

# The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online

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## Abstract

Presentation of self (via Goffman) is becoming increasingly popular as a means for explaining differences in meaning and activity of online participation. This article argues that self-presentation can be split into performances, which take place in synchronous “situations,” and artifacts, which take place in asynchronous “exhibitions.” Goffman’s dramaturgical approach (including the notions of front and back stage) focuses on situations. Social media, on the other hand, frequently employs exhibitions, such as lists of status updates and sets of photos, alongside situational activities, such as chatting. A key difference in exhibitions is the virtual “curator” that manages and redistributes this digital content. This article introduces the exhibitional approach and the curator and suggests ways in which this approach can extend present work concerning online presentation of self. It introduces a theory of “lowest common denominator” culture employing the exhibitional approach.

## Keywords

Goffman, online identity, performance, exhibition, privacy, symbolic interactionism

All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely  
players: They have their exits and their entrances; And one  
man in his time plays many parts.

—Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2/7

There is a distinct irony in Shakespeare’s claim, as spoken by Jacques in *As You Like It*. Shakespeare is not remembered for his charisma, his looks, or his wit at parties but for his voluminous plays and sonnets. The world is not only a stage but also a library and a gallery. We do not merely move through life’s stages, as Jacques’s monologue suggests, but leave a multitude of data traces as we go. In an era of social media, these data traces do not merely document our passage in life’s play but mediate our parts. We can interact with the data left by others alongside direct interactions with people themselves. The world, then, is not merely a stage but also a participatory exhibit.

The goal of this article is to clarify the ontological (rather than emic or phenomenological) distinction between actor and artifact. The actor performs in real time for an audience that monitors the actor. The artifact is the result of a past performance and lives on for others to view on their time. In making this distinction, I contend it is possible to extend current theories of online interaction and answer existing research questions such as: Why is it that contexts have “collapsed” online, as boyd suggests? Why is it so hard to nail down the notion of a friend online? How tightly can we

couple the identity of an individual online and the activities of that individual? Addressing these questions entails a distinction between the sorts of online spaces where actors behave with each other (“performance” spaces, or behavior regions; Goffman, 1959) and “exhibition” spaces where individuals submit artifacts to show to each other. Clarifying this distinction creates an expanded theoretical repertoire for scholars, thereby enabling them to disentangle processes occurring when actors are copresent (in time, if not in the same geographic place) and processes that occur when actors are not necessarily present at the same time but still react to each other’s data.

An exhibition is still a form of presentation of self. One can find off-line personal exhibitions in the presentation of photos in someone’s house. Indeed, Halle (1996) indicates how class clearly differentiates the choice of artwork (or lack thereof) on display in living rooms. This is to say that people take their choice of what to display personally and consider it a form of impression management.

This distinction between performance and exhibition should be useful to scholars who are interested in the presentation of self online, and those who, like this author, consider notions of impression management a useful theoretical foil

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for understanding online behavior (boyd, 2007; Marwick & boyd, in press; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008; Quan-Haase & Collins, 2008; Schroeder, 2002; Tufekci, 2008).

I begin this article with a review of Goffman's dramaturgical approach and its extensive use within social media studies. I then introduce the exhibitional approach, paying particular attention to the "curator," a key role generally absent from everyday life situations. In the penultimate section, I cover two areas of concern on social network sites (friend lists and collapsed contexts), where shifting the focus toward exhibitions may reveal new insights and facilitate future research agendas.

### Goffman's Dramaturgy

Goffman's dramaturgical approach is a metaphorical technique used to explain how an individual presents an "idealized" rather than authentic version of herself. The metaphor considers life as a stage for activity. Individuals thus engage in performances, which Goffman (1959) defines as "activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (p. 22). This continued presence allows individuals to tweak their behavior and selectively give and give off details, a process he termed "impression management."

