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Mobile Phone Communication: Extending Goffman to Mediated Interaction

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ABSTRACT
Mediated interaction has become a feature of everyday life, used routinely to communicate and maintain contacts, yet sociological analysis of mediated communication is relatively undeveloped. This article argues that new mediated communication channels merit detailed sociological analysis, and that interactional differences between media have been overlooked. Goffman explicitly restricted his interaction order to face-to-face interaction. The article adapts some of Goffman’s interactional concepts for synchronous mediated interaction, but argues that his situational focus is less relevant to asynchronous media. The theoretical approach developed is illustrated and supported by qualitative research on mobile phones, which fortuitously afford both synchronous and asynchronous communication. The study suggests that although the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous interaction is important, it is not technologically determined, but shaped by interactional norms.

KEY WORDS
Goffman / interaction order / mediated communication / mobile phones / new media / SMS / synchrony

Introduction
Face-to-face interaction has been recognized as an important area for sociological analysis, but less attention has been paid to mediated forms of social interaction, even though the telephone has been available for over 100 years. Whilst there has been considerable focus on the macro effects of the escalation of mediated
communication (e.g. Castells, 1996) there has been less microsociological focus on mediated interaction. Consequently, diverse mediated communication channels have been assimilated and treated as homogenous, ignoring the differences between their affordances. To assess the impact of the proliferation of new media, and of the escalation of their use, we need to understand the differences between face-to-face and mediated interaction, and the differences between different forms of mediated interaction (Hutchby, 2001; Whittaker, 2002). This research develops interactional tools for the analysis of mediated communication, and shows how these can illuminate our understanding of new media. These tools are potentially useful for the design of new mediated channels.

Goffman explicitly restricted his microsociological analysis to face-to-face interaction. However, previous studies have found Goffman's insights relevant to mediated interaction (e.g. Boden and Molotch, 1994; Heath and Luff, 1992; Meyrowitz, 1985). This article builds on this work, developing interactional concepts and analytical resources for the study of mediated interaction. Their relevance and value is illustrated in research that explores the perceptions of mobile phone users. Goffman’s situational focus is more applicable to synchronous than asynchronous media, highlighting the distinction between the two forms of media, and illustrating the value of microanalysis of mediated interaction.

The first section of the article briefly reviews literature that has used Goffman’s work in mediated communication. The next section distinguishes synchronous from asynchronous mediated interaction, and develops Goffman’s interactional concepts. This is followed by the research methodology and findings. Before concluding, the penultimate section of the article briefly explores the application of the theory to email and instant messages, and considers the boundaries of synchrony.

Goffman’s Interactional Insights and Mediated Communication

A number of authors have applied Goffman’s work to mediated communication. Meyrowitz extended Goffman’s theory to mediated contexts, arguing that because physical boundaries are irrelevant in mediated communication, situations should be defined as ‘information systems’ or ‘patterns of access to information’ (1985: 37). Boden and Molotch (1994) argue that a ‘compulsion for proximity’ limits mediated communication: face-to-face copresence is often preferred and affords thicker information, body talk and communication efficiency. Research suggests that in video- and audio-mediated environments (Ackerman et al., 1997; Heath and Luff, 1992) participants experience a sense of copresence in a shared social space, with consequent development of norms to organize interaction. Jirotka et al. (1991) show how norms are relevant in multi-party systems, and use Goffman’s participant roles to explain turn-taking in synchronous multi-party computer-mediated communication. Video-mediated environments can introduce communicative asymmetries (Heath and Luff, 1992); this reduces mutual monitoring, compromising privacy.
Goffman’s work has also been used in organizational studies of mediated communication. Research shows that customer interaction in telephone call centres is experienced as a ‘socially relevant activity that is structured by values, norms, moral dispositions and the interconnectedness of social ties’ (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005: 699). Face-work is often an implicit aspect of service work, resulting in the commodification of emotion (Sturdy and Fineman, 2001). Asynchronous mediated communication can change the emotional context of work; for instance, reducing embarrassment in the virtual classroom (Gilmore and Warren, 2007) or producing irrevocable messages which can be reviewed and replicated in new contexts (Myers, 2007).

Several authors apply Goffman’s concept of front and back regions to mediated interaction. Meyrowitz argues that mediation can expose back stage behaviour to unintended audiences creating a ‘middle region’. Ling (1997) claims that mobile phone calls create ‘parallel front stages’, blurring boundaries between public and private spaces (Cooper, 2001). Aoki (2007) develops the concept of multiple front regions in the context of a combat information centre, and shows how multi-party communication systems can complicate teamwork. Geser (2004) claims that the blurring of regions in mobile phone calls means that performances may overlap, increasing role conflict and awareness of role-play. For example, when mothers talk to their children from the workplace in ‘remote mothering’ (Rakow and Navarro, 1993) calls may be overheard, complicating impression management. Fortunati (2005: 205) takes this further and suggests that exposure of back stage performances in mobile phone conversation could affect social order.

