business' of the encounter, and some is communicated involuntarily: Goffman distinguishes between information 'given', that is, intended and managed in some way, and that 'given off' which 'leaks through' without any intention. He also points out a difference between the 'main' or 'attended track' of the interaction and other 'unattended tracks' which are at that moment less salient. If a colleague calls round, I may discuss a work problem and prepare a cup of coffee simultaneously, both of these going on cooperatively and interactively with the other person, but it is generally clear that the 'point' of the interaction is the discussion, not the coffee making.

Much of Goffman's interest is in his analysis of the depth and richness of everyday interaction. This depth and richness is perhaps not apparent in electronic interaction, but the problem of establishing and maintaining an acceptable self remains, and there is a range of expressive resources available for this end. As the technology develops, more expressive resources become available. Also, as the culture of electronic communication develops, people will construct expressive resources out of whatever facilities are available. Electronic communication will become more and more human communication to the extent that there is more to it than just efficiently passing information to each other.

Before looking at how the resources electronically available are deployed to produce impressions of self, it is necessary to establish how electronic communication differs from face-to-face interaction and to work out what expressive resources are available. The kinds of electronic communication I'm discussing here are email and the World Wide Web, though I will concentrate on the Web.

EC is a system which is instantaneous but asynchronous, can be one-to-one but may be one-to-many, one-to-anyone or one-to-no-one. Place and distance are largely invisible. It can be entirely private with unlisted email addresses and call screening or entirely promiscuous with homepages.

It could be argued that EC is not interaction in Goffman's sense at all. Goffman (1981) gives a series of system requirements for interactions. Some, like signals that informs senders that reception is taking place, or signals that announce that a channel is sought for or that a channel is open, are not present on the Web. None the less, Web pages are intended to be read by others, often invite comment, can be interactive in various ways, and almost always have an email address for contact. I would argue that they are part of an interactive system, although a pretty restricted one.

This promiscuity of the Web goes deep. To talk to you face-to-face, I have to travel to your town, walk up your street, knock on your door, and maybe get invited into your kitchen. Alternatively I might visit you at work. Even on the phone, I have to know the

appropriate area code and may have to go through various gatekeepers to talk to you. When we finally interact, we both know to some extent where we both are and probably where the other is coming from. We also know what kind of interaction this is, whether it's a customer order, a chance encounter in the street, or a bedroom conversation. This enables us to 'frame' the interaction appropriately (Goffman, 1974) so that we both know how to interpret what goes on in the context of what is really going on. When you call up my homepage, by comparison, you may get there through an orderly route via my institution, department, speciality, and so on, but you might have found me because I'm 'nerdy homepage of the month' on the homepage of someone in Mexico. If I knew that that was the way people were going to get to me, I might have arranged my public face differently.

Worse still, your communications may be repeated by people you don't know to audiences you never intended.

In electronic mail, the channel of communication is so limited that aspects of the embodied self can only be apparent if described by the sender. This has had a considerable liberating effect for those who are socially or functionally disadvantaged. It has also allowed others to establish fraudulent and exploitative identities (Stone, 1991). Web pages provide more opportunity for 'embodiment' though less for interaction. People can present photos of themselves (and their children), favourite graphics, snatches of speech, and access to a labyrinth of their interests and contacts. The homepage provides a locus for electronic self. There's even more possibility for misrepresentation than in Email, because Web pages are carefully set up before presentation to the world, and are only slightly interactive.

So what is the communication involved in putting up a homepage? It is putting yourself up for interaction in some way, even if only a limited way. That limitation can be liberating. Goffman points out that one of the difficulties of interaction lies in establishing contact, because an offer to interact always leaves one open to rebuff. Conversely starting an interaction always involves a risk about what the interaction might lead to, and possible difficulty in ending it. On the Web you can put yourself up for interaction without being aware of a rebuff, and others can try you out without risking being involved further than they would wish. There is another liberation that can be negative, too. One of the regulating and controlling forces in face-to-face interaction is embarrassment. That is less likely to work on the Web. Others may find your Web page ridiculous, but you probably won't be aware of it. Those others who might be prompted to find ways to mend your presentation to reduce their own embarrassment in a face-to-face encounter are unlikely to feel pressure to smooth over the interaction between themselves and a Web page. So, in two senses, it is easy to make a fool of yourself on the Web: there is little to stop you doing it, but doing it will cause you little pain.

The expressive resources available in HTML, the Hypertext Markup Language, are limited and not altogether under the author's control: size and shape of screen and display typeface depend more on the receiver than on the sender. Some layout features like rules can be used. Lots of images can be included, but the receiver can always choose not to

receive them, and may not have a system which is able to receive them. The same applies to sound and video.

