

Presenting the off-line self in an everyday, online environment

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Abstract

This paper looks at the presentation of self in one online community through examining the organisation of the “talk” that goes on within an ISP specific newsgroup. It looks not at the spectacular identity play often described as taking place in virtual environments but rather at the management of identity in the everyday newsgroup interaction. The sense of community that exists in the newsgroup relies heavily on posters' ability to know with whom they are interacting. A practised familiarity with others allows members to understand the nature of their online relationships, assess the validity of information offered to them by others, and place in context comments and actions of other posters. Unlike the often-fantastical environments of some synchronous online interaction, the identities enacted in the newsgroup are taken to be “real” in a serious sense. When messages are posted to the group or address individuals a level of trust is offered and expected between those involved in the group.

To this end rather than bending gender and pick-and-mixing personal histories people posting to RumCom.local consistently employ techniques for sharing and reinforcing details of their “real life” with those with whom they share asynchronous interaction. This paper describes and illustrates a number of these techniques by, in turn, exploring:

Display - the offering of background information on the self such as physical make-up, employment, family, etc.

Management - Declining to offer requested information on one's self, choosing to deliver it in a different forum (i.e. direct e-mail, selective IRC, etc.)

Orientation - which types of thread does a contributor to the group regularly contribute to or demonstrate an expertise in

Transtextuality - reference to TV programmes, books, music., web pages, etc. either because of it “says” something about the poster or displays cultural capital

Signature practices - text files appended to postings that reinforce the identity with quotations from favoured, reference to hobbies and interests, and, URLs of there own web pages

We argue that these devices are used to present a commonly acceptable self to those copresent in the newsgroup and to blur distinctions between on- and offline selves.

Introduction

The Internet offers a myriad of possibilities for people interacting with each other to play with identity. In MUDs, MOOs it is arguably possible to enjoy trying on different persona or gender traits in order to explore new interactive experiences and in newsgroups pasty-faced teenagers can take on hyper-macho, sci-fi-like names (Turkle 1995, Bruckmann 1992). However, such malleability creates problems when, rather than sharing a virtual zipless fuck, people want to stick around for some time, form allegiances and develop as an online community. This paper looks at the presentation of self in one online community through examining the organisation of the “talk” that goes on within an ISP specific newsgroup which we refer to as “RumCom.local”. It looks not at the spectacular identity play often described as taking place in virtual environments but rather at the management of identity in the everyday interaction within the group.

To this end we draw upon an ethnographic study of a virtual community based around RumCom.local and a corpus of over 900 threads (some 17,000 messages in all) collected over a six month period in 1998; telephone and face-to-face interviews with 40 active participants and ISP staff, and observations of the occasional organised social gatherings (“RumRendezvous”) held in various parts of the UK. RumCom.local is relatively distinct in that rather than being a topic-orientated newsgroup it is one that pivots around chat and general talk. The absence of a common theme or topic for the group helps to provide a straightforward, “conversational” quality to the messages posted. We suggest that the messages themselves provide a source of data particularly amenable to investigation by the interaction sociology of Goffman.

At the very opening of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, the book to which the title of our paper alludes, Erving Goffman (1959/1990) points out that:

When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. [...] Although some of this information about the individual seems to be sought almost as an end in itself, there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him.

Thus, in our everyday encounters we anchor and orientate ourselves to those around us by the push and pull of sign activities. We *give* - that is, explicitly offer details about our person - and *give off* - unconsciously or otherwise, by virtue of our expressivity, exude views of ourselves - (Goffman 1959/1990: 13) while at the same time looking for similar evidence from those with whom we are “copresent”. Although Goffman is specifically writing about physical copresence, there is every reason to expect similar interactional practices might be found in text-based online interaction, for these too are sign-rich environments (see also Kendall 1998: 130). Goffman’s lead provides direction for the empirical investigation of George Herbert Mead’s (1934: 140) proposal that “the self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience.” Our approach bears similarities to Aycocock’s (1995) analysis of newsgroup postings that frames them as Foucauldian (Martin *et al.* 1988) “technologies of the self.”