**Development of Interactional Concepts for Mediated Interaction**

The literature demonstrates the application of Goffman’s interactional concepts to mediated communication on an ad hoc basis. Meyrowitz’s (1985) formal theoretical development of Goffman has more general application, but weakens the concept of a social situation so that it contributes little to the analysis. Ito and Okabe (2005: 260) endorse Meyrowitz’s extension of situations to mediated communication, but argue for mediated situations that retain ‘a coherent sense of location, social expectation, and role definition [as] exhibited in Goffman’s analyses’. This article attempts to answer their plea and to show that mediated situations that involve a shared sense of coherence and which warrant situational analysis occur in some, but not all, mediated communication channels.

**Goffman’s Interaction Order**

Goffman explicitly confined his interaction order to face-to-face interaction, treating a physically defined social situation as the basic working unit in the study of the interaction order (1967, 1983). Physical copresence creates the vulnerability and...
risk of embarrassment that underlies Goffman's concepts of face-work, interaction ritual and personal territoriality. Shilling (1999: 553) claims that Goffman 'marginalizes mediated interaction'; Meyrowitz (1985) and Giddens (1984) make similar observations. Notwithstanding his treatment of TV and radio (1981), Goffman often carefully excludes 'mediated contact' from his analysis; for instance, listing the telephone, telegraph, and mail as 'marginal and derived forms of social contact' (1971: 70–1) and commenting 'presumably the telephone and the mails provide reduced versions of the primordial real thing' (1983: 2). Goffman's rationale (1967: 33) for excluding mediated contact is that 'direct, personal contacts' present 'unique informational conditions' that make impression management more pertinent. Goffman (1959) distinguishes between expressions given and given off; the latter include subtle gestures and facial expressions. In physical copresence these are witnessed, as is the fact that they are witnessed. This facilitates the presentation of self, whereas in mediated contact a participant's line has to be gleaned indirectly (1967: 33). Mutual monitoring in face-to-face interaction enables the collaborative and coordinated practices of social life:

When in each other's presence individuals are admirably placed to share a joint focus of attention, perceive that they do so, and perceive this perceiving. This, in conjunction with their capacity to indicate their own courses of physical action and to rapidly convey reactions to such indications from others, provides the precondition for something crucial: the sustained, intimate, coordination of action, whether in support of closely collaborative tasks or as a means of accommodating closely adjacent ones. (Goffman, 1983: 3, emphasis added)

Physical copresence is the prerequisite of a situation for Goffman, because situations require close coordination. For Goffman, mediated interactions do not constitute proper situations; instead they are 'situation-like' (1979) because they do not afford the requisite degree of mutual monitoring. If someone within a situation receives a letter or telephone call it is 'merely situated' (1963: 22) – the frame of the ongoing situation is not an intrinsic element of the interaction. Although Goffman twice refers to encounters of the 'immediate and mediated kind' and intermittently refers to telephone calls and letters, he disavows interest, and does not explicate the way in which mediated interaction is 'more attenuated' (1967: 33, 41).

Mediated Encounters

In Goffman's interaction order a shared definition of the situation creates the coherence of social reality: interactants share a physical location, a time-frame and a conceptual framework, coordinating their impression management through mutual monitoring and face-work. The mutual monitoring afforded by copresence helps interactants to identify and maintain a shared frame or 'definition of the situation', enabling concerted social interaction. Whereas for symbolic interactionists the 'definition of the situation' is about symbolic meaning, for Goffman it is used by the interactants to structure and shape their shared social experience. The social self is presented, and thereby formed, in the situation. If the participants cease to share a definition of 'what is going on here' (1974: 8), a situation...
may ‘collapse, disintegrate, go up in smoke’ (1974: 302). The interactants are still copresent, but the social structure of the situation is disrupted: ‘Experience ... finds no form and frame: is therefore no experience. Reality anomically flutters’ (1974: 379). For Goffman, a frame is not merely an informational context, but an integral part of the shared experience of interaction, and consequently an essential analytical tool if we want to understand the interaction.

