Mediated Me

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Abstract

Growing up, living, and working in a digital landscape over the last few decades has allowed me to witness the ways that technologically mediated communication has reshaped the way that we perform and present ourselves, as originally conceptualized by Erving Goffman. Through many years of experience working in call centers and telecommunications, my immersion and realization of my own mediated self came about, redefining the importance of understanding how we perform through any particular medium. By considering how telephones, email, instant messaging, and collaborative online utilities play a role in communication in the workplace, we can see how mediated performances can be both enhanced and misunderstood.
Mediated Me

The Formative Years

Working in and around technology just sort of happened. It made perfect sense. I grew up in the digital age, surrounded by it, at the forefront of it. My immersion in technology couldn't have been more obvious than when I realized that a handheld device called the Speak & Spell taught me to read. Literally. My parents bought me this big red, clunky thing that sort of resembled an enormous calculator with a keyboard when I was barely old enough to walk. I poked around at it until I figured out how to play word scrambles and hangman, fill in the blank and spelling games, learning to read before I ever stepped foot in an institution of education. I’m not sure my parents intended the toy to be anything more than a fun and educational thing that kept me occupied and out of their way, but it was the first of many technological experiences that created my mediated life. When it came time to look at possible career paths, working in a field related to technology felt perfectly natural, in so many ways. Being mediated, that is, “dealing with reality through something else” (de Zengotita 8) was the only reality I had ever known, so to speak.

When computers started to be generally available – and somewhat affordable – in the mid-1980’s, my dad was at the forefront of the curve, sure to pick one up simply to take it apart and see how it worked. He insisted on erudition for the sake of it all and was obsessive and compulsive about it. I naturally grew up in the large shadow that he cast, taking toasters apart and putting them back together, like a PC in miniature (or so I thought). When I was gifted my first computer, a Tandy-1000, I was about 10 years old and a natural at it; no instructions were required. I played Family Feud on the old floppy discs (you know, the ones that actually flopped) and I could type 120 words per minute by the time I entered into adolescence. Anything and everything that followed – bulletin boards (BBS), CD-ROMs, chat rooms, webcams, high speed internet, mobile phones – I insisted on being first to play with those, too. It was all just natural growing up in the volatile beginnings of the digital age. Without even realizing it at the time, I had a backstage pass to witness the ways that technology has shaped us, changed how we communicate, interact, and perform through our increasingly mediated encounters.

Performance, as introduced by Erving Goffman in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, is defined as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion
which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (15). We all create and manage the impressions that we give to others, consciously or otherwise, which then directly influences that person’s impression of us. In face-to-face contact, impression management might seem obvious, particularly when observing interactions between people. But, in considering how technology has become indispensable in our day-to-day interactions, I became interested in how those interactions are facilitated and adapted when we perform through any technological medium such as telephone, email, and online chat conversations. We are entering a new age of impression management that is frequently mediated through technology in (and out of) the workplace that is allowing us to perform in myriad new ways. We are beginning to minimize face-to-face contact through increased communications via email and web-based channels; we attend training, conferences, and even remotely work from the comfort of our own home; and we present ourselves to the workplace through these various developing channels of communication. As Goffman tells us, “if the individual’s activity is to become significant to others, he must mobilize his activity so that it will express during the interaction what he wishes to convey” (30). So, how do interactions and communication change the performance when technology is introduced?

The Paradox of Technology

Understandably, technology is both venerated and feared by individuals and organizations alike. The tech sector is often seen as some mysterious entity not to be trusted, and at times, the mistrust is based on simple mismanagement or misrepresentation. Workers in the field are admittedly not the best personality types to provide clarity surrounding the very thing that they work with, having learned the art of communication mostly through video games (myself included). But, maybe I can begin to clear up some of the confusion a bit here.

We, the purveyors of technology and information, are commonly at odds with ‘the business,’ those people whom we see as our direct (albeit organizationally internal) customers. It often feels like an us-versus-them situation where we aren’t actually working towards the common goal of the larger entity of the organization, but rather that we are separate silos of operation, bickering about which way is the best way to
execute any particular project. Having had the rare experience to work for both sides of the organization, beginning in ‘the business’ and later transitioning to IT, I was uniquely positioned to see – and possibly attempt to understand – where the confusion came from.

