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Front- and backstage in "social media"

Anders Persson*

Abstract

Excessive generosity with information about one's private life or the private lives of others, known as "oversharing", appears to be an oft-noted phenomenon in the context of "new" media. I have previously studied this phenomenon in connection with mobile phone conversations in public places. After having eavesdropped on, or maybe rather overheard, such conversations more systematically, I offered a number of different explanations for the intimacy that occasionally results from these conversations: Were such mobile phone users to be regarded as inconsiderate individualists, or as communicating exhibitionists, or as absorbed communicators? It is against this background that I am studying, in this paper, oversharing in the context of social media such as Facebook, and attempting to answer the question: What is it in "social media" as media and in the communicative situation of the person using them that constitutes front- and backstage and the border dividing them? The paper consists of a comparative analysis of face-to-face interaction and interaction in social media in which I use Goffman's terms "front- and backstage" and "expressions given and expressions given off." The two forms of interaction are also compared based on Goffman's system model of communication, which consists of eight different system requirements and system constraints. The results of the comparison between face-to-face interaction and interaction in social media has to do with differences in the natures of the two forms of interaction. When it comes to the communicative situation in which social media users find themselves, it appears to be paradoxical: on the one hand, the users can present themselves in a highly controlled manner while, on the other hand, the risk of oversharing appears to be great.

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1. Introduction

Some years ago, in my capacity as a dean, I had the dubious pleasure of dealing with a case in which a student in a vocationally oriented university education blogged about the children and young people he had met during his internship, and about the workplaces where he did extra work. Using his own name and those of the workplaces and of the children and young people, this student referred to certain children and young people as idiots, mentally retarded and the like, with the result that he was blacklisted at many workplaces where he could subsequently have done an internship. This made it difficult for him to complete his education. In a way, his actions are a mystery, but at the same time we hear in the media of similar cases in which people using social media push the borders between what is normally considered proper and improper. Headlines such as the following point in this direction: "What fools! Online comments bring out the worst in readers" (*Dagens Nyheter*¹ Oct. 30, 2009) and "Choose your friends. You can't trust anyone on Facebook" (*Dagens Nyheter* Jan. 22, 2010). Two cases also show that even particularly media-experienced people think out loud far too much on Facebook. In the first case, Swedish Prime Minister Reinfeldt's press secretary wrote on Facebook of his satisfaction with the so-called "work principle,"² but then went too far and wrote: "... [I] think that immigrants and immigrant business owners are unbelievable. During the night some idiot relieved himself in our stairwell (and left his handkerchief there...). I called our cleaning company, which is run by immigrants, and in half an hour they had sent over a Russian, who cleaned and sanitized the stairs. That's the work principle right there, getting a skilled cleaning person who does a fantastic job out to your house in half an hour on a Sunday!" (Orrenius 2010). Comments from political opponents noted that, for those on the right, the "work principle" meant that immigrants should have to clean up excrement for the upper class, while political allies apologized and indicated that the press secretary had overstepped an ethical border. We find another example in Denmark, where a media consultant in the Liberal Party made her feelings known on Facebook, calling the pope a "pig", referring to one politician identified by name as "power mad" and to another person as a "psychopath," and characterizing the opinions of the Queen of Denmark as "brain dead" (*Helsingborgs Dagblad*³, "Harsh words on Facebook trap political consultant "April 7, 2010).

¹ A Swedish newspaper.

² "Arbetslinjen" – essentially, the Swedish principle that, to retain their unemployment benefits, those who are unemployed must search for work and not decline offers of work.

³ A Swedish newspaper.

In the following pages I will analyze social media (such as blogs and Facebook) based on Goffman's studies of social interaction.⁴ More specifically, the purpose of the paper is to attempt to answer the following question: What is it in "social media" as media and in the communicative situation of the person using them that constitutes front- and backstage and the border dividing them?

I will first present a number of observations and studies of the phenomenon customarily referred to as oversharing, which points to the fact that people are sometimes excessively generous in furnishing information about their private circumstances or those of others. I will then compare face-to-face interaction (referred to hereinafter as "f2f") with the form of interaction encountered in the social media. Finally, based on this background, I will study the border between front- and backstage in social media.

2. The phenomenon of oversharing

Sharing too much information about one's private life or the private lives of other people appears to be a relatively common phenomenon (or at least an often noted problem) on the Internet and in particular in social media, and various analyses of this phenomenon have been conducted. It is interesting to note that there is not as much research on oversharing in the context of f2f interaction. Or, more precisely, generosity with private information does not seem to be referred to as oversharing in the context of f2f interaction, where the focus is instead on nearly the opposite situation, in which the individual conceals his or her private life from others, and which is referred to in terms of, for instance, inner-directed/other-directed (Riesman 1950), socialization/oversocialization (Wrong 1961), lowering/raising of the shame threshold (Elias 1978; 1982; Duerr 1994; 1996; 1998), or Goffman's aforementioned distinction between front- and backstage. Oversharing has thus been linked most often with various "new" media and, before I discuss research pertaining to the oversharing of information online, I will describe a study I conducted ten years ago concerning oversharing in connection with mobile phone conversations in public places. In my analysis of social media, I will draw certain parallels between these different "new" media.

⁴ This paper has grown out of my writing of a book about Erving Goffman and his sociological perspectives. The book is entitled "Ritualisering och sårbarhet i social interaction – ansikte mot ansikte med Goffmans sociologi" [Ritualization and vulnerability in social interaction – face to face with Goffman's sociology] and will be published in Swedish in 2011. I wish here to thank Max Persson for our many rewarding discussions regarding social media, particularly Facebook. Thanks also to Lisbeth Ranagården for her feedback on an earlier version of the paper.

