

Using media as involvement shields

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Abstract

It is a core feature of old and new media to allow communication in contexts where it cannot naturally occur since the individuals are out of each other's reach. In this classic understanding, media create a connection between two or more individuals.

However, media can also be used to inhibit communication. This contribution discusses systematically the various features of accessibility and non-accessibility that can be found in different media and in the uses they are put to by different participants. The analyses further show that participation in and with media cannot be described in the dichotomous terms of presence or absence. Rather, media allow various degrees of accessibility. These various ways of accessibility are better described as a continuum. The article further demonstrates how books, mobile phones, etc. can be used (in privacy and in public) as involvement shields (Goffman). By the means of a photographic ethnography it is shown how media are used as involvement shields in public contexts. These uses contribute to a "mediated behavior in public" that relies mainly on avoidance of interaction. At the same time, this avoidance can only be achieved by mutual monitoring.

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*The paper holds their folded faces to the floor
And every day the paperboy brings more
Roger Waters, 1973*

1. Introduction

Social situations can be defined and distinguished by the relations participants have in terms of their presence—they can be bodily present, or they may not share the same physical space. Wherever there is no physical presence, people cannot interact reciprocally without the use of assisting devices. They must resort to using media. In such cases, the medium takes a *mediator* position between *ego* and *alter*. Sciences concerned with theoretical and empirical studies of media generally treat media as precisely this type of object: something which places itself as a *connector* between two or more people not within face-to-face situations. This—at first plausible—line of argument fails to perceive a central quality of media: their ability to serve as *involvement shields* (Goffman), i.e. to modulate the presence of their users in such a way that they are *not* available for interaction. Hence, media do not only have the obvious and commonsensical function of creating presence, but can also produce *absence*.

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This exceptional feature of media forms the central point of interest of this text; for I will attempt to discuss the correlation between media and accessibility for interaction. In this undertaking, I will try to use as a basis not individual particular media, but inherent qualities of media per se, arguing from the angle of their ontological qualities. My argument is as follows: Especially with regard to new (or social) media, the classic distinction between absence and presence becomes obsolete as they allow varying degrees of accessibility which can be described as a *continuum of co-presence*. The various media consequently have varying (technical) resources for participants to *claim presence and/or accessibility*. On the other hand, media can also be used to *hide presence or to claim non-accessibility*. Books, mobile phones, or portable electronic devices for listening to music can be used (in privacy and in public) as “involvement shields” (Goffman, 1963:38–42). Some media even have technical means to claim non-availability (e.g. status bars in Skype, “away-from-keyboard” announcements in IRC, “out of office” notifications in e-mail programs, etc.).

This article will provide a systematic discussion of the various features of accessibility and non-accessibility to be found in different media and in the ways they are used by different participants. Furthermore, my analysis will show that the dichotomous terms of presence or absence fall short of giving an accurate account of participation in situations framed by media use. The analysis relies on observations of how books, mobile phones, etc. can be used (in privacy and in public) as involvement shields. The use of media as involvement shields changes the individual’s public relations and contributes to a *mediated* ‘behavior in public’.

2. Face-to-face situations: mutual accessibility

Customarily, we only speak of full reciprocity when participants have direct and mutual access. This is a prototypical given in face-to-face situations. The face-to-face situation is perceived as the fundamental social situation by numerous interactionist approaches found, for example, in Georg Simmel, Alfred Schutz, Berger/Luckmann, and also Erving Goffman. Bodily presence and reciprocal perceptibility are considered the essential qualities of this fundamental situation. Wherever people are in each other’s direct interactional reach—or as for example Georg Simmel puts it in “Excursus on the Sociology of Sense Impression”: wherever they perceive each other “in immediate eye-to-eye contact”—is where “the most complete mutuality in the whole realm of human relations is produced” (Simmel, 2009:571).

Alfred Schutz likewise viewed the social situation in which *ego* and *alter* share time and space as the prototype of all social relations (1972). In its immediacy, it is, as Schutz and Luckmann explain, “the most ordinary and genetically important social relation” (1973:69); it is here “that the intersubjectivity of the life-world is developed and continually confirmed” (1973:68). The face-to-face encounter allows the actors to continuously respond to each other. “In an encounter, the conscious life of the Other is accessible to me through a maximal abundance of symptoms” (1973:66). By studying *alter*’s facial expressions and his gestures, by hearing his voice, etc. *ego* can grasp the processes in *alter*’s consciousness without, Schutz and Luckmann inform us, *alter* conveying them voluntarily.

All other situations which are one-sided and/or mediate—e.g. written correspondence or newspaper advertisements—are seen as derivatives from this elemental situation.

However, despite sharing a spatio-temporal and social situation, people are not automatically accessible for each other. Instead, a graded interpretation of the term *accessibility* allows a precise understanding of the various possibilities of access available to interacting individuals in such situations. Goffman used the term to describe the possibilities strangers have to make contact with each other in public situations (1963:104–110). In these particular social situations, “those present will be obliged to retain some readiness for potential face engagements” (Goffman, 1963:104). According to Goffman, this constitutes a “general rule”, by which “the individual is obliged to make himself available for encounters” (1963:107). Put another way, accessibility is the state individuals are in *before* they engage in focused interaction with one another.

Focused interaction, too, is not simply given by the co-presence of interactants. In his seminal essay “Footing” (1981), Goffman introduced a typological terminology to describe the various structures of partaking and accessibility in social situations. With respect to focused interaction, he speaks not of ‘speakers’ and ‘hearers’, but of *participants* distinguishable from each other by their participation in the situation of what he calls the “participation framework”. For instance, present individuals may still not be accessible for an individual because they themselves are just involved in a focused interaction of which the individual is no “ratified participant”. In this case, they are non-accessible for the individual as dialog partners; the individual can merely witness (as an ear-witness or eye-witness or both) the conversation as a (visible) “bystander”, and wait until the time has come for him to get involved in the conversation or to interrupt it in order to become, for a shorter or longer while, a ratified participant in the interaction. A rather complicated case is presented by the “eavesdropper” phenomenon. The eavesdropper witnesses conversations whose participants mistakenly believe themselves to be unobserved. To be sure, eavesdropping is not always done voluntarily; consider for example eavesdropping during an argument in the neighboring apartment.

Goffman’s concepts were brought up in countless studies and, at times, also criticized. Stephen Levinson, for one, saw the flaw with Goffman’s categories in that “[u]nfortunately, although Goffman’s categories are a notable advance on earlier

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