Identities in Action!

It seems to us that, prior to exploring the more spectacular aspects of online identity play, it is vital to look at the fundamental routines, practices and techniques through which identities are communicated and interpreted. Take for example, one of the commonplace by-products of e-mail and listservs, the number of requests issued in any given week by students and researchers looking for help with their current project, reading list, tracking down a reference, etc.

```
Hi, my name is Victoria and for my dissertation I'm working on the
subject how it could be possible to improve the image of health food
retail. My thesis contents that it could be very helpful to use the
realisations of gelatology(?), especially for the three fields:
1.communication with customers
2.communication with the staff
3.public relations.
```

```
Until yet I found a lot of material about the theory of humor, mostly
philosophical and psychological approaches, so I'm quite sure that I'm
right in my thinking. What I'm looking for now is literature about the
use of humour inb the workplace and investigations on this topic. If
someone could help me with a bibliography or hints for getting it it
would help me a lot.
```

```
Thanks in advance for any replies,
Victoria1
```

Gender and the educational context of the request are provided in this posting to an electronic mailing list along with a brief history of the work already put into the poster's literature search. In this way we, as readers, get a better understanding of Victoria's request and of Victoria herself. Whether such activities are done consciously or otherwise is, to a large extent for the current project, irrelevant. It is of note is that the expressive dimensions of the poster's request for help can be read symptomatically to create a thumbnail impression of the flesh-and-blood person we might encounter, not merely an anonymous poster. She is a fellow academic who shares our interests and a person who effectively opens herself up to validation by the community that is held together by the mailing list. Of course, this may not be a fair or true representation of the "real" Victoria but it is one that is accepted until revision or adjustment become appropriate among those involved in the list.

The sense of community that exists in RumCom.local relies heavily on posters' ability to know with whom they are interacting. In this newsgroup a practised familiarity with others allows members to understand the nature of their online relationships, assess the validity of information offered to them by others, and place in context comments and actions of other posters. Unlike the often-fantastical environments of some synchronous online interaction, the identities enacted in the newsgroup are taken to be "real" in a serious sense. When messages are posted to the group or address individuals a level of trust is offered and expected between those involved in the group.

To this end rather than bending gender and pick-and-mixing personal histories, people posting to RumCom.local consistently employ techniques for sharing and reinforcing details of their "real life" with those with whom they share asynchronous interaction. This paper describes and illustrates a number of these techniques for mobilising real identities in virtual encounters, including:

¹ Throughout this paper, names of individuals, newsgroups and Internet Service Providers have been replaced with pseudonyms.

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- **Display** - the offering of background information on the self such as physical make-up, employment, family, etc.
- **Management** - declining to offer requested information on one's self, choosing to deliver it in a different forum (i.e. direct e-mail, selective IRC, etc.)
- **Orientation** - the types of thread in which a contributor to the group regularly participates.
- **Transtextuality** - message references to TV programmes, books, music, web pages, etc. either to "make a statement" about self or to display cultural capital
- **Signature practices** - text files appended to postings that reinforce the identity with quotations from favoured, reference to hobbies and interests, and, URLs of their own web pages

Display

By claiming to be one thing - whether that be a retired, male, solicitor living in the south of England, or a school teacher living with her husband on a small island of the coast of Scotland, the posters to RumCom.local must "drop all pretences of being other things" (Goffman 1959/1990: 22). This may not be necessarily true in the more fantastic and spectacular realms of some MUDs but newsgroups in general tend to be treated as areas of non-fictional engagement: if members of .local are to remain regarded as respected interactants by others then they must demonstrate consistency in their presentation of self and avoid, wherever possible, gross contradiction or discrediting.