Although copresence automatically creates a situation for Goffman, he makes a further distinction between focused and unfocused contact. An ‘encounter’ or ‘face-engagement’ occurs when two or more persons join ‘each other openly in maintaining a single focus of cognitive and visual attention – what is sensed as a single mutual activity, entailing preferential communication rights’ (Goffman, 1963: 89, original emphasis). In an encounter, the participants cooperate to maintain focused interaction, for instance, by engaging in conversation. Some mediated communication involves focused, concerted interaction rather similar to face-to-face encounters. A phone call affords a degree of mutual monitoring, warrants focused attention and facilitates the ‘sustained, intimate, coordination of action’ (Goffman, 1983: 3) typical of verbal conversation. However, collaborative interaction and co-construction of an ongoing shared social situation is less practicable in asynchronous media. There appear to be two different types of mediated contact: communication such as mail, which may occur incidentally within an existing situation but which does not create an intersubjective social experience, and communication such as a phone call, which is more similar to a face-to-face encounter. Synchronous continuous media, such as phone calls and video links, enable a degree of ongoing mutual monitoring in real-time. Although the interactants are in different locations, they share a time-frame and a mediated copresence: as the interactants converse they collaborate on what we can call a mediated encounter. Using Giddens’ (1984) concept of time-space distanciation, one can distinguish asynchronous mediated communication, which involves time-space distanciation, from synchronous mediated communication, which is spatially but not temporally remote.

Although the participants in a mediated encounter are not physically copresent, they work together in the ‘sustained, intimate, coordination of action’; this renders situational analysis apposite. Not all mediated channels enable concurrent mutual monitoring. Asynchronous mediated communication lacks a concurrent time-frame, consequently the interactants cannot coordinate their ongoing actions as they would in an encounter. The difference is exemplified by a comparison of an exchange of letters, in which each participant individually composes and interprets what is written, with the concerted interaction of a phone conversation. There is an important difference between mediated encounters that involve ongoing concurrent interaction, and mediated contacts in which the interactants do not work together in real-time. Goffman’s emphasis on focused attention, a shared sense of what is going on and ‘a sense of single mutual activity’ (1963: 89) supports this construal of a mediated encounter, but Goffman tended to avoid the phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2005) that might have clarified the relationship between mediated and face-to-face experience.
Rawls (2003) argues that Goffman and Garfinkel complement one another; developing her approach, Garfinkel's concept of shared practice can be used to illuminate the role of cotemporality in shared social experience. Ethnomethodology highlights ‘the actual methods whereby members of a society, doing sociology, lay or professional, make the social structures of everyday activities observable’ (Garfinkel, 1967: 75). Social life is orderly because members have shared methods ‘that they use to mutually construct the meaningful orderliness of social situations’ (Rawls, 2002: 5). For Garfinkel, social reality is constituted by shared, local practice; social order requires the ongoing work of its members, who produce its witnessable, recognizable coherence. Unless the participants work together, a situation quickly becomes meaningless, as demonstrated by Garfinkel’s breaching experiments. Cotemporality plays an important role in shared practice. In an early work, Garfinkel (2006[1948]) describes how conversation aligns the interactants’ inner sense of time or ‘inner duree’, creating a ‘new time dimension’ and a ‘common vivid presence’.

The listener experiences the occurrences of the other’s action as events occurring in outer time and space, while at the same time he experiences his interpretive actions as a series of retentions and anticipations happening in his inner time and connected by the intention to understand the other’s ‘message’ as a meaningful unit. The communicator’s speech, while it goes on, is an element common to his as well as the listener’s vivid present. Both vivid presents occur simultaneously. A new time dimension is therefore established, namely, that of a common vivid present. Both can say later, ‘We experienced this occurrence together.’ (2006[1948]: 116)

Garfinkel’s account shows how shared time, rather than physical copresence, is relevant to the experience of an occurrence as a shared event. This explains the crucial difference between synchronous and asynchronous communication. In synchronous media, such as a phone call, the interactants can work together in a common time; their shared practice of coordinated interaction creates the intersubjective experience of a mediated encounter. Synchronous media afford ‘situated action’ (Suchman, 1987: 179) where organization is ‘an emergent property of moment-by-moment interactions’. In contrast, although asynchronous communication is organized, it is not situated in a common present and consequently does not afford continuous cooperative practice and the experience of a moment-by-moment intersubjectivity in a shared social reality. The correspondents who exchange letters, emails or text messages monitor their responses to one another, but there is no ongoing collaboration in real-time.

The role of cotemporal shared practice in the construction of social reality helps to explain why the concept of a social encounter is more relevant for the analysis of synchronous mediated interaction. Note that encounters require prolonged, rather than momentary, connection through a synchronous medium, and that technical connection through a medium does not constitute an encounter; there is an encounter only if there is sustained focused interaction. Thus in video-mediated environments participants may ignore one another with only intermittent engagement (Heath and Luff, 1992). This is similar to people in a face-to-face gathering, who share encounters only when they engage one another in focused interaction.
The synchronous/asynchronous distinction is not clear cut: firstly, in all communication there is some delay between origination and reception, nevertheless some communication is perceived as synchronous; and secondly, even if a technology affords continuous synchronous communication, this affordance could be ignored in practice. For example, mobile phones could be kept on silent and used solely for asynchronous voicemail messages. The perception of a medium as synchronous reflects socially shaped expectations that the interactants will maintain continuous focused attention and will engage in coordinated interaction for a sustained period. This is discussed in more detail in the penultimate section of this article, which explores the boundary between synchronous and asynchronous communication.

