**Face-work and Facebook: Controlling Social Interactions**

Erving Goffman’s “On Face-work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements of Social Interaction” introduces the concept of face-work to describe the strategies we utilize to protect our identities during social exchanges. Face-work theory is foundational in discourse studies and sociolinguistics, offering insight into what happens when our identities come into question during face-to-face interactions. Since 1967 when Goffman’s original work was written, advances in technology have sparked changes in communication and social interactions. The Internet and computing technology have created new media for social exchanges, like text messages, emails, and online forums. These media require new discourse theories that speak to their electronic nature. For example, the social networking website Facebook is a popular hub for online discourse that enables strategies for face-work beyond those Goffman originally conceived. When we expand Goffman’s theory to include the types of face-work that are taking place on Facebook and elsewhere in virtual discourse, it is evident that our technologies have afforded us increased control over our face.

In order to apply the theory of face-work to contemporary forms of communication, we must first understand some of the main points of Goffman’s foundational theory. Goffman describes face as “an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (299). Face is not a physical part of the body, but rather the conception of one’s self. The idea of face is of Chinese origin and has been described as one’s sense of prestige, value, and personal reputation. Face is the way that we see ourselves within the context of our surroundings. Goffman explains that we maintain face when we “[present] an image of [ourselves] that is internally consistent, that is supported by judgments and evidence conveyed by other participants” (300). Face is constantly at risk during social interaction because it can be damaged by contradicting evidence that may arise during an exchange.

When a person’s face does not align with evidence that is presented or is not internally consistent, the person is said to be in wrong face. Wrong face occurs when “information is brought forth in some way about [a person’s] social worth which cannot be integrated, even with effort, into the line that is being sustained for [them]” (Goffman 300). Wrong face is often accompanied by embarrassment, humiliation, anger, or other negative emotional responses. It can damage an individual’s reputation and other participants’ perception of the individual. In an effort to avoid wrong face, we have developed ritual methods for saving our face during social interactions. Face-work, according to Goffman, is “the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with [their] face” (302). Avoiding wrong face or reacting to wrong face or “saving face” in a social interaction is face-work.

Goffman describes two basic types of face-work: the avoidance process and the corrective process. The avoidance process takes place when a person avoids situations in which their face is likely to be threatened or wronged. Avoidance could include withdrawing from a threatening situation, lying in order to avoid an incident, or even overlooking the fact that a face-threatening act has occurred. The corrective process, on the other hand, occurs when someone attempts to “correct for [their] offense and re-establish the expressive order” (Goffman 305). This requires the person who performed the face-threatening act to correct their action by performing additional acts, like apologizing or retracting their comment. The apology or corrective action then has to be acknowledged by everyone in the conversation and approved by the person whose face has been harmed before more social exchanges can take place. Goffman explains that if the corrective action is not sufficient, the offended person may react in “violent retaliation, destroying either themselves or the person who had refused to heed their warning” or leave the interaction in “in a visible huff” which denies the offenders’ authority and judgment in the situation (Goffman 306).

To Goffman, face-work is both necessary and complicated. Face-work often “induces compensative effort” from all involved because face-work is an integral part of our identities and feelings of social worth (Goffman 307). It requires the participation of everyone involved, either in avoiding face-threatening acts or helping to save the face of others. A person’s acknowledgment of face and cooperation in saving their own face or someone else’s face “represents his willingness to abide by the rules of social interaction” (Goffman 308). Problems develop in conversations when a person does not see face-work as an important tool in restoring social balance and performs “aggressive use of face-work” (Goffman 306). This occurs when someone forces others into awkward social exchanges by refusing to save their own face or complete face-work on behalf of others. Cooperation in face-saving acts is vital to maintaining social order.

Face-work allows us to maintain our identity and feelings of value during social exchanges. Goffman’s theory can be applied to any conversation exchange because face is always being presented or maintained. With the dawn of the digital age, social interactions and the media through which they occur are changing. The face-to-face social exchanges that Goffman studied were complicated because face-to-face interactions could be difficult to follow, unpredictable, and spontaneous. However, online communications, like social media websites and text messages, allow us to carefully monitor and maintain our face and give us control over content. The social networking website Facebook is an especially relevant medium for exploring the traits of online discourse and the related face-work strategies.

**Facebook, identity, and face-work**

Facebook is a social networking website that allows people to connect with each other and share information. Each user has a profile, which includes a profile picture, a status, personal information (e.g., hometown, relationship status), educational and vocational information, interests, “likes” (a person’s favorite things, such as TV shows and books), photo albums, list of friends, videos, notes, and additional content. The Facebook profile holds a store of information about a person and their associations, communicating their values and opinions to their social circles. This cultural capital creates a line or argument about an individual’s identity. If face is “an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes,” the Facebook profile is the virtual and visual incarnation of this self (Goffman 299). Social attributes are represented through the cultural capital and relationships displayed on the profile which solidify an individual’s membership within various social groups.