Inconsiderate disturber, communicating exhibitionist or absorbed communicator – on mobile phone conversations in public places

In an earlier study based on "eavesdropping" on mobile phone conversations in public places, such conversations were studied in particular with respect to the borders between front- and backstage. I found that such conversations sometimes transform public places such as buses, waiting rooms, and public squares into places where intimate matters are dealt with in ways that can be heard by everyone in the vicinity (Persson 2001; 2003).⁵ Sometimes this triggers what could almost be perceived as a "moral panic," with the mobile phone user defined as "the inconsiderate disturber," a sort of inconsiderate individualist who is characterized as follows in a book on etiquette:

"The person with a mobile phone all too often views his or her property as a sweet, spoiled pet that demands a great deal of attention, is allowed to destroy whatever and whenever it likes, is the center of everything, and is never told to be quiet." (Ribbing 2000: 252)

In Sweden, publicly voiced indignation over the mobile phone-equipped inconsiderate disturber peaked around the year 2000, although the issue still appears to be newsworthy in media elsewhere in the world. For instance in 2009, in an Australian business periodical, Dr. Peter West wrote an article in which he attempts to convince us that "the real scourge of public transport" is not delays or fears of violence or graffiti, but rather disturbing mobile phone conversations, and he offers plenty of tips on how we can sabotage them, the most interesting of which is: "Carry a fart cushion and use it freely to disrupt and alarm the ardent conversationalist" (West 2009). With this advice, West presumably unconsciously ties into Goffman's traditional distinction between front- and backstage, equating mobile phone conversations in public places with farts, and consequently urging mobile phone users to keep them equally private.

The scourge causing the indignation consists of private, and sometimes intimate, mobile phone conversations in public places, and by categorizing the mobile phone users as inconsiderate disturbers of the peace who could improve themselves simply by observing common

⁵ I perceived it as eavesdropping when, for the purposes of my study, I actively sought out public places where numerous mobile phone conversations took place and listened in on them, although such conversations are presumably overheard by chance to as great an extent. In public places, the distinction between eavesdropping and overhearing can be very thin, and appears to depend mainly on the intention of the listener. In addition, many such conversations are conducted in such a loud voice that it is difficult for those nearby not to hear them. This obviously represents a problem of research ethics that, however, is not addressed here.

etiquette, they are defined in such a way that it appears that they are disturbing the peace with full awareness. However, I do not believe that the situation is quite that simple. Consistent with Goffman's division of communication and interaction into a more functional and a more expressive side, I have consequently analyzed the mobile phone user not only as an inconsiderate disturber, but also as a communicating exhibitionist and as an absorbed communicator (Persson 2003).

Communicating exhibitionists are highly aware of their surroundings, and overstep the borders between private and public as part of their control of other people's impressions of them via mobile phone conversations. Individuals (mainly men in my study) can sometimes talk about money, power, and their personal sexual performance in such a way that one might believe that they are doing so more to impress involuntary listeners in their immediate vicinity than those with whom they are actually communicating remotely by mobile phone. One may sometimes even suspect that they are not communicating with anyone at all other than those in their physical vicinity; one such case is cited in my article "Intimacy Among Strangers" (Persson 2001). The mobile phone exhibitionist (mobile flasher), whom we also refer to as the communicating exhibitionist, can be quite creative in avoiding revealing actual body parts while still exhibiting him- or herself in the imagination of the listener through words alone.

If the communicating exhibitionist is highly aware of his or her surroundings, the absorbed communicator forgets about them, and may overstep the border between the public and private for that very reason. The absorbed communicator is thus, in a sense, lacking in dramaturgical discipline, to use one of Goffman's (1959) terms. Dramaturgical discipline consists of self-control and presence of mind, and it is at times when we are spontaneously involved that we can lose control over our appearance (Goffman 1959: 216f; 1961: 44). In this context it may also be noted that Asplund (1987: 11) used the term "responsorium" to describe situations in which "... the social responsiveness is absolute or universally prevailing" exemplifying this state as "forgetting the people nearby." This can cause one to share far too much information about oneself (oversharing), and it appears to occur more frequently in mobile phone conversations in public places, since one is speaking remotely with another person while the people in the immediate vicinity can also hear the conversation at the same time. When the mobile phone user thus becomes involved and absorbed in the conversation with the person who is remote from the physical location of the mobile phone user, the mobile phone user also becomes distanced from the people who are physically proximate, even as

these people become participants in his or her interaction via the mobile phone. For example, I recently heard a woman standing in front of me in line at a store who was speaking quite intimately on her mobile phone about an operation she had recently undergone; she even spoke in considerable detail about dealing with the stitches, and when it came time to pay for her wares she actually had her back to the cashier, and had forgotten that she had already taken a plastic shopping bag, and that she had to pay. "Excuse me," she then said, although not to the cashier, and went on: "I have to pay now – wait!" This woman was almost certainly not a communicating exhibitionist, but rather an absorbed communicator, like the man whose total absorption I observed at a train station. He was talking on his mobile phone and had to cross two tracks to get to the platform where his train was about to arrive. Suddenly the gate that prevents passengers from crossing the tracks when a train is entering or departing the station began to come down. The man on the mobile phone did not notice it until it just missed hitting his head by the slimmest of margins. Many other people at the station saw what was about to happen, except for the man with the mobile phone who, instead of stopping on the right side of the gate, took a quick step out onto the track and, because the gate on the other side of the track was also on its way down, was caught between the gates just as the train arrived. He succeeded in getting under the gate and up onto the platform, all apparently without interrupting his call.

The absorbed communicator is a particularly interesting type in the context of mobile phone communication in public places, not least because this type does not fully accord with Goffman's (1959, for example) characterization of individual behavior as consisting of a functional and an expressive side. The behavior is functional and expressive in relation to the person on the other end of the mobile call, but not in relation to those who are physically proximate while the conversation is underway.⁶ The mobile phone user could be said to be present as a body in the physical location, but absent from the standpoint of consciousness.⁷ Absorbed communicators cope only passably with their functional activities while a mobile call is in progress, and appear to be so occupied by their mobile communication that the expressive side of their behavior in relation to their immediate physical surroundings is "turned off". If

⁶ As noted above, mobile phone users may sometimes "address two different audiences," to quote Rettie (2009: 428), but that is hardly the case with absorbed communicators.