Based on my past experience working in call centers, I was hired on at Echo as a Business Analyst in the customer service call center. As an analyst, my primary function was to look for ways to maintain and improve the daily statistics that are common to most every call center: calls offered vs. calls answered, average speed of answer, abandon rate, service level, and so on. What all reportable numbers show, in some form or another, is the ability of the call center to answer incoming calls in a timely manner, which in theory provides a direct quantifiable measure of customer satisfaction. This much is true of any call center: the longer people have to wait, the more frustrated they become and the more likely they are to hang up without getting the help they need. The amount of patience people have depends upon the product and their level of interest in it. For example, speaking to someone about paying my cable bill compared to calling for an ambulance in an emergency has very different servicing expectations.

In terms of measuring success in the Echo call center, the statistics were important for two reasons: they were used internally to staff appropriately and were reported to the parent association so that standards of customer servicing and satisfaction were met. But, in retrospect, those reports also provided a quantitative measurement of an employee’s mediated performance. The statistics tracked evaluative information that allowed management to monitor performances – from the number of calls a representative took to the number and length of breaks. Employees learned to both love and hate the technology because of its ability to represent them, for better or worse.

I mostly enjoyed the work and naturally, looking for methods of improvement in a unit driven almost entirely by the phone system drew me into the IT world of telecommunications. It was fun to be surrounded by and immersed in innovative, bleeding-edge technology, but it didn’t come without its challenges. In general, innovation in the technological realm meets resistance at every corner because it is (and might always be) an unknown for many people. And, to be fair, technology is
admittedly unreliable at times. In the business, users rely on technology in the same way you rely on your plumbing. Each and every one of us takes for granted every day that an intricate system of piping and valves exists to connect our homes to the greater infrastructure of the city plumbing and the moment it breaks, we absolutely notice that it needed to be fixed yesterday. Enterprise technology works in the same discrete manner and as proponents of often complex and unique solutions, we in the IT industry were so often caught looking like the bad guys, delivering services that didn’t work or introducing risk by upgrading perfectly good systems that did. I wouldn’t trust us either.

We would, in moments on the defensive, chalk it up to unreasonable expectations of the business, a too-quick delivery, or unclear deliverables in a project, but honestly, we were often at fault. It wasn’t uncommon to move forward with an installation or project knowing that there was risk (because there always was). It’s degrees of comfort at that point, doing our best to minimize problems that might bring down the entire infrastructure (the problem that might burst the metaphorical plumbing at any moment) and mitigating problems if and when they come up. The delicate balance between functional and disaster was particularly noticeable when management decided to go with the cheapest solution. In technology, you definitely get what you pay for. A wise co-worker once told me that three elements must be selected in any technology-based purchase: quality, price, and simplicity. The problem is that you have to pick two (any two) and no matter how hard you try, you can never have all three at the same time.

IT was an interesting culture to work within, because we had to understand and believe in the products, balance the needs of the business, and then fix the systems when they break (like we said they wouldn’t). Workplace culture is, as Edgar Schein describes, “what a group learns over a period of time as that group solves problems of survival in an external environment and its problems of internal integration” (111). The challenges that we faced were very much about survival in an often-unforgiving environment. That said, it is mostly a good thing to be moving forward with increased availability to the tools that technology provides. Technology does in fact save organizations money by automating repetitive tasks, and expands possibilities for efforts like remote workplaces (which has been shown to increase productivity and employee
Mediated Me satisfaction). But, as alluded to previously, technology does introduce new challenges to the basic models of communication.

Communication in the Workplace

If we consider the communication model, as conceptualized by Roman Jakobson, we can see how technology provides the medium for a message to be transmitted from a sender to a receiver (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Roman Jakobson’s Communications Model

At its most basic level, the communication model can show us how any message between a sender and a receiver can be directly influenced by the context, channel, and code that it is presented. In the case of mediated communication, the channel would be the telephone, computer, network, or even the digital language that the message travels through, creating isolated “regions” that allow for “separate knots or clusters of verbal interaction” (Goffman 107). Messages are coded into the appropriate technological medium to take it from sender to receiver (think electrical current or 1’s and 0’s).