**A Gathering of Mediated and Face-to-face Interaction**

For Goffman, the people who share a situation constitute a gathering: ‘any set of two or more individuals whose members include all and only those who are at the moment in one another’s immediate presence’ (1967: 144). Gatherings occur in front and back regions or stages (1959). The front region is the physical setting where the main performance takes place; it indicates and supports the relevant definition of the situation, and the interactants’ roles. The back region is an area where an individual can drop the role performed on the front stage, and prepare props, collude with other team members, or relax in privacy. These distinctions are relative; performance of self continues back stage (albeit in a different role and to a different audience), and the same area may be simultaneously the front region of one performance and the back region of another.

In a face-to-face gathering an individual can be involved in several different focused and unfocused interactions, creating conflicting demands on attention. For instance, someone may interrupt and engage a person who is already in focused interaction, creating what Goffman calls ‘cross-talk’ (1971: 25). Humphreys (2005) shows how mobile phones create ‘cross-talk’ when they interrupt face-to-face interaction, leaving the other face-to-face interactant in an awkward position. This suggests that, when mediated and face-to-face encounters occur simultaneously, the pertinent interactional dynamics include both mediated and face-to-face contacts. Goffman seems to have been aware of this, noting (1971: 220–2) that people on the phone are particularly vulnerable, because the ‘person in the middle’ can collude with the face-to-face interactant, who forms a ‘concealed audience’. Similarly, Gergen (2002: 238) notes that a mobile phone conversation ‘typically establishes an “inside space” (“we who are conversing”) vs. an “outside space” constituted by those within earshot but prevented from participating’. These examples are similar to face-to-face gatherings that include participants in focused interaction as well as bystanders. Goffman’s concept of a gathering is restricted to physically copresent interactants, but it makes sense to extend the gathering to include interactants in mediated encounters (but not contacts in any coincident asynchronous communications).

When face-to-face and mediated encounters coincide, expressions intended for one audience may be overheard by another interactant, complicating impression
management. One way of handling this is to skilfully choose comments that simultaneously address two different audiences. For instance, a mother answering her mobile at work might deliberately use a name, to inform her co-workers that she is talking to her daughter, or might say she is working hard to impress her employer. In this example the visual and audio boundaries are different: the visual front stage includes only the face-to-face interactants, but there are two audio front stages. This is clearly confusing, as the redundant gesturing of mobile phone users indicates. Furthermore, front and back regions may be asymmetrical, with boundaries that are ill-defined: in mobile phone calls it is sometimes possible for other face-to-face interactants to hear, and/or be heard by the remote interactant. Borrowing Goffman’s terminology (1981), they are ‘ratified participants’, who, although they are not part of the focused encounter, may be entitled to listen in and contribute the occasional remark.

Extending the concept of a gathering helps to explain why mobile phones are seen as invasive. The area in which telephone calls can intrude is fixed, but mobile calls can interrupt any social occasion, reducing interactional coherence and shared context, because they change the structure of the gathering, creating asymmetries in performance management. The concept of a gathering facilitates analysis of the complex participative framework that may arise in concurrent mediated and face-to-face interactions.

In order to explore this theoretical development of Goffman’s interactional order, research was conducted on mobile phones, which fortuitously combine synchronous and asynchronous media, i.e. phone calls and text messages.

**Research Methodology**

The author conducted semi-structured interviews (upto two and a half hours long) with 32 UK adults who spent a minimum of £15/month on their mobile phones. The purposive sample included a wide variation in terms of class, income, education level and presence of children. Interviews were conducted in respondents’ homes whenever possible, but eight were conducted in the interviewer/author’s home. The research focused on mobile phones, but included respondents’ whole communication repertoires. A topic guide was used; in particular, respondents were asked to: explain how they would describe mobile phone calls and text messages to a non-user; compare the two media; rationalize their choice of media (in general and on specific occasions); and discuss the specific communication repertoires they used in different relationships. The research was influenced by previous mobile phone research, which combined interviews, communication diaries and text messages (Ito and Okabe, 2005). Consequently, participants completed 24-hour diaries detailing all mediated social communication on the day before the interview; these served as resources for discussion within the interviews, and substantiated respondents’ comments in the interviews. In addition, 278 text messages were collected from interviewees; again these were used mainly as research stimuli and for corroboration, but they also provided a corpus for content analysis.
The interviews and text messages were merged, transcribed and coded using Atlas-ti. Respondents were invited to validate the transcriptions, but all declined. The diaries were coded manually. Analysis was influenced by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967); line-by-line examination and comparison of the transcripts yielded over 500 open codes, and over 7000 coded segments. However, analysis focused on the identification of themes, patterns and negative-cases rather than on the development of axial and selective codes. Names have been changed; gender is indicated by choice of pseudonym.