⁷ Gergen (2002) discusses this particular aspect of mobile telephony in terms of "absent presence," while Bauman views mobile telephony as an example of a tendency to devalue the location that he believes exists in "the electronic media world," and writes: "The mobile phone, which offered liberation even from wires and plugs, dealt the final blow to any claim of spiritual solidarity that physical proximity may have had" (Bauman 2002: 50f).

this is so, then absorbed communicators should be expected to "dress socially" once the conversation ends and these communicators once again become aware of their immediate physical surroundings. One indication that such social "dressing" occurs could be the feeling of awakening that can be sensed when a mobile call among strangers ends and the conversationalist again becomes aware of his or her surroundings. It is approximately the same feeling that occurs when, for instance, a passenger on a train gets involved in a conversation with another person or a small group in a setting comprising other physically proximate people who are not participating in the conversation; in other words, when one is involved in a pair or group that is held together by their interaction, but where barriers to perception are absent and the other people there consequently belong to "the outside" but are still present. When the conversation is broken off, for instance, if the other person or people in the group with whom one is conversing get off the train, one might momentarily feel naked among the others with whom one has not been conversing; those on the outside suddenly become part of the front stage, and one must then "dress socially" and put on a facade suitable to the situation.

Using a mobile phone (or handheld mobile phone in some countries) while driving a car is forbidden by law in many parts of the world, such as Belgium, Denmark, and Portugal. In Denmark, 30,000 people are reported to have been fined for talking on their mobile phones while driving in 2009 (according to the Danish Broadcasting Corporation Jan. 8, 2010). The reason for the ban is that mobile phone use interferes with the driver's attention, and what we have here is thus an attempt to legislate the absorbed communicator out from behind the wheel. We may be able to calmly observe an absorbed communicator who has been diverted from his surroundings in a public place, but such people can pose a direct hazard when driving a car. A research overview conducted at the behest of the Swedish Road Administration found that talking on a mobile phone while driving is so distracting that it can pose a threat to safety and, after weighing all the negative consequences, concluded that mobile phone use while driving is comparable to driving under the influence of alcohol. One of the consequences of mobile phone use while driving is in fact "reduced situational awareness" (Brace et al. 2007: 25, see also Patten et al. 2003), as confirmed by the examples from the store and train station cited above, even if those instances did not involve someone who was behind the wheel. We see an illustration of the driver's reduced situational awareness when the authors of the aforementioned research overview discuss the differences between mobile phone conversations in a car and conversations with passengers. Because the driver and the passenger are sharing the situation, the traffic situation affects both individuals' involvement in the conver-

sation, and the passenger is presumed, according to Brace et al., not to allow the conversation to impinge on traffic safety. The circumstances are different in the mobile conversation, precisely in that the party that is remote from the situation is not affected by the traffic situation.

The absorbed communicator defined as a problem lies also behind the fact that several Danish day care centers actually have prohibited the parent's use of mobile phones while leaving and picking up their children. The parents are considered being mentally absent when they are speaking in mobile phones (*Dagens Nyheter* 2010-06-25, "Dagis inför mobilförbud för föräldrar" [Day care center prohibits parent's use of mobil phones]).

Social media and oversharing

Social media, such as blogs and social network sites⁸ like Myspace and Facebook, which may be fully open or available only to a network of personally identified "friends,"⁹ also seem to push the borders between private and public to which we are accustomed in the context of face-to-face encounters, given that some users make their private lives public through these media. A communicating exhibitionist has the complete means to edit his self-presentation and to publish it for the whole world via social media; the problem may be that few or no people will see, hear, or notice it. The question becomes: How do I get other people to notice me? Many techniques have been tried in recent years; everything from nudity, intimacy, and brutal openness to "talking shit" about celebrities, friends, or relatives. All these approaches tend to result in more attention, while at the same time shifting the borders between front- and backstage. It appears that making backstage behavior public is the very thing that draws attention. Making such matters public thus sometimes give rise to "moral panic," and warnings are issued against various risky behaviors among teenagers that are considered to create a risk that such teens will attract "online predators." This is characterized as a problem of oversharing in the context of blogging (e.g. Gould 2008), which means that bloggers tend to disclose

⁸ Boyd & Ellison define such sites as those where individuals can: 1. create wholly or partly public profiles that are accessible within a limited system, and 2. display a list of other users within the same system with whom they have contact. According to Boyd & Ellison (2008: 211), social network sites are not primarily about "networking" with strangers, but rather about displaying one's private network and communicating within it.

⁹ The word "friend" is used in English as a verb in connection with Facebook, that is, friend me (see for example Westlake 2008). As far as I know, no corresponding verb meaning "to make into a friend" exists in Swedish. The meaning of the term "friend" is also transformed when it is quantified in the manner that occurs on Facebook, where people can have 500 or even thousands of "friends." Former EU Commissioner Margot Wallström has close to 5,000 Facebook friends, and she herself sheds light on what "friend" means when one has so many: "It's wonderful to have so many friends, but I'm afraid that it is impossible to respond to all the messages and invitations I receive. But when I have the time, I do try to respond to some of them" (Margot Wallström on her Facebook page, visited May 31, 2010). A friend in this context is thus not someone you know, but rather someone who admires you, a fan.

too much information, or overly private information. Blogs are used in many ways, for example, as a type of public diary, but also as anonymous support groups where people can write about very difficult experiences (such as about their extremely sick children), and thus unburden themselves by speaking in anonymity about things that are hard to talk about face to face.¹⁰ This oversharing of information has been commented on in articles with titles such as "25 Things I Didn't Want to Know About You" in Time magazine (Suddath 2009). In a scientific context, Walther and others have launched the so-called hyperpersonal communication model, which shows that interpersonal relationships can grow more quickly with the help of computer-mediated communication than through face-to-face communication (Walther 1996; Hian et al. 2004), and also supports warnings to the effect that caution is needed online (e.g. Main 2006). Wallace (1999) also touched upon this in her study on the psychology of the Internet: "Paradoxically, some aspects of the net draw out our warmth and openness and lead the shy out of their shells." (1999: 234).