One interesting thing to consider in mediated communication is what gets removed from the traditional face-to-face interaction. When we speak to others on the phone or exchange emails, we do not see them. Erving Goffman’s emphasis of “dramaturgical discipline” of “one’s face and voice” is quite obviously lost (217). At the most basic level, technology can remove the physical presence of a person and therefore remove the immediacy and performative discipline required of any interaction.
Mediated Me

I can look at the caller ID, see that it’s my boss calling, and allow the call to go through to voice mail (though I would never do this, of course). Or, I can put the email about our team luncheon aside for later and work on the one that just came in labeled as URGENT. In addition, text-based communication, in particular, allows for significant self-editing that was never possible before, so I can really consider what I type and how it might be received at the other end of the exchange. On the opposite side of that coin is the surveillance that accompanies these exchanges, the forever record that will inherently exist. But, assuming that we’ve never met someone, an email or chat exchange is mostly void of gender, race, age, facial expressions – those things that Goffman considers a person’s “personal front” (24) are noticeably absent – allowing us to really focus on what’s important: the work. And, like I said before, the choice and change is mostly a good thing.

Technology is useful and ‘best practices’ abound, but like any other tool, the choices are personal. It may take some time to figure out what works best, but as with anything else, more and less appropriate ways to communicate are available and a simple web search for ‘email best practice,’ for example, will provide some direction for the uninitiated. But, it is important to be flexible. What works for one person, might not work for another; what is one’s time-saver is another’s time-waster. For example, I don’t call my mom on her cell phone because she never keeps it charged. I also don’t send my dad text messages because he thinks it is a useless method of communication and is actually offended by the brevity of the interaction (although he’s notorious for sending junk email to everyone on his contact list, go figure). Despite my best efforts to convert them both, my parents have their preferred methods of communication. In the same way, I know that my co-worker Parker who sits on the other side of the cubicle wall from me doesn’t respond to chat messages, not because he doesn’t want to but because he honestly doesn’t see the flashing indicator to let him know he has a new message. And while the notification seems glaringly obvious to me, it doesn’t to him. I’m better off kicking the wall or yelling at him; chat messages incite more frustration than the message is worth, so I choose other means of communication with him. Communication is, at the most basic level, a very personal endeavor and no amount of generalization could possibly encompass every mediated encounter, however broad this remains.
Mediated Me

Thank You For Calling

One of my very first jobs that placed me on the technological timeline was in a call center for a security company, taking calls from all over the country. In call centers, it becomes clear very quickly whether or not someone is cut out for the work; I was not. Talking on the phone for eight to ten hours a day is exhausting, mentally and emotionally. You deal with so many different personality types in short increments of time, with the expectation that you adapt to each, servicing each caller in a polite and professional manner. The average rep took 70 calls a day at approximately 4 minutes per call, speaking to people from every corner of the country, and probably every hole, too. We would get callers who wanted to tell you their life history and you’d have to reel them in to avoid getting in trouble for not taking enough calls. The most challenging were of course the irate callers; it is pretty much a guarantee that an incensed customer will yell and curse at you, as if whatever problem they are experiencing is of your personal will and doing. Your only available response is to take it with a polite “I’m so sorry” and do your best to calm them down (read: keep them as a customer) before you move on to the next call.

One particularly memorable call was from a man whose home had been broken into while he was sleeping. The security system should have sounded and the police should have been dispatched, but the system failed and neither actually happened. He called our company to report the problem, got me, and recounted the unfortunate story of how the burglars came upon him sleeping, causing him to have a heart attack and spend several nights in the hospital before he could return home to his now mostly-empty home. He said the most awful things about and to me, and as the single line of communication that he had into the organization, I think I might have actually deserved it for what he went through. I took it quietly, dying a little inside, and after he had vented enough and abruptly hung up on me, I moved on to the next call with a cheery voice. That was my job. For irate callers, you have to keep in mind that you are not the intended receiver of that message; that man wasn’t actually mad at me. I was just part of the channel, right alongside the telephone. The organization was the intended recipient and I made sure to pass the message on to my supervisor.
Mediated Me

I didn’t last in that position for very long – six months to be exact. I stayed with the company, but I moved off of the telephones and into a more analytical position, monitoring call volume and creating schedules, which suited me just fine. But the many encounters I experienced in the call center, although not all as profound as Mr. Heart Attack, did teach me a lot. I learned that most people just want to talk to someone, particularly when they’re having a problem. Regardless of whether their alarm was broken or they just needed to pay their bill, customers want to speak to a living, breathing human being that will be kind to them and get them through their crisis, however great or small. And since we were a national company with one customer servicing call center, they picked up the telephone and quite often got me.