One core assumption of the dramaturgical approach is that activity takes place in specific bounded settings. To explain this Goffman draws on Roger Barker's (1968) notion of the "behavior setting". In reacting to the behaviorism of the early 20th century (Skinner, 1939; Watson, 1913), Barker (1968) suggested most behavior was not determined by individual-specific stimulus-response patterns but was instead guided by the norms and goals of specific settings. Goffman (1959) distilled these specific settings into the well-worn dichotomy of the "front region" and the "back region," or more colloquially, the "front stage" and the "back stage." In the front stage, we are trying to present an idealized version of the self according to a specific role: to be an appropriate server, lecturer, audience member, and so forth. The backstage, as Goffman says, is "a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (p. 112). In the backstage, we do much of the real work necessary to keep up appearances.

What is key for this article is to highlight how situations are bounded in space and time. According to Goffman (1959),

[W]hen a performance is given it is usually given in a highly bounded region, to which boundaries with respect to time are often added. The impression and understanding fostered by the performance will tend to

saturate the region and the time span, so that any individual located in this space-time manifold will be in a position to observe the performance and be guided by the definition of this situation which the performance fosters. (p. 106)

This quote parallels Barker key qualities of a behavior setting (adapted from Heft, 2001, pp. 253-254):

- Specifiable geographical location
- Temporal boundaries
- Boundaries are perceptible
- Behavior settings exist independently of any single person's experience of them

Considering these qualities of the situation, Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach is quite apt. Much like a stage play (rather than the script), it is bounded in space and time, and represents the instantiation of specific roles. Players seek to perform their role as convincingly as possible, and for the show to succeed there is much work that must take place behind the scenes. That these regions are bounded in time is implicit in how Goffman discusses shifts in performances:

By proper scheduling of one's performances, it is possible not only to keep one's audiences separated from each other (by appearing before them in different front regions or sequentially in the same region) but also to allow a few moments in between performances so as to extricate oneself psychologically and physically from one personal front, while taking on another. (p. 138)

### The Audience

Within the dramaturgical approach, the audience refers those who observe a specific actor and monitor her performance. More succinctly, these are those for whom one "puts on a front." This front consists of the selective details that one presents in order to foster the desired impression alongside the unintentional details that are given off as part of the performance. Underlying this notion is the idea that the audience makes a single coherent demand on the individual. The above quote ("By proper scheduling . . .") reminds us that Goffman not only considers different regions as bounded in space-time, but that the audiences are bounded as well. That is to say, there is usually one specific front that needs to be presented in any given situation, because each region is not just a space-time locus, but a time-space-identity locus inhabited by a specific audience. Thus, it does not matter if the waiter knows his customers personally, so much that the waiter puts on that specific front to the customers. Moreover, a front involves the continual adjustment of self-presentation based on the presence of others. Goffman (1961) reinforces

this idea in *Encounters*, by discussing unfocused and focused interactions. Focused interaction “occurs when people effectively agree to sustain for a time a single focus of cognitive and visual attention” (p. 7). But even in unfocused interaction such as “when two strangers across the room from each other . . . [each] modifies his own demeanor because he himself is under observation” (p. 7). The key point here is that individuals put on specific fronts and modify said fronts because of the sustained observation of an audience.

Goffman also notes that conflict can arise when fronts collide. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) discusses the civil inattention that takes place when someone answers a telephone in front of others, or when conversations in public are loud enough to be heard by a third party. Similarly, Ling (2008) discusses the problem associated with the “dual-front” that emerges from the cell phone. He notes how an office phone that is tethered to the place of work represents the individual in that place, and is part of the rituals that constitute the office. In contrast, the cell phone connects people in many situations including ones where there is substantial mismatch between the two fronts (such as the high-powered business deal that gets done at the otherwise languid airport terminal).

