

# TIME, SPACE AND SITUATIONS IN AN INTERNET BULLETIN BOARD SERVICE

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## ABSTRACT

The definition of situations proposed by Joshua Meyrowitz is examined in the light of computer-mediated communication (CMC), and refined for this environment. It is concluded that for situations to be useful in analysing behaviour in public places created within CMC, a definition of situations as information access patterns is too broad. Instead, a definition that recognises such flows of information between situations is required. Goffman's definition, based on temporal and spatial boundaries, can be used if one takes into account the creation of virtual space. This approach is demonstrated in analysis of an Internet Bulletin Board Service.

## KEYWORDS

Erving Goffman, situation analysis, Internet, BBS.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Erving Goffman is one of the most important sociologists of the 20th century, and although his work has influenced many sociological schools of thought, it is difficult to pigeon-hole into any single category. His work is principally about behaviour and social interaction, and works such as *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and *Behavior in Public Places* (1963) provide a detailed field guide for the student of social behaviour.

It is important that any study of social behaviour should address the increasing amount of social interaction that occurs on the Internet. Despite this, research to date has largely ignored study of the relationship between ordinary practices in the virtual world and the material world (Jones, 2004). To study the social implications of the Internet requires a framework for understanding the social interaction that occurs online.

Many such theories have been proposed, including Cues-Filtered-Out (CFO) theories, the Social Information Processing Perspective, and Social Identity Deindividuation (SIDE) (Kim, 2000). All of these have shortcomings. First, both the technologically determinist "bandwidth limitation" theories that have emerged from the disciplines of Computer Science and Communications Studies and the "social deterministic" views are overly simplistic (Bargh, 2002). Mabry (2001) also concludes that theories with a narrow focus on the presumed communicability of message channels are at a disadvantage to theories based on self-interest.

As well as the preoccupation with anonymity at the expense of other factors, findings from experimental CMC research have also often been inconsistent (Baltes *et al.*, 2002). This is particularly important when one considers that CFO, SIDE and Hyperpersonal approaches are all based on short-term, experimental research (Kim, 2000), which may not be generalisable to situations outside the laboratory.

For example, one empirical study based on natural sources, found that confrontational messages were more likely to contain identity information than other messages. This is completely inconsistent with CFO perspectives, and is consistent with SIDE only if one assumes that participants felt strong in-group identification (Mabry, 2001). Further, many studies also do not support the view developed by experimental research that CMC lacks social content. That this is not true is particularly evident among younger and more experienced users (Walther, 1992; Walther, 1996; George and Sleeth, 2000).

Another weakness with experimental CMC research is that it has been highly variable. Variation in the types of CMC studied the wide range of dependent variables, the wide range of participants in experimental

studies and their degree of CMC experience, and the range of tasks and time allocated to complete them has contributed to a situation where it is difficult to compare findings from different studies (Bordia, 1997; Baltes *et al.*, 2002).

There is a need for Internet research that encompasses cultures and that is based on methods other than experimental research. What is the purpose of such research? One option has been to develop CMC specific theories that overcome the weaknesses already discussed; however, broader theories of social interaction exist and have been the subject of decades of analysis, refinement and critique, and rather than develop ad hoc theories of online interaction it is preferable to demonstrate the application of mature, more general theories (Dell and Marinova, 2008). Indeed, the distinction between online and offline is a false dichotomy, and activities in one influence the other, for example in Aarsand's (2008) observation of frequent frame-switching between online and offline interaction frames.

Goffman's situational analysis approach is a prime candidate for an existing, mature theory of social interaction to be used online, and is used in this article. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that situational analysis can be applied to CMC as well as to face-to-face interaction, by exploring the dual aspects of time and space. An application of this approach is demonstrated in a case study of an Internet Bulletin Board Service (BBS).

## 2. TIME

Social interaction requires the communication of social information. Goffman distinguishes between embodied and disembodied information – embodied is that which is the result of a current bodily activity, while disembodied is that which requires “something that traps and holds information long after the organism has stopped transmitting” (Goffman, 1963: 14). In other words, embodied information is communicated immediately – in real-time – while disembodied information is preserved by some other means after the transmission has finished, and not communicated in real-time.