Picking up the phone, however, is not something all that foreign to most people. The telephone has been in use for well over a century and is probably the most familiar piece of technology that we use, whether at home or work, or maybe even while standing in line at the grocery store. But, as prevalent as phone use is, we don’t often consider how we perform and manage impressions through the telephone, though we most certainly do. Etiquette has developed surrounding the telephone, in the way we answer, the way we pause to allow others to speak. In these situations, we are meeting the standards of performance and managing the personal and professional impressions that exist of us. We’ve all probably known someone like this: Cathy often called and left ultra-long, rambling voicemail messages that literally conveyed nothing more than “I have a question. Can you call me?” Really, a simple 5-second message or a quick email requesting a callback would have saved us both some time. So, whether we realize it or not, we are performing every time we pick up the phone, appropriating what Schein refers to as the “artifacts” of an organization, “the manner in which people address each other,” and other intangible expectations (111). It is understood, then, that the performance expectations in any organization must be learned through observation and a systematic process of trial and error.

Personally, I prefer not to talk on the phone – or in person for that matter – when dealing with people one on one. Maybe it is a relic from too many conversations with people like Mr. Heart Attack and my subconscious desire to never get scalded again. But, I do also like to take advantage of the fact that emails and other forms of text
Mediated Me

Communication serve as documentation of a conversation and allow for more calculated responses, standing in as a historical log of the interaction. If ever a dispute arises over a decision or a mere forgetful moment, the history is immensely helpful. That said, I do think moments arise when the telephone, or some form of voice conversation, is more convenient than other methods of communication. Calling my boss on his mobile phone almost always has a greater chance of success than emailing him because of his busy schedule. Often, conference calls are simply the easiest and most effective way of communicating to a group, particularly when the group is dispersed geographically, as is frequently the case. At Echo, we deal with mainland contractors, local vendors, and employees at six different offices, so conference calls are both a necessity and a great method of communication.

Honestly, even when geography doesn’t require conference calls, I almost prefer conference calls to physical meetings. One of my favorite things to see in a meeting request is conference call information (I actually get a little happy). Particularly for meetings requiring a small or segmented amount of participation on my part, dialing into a meeting allows me to do other work from my desk while I listen to the call. I can participate when required and otherwise ignore the unrelated portions of the meeting. Now, segmented attention spans are a double-edged sword and can become problematic – particularly when we catch attendees not paying attention – but when used responsibly, conference calls can definitely increase productivity and decrease the frustration of being stuck in meetings all day and having no time to get actual work done.

An interesting side note is that phone interactions tend to get monitored less frequently than text conversations occurring through email and chat (see Surveillance below). At Echo, the call centers are the only unit to have some form of voice monitoring. For the majority of the workers, phone calls are not under any surveillance at all. Some people obviously feel more comfortable with the lack of monitoring and are more likely to respond through the phone than other mediums of communication. Ultimately, the choice to use the phone is one of the many instances where personal preference definitely plays a role in the interaction.
Be Careful What You Send (There is No Undo)

It isn’t uncommon to require management and executive signatures on purchase requests or other important documentation. My co-worker Parker, the same guy who doesn’t respond to chat, always insisted on sending signature requests through email and then would complain when the management never got the forms back to him, ultimately holding up the entire process. He missed the important point that management, and especially executives, might see hundreds or thousands of emails a day and reading each and every one is low on their list of priorities. Most managers I knew filtered their emails by sender and would read only messages from people that were above them in the hierarchy and then, as time permitted, they would read everything else, at which point your email would sit for days (or maybe even forever) without a response. When you have a sense of urgency, email is not the most efficient tool to use for the occasion. Print it out and walk it over, watch him or her sign it, and you’re done in two minutes flat. Using the tools in responsible ways will provide the best results; jumping to blame the technology or a person, as Parker did, when some interaction doesn’t go as smoothly as hoped could quite possibly be an issue of misuse.