From an interactionist perspective, interviews are problematic. They are social situations, shaped by the ‘interview’ frame, by the selves projected by the respondent and (in this case) by the interviewer/researcher. An alternative, ethnomethodological, approach could have captured interactants’ situational work more directly, but an interview-based methodology was selected because the study focused on respondents’ perceptions and phenomenological experience. Miller and Glassner (1997) argue that although interviews are not transparent windows into respondents’ worlds, and are inevitably influenced by the researcher, nevertheless, knowledge of respondents’ social worlds can emerge. Moreover, discussion with respondents can evoke the researcher's (and reader's) recognition of commonplace social realities (cf. Sharrock and Button, 1991).

The first section of the research findings discusses respondents’ perceptions of the differences between mobile phone calls and text messages, the second considers concurrent mobile and face-to-face interaction and the final section explores presentation of self in mobile phone calls and text messages.

Research Findings

The interviews were the most useful source for understanding respondents’ perceptions, but usage detailed in the diaries and exemplified by the text messages corroborated respondents’ perceptions. The findings reported here refer to the interviews unless stated otherwise.

Comparison between Mobile Phone Calls and Text Message Exchanges

For respondents, a key difference between mobile phone calls and text message exchanges was the way in which the other person was ‘there’. Respondents frequently contrasted calls in which they felt as though they were both ‘there’, with text messages, in which the other person was ‘not there’. This is consistent with treating mobile phone calls, but not text message exchanges, as mediated encounters. In phone calls the participants feel as if they are ‘there, together’. In the excerpt below an interviewee pseudonymized as Carol explains the difference between phone calls and text messages.

Ruth: What’s the difference? I know it’s really difficult.
Carol: Yes. Oh I’ve not really had to think about it before so, um I don’t know, I think it is possibly because we are human and we do need that kind of contact and to know that there is a physical person there. Um, I’m not sure
how to explain it, because I mean I do get satisfaction from a text message as well.

Ruth: But it’s, you’re saying it’s different and when you’ve got-. Is it in the sense of the, with the phone call the other person is more there? Is that what?

Carol: Yes, I think the other person is there, then and there. And you’re both communicating at exactly the same time. And that person has stopped to speak to you and you’ve stopped to speak to that person and you’re both com[municating]. Like your thoughts are together at the same time. (emphasis added)

For Carol, phone calls provide a different sort of social contact: ‘because we are human and I do need that kind of contact’. Carol says that on the phone there is a ‘physical person there’. Her use of ‘physical’ is interesting given the mediation of the phone, and reflects a shared time dimension. In response to the suggestion that this is a matter of degree, Carol emphasizes concurrence: ‘there, then and there’ and ‘at exactly the same time’. She also suggests that focused attention is relevant; the participants have stopped to speak to each other, consequently their ‘thoughts are together at the same time’. Carol highlights the role of synchrony in the experience of phone calls, and supports their construal as social encounters. Situational analysis is more appropriate for this type of interaction than analysis that takes the individual and their actions as the basic unit, because the interaction is experienced as a holistic, mutual experience.

Respondents almost always likened phone calls to face-to-face interaction: ‘although you’re not actually looking at each other, I suppose in a sense it still, it’s face-to-face, without the faces’ (Jackie). Zoe, explained why she preferred SMS: ‘at least I don’t have to talk to them. I know it’s not, it’s daft ‘cos it’s not face-to-face on the phone, but it is face-to-face to me’. Several respondents used the same metaphor; being on the phone was like being with the other person with one’s eyes shut. In contrast, when discussing SMS, respondents spoke of the other person as not being there, or of ‘distance’. This could be advantageous: Olivia explained that it was easier to use endearments in text messages, because if one was rejected ‘it wouldn’t matter ‘cos you’re not there’. The feeling that the other person isn’t ‘there’ in text messages is especially useful in embarrassing interactions; several respondents explained how text message conversations had facilitated intimacy in their relationships.

All interviewees agreed that bad news should preferably be delivered face-to-face or in a phone call. They explained that one needed to ‘be there’ to provide emotional support for the other person. The indexicality of ‘there’ sometimes caused confusion in the interviews; respondents were clear that people on the phone are in different locations. ‘There’ does not refer to location in this usage, but to the shared interaction; the interactants are there together ‘on the phone’ in a mediated encounter (cf. Sacks, 1995: 461–2).