The distinction between embodied and disembodied is increasingly difficult to sustain today. Huge volumes of communication are disembodied – indeed disembodiment is the very nature of CMC. While Goffman emphasised embodied communication, it is possible to apply his approach to CMC by acknowledging that it is real-time social interaction with which he is primarily concerned. On the Internet, real-time applications are often referred to as synchronous applications. By considering synchronicity with interactivity, Dell and Marinova (2002) arrange different forms of CMC on a matrix as shown in Figure 1.

Interactive (communication between individuals)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online chat</li> <li>• ICQ</li> <li>• IRC</li> <li>• Videoconference</li> <li>• MUD</li> <li>• MMORPG</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Email</li> <li>• Usenet</li> </ul>
Non-interactive (communication between person and machine)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• WWW</li> <li>• FTP</li> <li>• Gopher</li> <li>• (Single-user) Virtual Reality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Automatic notification services</li> </ul>
	Synchronous	Asynchronous

Figure 1. CMC applications categorised by synchronicity and interactivity

In studying online social behaviour, we are concerned only with interactive services. While Goffman's ideas on performance have been applied to non-interactive, typically web-based applications (see Bortree, 2005; Chen, 2010; Cheung, 2000; Karlsson, 1998; Miller, 1995; Miller and Mather, 1998; Walker, 2000), they have been less explored in to interactive applications. It is not the purpose of this article to apply Goffmanian theory to the WWW. Rather, it is concerned with its application to interactive services.

### 3. SPACE

As well as time, one must also address space when analysing CMC. In particular, one question that has piqued the interest of CMC researchers has been whether a virtual space is created within these environments.

Steve Jones (1995) asserts that CMC is “socially produced space”, and intuitively it makes sense to consider Multi User Dungeons (MUDs) as virtual spaces as they are generally based on spatial metaphors. IRC channels are also often described in a similar manner - a search reveals many such channels, for example “AllNiteCafe”, “cybercafe”, “flirtbar”, and “cyberpub” to name but a few. Barbatsis *et al.* (1999) do not even attempt to distinguish between different CMC forms when asserting that space is created in chat rooms, Internet fora, and online virtual communities and web sites, in the same way that “televsual” or “filmic” space is created in other media.

On the other hand, Quentin Jones (1997) believes that simply sending and receiving messages – “where postings go directly from one individual to another with no common virtual-place” – does not constitute the creation of virtual space. Similarly, Soukup (2006) concludes that in order for viable spaces to be created, the conditions of localisation, accessibility and presence must be created.

We cannot consider all forms of CMC as equivalent, as different applications have different characteristics and different communication processes (Liu, 1999). Certainly, email has no dominant spatial metaphor and is perhaps more akin to posting a letter or sending a telegram than creating a virtual space. Analysis of one application cannot necessarily be extrapolated to explain others.

Problems are also caused by differences in what people mean by space. Samarajiva and Shields (1997) distinguish between environment and space, suggesting that environment is only a prerequisite for the creation of space, while space itself is a “context or resource for action” and can be either proximate or virtual.

In order to determine whether a CMC application supports a virtual space, we are really asking whether an application provides a suitable context for social action. In this sense the application is analogous to the environment. Different environments will create different types of space.

December (1995) distinguishes between communication space, interaction space, and information space. Communication spaces are those in which discussion is the dominant activity, typically in an asynchronous manner. Interaction spaces are those in which social interaction occurs, and information spaces are those in which the “dissemination and retrieval of network-based information” is key. Re-examining the matrix in Figure 1, we can map these different types of space onto the same four quadrants, as shown in Figure 2. This approach allows us to avoid any technologically determinist “technology x causes effect y” conclusions. In assessing whether a technology can sustain a space for social interaction, we must consider the intentions of the users – interactive or non-interactive, synchronous or asynchronous.

