

Backstage or Front Stage with YouTube

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores backstage behavior in videos found by searching for “drinking and puking” on YouTube. A small sample of 10 videos was critiqued using the definition of backstage language behavior found in Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. The question examined is: Is there a blurring of the boundaries between front stage and backstage behavior in videos posted to YouTube? Three possibilities emerge from the research relating to boundary establishment in this mediation of social interaction by technology.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H5.m. **Information interfaces and presentation** (e.g., HCI): Theory and methods.

General Terms

Theory

Keywords

Goffman, front stage, backstage, YouTube, video, social interaction, technology mediation

1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet has had a tremendous impact on the way we communicate in our daily lives. It has changed the way we interact socially and opened up a variety of avenues for expressing ourselves individually. Tools on the Internet such as blogs, personal home pages, and social network sites are among a variety of technologies that utilize the computer and Internet to facilitate new types of social interaction, community building, and communication. As one writer states, “technology has provided us with new sites of empirical experience and it has re-configured the complex ties that bind the social and the cognitive worlds” [3; p. 55]. This expansion of our social environment has led the author to question the ways in which technology mediates social interaction. An example where technology can be seen mediating interaction can be found on the YouTube web site (www.youtube.com).

YouTube provides us with a perfect example for examining the phenomenon of social interaction mediated by technology. There

are a range of social theories that might be of interest when analyzing this phenomenon. Of particular interest is Goffman’s dramaturgical theory. Among the many concepts involved in the dramaturgical theory, the most interesting is the concept of region and region behavior. In this preliminary study, Goffman’s framework is used to examine a small selection of YouTube videos and critique them within the context of his definition of backstage behavior. The question of interest in this preliminary work can be stated as: Is there a blurring of the boundaries between front stage and backstage behavior in videos posted to YouTube?

2. YOUTUBE

YouTube is a web site dedicated to the distribution of online videos. The site currently has 55 million unique users each month and has the 8th largest audience on the Internet [18]. YouTube brought video sharing into the mainstream by providing the ability for videographers to easily upload videos and tag videos with keywords. A visitor to YouTube can browse video categories, user-created channels, communities, or simply search by keyword. Visitors can create profiles, join live video streams, leave comments on each video, or rate videos. The site also offers a “related content” feature that provides visitors with a list of videos with similar keywords and titles.

By utilizing the Adobe Flash video player, YouTube presents videos in a single format which simplifies visitor requirement. Through the use of this video streaming technology, YouTube establishes a single media-player platform across the entire site. YouTube also allows for simple video sharing by providing html tags on each video page allowing visitors to copy and paste HTML code into other web sites such as MySpace, Facebook, or any other site that allows this copy and paste behavior.

Videos are uploaded to the YouTube website, waiting to deliver their content to any visitors who happen across them. These YouTube videos present us with a multitude of actors, teams, and performances. In this study, Goffman’s theory, specifically backstage behavior, has been used to examine 10 of these videos.

3. GOFFMAN

In [7], Erving Goffman provides a framework for examining social interactions in everyday experience. Dramaturgical concepts are used to interpret performed roles and deduce social meaning by examining an individual’s role during an interaction. A performance, in this framework, is defined as a setting in which an individual (actor) performs a distinct role given for the benefit of an observer (audience). The impressions the actors give and give off during a performance are defined by Goffman as sign vehicles.

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During a performance, the actor or actors are considered a team. Similar beliefs and behaviors are emphasized in the performance, signifying to the audience that the actors are part of the same team. Any disagreements between team members are discussed away from the audience. An impression is maintained by the team members at all times while in front of the audience. One of the primary motivating factors for establishing and maintaining a consistent impression is the avoidance of embarrassment [12]. Because of this behavior, a clear boundary is established between the audience and the actor/team. The audience can also be considered a team, acting in accordance with other audience members in response to the presentation before them. [7] considers this interaction among the two teams a dramatic interaction, a give and take between the actor(s) and audience that is central to avoiding embarrassment.

