

Self, script and situation

Identity in a world of ICTs

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Abstract. In my paper I will elucidate why ‘situation’ is a constructive unit of analysis for the study of both identity and the impact of technologies (particularly ICTs) on identity. Further, I will use a situational perspective to show some of the ways in which the ‘definition of situations’ may be affected by such technologies. I will conduct a conceptual analysis of the ‘definition of a situation’, looking into the notion of ‘scripts’, to show how alterations in scripts lead to changes in the ‘definition of the situation’, and these in turn lead to shift in the development and expression of identity.

1 Introduction

There are many ways of approaching the study of human identity. One of them is to focus on the relationship between human interaction and identity. This approach has been used by symbolic interactionists such as George Herbert Mead [12], Herbert Blumer [2], Tamotsu Shibutani [17] and Erving Goffman [9]. Goffman’s theory of identity forms the starting point of my research. In *The presentation of self in everyday life* [9] Goffman develops what has come to be known as the ‘dramaturgy metaphor’ [10] or the ‘dramaturgical perspective’ [4]. In search of an answer to the question ‘what is identity?’ Goffman turns to everyday, small-scale social engagements between people. His point of departure is the idea that the complex question of what identity is, is best tackled by studying its expression and formation in concrete micro-social interactions between people. For Goffman, identity literally *comes about* in and through social interactions – it is the ‘dramatic effect’ of such interactions. When they engage in social interactions with one another, he argues, people conduct ‘performances’ – they assume a ‘role’ and try to create as favorable an ‘impression’ as possible [9]. There is a distinction between the roles we play when we are ‘front stage’, i.e. before an audience, and the way we behave when we are in our ‘backstage region’, i.e. within the privacy of our home environment, where we can rehearse for future performances, rest and relax [9].

Identity, according to Goffman, is closely related to the ‘performances’ we create in our everyday lives: it is the “...*result of publicly validated performances.*” [4]. In the eyes of Goffman, it is simply the sum of all the roles we play in our lives. Thus, identity is not some innate quality, nor a physically localizable property. Also, identity is not an essence in itself. Rather, Goffman views identity as the socially constructed result of all our engagements with others.

2 Goffman on situations

Any social interaction between two or more people is a ‘performance’ according to Goffman. But how do people come to choose what ‘role’ to play when interacting with others? How do they know what behaviors to display, what roles to choose from, when placed in a given situation? According to Goffman people entering a social interaction make use of a ‘*definition of the situation*’ (a concept that dates back to the American sociologist William Isaac Thomas [18-20]). A ‘definition of the situation’ emerges when people – in the words of Joshua Meyrowitz – “...*ask themselves: ‘what is going on here?’*” [13, 14]. The ‘answer’ a person will come up with forms the basis for a particular course of action, chosen from a whole range of possible behaviors, he or she will adopt within that setting. Thus, people use the ‘definition of the situation’ to ascribe *meaning* to the situation at large and give an interpretation of their specific part to play (i.e. their ‘*role*’) within that situation. By ‘answering’ this question they choose a role for themselves within the given setting, and with that fit their course of action into a range of actions that they deem ‘appropriate’ within those circumstances.

Note that, despite the somewhat rationalistic formulation implied in phrases like ‘they ask themselves’ and ‘answering this question’ in the previous paragraph, it is important to observe that using a ‘definition of the situation’ is not necessarily a rational, conscious process. More often than not, ‘answering’ the question ‘what is going on here?’ is *not* done in an explicit, analytical or logical way, but rather in an immediate, automatic, implicit, un- or pre-conscious manner. The ‘answer’ to the question becomes visible in the choice of a role and its accompanying actions, but emerges in such an instantaneous, automatic way that the agent oftentimes won’t even be aware of the fact that he or she is using a ‘definition of the situation’ at all to assume a role within the given context. The ‘definition of the situation’, one could argue, comes about by using what Bourdieu calls ‘practical knowledge’, which he describes as “...*based on the continuous decoding of the perceived – but not consciously noticed...*” [3]. The use of practical knowledge, according to Bourdieu “...*continuously carries out the checks and corrections intended to ensure the adjustment of practices and expressions to the reactions and expectations of the other agents. It functions like a self-regulating device programmed to redefine courses of action in accordance with information received on the reception of information transmitted and on the effects produced by that information.*” [3]