Interactive	Interaction space	Communication space
Non-interactive	Information space	Information space
	Synchronous	Asynchronous

Figure 2. Types of space in CMC

The type of space then affects the action that takes place within it. The environment in CMC – the hardware and software – is affected not only whether applications are interactive or non-interactive, synchronous or asynchronous, but also by design decisions taken by those creating the application. On the BBS discussed at length later in this article, discussion fora are referred to using the spatial metaphor of “rooms”, and it is likely this influences user’s perceptions of the type of space is created. The effect of such design decisions is in itself a rich topic for investigation, however it is outside of the scope of this article.

Users’ intentions are difficult to gauge. A useful rule of thumb is to consider whether the user feels as if they’re going somewhere when they use a particular application. Virtual space is intangible and exists within the perceptions of the user. Thus, if the user does not feel as if they have visited a virtual place, no socially produced space has been created.

Blanchard (2004) makes a similar point, and suggests that a sense of place in virtual behavior settings is derived from mental maps used by participants to understand what is happening when they use CMC. In

other words, the thought processes of the user – whether they feel like they are going anywhere – are central to whether a virtual space is created.

A clue is the use of “verb emoting” to overcome the lack of physical contact (Chenault, 1998). Doing so creates at least some allusion to being in the same space, and is perhaps a sign that an effort is being made to compensate for the lack of proximate space by creating virtual space.

If a user treats email in the same way as they might treat an instant message product or IRC, it is reasonable to suggest that a virtual space is socially created as the application is used both interactively and synchronously. On the other hand, if the user considers their actions to be analogous to sending a letter or a telegram, that is asynchronously, it is unlikely that a virtual space has been created. Likewise, sending an email message to a document delivery service or similar automatic reply service does not constitute a virtual space because it is not being used to support social interaction.

#### 4. SITUATIONS

Goffman defines situations are bounded by space and time, limited both temporally and physically. However, Meyrowitz (1985, 1990) defines situations as patterns of access to social information. For Meyrowitz, situations are bounded not by physical and chronological limits, but by the ability to access information about others.

The rationale for this definition is that information from and about other people is what guides our behaviour in our interactions with them. Goffman (1959: 106) himself briefly alluded to the “barriers to perception” which bound regions, but only considered physical barriers such as walls and doors.

While this observation of Goffman’s tends to “get lost” in most discussions (Meyrowitz, 1985: 36), its importance should not be underestimated. If, as in Goffman’s example, a performance is given in a room bounded aurally by thick glass, the audience outside the glass wall can still see what is happening in the room. Thus, “mutual monitoring” (Goffman, 1963: 18) can occur visually between those on either side of the glass wall.

Likewise, that mutual monitoring is possible aurally among workers in partitioned offices is painfully obvious to those who work in such environments, in which they can hear but cannot see each other. In both these cases, the situational boundary is not dependent on the physical structures in place but on the availability of social information.

Clearly then, information access is an important aspect of situations and thus of behaviour. However, it is possible to obtain information about others via non-situational means, and there are many ways to obtain social information. Information can pass through indirect channels, through mutual friends and acquaintances, even through the mass media. However, when analysing situations we must limit ourselves to that which is synchronous and interactive. Information obtained asynchronously, that is, via delayed mechanisms, may even have been obtained directly from those in the present situation, but this does not extend the situational boundary to include the occasion in which the information was transmitted.

Rather, recognition must be made that information can be carried from one situation to another - our experiences in past situations can affect future situations. Otherwise, it would be impossible to avoid the conclusion that life is one giant, all-encompassing situation.

Thus, the patterns of access to information in which we find ourselves extend beyond the boundaries of the situations within which we interact. If situations cannot be defined by physical space, and if their boundaries are not defined by information patterns, we are left with the dilemma of having no definition of their boundaries.

Taking virtual space into account, which allows us to think about situations in Goffman’s terms, bounded by space, albeit virtual, can solve this dilemma. Parks and Floyd (1996) assert that “cyberspace is simply another place to meet”. Situations can occur within mediated environments, as long as virtual space is created. Situations are also bounded by time, and begin when mutual monitoring occurs and end when mutual monitoring is ended by the second-last person leaving.