Email is fairly commonplace in businesses and schools and we are becoming more and more comfortable in performing through it as a medium. But, it is useful to state the etiquette expected of business exchanges through email. The Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) suggests each email be written with a direct and meaningful subject line, proper email greeting, and careful professional writing and editing composed in a clear and concise manner with minimal joking to avoid misunderstandings. Emails are communications that can be misunderstood and no matter what you’ve been told, Unsend is a misnomer. Once you click send, an email is no longer under your control. You can retract it all you like, but there’s no guarantee that it hasn’t been read by everyone in the world, including your mother.

Regardless, email interactions don’t have to make us feel like automatons. Think of the many ways that exist to add a personal touch to text, that allow an individual to perform through the medium (though over-personalizing can be distracting in a business setting and might be viewed as unprofessional). Choosing colors and alternate fonts can add a touch of personality, although some can be admittedly difficult to read. Also,
Mediated Me

using more than one or two fonts and/or colors can become distracting from the original intent of the email, which is to convey some piece of information. I compose all business emails in a standard black, innocuous font that doesn't bring attention to the text itself. In addition to fonts, signature blocks and background images, tag lines and other add-ons can add a personal touch to an email. One of my favorite tag lines I would see frequently in emails was an image of a tree that said “please consider the environment before you print this message” or something to that effect. It was a nice sentiment and didn’t intrude on the email to the point of being obnoxious.

In terms of performance through email, it is quite possible to misstep and unknowingly perform what Goffman refers to as “unmeant gestures” (208). For example, it is possible to yell at someone through email with the simple use of ALL CAPS. You can quickly incite someone with the unmeant gesture and being mindful of the etiquette associated can save you from an unnecessary confrontation. Addressing is another such example. When I send an email to my team and exclude my boss, without explicitly stating anything, I communicate something entirely different than if I include my boss. It’s like sending out a party invite and leaving certain names off on purpose; someone is bound to get upset.

One particular co-worker is notoriously bad about this. Lani is a supervisor that I commonly interface with in the Customer Service unit and she likes to send emails to a carefully selected audience. For example, she'll send an email with a work request for some phone system changes and include my boss, her boss, and me (no problem here). In my response to her, I will include (Carbon Copy or CC:) my entire team as protocol, and I might also include the other supervisors of her unit to make sure that we have consensus before moving forward with significant changes. She will, in response, strategically remove certain names from the email, leaving some supervisors on and removing others (those that might disagree with her, I assume). The inconsistency of her behavior is annoying at best, and almost always ends in a miscommunication or some delay. Manipulation of the addressees communicates indirectly something that may or may not sync with the text of the email, and creates what Goffman might consider “a false front” where there is a “discrepancy between fostered appearances and reality” (59). Lani is possibly conveying that she is insecure, knows her opinions are
too radical for some, or that some people are unimportant. Regardless of what she intends, her actions appear deceptive and we can see how it is possible to communicate and perform, for better or worse, through the subtleties of the technology.

I'm Available, But Not Really

Instant messaging (IM), when it first arrived on the technology scene, was a game changer. The engagement that chat introduced elevated the computer from something that you checked on occasion for the lone email and turned it into the box you could sit in front of for hours at a time, losing yourself in the new social medium. The thing I remember most about those days was that I fell for it in every way, and in those interactions, some people were good at it and others just weren’t. Some personalities and performances transfer to chat well and it usually has to do with how witty the person is, but also how fast they type. The perfectly placed phrase is never as good if it’s really late. It is an entirely different form of communication and is understandably a challenge to navigate in the workplace.

If you’ve ever used a chat client, such as Instant Messenger, Google Chat, or even Facebook Chat, you already have a pretty good idea of what a corporate messaging utility can do. At the most fundamental level of chat functionality, the two are identical and IM is basically “nothing more than turbocharged e-mail” (Flynn 94). It is a great utility for quick conversations that don’t require in-depth responses, such as, “Want to get some coffee?” or “I updated the website. Can you make sure it looks alright?” IM allows me to select an individual and send them a message that will pop up on their screen, assuming that they are logged in. Where a corporate chat system differs from general IM is in its intended use and integration with other technologies. The actual application used may vary by organization, but at Echo, we used Microsoft Office Communications Server (OCS), which allowed us to integrate chat with email, calendars, the telephone, and more. Integration becomes really important, in terms of individual and team performance, with the new concept of IM presence.
When I log in to my computer, my IM client automatically logs me in and updates my status to anyone who cares to see. If I am on someone’s ‘buddy list,’ his or her OCS client will automatically see that my status has changed to Available and indicate the change with a little green dot next to my name (see Figure 2). The colors available are naturally red, yellow, and green and are used pretty logically within the system to indicate availability. For example, when I make a phone call, my status bubble turns red and will mark me as ‘In a Call’ and if I have a meeting scheduled in my calendar, at the appropriate time, my status will turn red and state that I am ‘In a Meeting.’ The awareness of what someone is doing is called *presence* and can be one of the most useful tools, as well as one of the most misunderstood, in an organization.