This boundary between audience and team is defined as a region. Goffman divides regions into areas of front stage, backstage, and the outside. Front stage behavior takes place before an audience; the place where actors perform for the audience while meeting standards and expectations of social performance. When the actors are at a pause from performing for the audience and are amongst fellow team members separated from the audience, they are considered in the backstage region. Lastly, the area that is not considered part of the front or backstage but separate from the performance is defined as the outside area. By dividing interaction into these three regions, Goffman has given us distinct boundaries in which teams, actors and audience members establish rules and regulations for proper interaction behavior. Access between front stage and backstage is generally controlled in order to prevent audiences from coming backstage or to prevent audiences from seeing a performance that was not given for them.

Goffman's theory provides a framework that allows us to explain our social interaction. We constantly create stages in our day-to-day lives in which we act according to social norms and follow behaviors consistent with our situation to avoid embarrassment. Each situation affords us a new constraint, shifting from front stage to backstage, audience to performer. We are also presented with moments as outsiders, in which we come upon a performance that was unintended for our consumption.

Videos on YouTube present another case in which we are presented with a performance. Videos are placed on the Internet, waiting to deliver their performance to a visitor who only has to push play. Although Goffman's theory focuses on face-to-face interaction, other research has shown that it can be a valuable theory when examining online sources.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

A selective review of the literature reveals a variety of uses for Goffman's front stage and backstage region definitions. In these research articles, a rigid boundary was shown to exist between front stage and backstage behavior in a variety of social settings. This is significant because it provides relevance for this preliminary study and shows that Goffman's dramaturgical framework can provide insight into social interaction behaviors.

In social setting devoid of technology, we find that boundaries between front stage and backstage regions exist. While examining a support group for pregnant women, [16] found

distinct separation between front stage, backstage, and what was termed "back-backstage" communication behavior. Communication behavior was recorded in "play-group" meetings, "night-out" meetings, and private discussions. Front stage behavior during play-group meetings revealed discussions of health care, doctors, appointments and tests and procedures. These discussions were limited to formal conversation and did not involve backstage behavior. Backstage communication behavior was observed during night-out gatherings. During night-out gatherings, the women were without children or husbands and discussed items they would not share during the more formal, play-group meetings. The writer noted that "without their children or husbands present, the women were able to discuss topics otherwise not discussed among their children or husbands" [16; pg. 459]. In private discussion among women, it was found that taboo discussions were limited to what Tardy termed "back-backstage" [16; pg. 462]. These discussions were held in strict privacy and involved issues such as sexual relations and sexual diseases.

In studies of social communications mediated by technology, we also see evidence of distinct front stage and backstage behavior. A researcher examined an organic online learning community (OOLC) and determined that language and pseudonymity were two important aspects for defining back regions [11]. Results found that using community-specific language in an online community allowed participants to include members of their own community while excluding outsiders. Observations also found that using pseudonyms to identify oneself in this online community provided for users a separation between front stage and backstage behavior. This allowed users to "reduce or eliminate the consequences of practicing FR [front region] performances, criticizing the FR and engaging in 'inappropriate' banter" [11; p. 321]. By providing this separation of front regions and back regions, the OOLC back region became "a sanctuary of sorts for taking academic and social risks, one where potential consequences to offline reputations are few" [11; p. 322].

Personal home pages were examined and [14] describe the occurrence of indirect and direct modes of self-presentation. Indirect modes of self-presentation were defined as whatever information was posted about the person on the page. These could include names, descriptions, or images of the person. Linking behavior was also discussed and related to Goffman's idea of team performance. Direct modes of self-presentation were defined as ways in which a person highlights aspects of self, while at the same time omitting other aspects that might seem inappropriate or secret. In regards to backstage behavior, the authors note that "the only way a visitor might access backstage information would be if someone on a performance team presented contradictory or unflattering information in his or her link" [14; pg. 9].

While examining blogging and blogging behavior, [8] found that bloggers portray an idealized version of themselves through their blogging practices. The findings state that blogs "provide a way to understand ourselves by inscribing ourselves into a new type of text" [8; p. 65]. She also believes a blog can loosely be defined as a front stage presentation of self; "The blog is a case where the human personal front is mediated by the technology to create a front hybrid, with new mutabilities and new durabilities" [8; p. 66].