It seems that the only reliable thing that can be used is the informational content of the text. This is what novelists have used for years to establish character, after all. For most people, though, it is difficult to establish yourself as a whole person through a selfdescription: it feels like an extended lonely-hearts advert. There are other resources that can be mobilised: show me what your links are, and I'll tell you what kind of person you are. This will be taken up in more detail later. Now that some people are becoming familiar with the Web, and know the 'usual' structure and content of homepages, it is possible to use this 'frame' more or less ironically to convey more subtle information.

The 'more or less' of the last sentence is an introduction to further consideration of the given/given off distinction suggested by Goffman. In many ways, this distinction would seem not to apply in electronic communication. Information about the self is explicitly stated and can be managed by the person making the communication. On the internet, you can't smell my breath, catch the tremor in my voice, or realise that I'm watching the rest of the party over your shoulder. The implicit information that does leak through is paralinguistic, rather than non-verbal - a matter of style, structure and vocabulary - or paracommunicational - a matter of how I deal with a Web page compared with customary ways of doing it. Try calling up a succession of homepages and see if they give you hints about the nature of the people who composed them, even without reading any of the information given. Beware of taking these impressions too seriously. Someone may chose to include a picture of their fiancee on their page: that picture may be incorporated innocently and seriously, ironically, or in irony-transcending seriousness.

My sampling of homepages for analysis has been very non-systematic. I checked obvious homepages which cropped up in the lists produced by WebCrawler searches for assorted other topics, pages with incomprehensible titles (which often are personal homepages) that were marked in these searches, pages suggested to me by colleagues as being worth looking at, and homepages referred to on other pages. This last is the easiest source: people on the Web seem to like introducing you to other people on the Web . Some institutions, Princeton (1995) for example, have pages which are purely lists of the personal homepages of people at the institution. This non-systematic sampling has shown the enormous number and range of personal homepages that there are out there; people feel a desire to establish their selves on the Web. It has also made me aware of the inadequacy of my approach so far. The impressionistic account given here should be backed up with more systematic fieldwork if this field is worth developing.

My impressionistic survey suggested that pages could be grouped into several categories. After each category I've suggested a non-electronic equivalent. I'm not sure that these references to 'penpal letters', 'company reports' and so an are helpful or productive: personal homepages are new kinds of personal presentation in a new medium. But this is a paper which starts from old analyses of well-established communications, and borrows from them to look at the new, so the traditional analogies are in keeping with the theme. More detailed work could tease out where these analogies fail to apply, and so help to

clarify what is new in this communication. The analogies may be valid in another sense: the people producing homepages are drawing on their knowledge and experience of verbal and paper presentations of self to help them to construct their electronic presentations, and so they will produce presentations at least partly derived from those models. The interesting point is when kinds of presentation emerge which can't be seen as analogous to verbal or paper presentations of self. I'm not aware of this happening yet, but then I'm blinkered by my lifelong experience of non-electronic presentation of self...

Here are my suggested categories:

1) Hi, this is me (as an individual). The purpose of the page seems to be purely selfpresentation. Content may include: this is what I look like, this is where I'm from, this is what I study (these pages are often by male college students), these are my favourite bands/pastimes/books, here are links to my friends' homepages, and here are some more neat/cool links. A variant of this is where the page author has a major interest, and the homepage is also a gateway to information about that interest. Sometimes the initial page recognises the possible different motives of those who arrive at it: Hi, this is me: more personal information is here; more about Lunar Landscape Studies is here. (The non-electronic analogy might be a penpal letter.)

2) This is me (as a member of an organisation). The most common examples are faculty homepages. A brief CV, teaching and contact details, timetable arrangements are the requirements, but some people choose to add more. A 'frame analysis' (Goffman, 1974) is useful here in working out how the self is presented. The clues to the person may not be in what is said/done, but in how that relates to the structure defined by others who are doing the same thing. Personality emerges from how people bend or gently break the rules established (formally or informally) by their institution. (An entry in a student handbook)

3) Hi, this is us. These are family homepages, sometimes titled as such.The content is more likely to be about membership, group structure, and history than about the personal self of the individual posting the page. Details of individuals emerge further down the tree of links, and they are often third party descriptions rather than first party. There is more emphasis on the personal achievements of the people presented than in individual homepages, and in structure and content, they are more like sets of pages produced by institutions rather than persons. Perhaps what is being presented is the corporate identity of the family. (A company report; the Annual Family Circular sent to acquaintances with a Christmas card.)

4) This what I think is cool. These pages are the extreme of those described as a subset of (1). Here there may be very little about the person as an explicitly presented self, just examples and links to what they enjoy or are interested in. A self emerges all the same. (The analogy here is perhaps with inference of self, rather than presentation. In this paper, I have not set out to present my self, and I've told you very little about me, but you now know about ideas that have influenced me, topics I think interesting, and the way I

write about them - and you will have formed some impression of the person who has written this.)