Presence is utilized in two directions: one person broadcasts their presence (Offline, Available, In a Call, Busy, etc.) and another person can use that broadcasted presence to make decisions. We’ll focus on the first to get a better understanding of how presence can be utilized to perform in the workplace. First, it is important to define the term Available in the context of IM presence. Available does not mean that I am not doing anything. It does not mean that I will necessarily answer your call or answer your
chat message instantaneously (the instant in IM can definitely be misleading). It is most certainly not an open invitation to come by and chitchat. Available simply means that I am logged in and sitting at my computer, probably working, since that’s what they pay me to do.

Consider this scenario: I’m sitting at my desk and perhaps talking to my boss, who has stopped by my desk. I’m logged in, so naturally I’m in the Available status. A co-worker sends me a message and when I don’t respond within 30 seconds, gets up and walks to my desk. They know I’m there because OCS tells them I am, and it’s true. But, I’m actually in the middle of something and their stopping by doesn’t help either of us. It creates the awkward moment of silent-mouthed “Oh, you’re busy, I’ll come back later” or they might interrupt the conversation I’m having with my boss. In this case, the technology tends to make us less productive, not more.

Similarly, other statuses carry certain implications. It isn’t uncommon for co-workers to manually place themselves in Busy status to give the illusion of work, or to schedule long periods of false meetings into their schedule to keep their status in a Meeting. By maintaining (and performing) the illusion of work, the users have “control over what is perceived,” allowing them to gain “control over contact that is made” (Goffman 67), concealing their real performance through manipulation of the technology. So, it is quite possible to exploit the tool or to use it as a benefit to the workplace, creating a moment of choice and flexibility for the performer. Keeping your calendar up to date is a simple way to effectively communicate to others when you are really ‘Available’ or when you aren’t.

The strengths of a system that allows you to see online presence are many. I grouped employees into teams on my ‘buddy list’ and when I had a question, I could look to see who might be available to answer my questions immediately. It prevented me from having to run down a static list of names, calling 5 people who weren’t even there before I reached the one who was, but was actually busy. Chat allows you to have quick, impromptu conversations that don’t necessarily require the exclusive attention required of a face-to-face or telephone conversation or the formality of email. One of the most entertaining, though less productive, uses of chat was to invite a load of
Mediated Me

people into a single conversation and watch it go with a simple prompt like, “What’s for lunch?”

Chat works best when both sides realize that it is a tool that is a best effort. I will answer your message if I can and as soon as I can. I will also give you the best possible information that I can, but it probably won’t be as well thought out as an email response. It is entirely a ‘best-effort’ interaction, in that sense. A ‘yes’ response in a chat message definitely carries a different amount of weight than a ‘yes’ response in an email. To give a useful (although generalized) analogy, chat is like talking (think chitchat) in the same way that email is like a contract. When you want something documented, you ask for it in writing, right?

What’s all the fuss about collaboration?

Within the last several years, blogs, wikis, and discussion boards have become the buzz. At Echo, a good deal of time and money was spent to bring the company intranet (only accessible by employees while at work) into the modern age of social networking and digital communication. The problem was that the group in charge of the implementation and content didn’t really understand the tools, creating a frustrating user experience. The discussion conversations were un-moderated and information was nearly impossible to find across the various platforms that were deployed, creating a vast space of information that was virtually useless. So, what went wrong?

The first thing we deployed was a wiki, which can be a great tool for developing documents that require multiple-author collaboration that are interlinked (one wiki page can link to multiple other wiki pages), providing a massive mesh of knowledge-based content. A wiki is basically a series of virtual whiteboards and everyone gets his or her own marker to add to the collective project, or a user can just reference what the many authors have already developed. However, if it isn’t necessary to have multiple authors, a simple Document Library will suffice. Also, it is important to keep in mind that most wikis do not provide any method for discussion about the working documents other than within the text of the wiki itself, which is exactly what made our wiki so confusing.