This implies that situations occur in synchronous CMC. Referring to Figure 2, this places situations in the interaction space that is created by synchronous, interactive applications. Goffman makes a distinction between situations and the encompassing concept of the “social occasion” (Goffman, 1963: 18), which provides the context for the situation. The IRC party documented by Danet *et al.* (1997), in which a number

of IRC participants simulated a party that culminated in the simulated smoking of marijuana, is an example of an online social occasion.

In order to explore online situations further, an analysis of one such synchronous, interactive chat service – an Internet BBS – is conducted in the next section.

#### 4.1 Online Situations, Social Occasions, and Behaviour Settings

There are three methods by which BBS users can send messages to each other. The first is to send private “eXpress” messages, which are transmitted directly to the recipient. These messages can only be sent to one recipient at a time, and appear on the recipient’s screen immediately after having been sent. Thus, express messages can only be sent to users who are currently logged in.

The second method is to post messages in the public discussion fora, or “rooms”. A large number of fora are available, including light-hearted topics such as “Babble” and “Humor”, technical topics such as “Intel PCs and Clones” and “Network Design and Administration”, and serious discussions such as “Gender Issues” and “Political Theory and Ideology”. There are currently 197 fora, a number that fluctuates as fora are periodically created and removed according to demand. Messages posted in these areas can generally be identified by your username, although a small number of fora allow an anonymous option, usually if the forum topic is a sensitive one. Some areas can also be accessed only by application and are not publicly available.

The third method is to send private mail messages that can only be read by the recipient. Such messages are stored semi-permanently, and in contrast to express messages can be sent whether the recipient is logged in, or not.

The following analysis is based on a log of messages posted to the “Babble” forum on the BBS. According to the forum description, Babble’s purpose is for “light conversation, inane chatting, socializing, unstructured role-playing, and just about everything else”. Although messages posted to the forum are saved for later viewing, the forum is analogous to ephemeral chat services like IRC (Internet Relay Chat). A maximum of 150 messages are stored, so that the 151st message posted causes the deletion of the 1st message. In this way only the 150 most recent messages are stored by the BBS. The forum also tends to flow rapidly; the transcript analysed here contains approximately 120 messages, all posted during a 50-minute period. Thus, messages do not persist for a very long time the way they do in, for example, web-based discussion fora or Usenet groups.

During the time logged, 19 different users posted messages. The highest number of messages posted by any single user was 23, and the lowest was 1. The median number of messages posted by all users was 4, and the mean average number of messages was 6. Five users tended to dominate the discussion, posting 10 or more messages each, while 13 users posted five or less messages.

While the messages analysed here were posted pseudonymously, the names have been changed in this article. It is often possible to trace the real-world identities of the users, either through personal profiles they themselves make available, or perhaps through other fora.

It is necessary to determine exactly what constitutes a situation in this example. The BBS environment, including the numerous discussion fora and express message facility, is not a situation. It is impossible for users who are simply logged in to the BBS, and not participating in any particular exchange with other users, to monitor or to be monitored by others. The term behaviour setting, as Goffman used it, is appropriate to describe the BBS as a whole.

Within such a setting, it is inevitable that smaller social occasions may occur, just as they would in a shopping mall containing hundreds of people. Goffman (1963: 18) uses the term “gathering” to refer to two or more people who are in each other’s immediate presence. When a gathering comes together, the space within which the gathering collects is the situation. Situations do not exist in and of themselves, but are created when a gathering forms – or when “mutual monitoring” (Goffman, 1963: 18) of each other begins. Likewise, situations cease to exist when the gathering disbands, that is when mutual monitoring stops.

Thus, merely being logged in to the BBS might place you in a behaviour setting but does not involve you in any particular gathering. When the user logs in they are placed in the Lobby, a general-purpose message area for general announcements from the BBS staff to all users. Normal users cannot post to the Lobby, and it is not used for social interaction. Thus, immediately after logging in a user is not being monitored by others, and is not monitoring anybody else, and is therefore not present in any particular situation.

Similar circumstances may occur in other environments, such as MUDs. If anything, a MUD is a richer environment than the BBS, and is perhaps the most comprehensive virtual space created by textual CMC. Such a space typically consists of a richly described virtual world, complete with buildings, roads, and implements that can be manipulated by the characters that populate them. While the BBS uses spatial metaphors it does not engage the imagination to anywhere near the degree that MUDs do.