6. SECTIONS

The results presented below are broken down by each of 13 backstage criteria. In table 1, a simple breakdown of the 10 videos and the occurrence of backstage behaviors are presented. In each video, backstage behaviors were recorded. In 70% of the videos, seven or more categories of backstage behavior were coded as existing.

6.1 First-naming

In seven out of the ten videos analyzed, first name or nick-name use occurred. In [2], we hear the name “Pete” several times referring to the young man who is the focus of the video. They use the name to encourage his drinking behavior, and to subsequently provoke him and antagonize him about his vomiting behavior. In [10], the title and description assigned to the video both contain the name “Vince.” The videographer focuses on a young man who is chugging a can of beer. The young man finishes chugging his beer and makes a gagging motion, prompting the audience members around him to turn and look at him. Off camera, several voices are heard acknowledging his accomplishment and using the name “Vince” to refer to the young man.

The third occurrence, found in [15], utilizes the first-naming behavior in the title, keywords, and description of the video. This video focuses on a young man who finishes a glass of whiskey in one drink. In the video, we hear the name “Parsons” utilized to refer to the drunken young man and we hear the name “Jason” in reference to another person in the performance. The fourth instance, found in [5], depicts a young man passed who is subsequently carried by two other men into a bathroom and dropped into a bathtub of water. Several times the passed out man is referred to as “Al” or “Allen.” Later in the video, another man refers to the videographer as “Randy.” [4], the final video utilizing first name behavior within the video itself, shows four men chugging beers. In the final moments of the video, we hear the name “Mort” in reference to a question we hear posed off camera.

The final two videos utilizing first name or nick-name behavior occurred only in title, description or tags. First name or nick-name use was not found in the videos themselves. The sixth video where first-naming occurs is titled [17]. This video has names in the title, description and tags. It is also posted by the username “Tarshh”, which is consistent with one of the names in the title and description. The final instance, in [9], also only has the name “paul white” in the title and description.

6.2 Co-operative Decision Making

Co-operative decision making behavior was observed in six out of the ten videos. [2] showed strong co-operative decision making behavior. Throughout the video, scenes emerged and interaction occurred demonstrating this behavior. An example includes the beginning of the video, which depicts three young men discussing the action of chugging beer. The three men agree to drink the beer and begin chugging the beer. During this discussion, other young men off camera can be heard saying “Pete wants to finish it.” This discussion leads to the chugging and vomiting behavior found in the video. Similar behavior is observed in [15]. The video features a young man chugging a glass of whiskey, his reaction, and his subsequent behavior. In a scene depicting chugging behavior, the audience can be heard exclaiming “go, go”

as he struggles to finish the drink. In a scene in which the young man is being tied up with duct tape, we hear dialogue between the other participants including “keep going” and orders to “lay him on his fucking stomach.” In [13], a young man is shown passed out on a couch being marked up with colored markers. The scene opens up with the videographer exclaiming “do it”, which is followed by a performer off camera moving to make more marks on the passed out young man’s face and back.

During the [17] a constant dialogue between two girls jumping in and out of a bathtub shows co-operative decision making behavior. Another occurrence, in the same video, involves a female off camera instructing the two girls to “go one at a time.” In [9], co-operative behavior is taking place between two females who are trying to lift a drunken man out of a bathtub. They work as a team and with the drunk as they lift him out of the bathtub exclaiming “hold on to that, hold on that.” [5] features many behaviors that can be interpreted as co-operative decision making. This video features a young man passed out on a couch who is shown carried by two other men into a bathroom and thrown into a bathtub. This entire video depicts co-operative decision making between the performers.

6.3 Profanity

In seven of the ten videos profanity was observed. [2] is set in a dorm room and several times the performers use profanity while observing the situation unfold. In the beginning, one of the actors asks “are you going to finish this, because it’s so fucking strong.” After chugging the beer, one of the men exclaims “oh fuck” as he belches. Once the young man vomits, several of the actors begin laughing and using profanity as they antagonize the young man for vomiting. In [10], several instances of profanity were tallied. Several times the phrase “oh shit” can be heard from off camera as we observe the young man gagging and running to vomit. After vomiting, the young man also exclaims “oh shit, yeah!” In [1], one person is filmed drinking beer. He begins the video by stating “What up crew... motherfuckin’ brew fan.” After drinking two beers, the man faces the camera and says “I will be needing this. There’s no way my stomach can hold 72 oz of beer in 10 minutes. You gotta let that shit settle.”