In the article “The Forms of Capital”, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu posits that our identities are created based on our cultural capital. Cultural capital consists of the material or immaterial things that we consume, such as religion, education, and material belongings. Social groups are communities that are backed by “collectively-owned capital” where each member of the group owns some type of cultural capital that “entitles them to credit” within the group (Bourdieu 51). Identity is built through memberships to groups and the related cultural capital. Facebook profiles display cultural capital, like religious and political affliations, interests, and hobbies, within the profile which makes cultural capital the core method through which identities are communicated on Facebook.

Facebook allows users to connect to other people and “friend” them by associating users with social networks organized through schools, place of work, geographic location, and similar interests. Users can search for people that they know, such as friends, family members, and classmates, and request to become their “Facebook friend”. Friends interact through the “like” and “comment” options that display with the user’s uploaded content. Friends are also able to write on each other’s walls, share photos and videos, and view each other’s updates through a news feed. Each update—a new status or a posted photo, for example—presents new content to the social group (friend list) and is an opportunity for social interaction and discourse.

The social interactions on Facebook require that users constantly work on maintaining face. In fact, completing face-work is one of the main tasks involved in having a Facebook profile or as users say, “being on” Facebook. Goffman perfectly summarizes the task of face maintenance saying:

By entering a situation in which [a person] is given a face to maintain, a person takes on the responsibility of standing guard over the flow of events as they pass before him. He must ensure that a particular expressive order is sustained – an order that regulates the flow of events, large or small, so that anything that appears to be expressed by them will be consistent with his face... (301)

By signing up for a Facebook profile, users position themselves within an ever-evolving social situation. A Facebook user constantly monitors “the flow of events” on his or her profile to make sure that all events are consistent with the face represented through their profile (Goffman 301). The plethora of discourse on Facebook requires users to constantly address comments and wall posts from friends. They must also be aware of the content they choose to share to ensure that it aligns with the identity they have presented on their profile. Users work to make sure that no wrong-face develops and that they are able to perform timely face-work when needed.

As with any social interaction, face-work is necessary and occurs as users interact through comments, wall posts, and other communication tools on Facebook. The principle acts of face-work on Facebook are similar to the avoidance and correction strategies described by Goffman: users ignore face-threatening comments; friends apologize to each other; and controversial conversations end with hurt feelings. These types of face-work mimic real-life interactions and utilize text-based communication that is much like face-to-face conversation. Facebook’s features, however, offer new strategies for saving face beyond conversational exchanges that create new “rules” for social interaction that are specific to Facebook. Friend requests, the hide feature, privacy settings, and the ability to delete and untag content are all strategies that users can implement to save face.

***Friend requests***

Unlike real life situations where interactions with others are often unplanned and spontaneous, online communications can be more carefully planned and monitored. One example of this is in the ability of Facebook users to choose who they interact with. In order to interact or “become friends” on Facebook, a user must submit a friend request. The friend request goes to the other user who then decides to accept or reject the person. This feature puts the user in control of who they want to interact with, allowing them to be more discerning about their social circle than might be possible in real-life situations. Some users friend everyone that they have ever known while others choose to keep their friend list short and intimate. In approving or denying a friend request, the user makes a statement about the nature of their relationship with the requester and their desire to communicate with them. In the context of face-work, users can practice avoidance by denying a friend request, thus preventing social interaction with the requester.

By avoiding certain people as Facebook friends, a user can maintain a friend list that aligns with their social values. Since it is unlikely that friends with common social values would perform face-threatening acts or aggressively use face against each other through Facebook, maintaining a list of friends that is consistent with a user’s Facebook identity prevents most wrong-face from occurring. Take a college student who spends her weekends partying with friends and drinking alcohol for example. She posts pictures of these activities on Facebook and considers them part of her identity. Most of her Facebook friends are her friends from college who understand that partying is part of who she is at school. However, her mother has also requested to be her friend. Because her mother has conflicting social values and concepts of her face, the student may ignore or deny the friend request in an effort to maintain both her Facebook face and the face that her mother knows.

***Hiding and privacy settings***

 Another method of avoidance specific to Facebook is the “hide” feature. This feature gives users the ability to hide certain content from their friends. For example, a user may choose to hide a specific photo album or a status update from their friend list. Hiding is a method of avoidance because it prevents friends from being able to perform face-threatening acts regarding the content that has been hidden from them.

 Facebook privacy settings allow users to hide content from specific people or groups of people. Privacy settings originally only allowed users to remove themselves from public searches, so that strangers wouldn’t be able to access their profile information. Over time the settings evolved to include privacy from specific friends or groups of friends. For example, a user may choose to show their photo albums only to their family members and not to their classmates, or vice versa. By hiding stories and making content viewable only to certain people, users are able to avoid interactions that may lead to face-threatening acts.