Recently such oversharing of information has also enabled employers and government agencies to monitor people via social media. In one study, the recruiting company Manpower found that 17% of the managers who participated in the study had checked out job applicants online, with the reason most often given being that "they wanted to see whether the applicant's personality fit with the company" (*Dagens Nyheter*, "Employers checking job applicants online" Jan. 29, 2009). Information that is put out on the web is thus considered to say something about the personality of the individual who put it there. Some time ago the Danish Broadcasting Corporation reported that a number of Danish municipal administrators were using Facebook to discover social insurance cheats. Because some people generously share their private lives on Facebook, the municipality was able to discover that, for instance, someone who had stated that they were living separately was actually living with a man when she posted on Facebook that "he is lazy when it comes to doing the vacuuming" (Danish Broadcasting Corporation, "Facebook reveals social insurance cheats" Jan. 24, 2009). American universities reportedly check up on potential students by studying their self-representations in online social media (Jaschik 2009). Depending on the social media being used, parents are also able to monitor their own children's activities in these media. Barnes

¹⁰ The blog as an anonymous support group may have a parallel in the 18th century novel, which, according to Johannisson, became a public stage for "... the feeling 'I'. Emotions literally become visible. They are tools for social communication. ... A powerful language in the melancholic tradition is activated: anyone who takes the world seriously must also make himself vulnerable to the world. Satisfied well-being is for simple souls" (2009: 95).

(2006) speaks in this context of a "privacy paradox," which means that young people disclose information about themselves in order to be able to participate in social network sites and are then surprised when their parents gain access to that information. In a study of bloggers, Viégas (2006) shows that even though the bloggers know they are responsible for the contents of their blogs, they do not appear to be aware of the risk that the information they post on their blogs could be misused.

This brings us back to the student who was blacklisted from potential future internship sites because he could not differentiate between front- and backstage in his blog. What did he gain from oversharing information, or from pushing the borders between front- and backstage? Writers of books on etiquette might say that it was attributable to his being an inconsiderate individualist. Another idea is to view him, as I did in the mobile phone study, as a communicating exhibitionist who is managing other people's impressions of himself by revealing a backstage in an uncustomary manner. One factor in favor of this idea is that he had a group of other students who cheered him on when revelations from various backstage regions occurred (this pertains not only to events inside the school, but also to things that happened at, for instance, student parties when people were highly intoxicated). From this perspective, the blog would be triggered in a group-dynamic interplay between individual and group. Another way to interpret those who blog beyond the limits of propriety is to view them as absorbed communicators who completely forget their surroundings. However, as absorbed communicators, bloggers differ from the aforementioned mobile phone users in one important respect: they are remote absorbed communicators, and not in physical proximity to those with whom they are (indirectly) communicating. To understand the special features of this particular type of communication, we will draw below on Goffman's distinction between "expressions given" and "expressions given off."

3. Differences and similarities between physically proximate interaction and social media

We do not watch the Internet in the way we watch TV, writes Castells (2009: 64), but rather we live the Internet. A great deal of what occurs in our face-to-face lives also obviously appears on the Internet (which has 1.8 billion users, according to Internet World Stats, May 21, 2010). Many people report on their lives and comment on what is happening in a diary-like manner in blogs (126 million users, according to Pingdom Jan. 22, 2010). Something similar

occurs on the microblog Twitter (105 million users according to The Huffington Post April 30, 2010), albeit using a maximum of 140 characters per post. Facebook (350 million users according to Pingdom Jan. 22, 2010) is one of many "social network sites" that can be used to build and display one's own personal network. All of these Internet applications resemble the face-to-face world, but are not identical to it. The difference between blogs and traditional diaries is that diaries are private, while blogs are open to others. One difference between Facebook and social networks in the face-to-face world is that, as noted above, it is possible to have thousands of Facebook friends, as a result of the expansion of the word "friend" to encompass everything from what we would refer to as a friend in a "normal context" to acquaintances of acquaintances whom we do not even know personally. Most of what is on the Internet is also interactive in the sense that you can comment on what other people write, as frequently occurs in social media, and share in the interactions of others. This alters the social interaction to some extent, in that the Internet's interactivity allows us to approach strangers, something that can be difficult in f2f, as Goffman, in particular, has shown. This interactivity also gives rise to other interesting features, such as the Internet tools that are used to manage party invitations.¹¹ These tools make it possible to monitor the process in which invited guests accept, decline, or simply fail to respond to an invitation. The invitees are thus exposed to a sort of anonymous group pressure to behave appropriately, such as by responding to the invitation. Even online commemorative sites for the dead, such as "Eviga minnen" ["The Eternal Memory"] (www.evigaminnen.se) and "Tributes" (www.tributes.com) offer a form of interactivity in that the visitor can light a candle for the dead person, or even write in a guest book, addressing comments to the survivors or even to the dead person.

"Living" the Internet thus does not mean that we live it in the same way we live our face-to-face lives. There are, for instance, differences between social interaction on the Internet and face to face. Determining what even constitutes social interaction on the Internet requires some measure of thought, since the interaction does not occur face to face but rather is mediated by computers that are connected in a network. The network user creates representations of him or herself, with the help of which he or she can communicate with other people's representations. The representation is an assumed character, a role or mask that can differ substantially from, or be nearly identical to, the person who assumes it. The mere fact of adopting

¹¹ For example, the program Evite (www.evite.com) is being used to organize the invitations to a dinner for members of the "Language and society" research committee, within which this paper will be discussed at the 2010 International Sociology Congress.

a user name, even if it is one's own name, entails the creation of a representation that is not identical with the person assuming it. In the pages below I will consequently refer to such a representation as a persona, and refer to any interaction between such personae on the Internet as persona-to-persona interaction (p2p). I would thus also point out that those who interact in this way can never be truly certain that the persona with whom they are letting their own persona interact is really a representation of the particular person with whom they believe they are interacting.¹² However, this difference must not be overstated, as we cannot be fully certain that the persons with whom we interact f2f are the persons they give themselves out to be, either, which is in fact the existential condition for Goffman's sociological perspective. In brief, the basic idea is that we attempt to control other people's impressions of ourselves by assuming roles in relation to norms that regulate how we are supposed to interact with others, and how we are to behave, be, look, etc. In light of this, permit me to draw a comparison between f2f and p2p based on Goffman's sociological perspectives.

A general comparison between f2f and p2p

Goffman's studies generally address interactions between people who are in physical proximity to one another, close enough that they can see, hear, touch, and sense one another's body heat and odor. Goffman refers to the information that one individual can obtain from another in such encounters as "social information," which is communicated via expressions given and expressions given off. Expressions given are verbal symbols and the like that the individual uses to express information. Expressions given off consist of body language and other things that the body does, such as perspiring or blushing, and which can be interpreted by others as symptomatic or non-symptomatic expressions of the individual who is giving them off.