[15] has several instances of using profanity. When the young man begins to chug a glass of whiskey, someone off camera proclaims “You’re fucking sick.” In another scene, we see a different man upset saying “You guys are to blame; you guys kept egging him on. All of you kept fucking egging him on”. Throughout the video, we also hear people off camera swearing. During [13], we witness a young man being marked on while he is passed out on a futon. While he is being marked on, he awakes enough to kick and slap at the person. During this interaction, he mumbles “fuck off” twice. In [5], profanity is prevalent. Several interactions includes at least one swear word. In the beginning, one young man moves the camera with his hand so it is focused on him and says demonstratively “Fuckin... Hey, Allen’s motherfucking becoming 2007 bitches. This is payback for the club.” In another scene, we witness two young men picking up another young man who is evidently passed out; the videographer exclaims “Al fucked up in the club, he’s about to get fucked.” After we see the two young men carrying the passed out individual into a bathroom and throwing him into a bathtub full of water, the cameraman yells “07 nigger”. After this, a man off camera states “look at his little pussy ass.” The cameraman then

again says “2007 nigger. We ridin’ dirty in this bitch.” The use of the term “nigger” in this video is considered as risky backstage behavior in our current society. In video [5], all actors are white. To use this term and post it to the Internet is very risky given today’s political sensitivity.

The last video utilizing profanity can be seen in [4]. After showing four men chugging beers, we see one of the men start vomiting into a trash can. From off camera, a young man yells “look at these fucking people.” Later, while we watch two men vomiting and laughing, a person off camera says “Yo guys, it’s too early for this shit.”

6.4 Open Sexual Remarks

Only one video contained open sexual remarks. At the end of the [5], while we watch a drunken young man stand shivering in a bathroom after being dropped into a tub of water, we hear a man off-camera say “Hey Allen, I slapped that (incomprehensible) noise the girl made from the time she swallowed man, so chill.”

6.5 Elaborate Gripping

Two instances were observed involving elaborative gripping. In [15], a very irate young man is shown yelling at the entire room. He yells “You guys are to blame. You guys kept egging him on. All of you kept fucking egging him on.” The second occurrence of elaborate gripping can be seen in [4]. At the end of the video after watching two men vomiting upon chugging beers, a young man off camera yells “What kind of people are we. What kind of people are we.” The camera focuses on this young man while people laugh in the background. After a pause, he exclaims “This is ridiculous.” In the background a female says “Is it over yet?”

6.6 Smoking

One instance of smoking occurred on camera. In [9], a young woman enters the frame smoking a cigarette. She begins helping another woman remove a drunken man from a bath tub. She turns to the videographer and hands him her cigarette. After handing her cigarette to the videographer, she turns back to the scene and again begins helping the man.

6.7 Rough Informal Dress

In eight out of ten videos we are presented with rough, informal dress. In the videos we see individuals in underwear, swimsuits or some other form of casual attire. Typically we see the person featured in the video in casual wear, although there are instances of other individuals on camera who are in informal dress. In [2], we see men sitting in a dorm room in t-shirts, jeans and backward baseball caps. [6] is a video of a man walking in a field in shorts and a t-shirt. The third occurrence found in [1] shows a man in a hooded sweatshirt and jeans. Half-way through this video the man removes his hooded sweatshirt and is shown wearing a white tank top.

[15] depicts a variety of people wearing baseball caps, blue jeans, and t-shirts. Some are ripped or very worn. At the end of the video we see that the drunken man, who is the focus of the video, wearing no shoes. In the fifth instance [13], we see a young man passed out on a futon wearing blue jeans and a ragged t-shirt that appear to be ripped in several places. The sixth occurrence can be seen in [17]. In this video, we see two young women, inside a house in a bathroom, wearing swimsuits. The seventh instance, in [9], shows two people in their underwear. We see a drunken man in a bathtub wearing a t-shirt and underwear. We also see a young

woman who is also wearing only a v-neck shirt and underwear. The eighth instance, in [5], portrays a young man passed out on a couch wearing only a t-shirt and underwear. At the end of the video, we see the same young man after having been dropped in a bath tub full of water wearing wet clothes that are falling down.