A primary way in which posters to RumCom.local (RumCommers) achieve this identity is through the description of posters' physical characteristics. While we want to stop short of agreeing with Donath that the body provides "inherent unity to the self" (Donath 1999: 29) during communication it is undeniably important as our own everyday experiences of interaction constantly reminds us. Posters are aware of this and their online discussions often gravitate towards such description.

```
> > When I am writing to people via Rumcom, I always build up a mental  
> > picture in my mind of what they look like, by what they write and  
> > their style of writing etc.
```

```
I suppose I do a bit - but I've been proved very wrong on occasions!
```

```
> I must admit I really enjoy making mental images of the people I chat  
> too. I have you with light brown hair that is shoulder length and  
> gathers round your face, which is fairly pale in colour. I can see  
> you with deep grey eyes that are very thoughtful and caring.
```

This concern with the physical is not limited to online interaction as curiosity spills over into face to face meetings and posters play games with each other by speculating as to what each of the regulars looks like:

```
Oh gosh - I'm dying to go to Bolton to see everyone!! - only meant it as  
a joke, but will go if I can possibly make it! When is it??
```

```
Dan I see as 5'10", fairish hair, blue eyes, glasses, medium build,  
mole on left forearm...
```

```
[...]
```

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Carol & Roger have blabbed already I believe - but I saw her with red hair and green eyes.

Daisy - 5'2", curvaceously sexy body, curly hair.

Les - 5'11", black hair, sixties Beatles hairstyle.

Patrick C. - 7' 4", yes he's got a beard, no he's not got a beard, no he's not got a beard <Made my mind up so you'll have to shave it off now ;)>, blue eyes and matching socks.

Will - 6' light brown hair, blue eyed sex bomb on legs. <<g> I may be wrong - are you going to Bolton?? ;)>

Arthur - 5'8" oops need to run - son with nose bleed!

JoJo

The RumRendezvous that are organised and attended by members of RumCom.local provide opportunity to verify both the mental images that have been developed of other RumCommers and the descriptions they have offered. These offline, informal meetings (similar to those discussed by others including Kendall 1998, Turkle 1995, and Rheingold 1993) take place about four times a year in a variety of locations throughout the UK. The gatherings, which tend to be held in a pub and restaurant over a Saturday and Sunday, offer an opportunity for those who have only met online to test their assumptions face-to-face and continue with the identity guessing game. There is a preoccupation at the RumRendezvous with the question, "Who are you?" Those new to the gatherings will tell of trying, when entering the venue, to work out who may be a RumCommer and which of the bodies fits with the online identities. They have learned something about the technical self and so want to find the "real life" self – and, so often, they are not that different.

Textual displays of identity are not limited to mention of physical characteristics in RumCom.local however. As people become part of the RumCom community they seek to be represented more fully as they begin to orientate themselves towards other posters. As such they offer references to their geographical location and history:

> Essex girls are referred to as
> Ilford girls, apologies to anyone from Ilford.

Have lived in Ilford all of my life, Redbridge actually,.

Their health:

I had mycoplasma pneumonia in 1987, Cath.

It is *extremely* variable in its effects, being no more than a bad 'flu to some and landing me in hospital for a short while. I lost a lot of weight and didn't get my stamina back till I'd regained half of it. This took about 10 weeks. I was lucky at the time as I worked for an agency doing locum work. This meant I could essentially choose my hours and build up gradually.

Their religion:

Being a Roman Catholic myself, (somewhat lapsed at the moment :- (),

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I don't know why a Priest has to be celibate, I know some aren't. Is it because they show their constant devotion to God rather like nuns or monks, or is it a form of penance? Is it in the Bible that Priests have to live a life of celibacy?

Mind you the Priests and nuns I have met certainly don't look their age. Is it their lifestyle? I am NOT becoming celibate just to avoid the ageing process!

Their age and family celebrations:

> I will be bringing the Champagne for my belated birthday
> celebrations. Who DOESN'T drink Champagne?

I definately do! And as it is five days away from my birthday, just might celebrate too. On second thoughts, I just remembered, I am not celebrating my birthday this year. I mean who the hell wants to celebrate turning 40!!!!