It is not until the user enters a virtual space populated by at least one other user that they become present in a situation. When a user posts an introductory message to the BBS's Babble room, they join the gathering, if one is already present. A critical difference of this virtual space is that it is not possible to tell if somebody is present, if they do not announce their presence. It is somewhat like entering a pitch-black room – nobody knows you're there unless you make a sound, and you don't know anybody else is there until they make a sound, either. Thus, it is customary to announce your presence, as in Figure 3.

```
Feb 16, 20:17 from Archer
who's bumping uglies in here?
[Babble> msg #23158290 (114 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next

...

Feb 16, 20:17 from Johnny
*bumps Archie's uglies*
[Babble> msg #23158293 (111 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next
```

Figure 3. Transcript excerpt showing presence announcement

The first message serves to announcing Archer's presence in the room, and also declares that he has no knowledge of others present. Johnny responds, albeit in a playful manner, both acknowledging Archer and declaring his own presence.

In this second example, Daydreamer "wanders back in" to the room. This illustrates a key point: that online gatherings, and thus the situations they occur in, can persist after individuals leave. Just as it is possible to leave and return to an offline situation, for example, temporarily moving to the kitchen during a family gathering, the same can be achieved online..

```
Feb 16, 2004 20:44 from Daydreamer
*wanders back in*
[Babble> msg #23158356 (48 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next
```

Figure 4. Transcript excerpt showing situation persistence

Likewise, it is typical for users to announce their intention to leave the room, as in Figure 5.

```
Feb 16, 20:53 from Chiz
buh bye babble
[Babble> msg #23158370 (34 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next
```

Figure 5. Transcript excerpt showing leaving announcement

There is no way of telling whether other users are lurking in the forum and not posting. It is difficult on the BBS, as with most forms of CMC, to know exactly who is in the audience. Other research has suggested that identity play is likely to be much more prevalent in personal or recreational Internet use, and this difficulty in identifying the audience leads to pseudonymous or anonymous Internet use (Dell and Marinova, 2002). This is certainly demonstrated in the BBS, where nearly all participants use pseudonyms.

Occasionally, when the spontaneity of interaction breaks down, users resort to "verb emoting" (Chenault, 1998) to break the silence. Ostrow (1996) describes difficulties in maintaining spontaneous involvement, once one becomes conscious of the difference between "where we are experientially and where we feel situational pressure to be". Further, if we are conscious of an insufficient involvement in a situation, our

ability to act spontaneously is hindered. Behaviour becomes contrived as the individual attempts to demonstrate appropriate involvement, as in Figure 6.

```
Feb 16, 20:21 from Thoriem
*listens to di.fm*
this is rockin'
[Babble> msg #23158307 (97 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next

Feb 16, 20:22 from Confused
*watches Spike TV*
[Babble> msg #23158308 (96 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next
```

Figure 6. Transcript excerpt showing demonstrations of appropriate involvement

By describing offline activities, such as listening to the radio or watching TV, users demonstrate that the BBS is not the only involvement in which they are engaged. In other words, they are demonstrating that they are suitably engaged in activity, albeit outside the BBS.

Such behaviour also confirms one's presence in the situation. Messages such as these are sometimes sent when the user is not playing a central part in the interaction. This is necessary because the user has no physical presence in the situation at all – one is only present as long as one is posting messages.

Thoriem is a good example of this type of action. She returns to the situation after a brief absence at 20:13, continuing a previous conversation. Her involvement dwindles, however, and by 20:22 all threads in which she is involved have ended. After a period of five minutes, during which she is not addressed by any of the other participants, she posts the message illustrated in Figure 7, simulating the polite cough one might utter when trying to attract attention.

```
Feb 16, 20:27 from Thoriem
*cough*
[Babble> msg #23158327 (77 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next
```

Figure 7. Transcript excerpt showing a "polite cough"

A further period of 10 minutes passes, at which point she posts another verb emote message, asserting that she is still present. This time, the message is more provocative (Figure 8).

```
Feb 16, 20:37 from Thoriem
*runs amok*
[Babble> msg #23158345 (59 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next
```

Figure 8. Transcript excerpt showing unsuccessful attention grabbing

Still another 17 minutes pass, during which period Thoriem is not addressed. She tries a third time to catch the attention of other users. By handing out cookies, she simulates an action that directly involves others, and a response is received from QTip (Figure 9).