The individual controls the expressions given to a fairly large extent. Expressions given off are an entirely different matter, and control over them lies to a greater extent with the other people in the individual's surroundings, since it is they who define the expressions being given off by the individual as symptomatic in their perception of the individual doing the action. The boundaries between these types of expressions are not clear-cut. Expressions given off include things that the body does, sometimes against our will: perspiring, laughing, shaking, crying, intestinal rumblings, and blushing are examples that can be interpreted by others as

¹² In light of this, we may also speak of Internet interaction in terms of avatar-to-avatar interaction in the sense that, in order to be able to interact with others on the Internet, we must in most cases assume a personality or "user identity," and not just a user name.

symptomatic of various things. Imagine a person who is about to give a lecture. He has learned to control his voice, which sounds steady, but for the moment he can do little about his hands, which are shaking because he is nervous. We may notice the shaking when he puts up an overhead picture or raises a glass of water to his lips. Inherent in this situation is a tension between the expressions that the person is giving and giving off. Another lecturer may have control over both forms of expression, while yet another may have no control over either.

Goffman writes that the very acts of existence produce expressions: "Individuals ... exude expressions" (Goffman 1970: 5). And in another context he writes: "Performers can stop giving expressions but cannot stop giving them off" (Goffman 1959: 108). Even silence can be an expression given off in cases where an individual can choose between speaking and silence. The richest interaction in terms of expressions given off is interaction face to face, since all the senses are (or can be) acted upon during the interaction. In his essay "Replies and responses" Goffman offers a detailed analysis of the conditions that prevail in a face-to-face conversation. He chooses to view the conversation as a system, whose function requires that the following conditions be met:

- "1. A two-way capability for transceiving acoustically adequate and readily interpretable messages.
2. Back-channel feedback capabilities for informing on reception while it is occurring.
3. Contact signals: means of announcing the seeking of a channeled connection, means of ratifying that the sought-for channel is now open, means of closing off a theretofore open channel. Included here, identification-authentication signs.
4. Turnover signals: means to indicate ending of a message and the taking over of the sending role by next speaker. (In the case of talk with more than two persons, next speaker selection signals, whether 'speaker selects' or 'self-select' types.)
5. Preemption signals: means of inducing a rerun, holding off channel requests, interrupting a talker in progress.
6. Framing capabilities: cues distinguishing special readings to apply across strips of bracketed communication, recasting otherwise conventional sense, as in making ironic asides, quoting another, joking, and so forth; and hearer signals that the resulting transformation has been followed.
7. Norms obliging respondents to reply honestly with whatever they know that is relevant and no more.
8. Non-participant constraints regarding eavesdropping, competing noises, and the blocking of pathways for eye-to-eye signals." (Goffman 1981: 14-15).

Goffman describes the conversation here in a highly technical manner¹³, which is done for analytical purposes so that we can see the component elements as clearly as possible. We can use this description as a tool to compare f2f and p2p:

Figure 1: Comparison of f2f and p2p as communication systems

System requirements for talk as a communication system	F2F	P2P
1. two-way transeiving capability	Yes	Yes
2. back-channel feedback capabilities	Yes	Limited, since the interacting individuals are not in one another's physical presence
3. contact signals	Yes	Yes
4. turnover signals	Yes	Yes, but they are taking turns mechanically.
5. preemption signals	Yes	Yes, but it is not, for instance, possible to interrupt anyone in the middle of their "speech," and interruptions can occur only after the post has been completed. The character of the interruption is however different because it has to be indicated by, for example, a change in subject or that the interactants actually tells that there is going to be an interruption.
6. framing capabilities	Yes	Limited, but present with the help of, for instance, emoticons
7. norms obliging honesty	Yes	Yes, but more difficult to monitor compliance, given the minimal social information
8. non-participant constraints	Yes	Yes, with the help of various technical solutions

Both f2f and p2p correspond to the system requirements formulated by Goffman with regard to the conversation as a communication system, although p2p is limited in various respects. The differences can generally be reflected using two metaphors: f2f may be described as an encounter between two flows of different types of expressions (both given and given off), while p2p can be likened to a ping-pong communication model in which the technical limitations on the flows of expressions make the transitions in terms of turn-taking, framing and back-channel cues highly distinct, and mechanical.¹⁴ The flow from one person to another in f2f actually consists of two parallel streams that can have the same or contradictory messages.

¹³ "We would thus be dealing with talk as a communications engineer might, someone optimistic about the possibility of culture-free formulations" (Goffman 1981: 14).

¹⁴ It should be noted that different types of both f2f and p2p interaction exist. There are, for instance, distinct differences between f2f interaction, in which the people involved are physically close to one another, and interaction on Skype. The latter variant of f2f lacks the elements of body language related to odor and touch, in addition to which the other person is perceived as a flat surface. In corresponding fashion there are different types of p2p interaction, depending on different technical solutions, as can be illustrated by the difference between the relative abundance of options that Facebook has to offer compared to Twitter's relative paucity.

Metacommunication (communication about the ongoing communication) is also possible in that one person involved in f2f can, so to speak, comment on one stream of expressions with the help of the other.

In conversations between people who are in physical proximity to one another, everything flows into each other and is held together by the situation being shared by the conversationalists. Take for instance the apparently trivial question "What's the time?" and the answer "Five". This conversational sequence requires a specific context, a particular situation that is shared by the conversationalists. You can get an illustration of this by writing the question "What's the time?" in a letter or e-mail and sending it to a friend; the fact that you are not sharing the situation then becomes apparent in that the question cannot be answered without reservation, and instead of getting "Five" as an answer, you might get a response such as "It's five o'clock here, don't know what time it is by you" or "As I read your e-mail the time is six o'clock, but I see that you sent it at five." When I posted the question "What's the time?" on Twitter and Facebook, I obviously did not get the implicit response, but rather mostly silence and in some cases, reflections on how we organize time (see also Castells 1999: 464 et seq.).