As well as things such as employment history, children, marital status, pets, and so forth. Given such rich and explicit sharing of personal, offline details, it is hard to consider notions of online anonymity and identity exchanging become difficult to apply to this community even if they have currency elsewhere.

Management

However, although the newsgroup RumCom.local is the “front” region for display of identities for those who inhabit the Rumcom.local community it is by no means the totality – or necessarily the greater part – of it. As has been pointed out elsewhere, “many individual identity deceptions are acts of omission, rather than commission; they involve hiding one’s identity” (Donath 1999:52): often members of .local do not wish certain discussions, opinions or pieces of information to be generally displayed to all the group. In such situations a certain amount of interaction takes place through other channels. We have already discussed the importance of the RumRendezvous but Internet Relay Chat (IRC), and other synchronous chat systems, along with direct e-mails and telephone calls form the “back” region of identity construction for RumCommers.

During our fieldwork, visits to early RumRendezvous made evident a major example of non-newsgroup interaction: “The Baker’s Dozen.” This was a group of women who were affiliated by their shared familiarity of .local (although some of them no longer read the group), their fondness of IRC and their interest in baking and confectionary making. The talk of the Bakers Dozen on IRC was separated from the threads developing in .local and, like some sort of anachronistic gentlemen’s club, the number of members was fixed and strictly by invitation only. Their regular Sunday night sessions are a well-established offshoot of .local culture. Participants claimed that the group provided the initial impetus for early RumRendezvous meetings, before being joined by other, .local newsgroup orientated RumCommers.

For the ethnographer it is impossible to estimate with any accuracy or confidence the amount or level of importance of such interaction since much of it remains deliberately hidden from wider view.² Indeed, it was only after nearly a year of research that the hidden side of RumCommers’ identity management started to become partially visible to

² For further discussion of online ethnography see Rutter & Smith 1999b.

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us. As core RumCom.local participants became familiar with us, stories of personal animosities, quarrels and illicit affairs started to be shared with us and verified by the parties involved.

While the management of information about self was often treated by RumCommers as largely confined to the online realm, some posters were coming to realise that there could be a spillover into real life that they could not control. One of the core posters told us of her disquiet when, on the occasion of returning books to her local library, she was greeted by her RumCom nickname by the unacquainted man next in line. She also felt disturbed when she discovered that a metre and a half high poster of herself had been made from a photograph appearing on a website of a RumRendezvous and was adorning the wall of an expatriate worker in the Middle East. These proved to offer practical lessons that control of information about self in an electronic environment was a riskier business than first anticipated.

Orientation

As RumCommers develop knowledge of each other they begin to demonstrate this knowledge to each other. What appears to happen is that as posters build up a sense of belonging to the RumCom community they begin to want to show their belonging through using knowledge topical to the group. Postings, questions and requests for comment will be directed to members of .local who have been recognised as having specialist knowledge either through profession or interest:

```
> The Fokker Wolf only had one engine, Fokker is a Dutch company which  
> I think went bust last year  
  
> Dont you just love a smart arse:)))
```

```
The Fokker Triplane (a passenger plane that looked as if it were made  
out of corrugated iron) is the one I was thinking of. I seem to  
think that the German airforce used them in WWII or before? I'll  
look at the WWII CD-ROM later, but I seem to remember the German  
Airforce Commander stepping out of one, or was it Hitler, or maybe  
the infamous 'peace in our time' footage? Or even all three!
```

```
Can you explain how you could do it in a single seater at a mile AGL  
then Dave? <WG>
```

```
OK OK - Maybe they went bust - I didn't know - Sorry ;-)
```

```
> Henry over to you
```

Occasionally, and more ostentatiously, posters will demonstrate their power of recall as though they were playing a parlour game:

```
Elizabeth's worked in:  
Sheffield  
Doncaster  
Stourbridge  
Dudley  
Leeds  
Orpington  
Cambridge  
Lerwick  
Glasgow  
London
```

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Norwich
Hillingdon
and is now in Poole, where she also does a bit in nearby Bournemouth.