5) An advertisement for myself. There are some subcategories here:

5a) Cool style. There is content to show that the person is particularly skilful, interesting, or striking. More mundane information may be left out, so the whole intent of the page is 'self-promotion' and there is no pretence of the spurious objectivity of 'self-presentation'. These pages can be tongue in check, and there may be links to ego-undermining mundane information for those who really want to know. (The analogy that occurred to me was with the collections of own work, found objects and reference material that some design lecturers pin up on their office walls. These are ostensibly a private version of 'what I think is cool' above, but they may tip over into a public presentation of 'see what a cool person I am'. When I was a student, some of the decorations in my college room were meant to serve the same purpose, if I'm honest. Video dating might be an analogy in a different medium.)

5b) The electronic curriculum vitae. A very straightforward and honest attempt to gain employment and a way of making your abilities and occupational interests available round the world. I've come across these randomly, but an effective presentation might be one which was likely to be picked up by search engines - if there are people who set search engines looking for pages from post-doc microbiologists ready to work for less than $25,000. (These are like paper CVs, though I don't know of a way in which paper CVs can be posted for promiscuous consumption.)

5c) An advertisement for the service I can provide. This falls in a range between the CV and the impersonal corporate advert. Those that are most a form of 'self-presentation' are from people whose services depend on particular personal skill or charisma: designers and drag artists are two examples I've found. These overlap with 'Cool Style' above, but I think the intention is different, and there may be a definite split between the 'commercial' and 'private' selves, which will not be played up in the presentation. (The best analogy is with the disk-based 'electronic CV', but at the moment the Web's limited bandwidth and presentation style forces a restricted version of what can be done on disk or CD. Non-electronically, they're like flyers, demo tapes, or the people who stop you in the street in Edinburgh at Festival time to charm you into coming to their Fringe performance.)

There are design groups advertising on the net who will construct sets of pages to help you promote your business, and they are evolving styles and conventions which will be taken up in self-promotions and self-presentations. One of the complex 'family homepages' I found was through a link from one of these designers. Will the same gulf develop between those of us who have Web Designers to present our selves on the Web and those who don't, as already exists between those who employ Interior Designers in their homes and those who don't?

Some notes on gender differences: many more men than women have personal homepages on the Web, and although it's common for men to attach pictures of

themselves to their pages, it seems much less common for women to do so. Apart from faculty homepages, where it may be corporate policy to attach a photo, the only woman's picture I found at the top of a homepage was a faint, blurred - decorative rather than informational - photo on a page for a poet and performance artist. I have the impression, though I haven't checked this, that women are less likely to have their given name, which may identify their gender, in the title of their page than men are. This wouldn't be surprising, for the same reasons which make women less likely to put their given name below the bell-push on their front door - avoidance of casual harassment.

Where does this lead to in a discussion of 'electronic self'? One of the things that has been a background worry in this discussion is the idea that EC is not interpersonal interaction of the kind that Goffman was describing. An interpretation of Goffman's work, and that of the Symbolic Interactionist school in sociology, is that self is developed and maintained, as well as presented, in interaction. Perhaps the electronic self of the homepage can not be developed and maintained in EC, but has to derive from face-to-face interaction, or at least email interaction. Or are there kinds and categories of electronic selves which can be presented and maintained in cyberspace, apart from our corporeal selves? That is one of the fantasies of cyberspace, but the selves presented in Web pages have not seemed to me to be qualitatively different from selves presented in other ways, and their styles of presentation can easily be likened to non-electronic presentations of self. This might mean that this aspect of EC, at least, is not rich enough to support the interactive development and definition of distinctive 'electronic selves', or it might mean that we should wait to see what happens when people have actually grown up with the Web. My feeling, as an old-fashioned psychologist, is that sociality and interaction are necessary for us to know who we are and what we can say about ourselves to others, and much more depth and richness in EC is needed before 'electronic selves' can emerge. Contrariwise, much of the depth and richness that we can think of adding would be to make EC more like face-to-face interaction, which might suggest that electronic selves could be developed in a different social context (continuing the extension of the social world from the hamlet to the city to the global village) but that many of the basic issues, moves and processes that go on would be the same as they always were.

Even if our selves will not be very different from what they always were, EC provides an interesting new medium for us to use to display ourselves and make claims about ourselves. At the beginning of this paper I pointed out Goffman's distinction between what was 'given' and what was 'given off' in an encounter. Even though Web pages are apparently limited in the depth of information they provide compared with face-to-face interaction, there is still room for information about the self to be given off in the way people use the medium, in what they say as well as what they don't say. A full appreciation of this has to wait until we have an implicit understanding of the 'frames' that can be applied to communication on the Web, so we know how to interpret what people say about themselves in the context of 'what is going on' when they say these things. In earlier times, relationships could be established and maintained, and people could become people to other people, by exchanging letters. Part of the skill in letter reading is in reading between the lines. I was tempted to say that we just have to learn to

read between the pixels of Web pages, but I think we have to read beyond the pixels to see how they express the social processes and intentions that lie behind them.

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