Broad and narrow transmission of expressions

I am convinced that the differences between f2f and p2p in terms of the capacity to send and transmit expressions have a major impact on the definition of borders between front- and backstage. We can speak of broad transmission in the sense that, face-to-face, we share the situation and thus transmit a high volume of expressions to one another. In the less expression-rich interactions achieved by means of various aids such as letters, telephone, e-mail, or social media, we may speak instead of narrow transmission.¹⁵ A broad transmission of expressions includes verbal speech, non-verbal sounds, and body language expressions. In a face-to-face conversation, we speak with one another by means of words and so-called "back-channel cues," which Goffman describes thus:

¹⁵ I have tried out various expressions to capture the distinction between these different interactions, such as full and limited transfer, which unfortunately has a normative ring; elaborated and restricted transfer, expressions inspired by Bernstein (e.g. 1983) in which, in particular, the word "prepared" is misleading because we suspect an actor who prepares his or her expressions given while, as noted earlier, we generally do not control all of our expressions given. Goffman (1959: 2) also speaks of broad and narrow communication. The two expressions I do use, that is, broad and narrow transmission, allude to bandwidth in a technical communications context, and it may be that we can speak of social bandwidth when discussing the scope of information transmission that occurs in various social interactions. See also Walther (1996: 20f), who has compared f2f with interaction by computer.

”It would be helpful to have available, and oblige the use of, ’back-channel cues’ (facial gestures and nonverbal vocalizations) from hearers so that while the speaker was speaking, he could know, among other things, that he was succeeding or failing to get across, being informed of this while attempting to get across.” (Goffman 1981: 12)

We can speak here of an immediate coordination between the conversationalists in which body language is extremely important. Body language is situation-dependent and, in principle, cannot be communicated beyond the situation shared by the interactors, or as Father Kent Wisti put it in a radio church service: ”You can't smell sweat on Facebook” (based on a quote in *Svenska Dagbladet*¹⁶ April 21, 2009). That to which we somewhat carelessly refer as body language comprises many different activities that Ekman & Friesen term ”non-verbal behavior” and define as ”any motion or position of the face and/or body” (1981: 57). Kendon speaks instead of ”non-verbal communication,” describing it as ”all the ways in which, in one another's presence, people communicate without words” (1981: 3). Wiemann & Harrison (1983) delineate a particular area of social interaction that they refer to as ”non-verbal interaction.” Fast speaks simply of ”body language” and delineates it as ”all possible movements of the body, everything from the fully conscious to the 100% unconscious” (1984: 15).¹⁷

Because Goffman mainly studied interaction between physically proximate people, individuals sharing a physical space, he discussed non-verbal communication comprehensively and consistently. Expressions given off consist to a large extent of bodily expressions, and when he analyzed social interaction in public places (such as streets, parks, restaurants, theatres, stores, dance halls, and meeting rooms, to use Goffman's own examples), the real point is that the individuals in a public place communicate to a large extent as bodies (often in fluid encounters). Goffman refers to this type of interaction as unfocused interaction (as opposed to focused interaction, in which the interactors have a common interaction focus) and, according to Goffman (1966: 34), it occurs through non-verbal expressions to a greater extent than does focused interaction. Goffman speaks here of a sort of body symbolism, a special language (body idiom) of behaviors and gestures:

”Although an individual can stop talking, he cannot stop communicating through body idiom; he must say either the right thing or the wrong thing. He cannot say nothing. Para-

¹⁶ A Swedish newspaper.

¹⁷ For the sake of order, I should also note a use of a term that is related to body language, namely "body expression," which appears to be used in some psychotherapy contexts in the sense of bodily expressions that mirror the character of the individual (Lowen 1971).


doxically, the way in which he can give the least amount of information about himself – although this is still appreciable – is to fit in and act as persons of his kind are expected to act.” (Goffman 1966: 35)

Individuals manage and organize their social interactions in public places with the help of externalization and scanning. Goffman also refers to externalization as body gloss (Goffman 1971: 11f, 122ff), which is a sort of clarifying and amplifying of body expression, such as occurs when, because of a mishap like a credit card getting stuck in a vending machine, a person uses exaggerated gestures to try and make the situation clear to the strangers standing in the line. Scanning refers to the ”reading” of strangers in a public place so that people can smoothly adjust to one another, such as occurs when people meet on the sidewalk.¹⁸

In narrow transmission, which is narrow in the sense that it consists to a greater extent of expressions given and to a lesser extent of expressions given off, various things are done to compensate for the relative paucity of expressions given off. The scent of perfume on a love letter is one such example, as is a photograph of the interactor in a Twitter exchange. The characters used in computer-mediated communication to copy expressions given off, such as smileys or emoticons¹⁹, become expressions given, since the sender fully controls them. They are often used to create distance and partially recode the content of the text in a humorous or ironic manner. The ways in which individuals express themselves in text, misspellings and other expressive peculiarities that can differentiate one person from another can become expressions given off in computer-mediated communication. For instance, how do our perceptions of a person who uses abbreviations differ from our perceptions of someone who writes words out in full, or of someone who writes ”symtomatic” as opposed to someone who writes ”symptomatic,” or of someone who writes ”excrement” as opposed to someone else who writes ”shit”?

¹⁸ If we consider the body language discourse using these two terms, we can see that much of the scientific part of this discourse has to do with externalization, i.e. the non-verbal communication in which body language is important. With regard to scanning or reading other people, we find that it is much more pronounced in the practical part of the body language discourse. This brings us to the type of do-it-yourself books where the reader is offered the ability to learn how to read other people. These books have titles such as *How to Read a Person Like a Book* (Nierenberg & Calero 1980), *Konsten att läsa tankar* [The Art of Reading Thoughts] (Fexeus 2009), *Reading People* (Dimitrius & Mazzarella 1999) and *What Every Body Is Saying* (Navarro & Karlins 2008). The latter two books combine scientific and professional knowledge. Dimitrius is a PhD, and an expert in scanning or reading actors in court trials. Her co-author is an attorney. Navarro is a former FBI agent and an expert in reading people in interrogations, while his co-author is a psychologist and professor in the field of management.

¹⁹ The development of the language in computer-mediated communication often has to do with creative adaptations to the particular conditions that apply to such communication (see, for instance, Wallace 1999 and Hård af

Segerstad 2002), and emoticons such as :-) and smileys as  exemplify this.