By approaching identity as the performance of different roles in different situations Goffman achieves two goals. Firstly, it enables him to accommodate for the fact that people display different ‘sides of themselves’ under different circumstances – for Goffman identity is not an essential, localizable property of human beings, but rather a dynamic, open-ended, developing feature of human nature. Secondly, by looking into identity as it is developed, experienced, and expressed in different settings, Goffman can make the notion of ‘situations’ into the central unit of analysis of his research. Thus, he can analyze, compare and differentiate aspects of identity across different settings, places and times – ‘situation’ is used as the entity of investigation into which the complexity of social life is dissected. This is why Goffman has been labeled the “*quintessential sociologist of the ‘situation’*” [10].

This latter point, that ‘situation’ may be used as a fruitful unit of analysis for the study and explication of human identity, is central to my research as well. The reason for choosing ‘situation’ as the central unit of analysis in my research regarding the impact of technology¹ on identity is twofold. Using the micro-perspective of situations to study social processes enables us to investigate the role and impact of different *aspects* of situations very precisely, and thus get a clear image of the ways in which new technologies may affect the ‘definitions of situations’. Secondly, when we combine findings concerning the relationship between situations and identity on the hand, and findings concerning the effect of technologies on situations on the other, we can come to an analysis of the ways in which new technologies may influence the experience, expression and formation of human identity.

3 Scripts and situations

When adopting Goffman’s interpretation of the ‘definition of the situation’ as one of the building blocks of interactions, and hence of the construction and maintenance of identity, one of the central questions that emerges is: how do people come to a ‘definition of the situation’? What aspects of the situation do they use to reach such a definition? Which ‘cues’, that are embedded in the situation, play a part in this process? These questions are left unanswered by Goffman, but seem relevant in light of the development of new technologies. After all, establishing what ‘cues’ people use to come to a ‘definition of the situation’ enables us to pinpoint the ways in which the addition of new technologies affects the environments we live in, and hence, their effect on human identity. Therefore, I propose an investigation of such ‘cues’.

I argue that each situation contains ‘*scripts*’ that human beings use to come to a ‘definition of the situation’. I define a script as *a set of guidelines or regulations*

¹ In my research the focus is on Ambient Intelligence, the technological vision of the future by Philips and the European Union.

*explicitly or implicitly governing (courses of) action in connection with a situation*². Note that this definition deviates from the meaning ascribed to the same term within the field of Science and Technology Studies (S&TS). In S&TS much research has been conducted on the images of and presuppositions concerning users that become incorporated into technological artifacts during the design process [1, 6, 15, 16]. As such investigations have shown convincingly, a whole host of ideas about prospected users and practices of use is embodied in even the most simple and straightforward technological artifacts [cf. 6, 15]. Whereas S&TS focuses mostly on the scripts embedded in technologies during the *design and development* process, I concentrate on the ‘cues’ technologies may give off *once they enter our everyday environments*.

Scripts are embedded in the environments that we find ourselves in or move between. They may be present explicitly within a given situation, and thus guide our actions in a conscious manner, for example when a sign in the park says we are not allowed to walk on the grass. But scripts often do their work in more implicit and unconscious ways. This is why we are not always aware of the ‘definition of the situation’ we may use in a specific setting. A railway platform with an escalator and staircases leading to the main entrance of the building has implicit scripts concerning the way the flow of passengers should move through. When entering the office building in which one works, there are implicit scripts that guide us in adjusting to the environment, both in a literal way (we enter the offices in the building through the door and not through one of the windows), but also in more symbolic ways – we instantly and automatically assume roles appropriate for interactions with colleagues, clients, and superiors. The scripts contained in the environment help us make these transitions from one situation to the next.