### Goffman as Applied to Online Media

Goffman might not consider himself a media scholar, although Lemert (1997) makes the case that Goffman is a product of the televisual age. And to the extent that he does, it might be more for *Frame Analysis* (Goffman, 1974) than for *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959). Nevertheless, Goffman’s dramaturgical approach is frequently considered a useful foil for understanding online presentation of self. The following list contains some of the many articles that use Goffman to this end:

- Donath (1998) employed Goffman as a starting point for signaling theory.
- Schroeder (2002) uses Goffman’s dramaturgy quite literally in his analysis of virtual worlds.
- boyd (2004, 2006, 2007) used Goffman to ground SNS activity as networked identity performance.
- Hewitt and Forte (2006) use Goffman to explain identity production on Facebook and conflict because of the use of multiple fronts.
- Robinson (2007) argues for the effectiveness of Goffman’s approach over postmodern perspectives found in Turkle (1997).
- Lewis, Kaufman, and Christakis (2008) draw on Goffman’s front stage/back stage distinction for deriving research questions about privacy.
- Tufekci (2008) builds her research on Facebook presentation around Goffman alongside Dunbar’s social brain hypothesis.
- Quan-Haase and Collins (2008) use impression management to discuss the art of creating status messages that signal availability.
- Menchik and Tian (2008) use Goffman and symbolic interactionism more broadly to interpret “face-saving” on e-mail mailing lists.
- Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) demonstrate that pictures on social network sites conform to traditional notions of impression management.

A common thread running through these articles is that individuals would employ impression management (or the selective disclosure of personal details designed to present an idealized self). However, several articles draw more explicitly on the dramaturgical approach to suggest that sites based on access control are inherently private, and therefore, a “back stage” (boyd, 2006; Lewis et al., 2008; Robinson, 2007).

The notion that media provide a window into the private lives of others (or into things they would not normally show in public) is not specific to social media. This idea was used by Meyrowitz (1986) to explain some of the cultural impacts of television. He asserts that television exists in a private space and shows private lives: “through electronic media, groups lose exclusive access to aspects of their own back region, and they gain views of the back regions of other groups” (Meyrowitz, 1986, p. 135). Children get to view the typical adult world of their parents, men and women are now privy to conversations that would normally be segregated, and idols are brought down to earth through tabloid journalism. It is from here we can see the genesis of boyd’s “collapsed contexts” (2007), as well as concerns about impression management vis-à-vis tabloid journalism and television’s focus on scandal.

### Backstage Is Not Private Space

I consider two issues emerging from this model: the conflation of the backstage with private spaces and the conflation of presentation of self with performance.

Several researchers have used the idea that Facebook is a backstage (Lewis et al., 2008; Tufekci, 2008) in order to motivate questions about privacy. However, the idea that some information is to be withheld from people is not the same thing as saying this information was part of what went into the creation of a front or that it contradicts a front as matter of course. From Goffman’s definition, anywhere can be a back stage to another front stage. Academics working in their office present a front to the colleagues at their department by showing studiousness and perhaps not surfing the net. However, this front may also involve long periods of deliberation on a piece of work that is hidden from another front: the audience at a conference.

Online, the notion of a backstage fails to capture the role of a third party in regulating who has access to information

about an individual. That Facebook allows only friends or “friends of friends” to see specific content does not suggest that this content signifies a backstage to other possible content that is available for anyone to see. To expect privacy online is not to imply that one has something worth hiding or a presentation that may contradict one’s role in other spheres of life. Rather, it signifies that some individuals are classified as being considered contextually appropriate for this specific information (Nissenbaum, 2004). It further suggests that there is a third party (Facebook’s servers) that knows who is considered an appropriate audience member for this content and who is not.

Lewis et al. (2008) used the notion of the backstage when comparing cultural information displayed by individuals with private and public accounts. They discovered that those with public accounts actually display more obscure music tastes. They loosely connected this to the notion of the backstage and suggest that some individuals draw open the stage’s curtain to let the world see their tastes. To make their metaphor successful, they imply that music tastes are something inherently private and something that go into the creation of a front stage. However, it is more likely that showing music tastes is appropriate to the context of Facebook. Musical tastes are not a backstage but rather are a front. Some people carefully select which tastes to show, and thus, give a clear reason to make their profile less private. It is not that others with a narrower range of music want to hide their musical tastes but that they are indifferent to the association of taste and identity.