In principle, the difference between expressions given and expressions given off in f2f as opposed to p2p is that the recipient has a more limited basis for his or her interpretations of expressions given. Almost the only means of feedback available to a person sitting at her or his computer and entering text to be posted on, for instance, a blog, and which "everyone" will soon be able to read, is expressions given. The person is not in physical proximity to the recipient, and thus has no access to the expressions given off that escape during face-to-face interaction. The situation that he or she shares with others thus differs markedly in terms of "the human and material setting," to quote Goffman (1964: 133), since it is not a situation that is characterized by physical proximity. Here we instead encounter an "absence of regulating feedback" to borrow an expression from Kiesler et al. (1988: 661), or at least the absence of immediate regulating feedback, albeit not of delayed feedback. If we again recall the blogger who expressed himself in disparaging terms regarding the children and young people he encountered at his internship, we find that he receives no immediate signals in the form of harsh looks, serious faces, or knit brows from his surroundings that could induce him to moderate, alter, retract, explain, etc. He doesn't either get any uh-huhs or uhms since it would appear strange to write them (Wallace 1999: 16) and anyhow too late. His text is instead published in full, and changes cannot be made until after the reader has read it, and not while it is en route from brain to organ of speech, as is the case in f2f. The element of automatic coordination between interactors that is also present in face-to-face encounters has been replaced in computer-mediated communication by the ping-pong model of interaction described above. This particular dynamic, which requires us, in a sense, to express a great deal from the outset and not communicate our way forward along a winding path toward shared meanings, could explain why we sometimes tend to say too much online or, more precisely, write things that we may later regret.

4. Borders between front- and backstage in social media

The difference between front- and backstage is one of how an individual performs in relation to different audiences. Audience segregation, which is maintained with the help of barriers to perception, creates the conditions for a division into an public part of the space that is shared by individuals who are performing for one another, and another part in which those particular individuals do not share. Goffman referred to the part of the space in which the individual is more expressive in his or her actions in front of the audience as the stage, or front stage. The backstage is hidden from the audience. Here, individuals can (but do not have to) act diffe-

rently than they would act on the front stage. Backstage actions may be influenced by the audience (e.g., by whether there is any audience at all, or whether it is a different audience from the one addressed from the front stage). The relationship between these stages is not set, but rather what is shown to the audience in one instance may differ from what is shown at another time, depending, for instance, on the ways in which various institutions influence interplay between individuals. Goffman studied, in particular, two such institutions that have an immediate influence on how borders between front- and backstage are drawn: the interaction order (Goffman 1953; 1983) and the identity-values of a society (Goffman 1963). The interaction order is, firstly, based on two different types of norms: norms of deference that regulate how we are expected to treat other people, and norms of demeanor, which regulate what we are expected to do and say in the presence of others, that is, what is suitable in a given situation (Goffman 1959). The former type of norms pertains more to what is called ethics in the sense of morality, while the latter pertains more to etiquette interpreted as rules of social conduct. Second, the identity-values are described as normative and institutional regulations of expectations and preconceptions about how individuals are supposed to be, behave, look, and act. Deviations from the identity-values can be stigmatizing (Goffman 1963), which means that the individual becomes defined as a deviant from his or her surroundings. The norms that regulate interaction and identity can vary over time, from society to society, and between different parts of a society.

In f2f interaction, the physical proximity between the interactors is the most important constitutive factor in terms of the borders between front- and backstage. Differences between front- and backstage are established through barriers to perception and physical movements from space to space. Some places are always more backstage than others; for instance, despite changes over time, the bathroom is more backstage than public places. The individual must thus develop a sort of region competence, so that behavior can be segregated in relation to the prevailing region. This is particularly evident when it comes to all activities associated with the body and various bodily secretions. The individual develops this behavioral competence by learning to assign the right behavior to the right region, and thus learns what can be shown and what should be concealed.

The communicative situation in terms of social media is fundamentally different. It might be likened to a situation in which individuals in an apartment complex sit inside their own apartments and communicate with one another by calling out through windows that open onto

a common area. Any location can serve as a node in a social online network, given the technical connectivity options that exist. The node is presumably often located in the user's home or at work or school, and that very circumstance should have a bearing on how the user communicates, specifically in that the user is often present in a private backstage area, communicating with others in the same situation. However, the communication may also be experienced by others in a manner akin to the situation in the apartment complex above, and in that sense the user is front stage.²⁰

Social media entail the creation of a private place in public, the backstage nature of which is underscored in that the individual is often actually in his or her private physical backstage when the communication occurs. This, I believe, can increase the likelihood of oversharing. The oversharing of information can, in a manner consistent with the study of mobile phone calls in public places referred to above, be a result of inconsiderate individualism (failure to comply with norms of suitable behavior in the presence of others), exhibitionism, or absorbed communication. This increases the likelihood that one might, so to speak, think out loud in a way that may be perceived as inappropriate. In a study of 124 bloggers, Mazur & Kozarian (2010) found that nearly 80% of blog posts had to do with the blogger him or herself, which could be an indication that the blog is a self-centered social medium. This could also mean that the blog is more of a backstage medium. In connection with this one can assume that it is of importance that the interactants in social media can stay anonymous and consequently to a lesser degree can be kept responsible for their writings. According to Wallace: "People can act in very uninhibited ways when they think no one can find out who they really are. In the environments that offer this, or at least offer some measure of it, people tend to let loose in both positive and negative ways." (Wallace 1999: 239).

Facebook appears to be focused more on the user's social network, and the individual's network activities can be interpreted in different ways. One interesting interpretation is offered by Tufekci (2008b) in her application of Dunbar's (1996) analyses of the physically proximate socializing that arises among apes when they clean and groom one another. Dunbar believes that grooming is the most important mechanism in binding smaller groups of primates together. Indeed, the human variant of grooming, which is referred to as "verbal grooming" by

²⁰ In his early study of social interaction through "electronic media," Meyrowitz (1985) indicates that the boundary between public and private behavior becomes indistinct in such media. He also describes a type of gray area that arises because the boundary between front and backstage becomes unclear. See also Tufekci (2008a) for a discussion of audience segregation in social media.

