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*Citation for published version (APA):*
Persson, A. (2012). Front- and backstage in social media. *Language, Discourse & Society*, *1*(2), 11-31.
http://www.language-and-society.org/journal/1-2/language_discourse_society_1-2.pdf

Total number of authors:
1

# FRONT- AND BACKSTAGE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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**Abstract**

Oversharing of information about one's private life or the private lives of others appears to be an oft-noted phenomenon in the context of social media. This paper aims at answering the following question: What is it in social media as media and in the communicative situation of the person using them that facilitate oversharing of private information? A comparative analysis of face-to-face interaction and interaction in social media is conducted. The two forms of interaction are compared, firstly, by using Erving Goffman's system model of communication, which consists of eight different system requirements and system constraints, and, secondly, by comparing expressions given, expressions given off and front- and backstage in face-to-face interaction and interaction in social media. The difference between face-to-face interaction and social media has to do with differences in the very natures of the two forms of interaction. The almost automatic coordination between interactors that we find in face-to-face interaction has in social media been replaced by a ping-pong model of interaction in which the technical limitations on the flows of expressions make the transitions in terms of turn-taking, framing and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. 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.

## 1. Introduction

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, such as blogs and social network sites like Myspace and Facebook. These sites may be fully open or available only to a network of personally identified "friends," (friend meaning someone you know or someone that knows someone you know or someone who knows of you). Some people using social media seems to push the borders between what is normally considered private and public, proper and improper and headlines such as the following point in this direction: "All of you are 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). Even particularly media-experienced people seems to think out loud far too much on Facebook, for example a media consultant in the Danish Liberal Party who 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*[2] April 7, 2010). The question is not whether these statements are true or not, rather if it´s appropriate to say them in public or not. In other words: if the statements belong to a front or a back region and consequently being front- or backstage (Goffman 1959).

Not maintaining the border between front- and backstage is often characterized as a problem of oversharing, which means that users of blogs and social network sites tend to disclose too much information, or overly private information (see e.g. Gould 2008). 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).

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[1] A Swedish newspaper.
[2] A Swedish newspaper.

Recently such oversharing of information has also enabled employers and government agencies to monitor people via social media. In a 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*, Jan. 29, 2009). 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*, Jan. 24, 2009). Further, 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 (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.

In this paper[3] I will analyze oversharing in social media, using and thereby demonstrating the usefulness of some of the central concepts of Erving Goffman. The purpose of the paper is to answer the following question:

What is it in social media as media and in the communicative situation of the person using them that facilitate oversharing of private information?

## 2. Differences and similarities between physically proximate interaction and social media

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[3] A former version of the paper was presented in the session "Studies of Language: Contributions to the Discipline" organized by the Research Committee Language and Society at the XVII World Congress of Sociology, Gothenburg July 11-17, 2010, arranged by the International Sociological Association (ISA). I wish to thank Dr. Corinne Kirchner, Dr. Wade Nelson, Mr. Max Persson, and Dr. Lisbeth Ranagården for feedback on an earlier version of the paper. Part of this article also appears in Swedish in my book Ritualisering och sårbarhet - ansikte mot ansikte med Goffmans perspektiv på social interaktion [Ritualization and vulnerability - face-to-face with Goffman´s perspective on social interaction] (Liber publishing house 2012). A summary in English is availiable in the Erving Goffman Archives: http://cdclv.unlv.edu//ega/articles/ritualization.pdf

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.[4] Many people report on their lives and comment on what is happening in a diary-like manner in blogs.[5] Something similar occurs on the microblog Twitter,[6] albeit using a maximum of 140 characters per post. Facebook[7] is one of many "social network sites" that can be used to build and display one's own personal network.[8] 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 usually would refer to as a friend 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 (1971), 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 (for example Evite). 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

4 Internet has 2.1 billion users, according to Internet World Stats: http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm (visited 2012-01-16).
5 152 million users according to Pingdom 2011-01-12: http://royal.pingdom.com/2011/01/12/internet-2010-in-numbers/ (visited 2012-01-16).
6 Around 100 million users (McMillan 2011).
7 800 million users according to Facebook, http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics (visited 2012-01-16).
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.

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 (f2f) 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 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. 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 gives themselves out to be, either, which is in fact one of the existential conditions 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 perspective.

*2.1 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 and touch each other, and sometimes also 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 (Goffman 1959: 2). Expressions given are verbal and other symbols 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 or non-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, different body sounds, and blushing are examples that can be interpreted by others as symptomatic of various things. Imagine a person who is about to give a lecture. He or she has learned to control the voice, which sounds steady, but for the moment he/she can do little about his hands, which are shaking because he/she is nervous. We may notice the shaking when he/she puts up an overhead picture or raises a glass of water to the 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 choosing between speaking and silence is essential. 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 manner,[9] 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 face-to-face-interaction (f2f) and persona-to-persona-interaction (p2p):

**Figure 1: Comparison of f2f and p2p as communication systems**

| System requirements for talk as a communication system | f2f | p2p |
|---|---|---|
| 1. two-way transceiving 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.

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

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.[10] The flow from one person to another in f2f actually consists of two parallel streams that can have the same or contradictory messages. 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.

To conclude: f2f and p2p are very different communicative situations. 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. 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 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" (see also Castells 1999: 464 et seq.).

*2.2 Broad and narrow transmission of expressions*

Differences between f2f and p2p in terms of the capacity to send and transmit expressions have a major impact on the communicative situation of the interacting person. We can speak of broad transmission in the sense that, face-to-face, we share the situation and thus transmit a large 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. 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:

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10 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 inter-action 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.

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[11]* 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).[12]

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 point is that the individuals in a public place communicate to a large extent as bodies (often in liquid 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 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:

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11 A Swedish newspaper.
12 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).

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. Paradoxically, 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 expressions, 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.

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 photo of the interactor in a Twitter exchange. The characters used in computer-mediated communication to copy expressions given off, such as smileys or emoticons,[13] 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 constantly using capitals, or of someone who writes "excrement" as opposed to someone else who writes "shit"?

In principle, the difference between expressions given and expressions given off in f2f and p2p is that the recipient in p2phas 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

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13 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).

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, as shown earlier, the absence of immediate regulating feedback, albeit not of delayed feedback. An interactant will, in this situation, not receive any immediate signals in the form of looks, serious faces, or knit brows from his surroundings that could induce her or him to moderate, alter, retract, explain, etc. He/she doesn´t either get any uh-huhs or uhms since it would appear strange to write them (Wallace 1999: 16) and anyhow they will be received to late. His or her 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 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 overshare information online.

## 3. 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 a 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 (1959) 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 front region, the stage, or front stage. The back region or backstage, on the other hand, is hidden from the audience. Here, individuals can (but do not have to) act differently 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 in the front region). 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, the situational proprieties (Goffman 1959; 1967). 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.[14] One might say that social media often connect back regions in the front region.

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 back region when the communication occurs. This, I believe, can increase the likelihood of oversharing, 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).

Compared to the blog 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 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)

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14 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.

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 social grooming in f2f 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, facial 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 (give 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. In other words there are no mechanism in social media to correct wrongdoings while doing them.[15] 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-minded 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

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

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 an informative but an actual silence.

## 4. Concluding remarks

To conclude, 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, because of the physical separation of the interactors, 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.

The difference between the communicative situation in interaction face to face and social media is a difference in the way expressions given and expressions given off have to be combined. Face to face these different kinds of expressions are intertwined because of the physical proximity of the interactors, while social media, in comparison, are characterized by oversharing of expressions given and undersharing of expressions given off.

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