The corporate wiki was deployed with a miniscule amount of content and ended up becoming a place to take notes and have discussions. Since it could not be seen
Shea

Mediated Me

very clearly who made edits, the wiki became almost immediately ineffectual and had to be taken offline to avoid confusion. A better deployment might have used a small group of writers to generate a foundation of knowledge with a clear format instituted for each page that could be built upon by the users. Rather, we ended up with a bunch of gibberish that could have been better served existing in a discussion forum instead.

We also deployed (to a limited audience) a test discussion forum, which is a highly adaptable space that allows for open conversation among the participants. Good discussion utilities will allow for categories, tags, and threading (comments on comments) keeping discussions organized and easy to follow. The downside is that very active discussions make important information difficult to find, particularly since it is organically generated among the users. Many busier discussion forums may even require moderation to make sure that conversations stay on-topic and are respectful of others, or to transfer really important information into FAQ's or other resources for users to access more readily. Ironically, our discussion forum was actually not bad, with various subjects that were mostly well moderated, but we missed the mark because the information wasn’t made available to the entire company. The limited audience didn’t remain engaged because there just weren’t enough people participating.

And this brings me to the biggest flop: the blog. The internal blog came out with full steam, lots of contributors, and lots of interesting stuff. Some of the content was really good and I was hopeful for us to finally get something right. A blog is intended to provide informational posts in a timeline, similar to a new feed, which is great for announcements or daily/weekly articles, but pushes older posts out of view (or off the page) as newer posts are made available. The time-sensitive nature of blog posts implies that most users will read only the most recent information posted. As such, blogs aren’t the best tool to use for material that should be referred to in an ongoing manner, which might be better suited in a wiki or a Document Library.

There was one noteworthy blog post that was meant to generate a moment of reflection, with a prompt at the end asking for feedback; the author spoke of workplace culture in her view and asked for others to share their own opinions. Because blogs do provide space for users to comment, this opened up a moment for users to share. The prompt for feedback, in and of itself, doesn’t indicate that the blog post should be in a
Mediated Me

discussion forum, but it does mean a couple things. Asking for feedback implies that someone will actually read the responses and either respond back or that the responses will create opportunities for change in the organization. Good stuff, right? Right. But instead, one early comment that was controversial in its stance (though not incorrect in its observation of the work culture) became the focus. Rather than responding to the blog, all 160-some comments that followed were in response to the one comment and those that followed. The original author never once responded. Similarly, other posts that asked for feedback failed to provide users with responses or results, ultimately creating an environment in the blog that was not comfortable, or even useful, for users. As you might expect, the readership quickly dwindled to nothing and the original intent and opportunity for meaningful sharing was lost as the users saw that the blog was only a means of one-way communication and that no one on the other end was listening.

Basically, what you don’t want to do is use a discussion forum without appropriate moderation, which serves to keep discussions on topic and conducive to participation. Similarly, you would not want to create a wiki with the intention of carrying on a discussion because it is meant to be a single cohesive document. Although authoring is collaborative, a wiki will appear to readers as seamless (and essentially authorless). Each tool has its strengths and weaknesses and when appropriately managed can be invaluable tools to generate interest and support for and within an organization.

In addition to these fronts that can put up through the web, providing the appearance that an organization “maintains and embodies certain standards” (Goffman 107), it is also important to note that employees have a similar responsibility to their own performance through the available tools. For example, Flynn advises readers to “be aware that employers are prescreening job applicants’ blogs [and] social networking profiles” (203). This also applies to current employers and if you post about how much you hate your job or co-worker, consider that your boss might read it. If you are comfortable with that, then by all means, go ahead and click Submit.

Surveillance
As with any technological communication that occurs in the workplace, it is important to be aware of corporate security standards. At Echo, we had to complete a series of readings and take an annual Compliance and Ethics quiz that confirmed that we would comply with the security standards that the company required. The digital sign-off entitled the company to reprimand or fire you when you set up a computer in a remote corner of the office to play video games, or when you used company time to run your private eBay business (both of these actually happened). “Courts in the United States have consistently ruled that employees should assume that their workplace computer activity is being watched – even if they have not been formally notified of monitoring” (Flynn 197). Really, what all of this means is that, as an employee, every bit of information that passes through the corporate network is traceable and that you are potentially always being monitored. So, in effect, every aspect of work conducted through technology could be considered the “front region, where the performance is presented,” rendering the “back region, where the performance of a routine is prepared” virtually absent within the technological framework (Goffman 238). The blurring of regions requires an implicit necessity for awareness and self-monitoring on the part of any employee.