A user's having to consciously remind others of their presence could serve to heighten their awareness of their peripherality in a situation. In an online environment, a user's involvement is indicated through the messages they send and receive. Thoriem's behaviour can be explained by her feeling insufficiently involved – what is sometimes referred to as "being at a loose end".

Thoriem is able to appeal to others to involve her in the situation because people have an obligation to be accessible in Babble, just as people have an obligation to be accessible for "face engagements" (Goffman, 1963: 104) in offline situations. No infractions of this requirement occurred during the logged period. In itself this cannot be taken as confirmation of the rule, due to the relatively brief period involved. However, it is noted from other observations that infractions occur very rarely, and that users generally do observe the requirement to be accessible.

Whether this obligation extends beyond Babble is unclear. Users who are not participating in any forum in particular can still be contacted by eXpress messages, and not responding to such messages can cause offence. The system allows users to prevent eXpress messages being sent, perhaps reflecting that many users

do not perceive the wider BBS as a situation, and that choosing not to receive such messages is acceptable. The “disable eXpress” option provides a convenient mechanism by which the awkward task of declining an unwanted engagement is avoided, analogous to the offline act of wearing dark glasses, thus avoiding making eye-contact with others.

```
Feb 16, 20:54 from Thoriem
*passes out sugar cookies*
[Babble> msg #23158371 (33 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next

...

Feb 16, 20:57 from QTip
OH
MAN
No more damn sugar cookies
Wife made about 6 dozen and took about 2, not 2 dozen, TWO! on her
overnight casino trip.
[Babble> msg #23158374 (30 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next
```

Figure 9. Transcript excerpt showing successful attention grabbing

Goffman’s term for this kind of act is “civil inattention” (Goffman, 1963: 83). This is the manner in which people, when unacquainted but in the proximity of each other, convey by their actions that the other “does not constitute a target of special curiosity or design” (Goffman, 1963: 84). Civil inattention avoids the aggressive, threatening act of staring at somebody (hence the dark glasses, referred to above). It seems that such elements of face-engagements are felt so strongly that they translate into a virtual space, where physical eye contact cannot be made, as in Figure 10.

```
Feb 16, 20:17 from Confused
u looked in the mirror?
[Babble> msg #23158282 (122 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next

Feb 16, 20:17 from Thoriem
No mistake. I just said...never mind.
[Babble> msg #23158283 (121 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next

Feb 16, 20:17 from Chiz
*stare* are you calling me ugly?
[Babble> msg #23158284 (120 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next
```

Figure 10. Transcript excerpt showing face engagement

```
Feb 16, 20:27 from Johnny
BL me, ASAP.
[Babble> msg #23158328 (76 remaining)] Read cmd ->

...

Feb 16, 20:27 from Black Leather
*humps JY into a fine paste*
[Babble> msg #23158330 (74 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next
```

Figure 11. Transcript excerpt showing exaggerations for comic effect

Goffman remarks that face engagements are often conversational, and can be applied to Babble as the main focus of activity is conversation. In fact, “[m]any face engagements seem to be made up largely of the



exchange of verbal statements, so that conversational encounters can in fact be used as the model" (Goffman, 1963: 89-90).

While verbal exchanges are important, Goffman does not discount non-verbal gestures within the face engagement, however these have much less relevance in Babble. While non-verbal actions are often communicated using verb emoting, such as Louise's laugh illustrated below, they are often exaggerated for comic effect and are not intended to be taken literally, as shown in Figure 11.

In the final message we see Black Leather "humping [Johnny] into a fine paste", in response to Johnny earlier entreating "me, ASAP". Black Leather does not intend this to be taken literally, and it was not interpreted as such by Johnny. It is noted that each individual CMC service will have its own culture and norms, however, and that in other services such an act might be taken literally. MUDs, for example, often tend to interpret verb emoting far more literally.