Some respondents said they preferred phone calls when they felt lonely or wanted company. Anne explained: ‘if I am feeling, um, kind of a bit needy or vulnerable, then text isn’t enough. Then I do need I need to kind of have a proper dose of somebody.’ Patricia, a single mother, said she had run up huge phone bills,
because the phone was her main source of adult company. For most people, phone calls are much more social than text messages (although a small minority found phone interaction challenging; see Rettie, 2007).

Respondents conceptualized phone calls as involving the focused attention typical of encounters: ‘you’ve very much more got somebody’s undivided attention on the phone and than, than almost anything else’ (Harry). In public places, calls diverted attention from physical surroundings and local interactions: ‘you forget actually that you’re in a crowded place, you’re kind of in your own little world’ (Anne). Anne’s ‘own little world’ is that of the mediated encounter; text message exchanges also diverted attention but to a much lesser extent. Consequently, for many it was acceptable to discreetly read and respond to text messages during meals, but not to answer phone calls.

However, the requisite attention was not always forthcoming in phone calls. Dee’s boyfriend Chris phoned her very frequently. Here she discusses how she feels when on the phone.

Dee: Sometimes you know that other people are talking to you on the phone really and you’re talking to them, but they’re not listening. I do that a lot with Chris (her partner). Sometimes I’ll be sitting doing whatever. Watching the telly and he’ll be going on. And I don’t even know what he’s saying, I just know that he’s finished and I will be going yeah, OK, yeah, watching Tricia sort of thing. So sometimes I’m not even on the phone, I am on the phone, but I’m not really listening. (emphasis added)

Dee says that sometimes she is not even on the phone, even when she is on the phone, because she is not really listening. The feeling that the other person is ‘there’ depends on a shared focus of attention. If the other person isn’t listening, it may feel as if they are distinctly ‘not there’. Dee’s usage reflects her assumption that focused attention and ‘being there’ are intrinsic aspects of being on the phone, but also indicates that these expectations are not always fulfilled. In Goffman’s terms (1974), when Dee stops listening to her boyfriend, they cease to share a frame and the situation collapses. Consequently, she is ‘not even on the phone’. The example also illustrates how media are socially constructed: it is social expectations of focused attention in phone calls that generate mediated encounters; phone technology enables, but does not guarantee, sustained focused communication.

Some interviewees said that it was easier to ‘leave the situation’ when on the phone than when face-to-face. However, other respondents found it very difficult to end phone calls, and this discouraged use of the medium. These comments indicate strong situational proprieties for both phone calls and face-to-face interactions. In contrast, text message conversations were not usually treated as situations that required an extended leave-taking; one could just ignore or delete a text message. This was a major advantage of text messages. Patricia explained that rejection was less distressing in text message conversations:

Patricia: [on the phone] you have to leave the situation and it’s the awkwardness of, you know, having to deal with the situation. At the end of the day you can delete somebody’s number, turn the phone off. (emphasis added)
Her comment illustrates the difference between the mediated encounter of a phone call, which is treated as a shared situation that requires focused attention and imposes onerous social proprieties, and the asynchronous mediated contact of a text message, which can be ignored. There are text message response expectations, as evidenced by the curt ‘Alive are we!!’ text that Lynn showed me, but these are easier to evade. (In the diaries 29% of text message entries were ‘singles’, and unrelated to other communication.) Social proprieties seemed to be stronger in prolonged near-synchronous text message conversations, where previous messages indicated the cotemporality of the exchange.

**Concurrent Mediated and Face-to-Face Interaction**

The study supports the extension of the gathering to include both mediated and face-to-face interfaces. Respondents’ descriptions of mobile phone calls frequently included concurrent face-to-face and mediated interactions. These were not treated as independent interactions; their interconnectedness was taken for granted, not only for the interactant involved in both concurrent encounters, but also for the other interactants. For example, Bill explained how the calls he received from one of his pupils annoyed his girlfriend; these interruptions had clearly become an issue within their relationship.

In another example of invasive calls, Dee had enlisted the cooperation of the face-to-face interactant. Dee’s boyfriend suspected she was having an affair and called frequently to check her whereabouts. She described how she colluded with her employer to establish her location, clearly assuming that her boyfriend would overhear the face-to-face interaction: ‘Wanda actually does me a favour and talks in the background, so that he can hear her.’ Their face-to-face interaction is a collusive performance that exploits the blurred regions of mediated interaction. To analyse this interaction one needs to include both mediated and face-to-face interactants in the gathering.