### *Artifacts Are Representations Not Performances*

Beyond the issue of the back stage and privacy is a deeper issue about whether online content can be considered a performance in the first place. The conflation of performance and online profile is likely because of the notion that because a blog or profile signifies a single individual it does not merely stand in for that individual but is that individual (Reed, 2005). Similarly, Robinson (2007) coins the term *cyberperformer* to denote individuals who perform in cyberspace. In doing so, she equates the behavior of individuals in chat rooms and instant messengers (who either interact in real time or with specific known recipients) with the behavior of Flickr.com photo submitters and bloggers.

Can all content be considered a performance? To address this issue, it is useful to distinguish between performance as ephemeral act and performance as recorded act. Once a performance has been recorded, the nature of the performance has altered. It may still be a presentation of self, and undoubtedly it continues to signify an individual. However, it no longer necessarily bounds the specific audience who were present when the performance took place. Instead, it can be taken out of a situation and replayed in a completely different context. For example, a concert video may bring back

great memories of a summertime show, but it does not transport the band to the viewer’s living room.

The distinction between ephemeral act and recorded has an instructive parallel in the domain of art. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin (1967) considers the functions of art in a time when process and reproduction make most artwork easily accessible to the masses. He asserts that these reproductions lack the unique “aura” of the original object. This aura is not a transcendental force but simply the unique historical trajectory of a singular object. This distinction between unique artwork with its aura and mechanical reproductions designed to signify the original parallels the distinction between singular individual, with one’s own mind and presence, and digital traces designed to signify the individual.

Benjamin (1967) notes several consequences of this shift away from an emphasis on the aura of objects that also have a relevant parallel. First, in being reproduced, the reception of art becomes less something to be revered in a unique situation and more something to be consumed alongside other work:

In the same way today, by the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental. (p. 225)

Benjamin also suggests that individuals should be dissociated from their reproductions. All historically unique objects (including people) have an aura. He suggests that film is what separates the person from their aura:

[F]or the first time—and this is the effect of film—man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. (p. 229)

Third, he presages the difference between immediate impression management and the context-collapsing artifacts online. He does this by considering the fixed gaze of the camera:

The film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during his performance, since he does not present his performance to the audience in person . . . The audience’s identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. (p. 228)

Thus, embedded in Benjamin’s (1967) thesis about artwork is a relevant distinction between the individual and the representation of the individual. Benjamin, as well as those writing in his wake tended to focus on the consequences of art and film (cf. Hansen, 1987). However, there is nothing in his thesis that prevents us from importing these ideas into everyday



life—now that everyday life is replete with reproductions of the self. To link this notion more explicitly to Goffmanian impression management, I offer below an explication of exhibition sites.

## Exhibitional Approach Introduced

An exhibition site can now be defined as a site (typically online) where people submit reproducible artifacts (read: data). These artifacts are held in storehouses (databases). Curators (algorithms designed by site maintainers) selectively bring artifacts out of storage for particular audiences. The audience in these spaces consists of those who have and those who make use of access to the artifacts. This includes those who respond, those who lurk, and those who acknowledge or are likely to acknowledge.

## Scope

In contrast to situations, many social media sites do not depend on being bounded in space and time with continued observation occurring between individuals. Instead they have the following features, which I consider sufficient components of an exhibition space:

1. Information signifying an individual is delivered to the audience, on demand by a third party.
2. Because of the reproducibility of content and the fact that it is sent to a third party for distribution, the submitter does not continually monitor these data as an audience is receiving it, and may possibly never fully know the audience.