Through the example of the partying student discussed in previous section, we can come to understand some of the avoidance face-work strategies made possible through features of Facebook. First, the friend request option allows the student to ignore her mother’s friend request which prevents the mother from seeing any content that contradicts her perception of her daughter’s face. If the daughter were to accept the friend request, she could further practice avoidance by hiding specific content from her mother, such a status update about her favorite cocktail. Additionally, she could adjust her privacy settings to prevent her mother from viewing photo albums or events that she organizes through Facebook. This type of avoidance still abides by Goffman’s original idea of “[avoiding] contacts in which threats are likely to occur” (302). In terms of face-to-face conversations, this might include not attending specific events, avoiding a certain person, or acting like a comment wasn’t made. Facebook, however, introduces settings and commands that give the user ultimate control over who they talk with and how they interact online.

***Deleting and untagging***

As mentioned in the previous section, many conversational approaches to face-work are used on Facebook through comments and wall posts. Apologizing, hedging, and offering solutions to face-threatening acts are common examples of correction that can be seen throughout Facebook comments. While such interactions are similar to a corrective process that would take place face-to-face, Facebook’s features also allow for a new method of correction: deletion.

Facebook allows users to delete any content that they have added or that appears on their profile. In effect, deleting content permanently removes conversations from the Facebook profile and news feed. Friends who saw the comment may remember it, but it is no longer recorded on Facebook or visible to other users. Deletion gives users ultimate control over the social interactions that are taking place on their profiles or in regards to their own comments. If a user is angered or threatened by a conversation, they can simply click the “X” and the conversation disappears.

Untagging photos is another way to remove content from a Facebook profile. Facebook’s photo settings allow users to upload pictures of their friends and tag the pictures with the friend’s name. Tagging a photo automatically posts the photo to the friend’s profile. At times, tagging can be a dangerous game as it not always easy to judge whether a photo is flattering or aligns with a friend’s face. Just as you never know what a friend will say in a real life conversation, you never know what kind of photos your friends might post of you online. Untagging a photo is a way to remove it from your own profile. Untagging oneself from photos that show inconsistency of face is a vital face-work task on Facebook.

Deletion and untagging are considered corrective for the purposes of this analysis because they generally occur after evidence is presented in discourse. The acts of deletion and untagging could also be considered avoidance because they are similar to Goffman’s explanation of interactions where “the person [being threatened] acts as if an event that contains a threatening expression has not occurred at all” (303). At the same time, they could be considered correction in that they forcibly remove an offender from a conversation, thereby “denying the offender his status as an interactant, and hence denying the reality of the offensive judgment he has made” (Goffman 306). Regardless, these methods of face-work are integral to restoring social order and saving face within Facebook profiles.

**Conclusion**

Our main task as Facebook users is to maintain our identities amid the multiple conversations and interactions that take place in the virtual world. Facebook profiles represent our personal identities and reflect our face; we are attached to the content and ideas that the profiles come to represent. Control of our virtual identities, face, and the face of our friends is a high priority on Facebook because the conversations and social interactions are constantly changing. Many users “check” their Facebook every day, performing face-work acts to save their own face or the face of friends.

Facebook face-work strategies reveal an interesting phenomenon in online communication: that individuals can control social interactions. Goffman wrote of discourse as being governed by rules and a self that acted “as a kind of player in a ritual game” (308). Facebook discourse, however, lacks the rules and rituals that Goffman describes. Face-to-face interactions may be spontaneous and unplanned, and the success of face-work strategies depends on everyone’s agreeing to follow conventions. The social exchanges that occur on Facebook and other social networking websites, however, combine both the face-to-face conversational face-work strategies and face-work strategies made available by technology. A Facebook user’s ability to hide information, deny friends, and delete unwanted conversations illustrates the amount of control that Facebook users have over social order. The rules of interactions vary from profile to profile and revolve around the individual user and the types of social interactions that they value. The control of conversations and flow of events in relation to a user’s face rests at the click of their mouse—not the natural flow of face-to-face conversation or social conventions.

Goffman explains that “the person becomes a construct, built up…from moral rules that are impressed upon him” (310). The rules that govern our social interactions shape us as people and form our perception of face, dignity, and tact. Goffman continues, “The particular set of rules which transforms him into a human being derives from requirements established in the ritual organization of social encounters” (310). If man is a being shaped by the rules of social encounters, what types of men are being shaped by Facebook encounters? An individual’s ability to manipulate online social exchanges surely has an effect on face-to-face interactions. When conversations are mediated through a technology like Facebook, the rituals and rules of face-to-face encounters may no longer be relevant. Clearly, technology is shaping our discourse and in doing so, it must also be shaping our selves.

Works Cited

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