The concept of a gathering is also relevant to mobile phone etiquette. Many felt that it was acceptable to use their phones when in public (which generally involved only unfocused interaction) but not when engaged with other people in focused interaction: ‘that’s unsociable, he’s out with me, he shouldn’t be bloody answering the phone’ (Zoe). Olivia is the manager of a small store; she explained that her customers could be very rude: ‘Instead of answering and saying sorry, I’m in a shop at the moment, I’ll ring you back, they carry on their conversation … might as well not be there’. Their behaviour is offensive because they ignore Olivia’s presence within the gathering, and the face-work obligations of copresence. When a phone call interrupts face-to-face interaction, the person answering the phone reduces his involvement in the face-to-face interaction. This unilateral change leaves the other participant in an asymmetrical interaction; ‘you feel a bit awkward’ (William). This awkwardness is assuaged by acknowledgement of the other participant’s presence within the gathering. As William observed, ‘If they say, “Oh I’m just having dinner with William”, you feel a little bit [better]’. The comment is clearly intended for both remote and face-to-face audiences; face-work that explicitly recognizes and ratifies William’s presence within the gathering. SMS
exchanges do divert attention from face-to-face interaction, but they only require intermittent attention, so they are less disruptive to the ongoing interaction.

**Presentation of Self in Mediated Interaction**

For Goffman, a key role of the situation in face-to-face interaction is the presentation of self, although he states that a reduced form occurs in mediated communication. The research explored differences between the presentation of the self in synchronous and asynchronous mediated communication.

Goffman (1959) claims that expressions given off are less controllable and are therefore deemed more revealing. Respondents referred to expressions given off as ‘signals’ and ‘nuances’ which were ‘picked up’, or ‘came across’. They noted that phone calls had more implicit cues than text messages and that these could be more revealing than what was actually said. Talking about calls, Jackie commented: ‘you know, you can hear sighs, you can hear sighs. You can’t hear them on text messages can you? You can hear if somebody’s worried, you can hear if they’re dealing with it well.’ Similarly, Fred said he could tell how his daughter was from the tone of her voice on the phone, ‘I can hear [whether] she’s happy or not happy.’

Respondents used examples of their text messages to show how abbreviations, punctuation marks, kisses, timing, etc. could be indirectly meaningful, but thought these were more calculated than expressions given off in phone calls. Carol said that when sending a text in a new relationship, she might revise ‘it about ten times over sort of thing just to appear like as if you’re really cool’. The synchrony of phone conversations meant that expressions given off were more spontaneous, and consequently more revealing, as Lynn explained:

Ruth: So you get to know them better on the phone than you would in a text. Why is that?

Lynn: Because you can ask questions, you can respond a lot quicker. The, the other person has to respond a lot quicker. I mean it’s a lot harder on the telephone to sort of say, ‘Oh give me half an hour to think about that, then I’ll come back with a witty answer.’ You get an immediate response from somebody, you can pick up much [more] I think, emails and letters I mean you can, you can contrive yourself in a way that you want to be perceived, which perhaps isn’t necessarily the way that you are. (emphasis added)

Lynn says that one ‘picks up more’ from an immediate response; this is a reference to presentation of self. Her phrase: ‘you can contrive yourself in a way that you want to be perceived, which perhaps isn’t necessarily the way that you are’ suggests that presentation of self in asynchronous communication can be more deceptive. Greg made the same point, ‘what they reply back in a text might not be as strong as how they were reacting initially, you know what I mean, because they can hide more of what they are thinking of, in a text’. Manipulative presentation of self is harder in a phone call; the synchrony of the encounter highlights any delays, which then form part of the context of interpretation.

In the ongoing encounter of a mobile phone call there is a continuous performance of self. In addition to what is given, and therefore presumed both intentional and calculated, the rapid collaborative practice of the conversation reduces control
over expressions given off. The concurrent mutual monitoring of mediated encounters exposes the self behind the performance: ‘What is important is the sense he provides them through his dealings with them of what sort of person he is behind the role he is in’ (Goffman, 1974: 298). Concurrent mutual monitoring conjures an impression of the self behind the performance; without this the performance is one dimensional, so that it is difficult to distinguish the self from the role performed.

In SMS, asynchrony makes it easier to control expressions given off, consequently they are deemed less revelatory of the self behind the presentation. This can be interactionally useful, reducing exposure of self and potential embarrassment in new relationships (Rettie, 2008). There is also limited scope for expression of self in text messages, which may explain why face-work and social proprieties seem to be less important.

The next section explores the concept of synchrony, comparing respondents’ conceptions of SMS, email and instant messages.