Sites such as Facebook.com, Flickr.com, and YouTube.com have these qualities, as do the talk pages on Wikipedia.org (where content is associated with contributors). Wikipedia article pages would not be considered exhibition sites since the article is not designed to signify the specific individuals who wrote the article. Blogs generally fulfill these criteria but online gaming sites would not. That is to say, these criteria are most closely associated with what we presently consider social media or social network sites (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

The first and fundamental criterion draws a line between that which requires the *present* in order to be understood and that which makes no such demand. Virtual worlds and most online gaming (particular first-person shooters and MMORPGs) take place in the present. A user's actions are not simply placed in a sequence (such as reply-to), but are understood through mutual reactions where the timing of each action is relevant. Although individuals are not copresent in space, they are still monitoring and reacting to each other. The context of the game or the social world stands in for the context of a specific setting (Schroeder, 2002). In contrast, exhibition

spaces require a third party to store data for later interaction; real-time interaction can take place, but it is not necessary. This is clearly unlike a "situation" as is noted by the aforementioned quotes from Goffman.

The second criterion draws a line between that which is *addressed* and that which is *submitted*. Some content is addressed to a particular person or some particular people. E-mail and instant messaging are examples of addressed media. Each message denotes a specific sender and a specific set of recipients. This is much like a situation where people are addressing specific alters or a specific audience. It is not necessarily in real time, but one can still put up a front intended for a specific set of recipients, and monitor activity in a direct reply. In exhibition spaces content is submitted to a data repository; people post status updates to Facebook, upload pictures to Picasa.com or Flickr.com and post articles to a blog. This latter content may be produced and submitted with a specific audience in mind, but those who view and react to this content may be different from those for whom it was intended (if it was intended for anyone in particular to begin with).

These criteria do not preclude the use of an exhibitional approach in other domains but to suggest spaces where it is most appropriate: blog posts, photo galleries, and status updates. These are places where content is submitted to a third party, available to a large and potentially unknowable audience and tethered to a specific submitter. The extension of the exhibitional approach to other spaces (and to hybrid spaces such as Google Wave) is beyond the scope of this article.

## The Curator

Unique historical artifacts have typically been curated by experts. These people select which artworks to display, where to place them, and what narrative to tell about this selection. With a shift from presence (and aura) to data and reproduction, it is now possible for information signifying someone to be endlessly copied and reconfigured. Everyone can have his or her own exhibit, as long as the relevant information can be displayed with some coherence. Yet it is simply impractical to have a human curator pore over one's social information and devise a unique and relevant exhibit for each person, on demand. Consequently, computers have taken on this role, devising continually more sophisticated ways to curate artifacts.<sup>1</sup>

Curators mediate our experience of social information. Good curation presents things to the user that the user finds relevant or interesting. Bad curation is either overwhelming or unexpectedly irrelevant. Curators facilitate the following functions, which are available online and generally not a part of performances and situations: filtering, ordering, and searching. These functions are based on the fact that storehouses keep more artifacts than are generally on display. As such, it is necessary to limit the artifacts in some meaningful way.

*Filtering* artifacts simply limits which artifacts are on display. This can be done based on qualities of the artifacts or qualities of the relationship between an individual and the artifacts. For example, one might want to view only tweets that mention a specific topic. If the tweet is public and mentions the topic, it is included in the set of things to be displayed. If it is private, then the curator determines access to this tweet. If I am following someone's private account, then I can view these tweets.

Filtering performances is not something that can be done in a situation. Granted, one can choose to ignore a performance or specific aspects of it. People may choose to censor a humorous story for a specific group. But selectivity in a situation is not the same as filtering. Performers censor, curators filter on behalf of the audience. We can "tune in" or "tune out" performances, but filtering implies that one can evaluate a *set* of things *before* they are presented for consumption. Curators can do this because they retrieve things from a storehouse and put them on display.

Artifacts are also *ordered* in some way. Depending on the task, there is often a meaningful ordering. Communication is usually presented in reverse chronological order. Items for sale are frequently ordered according to price. More sophisticated algorithms can order items by relevance. For example, Facebook will select potential friends for the user from the larger set of friends. These potential friends will be ordered using a black box statistical metric seemingly related to the individuals one is likely to know. Amazon orders potential products based on their perceived relevance, which is a rank order based on a statistical measure of similarity. Lists of names are often sorted alphabetically.