Funny story: Danny, a member of the Network group, was running systematic checks on our systems, found a potential security breach, and reported it. Upon further investigation, it was found to be his computer downloading music, a direct violation of our company policies. Needless to say, he didn’t keep his job for much longer. He was, as Goffman might say, an “impostor” that “did not have the right to play the part he played,” immediately discrediting his performance as a member of the Network team (59). But, it isn’t always this amusing or seemingly idiotic. The important thing to keep in mind is that any business (personal or otherwise) conducted on a corporate network, can be tracked. Every keystroke, phone call, and screen looked at is potentially being monitored and can be used for or against you, given the situation. And don’t assume that it won’t be taken out of context, because it just might.

It is also important to note that surveillance is not limited to workplace activities. One particular illustrative incident involved a co-worker (unidentifiable, for fear of what I am about to describe) who was arrested on outstanding charges, to the surprise of all of
Mediated Me

his teammates. As is so common these days, several people in the office posted about it on their Facebook accounts and were subsequently reprimanded for their actions, to put it lightly. Irrelevant was how innocuous their Facebook post might have been or how elusive it was in its identification of the co-worker or the incident itself. The statements were made on personal time, on personal accounts, and yet, were subject to the surveillance of the workplace. As Goffman might say, the organization considered the material to be an “inside secret,” that had “little strategic importance” (142) but was considered a secret nonetheless. In the end, I don’t do or write anything through technology that I wouldn’t want the whole world to see, because they might just be watching.

Realizing the Mediated Me

Due to different levels of comfort with technology in the workplace environment, I have always been amazed when witnessing the variability of performance through these mediums. In many organizations, little to no time is spent acclimating employees to the best practices of technology; moving into the digital workplace implies that, as Goffman states, a person “obtains a new part to perform” without being “told in full detail how to conduct himself” (72). It’s a learn-as-you-go product that most companies teach by simple immersion, where employees “learn enough pieces of expression to be able to ‘fill in’ and manage, more or less, any part that he [or she] is likely to be given” (73). The technology is, for the most part, thought to be intuitive enough to allow anyone to just begin using it and figure it out. And sometimes it is. But, without guidance, people tend to do what works for them, which isn’t always the most efficient or widely accepted method. Fortunately, in performance, a period of forgiveness is granted, which Goffman identifies as time when “the performer is known to be a beginner, and more subject than otherwise to embarrassing mistakes [and] the audience frequently shows extra consideration, refraining from causing the difficulties it might otherwise create” (232). As such, learning to perform through technology isn’t meant to be frightening – and certainly need not be avoided – but the outcome of any technology-mediated experience can often be interesting (see also: funny, scary, infuriating, or choose your own adjective).
Mediated Me

In any organization, new technology brings with it the best intentions of improving productivity and is *supposed* to help save money while increasing efficiency and output. Otherwise, there would be no point. However, as Andrew McAfee eloquently states, “it is not enough simply to deploy the new technologies of interaction and collaboration and then sit back and wait for the benefits to accrue. That strategy will almost certainly lead to disappointment and failure” (83-89). It is vital to the success of any organization to understand how to best utilize any given technology and convey the performance expectations to the staff. If we take the time to think about the ways that technology allows us to perform and how those performances can be enhanced or inhibited by the medium, communication in the workplace will be a much more pleasant experience for everyone involved.

At the end of the day, I found that I have developed, through decades of working in and around technology, a mediated self that is in many ways identical to my embodied self, but have also learned and adapted language and expression to become a manifested digital self. I’ve learned to self-moderate, adapt, and present myself professionally, intellectually, or otherwise, depending on the situation and am able to experience through and with technology a little more understanding and have a little less performance anxiety in each interaction. And though technology will only continue to develop and hopefully enhance the way we interact, the foundations of a mediated me have been established and will hopefully help me to meet whatever challenges are yet to come.