## 4.2 Situational Start and End-Points

Identifying the start and endpoints of the situation that occurs within Babble may seem problematic because of its longevity. While situations are defined as continuing until the second-last person leaves, this may not happen in an online environment. A similar dilemma surely faces researchers studying other chat services such as IRC – a single chat session might last for days, if not indefinitely, as new users join to replace users who have left. For an offline analogy, consider a doctor's waiting room. Patients are seen and leave; new patients in the interim arrive. Eventually, all of the people in the room have been replaced, but at what point has the situation changed, if at all?

In such cases, it is clear that the situational definition may change over time. However, the situational spatial boundaries remain fixed. In the case of Babble, the forum is the space within which the social occasion exists. The social occasion may evolve, in the same way that offline social occasions may also evolve. In fact, it is a requirement of many occasions that such evolution take place. Consider a hypothetical example of a small wedding ceremony. The groom, groomsmen and celebrant may be present at first. The nature of the occasion changes as guests arrive. Further changes will occur when the bride arrives. Finally, when the bridal party leave, followed by the celebrant, the guests are the only people remaining.

As with offline situations, information can be carried from one situation to another, whether those situations occur within the BBS or outside of it. Participants known to each other offline can exchange information that then influences their behaviour in online situations, as in Figure 12.

```
Feb 16, 20:14 from Chiz
Lou you've seen me in a hotel...

[Babble> msg #23158270 (134 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next
...

Feb 16, 20:14 from Louise
Chiz, i know    what a night  heh
[Babble> msg #23158273 (131 remaining)] Read cmd -> Next
```

Figure 12. Transcript excerpt showing the influence of offline information

Here, interaction between Chiz and Louise is affected by information about each other from a previous, offline encounter.

This example also serves to illustrate how, even though a number of users are present in the situation, how smaller groups of users tend to interact together. While Chiz and Louise are involved in conversation with each other, Thoriem and Confused are involved in a separate thread of their own.

Such interaction is unavoidably visible to all others present in the situation, however – a similarity Babble shares with most, if not all, multi-user CMC systems. This is a key difference between situations in CMC and offline situations. As communication within channels is transmitted to each user present in the channel,

it is difficult for distinct and sustained group engagements among a subset of channel members to form. Throughout the whole of the logged session, at no point do separate groups form for very long.

Rather than forming separate groups within the situation, if a group of users wish to have a private conversation excluding others in the forum, private eXpress messages can be exchanged. A similar approach can be witnessed in IRC, where private messages can be exchanged, or a new channel can be formed – the equivalent of moving to another room as people might do offline. Note that in both the BBS studied here and IRC, other users are not notified about the existence of private messages – only the sender and recipient know the message was ever transmitted. While in face-to-face interaction, an encounter within a situation communicates information to the situation as a whole (Goffman, 1963: 103), within IRC such an encounter can be carried out entirely in secret.

Further, eXpress messages on the BBS can be sent to any user, however, and not just those in the same forum or channel. Thus, they can create entirely new situations. This is also true in IRC, where users can participate in several IRC situations simultaneously, either by having multiple copies of their IRC software running, each in a separate window, or by being present in a number of situations caused by the exchange of private messages. Being present in multiple situations face-to-face would be much more difficult; there is truth in the cliché that you can't be in two places at once. There is thus a dimension of multiplicity to virtual situations that does not exist in face-to-face interaction.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Goffman considered situations as bounded in both space and time. The analysis above demonstrates that, by considering online social interactions in terms of virtual space, it is possible to apply his theoretical framework to understand social interaction in synchronous, interactive CMC. The advantage of this approach is that Goffman's theoretical legacy is thorough, mature and its use widespread; thus, it can provide a sound theoretical foundation for analysis of online social interaction.

The Internet is not disconnected from physical reality. Individuals interact socially with the purpose of reducing uncertainty and developing affinity; they will do this regardless of the medium, be it Internet, telephone or otherwise. The use of mature, established social theory allows the analyst to recognise this fact. Situation analysis provides a rich field for the analysis of online social interaction, and its application is a step towards a comprehensive approach for understanding online behaviour.

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