Again, ordering is not something that can be done in a performance. That is not to say things in situations do not have a sequence. It is to say that performances in situations cannot be "reordered" as convenient. The order of online artifacts is based on the fact that each artifact is part of a set of similar artifacts that are known ahead of time. Performances have sequence but because they take place in "real time" or have a specific space-time locus they cannot be resorted at will.

Finally, artifacts online can be *searched*. Searching is simply filtering (and ordering) based on user input. Curators often work passively, as when people view their RSS readers, their Twitter queues or their Facebook news feeds. However, sometimes filtering and ordering is done on content that includes specific requests from a user. Simply by viewing online content one is subject to filtering and ordering. Searching requires the user to submit additional information to fine-tune the display of content.

The role of the curator is to manage the preexisting content on behalf of the submitters. Within this space, it is more relevant to ask about the access controls that the curator put in place than whether or not this space is private. We may ask about the consequence of a specific ordering of data and

whether this ordering is effective. We may also ask what is hidden from the users as a result of filtering, or what data are available for users to reorder. For example, can one reorder friends based on the number of mutual ties? Can one restrict access to content to a specific group of friends (i.e., impose a filter based on specific audience members)? How clearly do individuals understand different groups of friends on a given site? How easy is it to move content from one site to another?

## Limits of the Exhibitional Approach

The exhibitional approach does not cover all online interaction, much like the dramaturgical approach does not cover all off-line interaction. For example, virtual worlds are hybrid spaces that share aspects of both off-line situations and online exhibitions. Insofar as there are servers that mediate information between individuals who are not immediately copresent, there is some recording involved. But play in social worlds generally takes place in specific bounded locations at specific bounded times in the same way that off-line interaction takes place in situations. One's avatar is meant to signify her mind as acting in a virtual context. The avatar interacts directly with other avatars that appear on the screen within one's field of view. It simulates off-line interaction, and consequently simulates the situation. Thus, it is unsurprising that Goffman has already been applied to these spaces (Schroeder, 2002).

## Examples That Apply an Exhibitional Approach

In the penultimate section, I illustrate some examples where an exhibitional approach may illuminate or at least reorient our interpretations of online spaces.

## What Is a Friend Online?

Sharing artifacts online is often done through "friends." As such, people add many friends to their online profile in order to participate in these sites fully. Curators use this list of friends in order to determine how to properly redistribute content. This list, however, is not tethered to a situation, but to an individual, beyond any specific situation. Consequently, people can add many more friends than would normally be included in a specific situation. It is not uncommon for students to have more than 200 friends on a social networking site (boyd, 2007; Lewis et al., 2008). This is larger than the number of people one is likely to know personally and feel close to. Depending on the question asked and method used, the number of people in the personal network varies from the low 30s (Hogan, Carrasco, and Wellman, 2007) through the upper 60s (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006; McCarty, Bernard, Killworth, Shelley, & Johnsen, 1997) to upwards of 150 (Roberts, Dunbar, Pollet, & Kuppens, 2008), but rarely if ever above that.

The irony of this situation is that only 10 years ago, sociologists and those in related fields were actively assessing whether online interaction was isolating people (Kraut, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998; Nie, Hillygus, & Erbring, 2002). Yet in 2009, the most recent OxIS report in Britain notes ex-users and nonusers of the Internet report twice as much of a sense of loneliness as Internet users (Dutton, Helsper, and Gerber, 2009). At the same time, people online are complaining the need to manage overwhelming lists of friends (Acquisti & Gross, 2006; Hewitt & Forte, 2006). This is unsurprising as there cognitive limits to the number of people one can actively maintain in a personal network (Dunbar, 1998).