6.8 “Sloppy” Sitting and Standing Posture

Because of the nature of the videos retrieved, all ten videos showed instances of “sloppy” sitting or standing postures.

6.9 Use of Dialect or Sub-standard Speech

Again, because of the nature of the videos retrieved, all ten videos showed instances of language that would be deemed dialect or sub-standard in normal interaction behavior.

6.10 Mumbling and Shouting

In nine of the ten videos, there were instances of mumbling and/or shouting. Because videos were examined that contained drinking behavior, this type of verbal behavior is expected. In all nine videos containing this behavior, there were both mumbling and shouting instances.

6.11 Playful Aggressivity

Three of the ten videos observed displayed acts that were deemed playful aggressivity. In [15], we are witness to one act of playful aggressivity. This involves a scene after the drunken young man vomits in which he is duct taped and left on the floor. Everyone is laughing during the scene and the drunken man is taped up and made to put something into his mouth. The second occurrence, in [13], shows a young man who is passed out on a futon being written on by another person. The drunken man kicks and swings at the person marking on him while the other people off camera can be heard laughing. The last video that displays acts of playful aggressivity, [5], presents a young man, who is also passed out, being carried into a bathroom and dropped into a bathtub full of water.

6.12 Inconsiderateness for the Other in Minor but Potentially Symbolic Acts

Depending on interpretation, instances seen in videos could be considered inconsiderateness for the other. However, I chose not to rate the ten videos using this category because of possible inconsistency in interpretation.

6.13 Minor Physical Self-involvement (humming, whistling, chewing, nibbling, belching and flatulence)

Lastly, this category again was seen in all ten of the videos. This is primarily due to the choice of videos to observe. Because all videos contained acts of vomiting and drinking, there were many occurrences of belching throughout the videos critiqued.

7. DISCUSSION

As shown in the previous section, instances of backstage language behavior were prevalent in the videos analyzed. This behavior, although not definitive, provides ample insight into a variety of communication strategies occurring in this subset of YouTube videos. Backstage behavior, typically reserved to members of one’s own team outside of the view of the audience, can be seen on these sampled videos

At the beginning of this study, the question was posed: Is there a blurring of the boundaries between front stage and backstage

behavior in videos posted to YouTube? This preliminary work cannot answer this question definitively. There are three possibilities that have emerged utilizing the dramaturgical theory.

This may suggest that the lines are blurring between front stage and backstage behavior. It may also suggest that technology has presented a new communication tool that is not yet governed by traditional communicative patterns. When viewing YouTube videos, we may be gaining access to a communication that was intended for a specific audience. What we gain from the experience may be an insight into backstage behavior of the actor. Goffman suggested that actors define their backstage region based on different situations and that they are always recreating the backstage area. However, in video posts the actor doesn't have the ability to change behavior. Therefore, we may be gaining insight into a particular behavior that was not originally intended for us.

Another possibility could be that the boundaries between front stage and backstage behavior have been moved, allowing previous behaviors defined as backstage to be accepted in the front stage arena. The intent of the videographer may have been to present this behavior in a front stage manner.

Another theory may also exist using the dramaturgical outline. Visitors to YouTube may initially be considered "outsiders." Goffman defines this as region as "neither front nor back with respect to a particular performance... those individuals who are on the outside of an establishment" [7; p. 135]. As outsiders, we are not meant to be the intended audience and therefore could be viewed as having access to the backstage region by simply watching the video. However, this does not seem to be consistent with the norms of Internet behavior. When a person posts a video to YouTube, unless they mark the video as private, they are made aware of the implications. Users of YouTube have only to search for the proper keyword to find any video that may exist.

These possibilities suggest that the question posed in this paper cannot be determined using this small, sample data. Future research is needed to address this issue. This study does indicate that Goffman's dramaturgical theory can be useful when analyzing videos posted on YouTube. Future research should include a larger sample and surveys or interviews collected from the actual videographers to determine intent when posting videos.

"When we blur the boundaries that distinguish private thought from shared experience, when we adjust the lines that separate past, present, and future, or fact from fiction, we expand the confines of what we call reality" [3, p. 55].

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