Further, regular readers of the newsgroup will develop expectations of what responses to expect from other and what sort of threads they will contribute to. Indeed, as Myers (1998) reminds us, moderators in focus group interactions can quickly ascertain those individuals who nominate themselves as regular source of contention and argumentative statement. In RumCom.local these posters become “characters” known to the group. Readers of the newsgroup quickly begin to expect conflict from these posters and effectively grant them license to argue beyond the normal regulation of politeness. In interview we were told

There’s a fellow Nick Harwood who is... used to make quite a lot of interesting post and he... I haven’t seen his name for a long time. The other one was Huw Jones and they often used to have lengthy debates. Huw’s still there, but he doesn’t do as much as he used to do.

Transtextuality

One of the often-repeated questions asked of us about RumCom.local is, “what sort of things do they talk about?” Try as we might we still haven’t found a succinct yet informative answer to this. Topics of conversation are diverse in .local – ranging from medical advice and talk of vacuum cleaners to reminiscences of childhood games and the value of cycling paths. However, like other general conversational talk, the interaction is not possible without reference to texts that exists outside the conversation itself. It is through sharing a common knowledge of such “transtextual”³ references that a unspoken cultural background is created within .local in which references can be spotted and have their significance decoded.

When posters to RumCom.local write about TV programmes they watched as children they not only give others an indication of their age but information on their family background is given off. For example, until relatively recently television sets – especially colour ones – were far less common in homes in the UK than in the United States and it is not that uncommon to find people who as children were only allowed to watch the publicly funded BBC rather than independent television.

When one RumCommer asks for an update on a British television soap opera with:

> What happened on Eastenders tonight?

the apparently simple request for a information displays a fairly complex understanding of the cultural identity of the newsgroup constituents:

- that the question will be understood

³ We use the term “transtextuality” rather than the more common “intertextuality” as a more inclusive term that can, after Genette (1982), be broken down into five subtypes: intertextuality; paratextuality; architextuality; metatextuality; hypotextuality.

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- that it is an appropriate broadcast request⁴
- that the poster can reasonably expect and answer

Members of RumCom.local see such exchanges as a vital and distinctive element of the newsgroup identity. In interview subscribers often comment on the readiness of other RumCommers to offer support, advice and help and the contrasting experiences they have had in other newsgroups:

But generally I mean [laughs] most people including me, 90% of the time, will help them. [laughs]

[...]

So I mean self-help also counts for a lot. I mean if you were to try something like that on Demon, you'd just end up getting flamed. And all you have to do to (pile) that one up is have a look at (Demon dot Wilco). [laughs]...

These shared transtextual references can be made to popular television and music:

I also remember the reference in the young ones where Neil was a bit depressed, playing the part of a police man if memory serves me correctly. I think his words were along the lines of 'I'm so depressed I might as well be listening to a Leonard Cohen record'. Many young ones fans were asking who on earth was Leonard Cohen?? :-))

or childhood recollections

> Does anyone remember knockers from the early seventies.

Went under the name of Clackers in our area. The other reason for them being banned was that on occasion the balls burst (shattered), and bits went into eyes.

as identities are presented and shared.

In the extract below talk of the Radio 4 programme *Woman's Hour* not only demonstrates a shared cultural reference between the posters (and other readers who have similar daytime listening habits) but carries with it a certain level of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1987). That is, status is awarded by virtue that the posters listen to and appreciate "quality" talk radio in contrast to the more broad appeal of the pop music stations.

> I've even been caught listening to
> Women's Hour - OK, make some thing out of that!!

I've listened to Women's Hour for a long as I can remember (about 30 years), which may account for why I find it easy to talk to women, and hard to talk to men. At least, in the "laddish" sort of style.

