

Reconstructing the Stage: An Exploratory Study of Instant Messaging Use to Restructure Meeting Interaction

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ABSTRACT

We use Goffman's characterization of "front" and "back stage" interaction practices to characterize changes in the configuration of communication in electronic and face-to-face meetings afforded by instant messaging (IM) use. Viewed through Goffman's dramaturgical frame, interpersonal interaction can be understood as consisting of "front stage" and "back stage" arenas, depending upon the relationship among the actors present. In contexts where one or more actors can be considered to be "performing" with respect to another actor or actors, who constitute an "audience," the actors can be said to be "front stage," their behavior modified to be consonant with an idealized image of the role they are playing, i.e., "project leader." In the "back stage" arena, characterized by interactions among "teammates," or people who share the same role or who work to foster the same impression with respect to the audience, actors relax the illusion of the 'ideal' and act in ways that may be incongruent with the projected "front." In face-to-face situations, actors are constrained, socially and physically, to participate serially in front and back stage interactions, but the affordances of mediated interaction remove these constraints.

In an interview study of knowledge workers in four groups at two organizations, we found that workers used instant messaging in both face-to-face and technology-mediated meetings (1) to participate concurrently in both "front" and "backstage" interactions, (2) to manage front stage activities through concurrent backstage conversations, (3) to create transient "backstage" regions, and (4) to participate simultaneously in multiple "backstage" conversations. We first describe three meeting archetypes defined in terms of the role of our focal participants as either performers, audience members, or both. We then contrast examples from the data with their non-IM enhanced versions of each meeting type to show how the use of instant messaging enables participants to reconfigure the boundaries of the "front" and "back" regions, influencing the flow of information both within and between stage areas, the establishment of shared understandings, and the process and quality of group decision-making. We draw on the GSS literature and on social psychological studies of the temporal structuring of information flows to consider the implications of these boundary changes.