If we consider online friends not as a means for signifying those with whom we have close relations but those with whom we want to manage access to content, we can refocus both what a friend means online and how to manage the surging lists of friends on many social network sites. How can systems be designed in order to curate more effectively? How do users classify their friends relative to a classification that emerges from the traces of interaction on a website? Gilbert and Karahalios (2009) approach this latter question by focusing on the ways in which strong ties can be modeled through passive data, such as time to last message or mutual friends. This work is oriented toward the ordering of content that has already been submitted. It is therefore possible to consider it as a means for fine-tuning the curatorial process. However, there is still little work on the means for fine-tuning the submission process. Do strong ties represent a single group to which one submits content? Or are there different strong ties within different groups whereby it is more useful to submit to the group and have group members filter accordingly? Here I do not provide an answer but reframe the question so that an answer can more effectively conform to the reality of what a "friend" is in an exhibition space.

### ***Collapsed Contexts and the Lowest Common Denominator?***

Friends are a form of access control online, and followers are a form of information management. These metaphors (friend and follower) do not perfectly correspond to their original meanings. Nevertheless, they are evidently a useful way to simplify the process of granting access controls online. If anything, these metaphors may be too simple. boyd (2006) lists 13 plausible reasons for befriending someone she encountered in ethnographic studies with teens. Only one was being a friend. The remainder focused on popularity, concerns for access control, and difficulty in saying no. What has emerged from this underdetermined friend tag is the accumulation of many social circles of friends under a single rubric (Hewitt & Forte, 2006). As sites expand to encompass more individuals from one's off-line life, with no clear distinction between them it also collapses all of the partially

overlapping social circles of modern life (Simmel, 1922) into a single list. Friends may now refer to family members, coworkers, actual friends, neighbors, acquaintances, high school friends, people from online hobby groups or gaming sites, one-night stands, distant friends of friends, students past or present, and generally any other potentially personal relationship.

boyd (2007) has referred to the existence of all of these groups in one space as the "collapsed contexts" quality of social network sites. For each of these contexts, one might have a slightly different presentation of self. Yet since they all have on-demand access to one's online artifacts, this results in a decontextualization of any of these artifacts. Artifacts are not tied to situations but to individual profiles. The individual therefore comes to represent these same artifacts to all "friends." If social network sites house more friends than are cognitively manageable, all of whom have access to one's content, and many of whom represent different social groupings and different potential fronts, then how do individuals manage to submit any content at all? Why is there not a sense of self-presentation paralysis?

The answer is that one need not consider everyone when submitting content but only two groups: those for whom we seek to present an idealized front and those who may find this front problematic. That is, in addition to the traditional audience of situations, one must add a hidden audience who are not the intended recipient of content but will have access to it as well. One might not post for one's boss on Twitter, but if one's boss is following (or is likely to follow), then one will certainly post in light of the fact that the boss may read it. One might not be posting for one's parents (or children or students) on Facebook, but again, one is posting in light of the fact that these individuals may have access; these individuals define the *lowest common denominator* of what is normatively acceptable.<sup>2</sup>

A theory of lowest common denominator culture is more appropriate to exhibition spaces replete with persistent content than single context performances. It offers a potential explanation for three aspects of social network sites. The first is why individuals effectively participate in these sites, halfheartedly join, or even refuse: An individual assesses whether his identity can be effectively represented by the lowest common denominator of the people who view his content in his absence. The second is to explain how in an age of profound surveillance (both from authorities and peers), individuals still submit content that is unambiguously questionable (nudity, violence, political extremism, racial epithets): The lowest common denominator of niche sites may be different than that of general sites. As such, one may have a clean profile on Facebook but a series of lewd pictures on Xtube.com, Suicidegirls.com, Pornotube.com, and so forth. Similarly, one may be sexually ambiguous or even deceptive on Facebook or one's twitter account, but still have a openly gay profile on Gaydar.co.uk, Gay.com, Manhunt.com,

and so on. A businessperson may seek to be clean cut and professional on one site but espouse politically extreme views on Stormfront.org or Newsaxo.org. In more positive terms, a teacher may complain about troubling students on TheApple.Monster.com but make no such claims on Facebook, where the teacher might be friends with students' parents or the students themselves. The third aspect of these sites that a theory of lowest common denominator addresses is how exactly individuals interpret this particular context: it is likely that people do not create sophisticated projections of their social network, nor need they. Instead, their behavior is in reference to specific salient individuals, who are small enough in number to be coherent. The persistence of this content beyond these salient individuals is rarely accounted for. This theory is also in keeping with research by Acquisti and Gross (2006) about why individuals will reveal a great deal of information on Facebook: they trust the site to curate it for them appropriately (even though they are often misinformed about the who can access what), and that they submit information they feel is inoffensive to some perceived salient individuals.