The Boundaries of Synchrony

The study suggests that the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous communication is somewhat blurred and not wholly determined by technology. The research included SMS, email and instant messenger; consideration of these three media helps to delineate the boundaries of synchrony. Their technical transmission times are similar, but in practice reception times and feedback immediacy are shaped by normative expectations and usage patterns. Email was often treated as an asynchronous medium. Many respondents had friends who only accessed their (social) email accounts sporadically, consequently delays of several days were anticipated and regarded as acceptable. These modest expectations increased response times, because there was little pressure to respond immediately. However, email response expectations were higher when both interactants were known to be online. In contrast to email, SMS was usually regarded as near-synchronous; most people carried their mobile phones with them, and were expected to read their messages almost immediately. Consequently, SMS replies (where pertinent) were expected quickly, and delays were interpreted as meaningful. Text messages were usually much shorter than social emails, and in SMS conversations short messages alternated rather like verbal dialogue. Near-synchronous exchanges seem to enable a degree of collaborative interaction that is closer to an encounter. Messages can be less explicit and briefer, because meaning can be clarified progressively (cf. Garfinkel’s documentary method of talk, 1967).

Instant messaging (e.g. MSN Messenger) also has near-synchronous transmission. Ongoing conversational usage is fostered by a screen which displays the threaded ongoing conversation, encouraging focused attention and providing a common focus. Just over one-third of respondents had used instant messaging, but few used it regularly. Users felt they were expected to remain at their computers throughout a conversation, but multi-tasking (with other activities and
separate messenger conversations) was acceptable. Consequently, feedback could be almost instantaneous or subject to delay. Turns tended to be shorter than both email and SMS, and conversational in style. When feedback was rapid and focused attention on the screen was sustained throughout the conversation, users felt that the other person was ‘there’, but this feeling diminished in the polyfocality (Scollon et al., 1999) of multi-tasking. Strong situational proprieties in instant messenger were reflected in extended closing sequences when an interactant left a conversation. Despite its near-synchronous technical transmission, instant messenger seems to be perceived as a synchronous medium that affords encounters; these may become temporarily unfocused when an interactant is multi-tasking (rather like somebody on the phone who temporarily suspends the call to answer the door) but there is nevertheless a feeling of continuity. See Knorr-Cetina and Bruegger (2002) for a somewhat similar discussion of the intersubjectivity experienced by spot-traders using a text conversation dealing system. Instant messaging software allows several interactants to share a group conversation, while conducting separate, private conversations with each other, in an extended gathering and complicated array of front and back stages.

These examples support the distinction drawn between synchronous and asynchronous media, but suggest that the perception of a medium as synchronous depends on framing expectations of immediate feedback and sustained focused attention. As Hutchby (2003: 585) notes, there is ‘a complex interplay between the normative structures of conversational interaction and the communicative affordances offered by different forms of technology’.

**Conclusions**

This study shows how concepts developed by Goffman for face-to-face interaction can be usefully adapted for mediated interaction. The article argues that continuous, synchronous communication affords focused encounters that warrant situational analysis, but that asynchronous communication does not enable the continuous shared practice of an encounter. Thus there is an important distinction between synchronous and asynchronous media. However, synchrony is not mere technical affordance, but also depends on social expectations of immediate feedback and sustained, focused attention.

Respondents in the research conceptualized mobile phone calls as encounters in which they were together, although this ideal of a shared intersubjective experience was not always realized. In phone calls participants collaborate in the shared practice of conversation, jointly constructing what is being understood and what is ‘going on’. A shared definition of the situation is important in this sort of interaction, because it provides the expectancies that enable cooperative practice, providing the frame of the ongoing intersubjective experience. In contrast, text messages are usually constructed and interpreted individually. Shared expectancies are less important, because the experience is more individual than intersubjective. Agential analysis from each individual’s perspective is more appropriate than situational analysis, because much less is ‘going on’ between the interactants.
Mediated communication complicates interaction, because a gathering may include mediated and face-to-face interactants. Respondents in this research included both mediated and face-to-face interactants in their descriptions of ‘what was going on’, but also broke this down further, recognizing the conflicting demands on attention of simultaneous mediated and face-to-face encounters. With the rapid development and uptake of mediated communication technologies, individuals are increasingly involved in concurrent face-to-face and mediated interactions. This highlights the need for interactional analysis that encompasses both mediated and unmediated interactions. Applying Goffman’s concepts of the encounter, of the gathering and of front/back stages, to both mediated and face-to-face interaction facilitates analysis of the complex interactional dynamics and participative frameworks created by new media.

This study shows how the experience of mediated interaction is shaped both by the temporal characteristics of the medium and by normative framing expectations. With the rapid expansion of new interpersonal media there is a need for further research of mediated interaction; this article helps to provide resources for this work.

References


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