Adelswärd (2009), consists of a number of different components that can be related to the establishment and maintenance of social bonds. One of these consists of a sort of constant social updating of one's personal network through gossip and chitchat, and by presenting it to and comparing it with others, that can be described as follows:

”Who is doing what with whom, and whether it's a good or a bad thing; who is in and who is out, and why; how to deal with a difficult social situation involving a lover, child or colleague.”(Dunbar 1996: 4)

This is not a description of Facebook, but rather of a chat at a café to which Dunbar's research team listened. But it could just as well have been a description of the conversation in the lunchroom of a university department, the gossip at a beauty salon, the content of a magazine with articles about celebrities, or activity on Facebook. However, while such verbal social grooming is more interwoven into the routines of daily life, it tends, at least on Facebook, to become refined into a differentiated and specialized function.

Such social activity on Facebook could explain why the borders between front- and backstage are defined somewhat differently there than in a number of other arenas. The conversational tone on Facebook sometimes resembles that of a family that is working on their social bonds, even though many people outside the family may sometimes share in the exchange. It is possible, however, to delimit one's personal Facebook network using the various technical audience-segregating settings that the user can make in Facebook independently. Max Persson (2010) has studied this, and describes all the choices that Facebook users can make in designing their personal networks. There are fully 160 choices related to Facebook's four levels of privacy: ”Everyone” (open to everyone on the Internet), ”Friends of friends,” ”Friends Only,” and ”Customized” (access given only to people identified by name). However, part of the situation is the fact that Facebook is never fully private, since its owners are entitled to share in all the information on Facebook under certain conditions. Do the users then make such choices? A survey that Persson conducted among Facebook users showed that nearly half of the 155 respondents made heavy use of their ability to ”control whom you will share information with on Facebook” (Persson 2010: 21). An equal percentage indicated that they had removed pictures of themselves from Facebook on several occasions because they considered them to be too personal. Although this survey is based on too small a body of material to enable generalization, one can conclude from it that a relatively large share of this particular selection of Facebook users is working actively with the border between front- and backstage. A study of

the ways in which users manage photos on Facebook and Flickr points in the same direction (Van House 2009), as do the "facerape" phenomenon. This is a sort of practical joke among friends that involves posting something on someone else's Facebook page when that person has left his or her computer unguarded and is logged onto Facebook. For instance, it can occur when a coworker has gone on an errand and someone else passing by writes something derogatory about the absent person on that person's Facebook page. It is a sort of variation on losing face, and means that someone has lost control over their Facebook page for a period of time. To judge from the 699 examples that were collected by the Facebook group F.A.C.E Raped, the backstage "content" on Facebook is generally the same as in life otherwise: the lower body, emotions, and sex.

But there are other features of social media that probably affect the definition of the borders between front- and backstage. In f2f interaction, the interactors can transmit information to one another through body language, and such information can enforce norms and make it known that certain behaviors are inappropriate, for example, through glances, expressions, and bodily movements, and this can occur at the same time as verbal expressions are being sent. The ping-pong model of interaction in the context of social media entails the interactor writing something (sending expressions) before other interactors can in turn write back. There is very little opportunity for the parallel sending and transmission of expressions, and thus little or no opportunity for back-channel cues. First of all, this means that the one party must send out (write) too much before it becomes possible to make adjustments, and it may be that the border between front- and backstage has already been overstepped.²¹ Second, the efforts of others to make adjustments cannot occur until after the limits of what is deemed respectable and proper have already been overstepped, with the result that the person overstepping the border will likely lose face, and thus must choose between apology and defense, rather than between "will I say/write this?" and "will I not?" In the context of this discussion, the forms of interaction that are peculiar to social media lead, in theory, to a rapid escalation of conflict, thereby creating special conditions for what Goffman called "civil inattention". This refers to a situation in which two interactors who are unknown to one another act in such a way that they both see and do not see one another, for instance, when they meet on the sidewalk and scan one another to acknowledge each other's existence, and then shortly thereafter lower their gazes to demonstrate that the other person is not attracting anything other than absent-

²¹ This could probably also explain malicious comments on the Internet.

mindful interest (which signifies that he or she is considered "normal"). Such interactions are wordless and require physical proximity, and it remains to be determined whether civil inattention can be exercised in social media and, if so, how. I would imagine that some distorted form of civil inattention occurs in social media through "silence," that is, one interactor choosing not to try to rectify transgressions of the border between front- and backstage. It is possible that such an attempt at informative silence could be interpreted as approval of the border transgression. This may be due in part to the fact that informative silence in f2f is never just silence, and the verbal silence is instead supported by expressions given off. The body is thus not silent when it is in physical proximity to other bodies. Nor is the body silent in social media, but there is no one else who can "hear" it, with the result that silence in p2p interaction probably not is informative but actual silence.

5. Concluding remarks

To conclude, I will attempt to answer the question that has served as the basis for this paper, namely: What is it in "social media" as media and in the communicative situation of the person using them that constitutes front- and backstage and the border dividing them?

The character of social media can be summarized as follows in a general comparison with face-to-face interaction:

Figure 2: Face-to-face and social media as media

	Face to face	Social media
Space	Shared physical space, physical proximity	Shared computer network
Time	Same time	Time can vary
Language	Verbal language, body language (written language and symbols possible)	Written language, symbols
Social information	Broad transmission of expressions	Narrow transmission

The spatial and physical separation between the interactors thus distinguishes social media, even as the audience segregation can, at the same time, be difficult to maintain.

The communicative situation of the user in social media is paradoxical. On the one hand, the user has much greater opportunity to edit the expressions he or she sends out, thereby enabling highly controlled self-presentations. In the physically proximate face-to-face interactions,

it is possible to compare other people's self-presentations against the highly body-language-based social information that can be gathered about the person with whom one is interacting. Self-presentations are thus less vulnerable with the interactors separated in space. On the other hand, the risk appears to be greater that the user will send out overly unconsidered expressions, think out loud, say too much, and become indiscreet because he or she is unable to benefit from the expressions given off that we constantly receive from (and give to) the other people involved in face-to-face interaction. The amount of regulating social feedback decreases markedly in social media, thereby increasing the tendency to "overshare" information.

It may require further research, and will definitely require more critical reflection to determine whether this paradoxical situation causes the border between front- and backstage to be delineated differently in social media than in f2f, or if the relatively greater control over self-presentations and the tendency to overshare information in social media cancel one another out.

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²² A Swedish newspaper.

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