## Conclusions

Many online sites set up a situation where individuals can continually submit data to be associated with their profile. This sort of "interaction" where people view and react to the submitted content of others is dissimilar from the traditional situations that gave rise to Goffman's germane dramaturgical approach. The impetus for this article was to suggest that many aspects of Goffman's approach (e.g., impression management) can work in a framework that is more aligned to these spaces, namely through the metaphor of an exhibition rather than one of a stage play. One of the key distinctions between exhibitions and performances is that performances are subject to continual observation and self-monitoring as the means for impression management, whereas exhibitions are subject to selective contributions and the role of a third party. I refer to this third party as a curator that has the capacity to filter, order, and search content. The exhibition has its own logic, such as lowest common denominator culture and easy persistent friends that do not have direct analogs in offline life. Privacy becomes a matter of how content is aggregated (e.g., Is it tied to a real name? Is it tied to a geographical location? How findable is the user and the user's data?) and how access control is managed *a priori*, rather than *in situ*. I draw on Benjamin's classic essay to indicate that the notion of distinguishing individuals from their reproductions is not a novel idea. What is novel, however, are its application to everyday life, and its aggregation through digital means.

Acknowledging the difference between performances and exhibitions is an ontological matter, not an empirical or phenomenological one. People need not acknowledge this

mediated relationship in order to participate in it. In fact, it is likely that ignorance blissfully facilitates the willing capture, storage, and use of private data. Moreover, it is a difference that allows individuals to consume and view each other's past artifacts without directly engaging the individual, or in many instances, even letting the profile owner know that their information is being viewed.

What is empirical in this domain is the extent to which misunderstandings about the basic ontological structure of data, its curation, and exhibition give rise to new unintended problems: social information overload, collapsed contexts, accidental disclosures, and "identity" theft. What people do is based on their mental models of these sites, and as past work has demonstrated, there is often a great mismatch between the mental models and the actual behaviors (Acquisti & Gross, 2006). These sites also give rise to new potentials: heightened social capital from newly accessible weak ties (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007); asynchronous and coordinated grassroots organizing (Earl, 2010); strengthening of long distance ties through photo sharing and rapid exchanges (Cook, Teasley, & Ackerman, 2009); otherwise hidden communities such as gays and lesbians suddenly being able to find each other rapidly and privately (Gray, 2009). These new phenomena are not necessarily about the performance but the new mediated architecture that encapsulates and redistributes past performances for mutual and often asynchronous benefits. The capabilities of exhibition sites allow a person to be found when others want to look rather than when the person is able to be present and perform. Thus, extending presentation of self by considering an exhibitional approach alongside a dramaturgical one is meant to be a step toward a clearer articulation of both the potentials and the perils of self-presentation in an age of digital reproduction.

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## Notes

1. Interestingly, "digital curation" is now used in the United Kingdom to refer to the practice of maintaining storehouses



of digital research content (see <http://www.dcc.ac.uk/>). But in this case, it is still implied that there is an expert individual who is maintaining the data. This is a different matter, and one that parallels offline archival. This sort of curation also tends to work at the level of the data set, much like off-line curation works with a specific artwork, rather than the level of raw data.

2. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for noting that lowest common denominator culture is not specific to exhibition spaces but to collapsed contexts. For example, a wedding speech might not cater to every single audience member but simply be inoffensive to salient individuals (e.g., a priest and one's mother-in-law) while appealing to friends and certain relatives. That said, even in the case of a wedding speech, certain poor jokes can immediately be "recovered" in ways that artifacts may not.

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