Those with this capital recognise its worth in other posters. Such exchange of transtextual references often become, like so much of the interaction in .local, a playful swapping of puns and allusions. A joke culled from the sitcom *Porridge* forms the cue for a reference to the 1941 John Ford film/Richard Llewellyn novel, *How Green was My Valley*.

> I read a book once.....green it was"

> (Porridge, but can't remember the character's name)
> --

⁴ For further discussion of broadcast requests in newsgroup messages see Rutter & Smith 1999a

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Ah yes.. 'How Green Was My Book'

Signature practices

Signature files (or, more commonly, sigs) are short pieces of texts that are often appended to the bottom of newsgroup and e-mail postings. Just under half of the postings to RumCom.local contain a sig file.⁵ These short texts appended to posting contain further information that the author looks to provide signification of them as “real” people. They will contain

- URLs to personal pages
- URLs to their fan or specialist page (football teams, TV programmes, artists, etc)
- ICQ or Fidonet numbers
- Amateur radio call signs
- Jokes or humorous slogans:

Get thee behind me, Santa

And:

--

Richard Carlton
Nelson, Lancashire

Diamonds are a Girls Best Friend
but a Mans Best Friend is his Dog

- Quotations:

*****Carol*****

No cord or cable can draw so forcibly, or bind so fast, as love can
do with a single thread. ***Robert Burton*** (1577-1640)

- Poster's name
- E-mail addresses
- Reminders of forthcoming events (e.g. the next RumRendezvous)

Dan
Bolton

*****Bolton RumRendezvous*****
Saturday 18th April

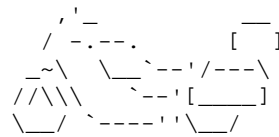
- Pseudonyms used on IRC, MOOs etc.
- Indication of employment as in:

paul.morecambe@rumcom.co.uk
Paul Morecambe - Electronic Music Repairs/Services

- Small ASCII art pictures:

⁵ Although no comparative figures exist this figure may be somewhat low if compared to other newsgroups. This hypothesis is based upon the almost total use by subscribers to RumCom of a proprietary piece of software written by the company's technical director and distributed free to RumCom subscribers. This software handles sig files but does not automatically append them to messages as do some other news and e-mail clients.

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The rubber bits go on the bottom

Unlike the sig files used in many work orientated e-mails and newsgroup postings such as those discussed by Donath (1999) or discussions lists postal addresses or phone numbers appear very rarely to be part of the RumCom sig. Similarly neither do “Geek codes” or variations of such systems. These blocks of text, originally designed by Robert Hayden but based upon “bear”, “smurf” and “twink” style-and-sexual-preference codes from lesbian and gay newsgroups.⁶ This seems hardly surprising given the general focus of .local banter and its fairly consistent make up.

However, what they do offer are further displays of the way in which the poster wishes to be perceived by other RumCommers. Web pages and contact details offer further means for the curious of verifying the self presented in the newsgroups postings whilst the transtextual allusions and reference to hobby pages suggest a frame through which to view the author.

Conclusions

What we hope we have done in this paper is show not merely that there are possibilities for presentation of a self online and identity play which do not exist offline but that routinely such possibilities are ignored by members of RumCom.local. It appears a vital part of the .local culture that trust and understanding is earned through identity performance and that the self presented is allied with that which exists offline. Personal details given off through styles of writing, allusions employed and inferences about what is *not* shared in the newsgroup all contribute to this construction of identity. More importantly though, RumCommers actively seek to present their offline selves as a practical means of generating solidarity and community online.

In both a strong literal and a metaphorical sense, the self-presentation techniques sketched out above are technologies of identity. Given the absence of expressive markers of the embodied self, they help create a virtual presence that marks a posting as one’s own and further, demonstrate that the author accepts responsibility for its contents. In an environment that comprehensively textualises identity signifiers, these techniques are the vehicles through which online selves are interactionally enacted and exhibited. We believe that these devices are used to both to present a commonly acceptable self and to blur distinctions between on- and offline selves.

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