It is important to note that scripts arise on the basis of *shared cultural meanings*. They are the result of processes of cultural dynamism, in which people create ways of interacting, rules of conduct, legal prescriptions, and so on and so forth to facilitate the relations among participants in social connections and exchanges. Most of these processes of cultural dynamism are wholly implicit and could hardly be made explicit – they have been ingrained in our interaction patterns through gradual and unconscious socialization and have been integrated into our repertoire of roles in such a way that we cannot view our exchanges with others apart from them. Meeting and interacting with the world and the other people in it presupposes shared cultural meanings, and precisely these are expressed in the ‘cues’ we take from the situations we enter: scripts.

Scripts, then, are *social constructs*. They are created and preserved in and through social processes. Scripts can only be sustained by their affirmation in everyday practices. Goffman calls such affirmations ‘*everyday-life interaction rituals*’ [4]. Such rituals consist of all kinds of “...*unspoken social traffic rules that pervade everyday existence*” [4, 7, 8]. When coming to ‘define a situation’ we use

² A situation, in turn, can be defined as *an ensemble of a specific meaningful locale (place), and a specific moment in time in which agents, their behaviors, and scripts come together to create a single 'slice of social reality'*.

such ‘traffic rules’ to select what role to assume. Due to the fact that most scripts intervene in our courses of action in an implicit or unconscious way, it is hard for individuals to change or influence the scripts that prevail in a given situation.

One could argue that scripts *structure situations*, in the sense that they provide guidelines for choosing a role befitting the environment a person has entered. Their ‘cues’ enable us to pick a course of action that is deemed appropriate within the situation. At the same time, however, their structuring capacities are not exhaustive, in the sense that there is room for variation in interpretation and, therefore, room for maneuvering through social traffic with unique personal patterns and courses of actions. Scripts are *non-determinate* in this sense. They could be labeled as ‘*strategy-generating principles*’, to use a term by Bourdieu [3], principles that accompany people’s actions within given situations, but don’t determine these actions completely. Bourdieu emphasizes that people don’t have ‘*mechanical reactions*’ [3] to given situations. This does not mean, however, that people always act fully from their free will – rather, acting within a given situation there are schemes or strategies embedded in the setting, which are at once ‘free’ (one can choose to follow them or not, and one can choose from different ones), and ‘restricted’ (there are only a limited number of strategies one can follow within the given situation).

Still, as guidelines in action one could argue that scripts *condition* us to some degree within the situations we enter, since their expression in the physical setting, in social conventions, in legal rules and so on point us in clear directions. Thus, one might argue, scripts have a repressive effect on our action patterns. They can be seen as expressions of political/power strategies used by some (*viz.* those in power) to control the behavior of others (*viz.* those without power). Simultaneously, though, scripts can be conceived of as *aides* or guidelines that facilitate the burden of having to choose a role in every given situation. Scripts help us select a course of action from a whole range of possible options. So while scripts may indeed be labeled as restrictive, they can also be viewed as supportive, assisting mechanisms. Scripts, therefore, can be said to be both *limiting* and *liberating*.

Scripts come in different forms and fulfill different functions. They can be found in the implicit social scripts governing our interactions, or in the more explicit legal rules that groups and societies create. Explicit scripts (e.g. legal rules) are often backed up by institutionalized fines or penalties in case of an offence. Implicit scripts lack such formalized penalties, but violating them may still have severe social implications (e.g. breaking a taboo). There are also scripts that are expressed in the physical environment of the situation. Doors, walls, windows, and traffic lanes are simple examples thereof. Some scripts are made explicit by signs and symbols, while others are left unspoken. Making a clear distinction between the social, legal, physical, political and symbolic scripts that may be present in situations is impossible. In the reality of everyday situations different *constellations* of scripts may be present, working in concert and reinforcing one another. It is impossible to untangle these assemblages. Also, one type of script usually entails another. For example, a door may be viewed as a demarcation for the entrance and boundaries of a confined space, say a store, and thus functions as a physical script cue. At the same

time, going through this door and into the store calls forth a number of social scripts regarding conduct, for example assuming the role of a customer. Thus, whereas the door initially serves as a physical ‘cue’ it entails a number of social ‘cues’ as well.

After this analysis of the form and function of scripts as ‘role cues’ contained in the situations we enter, we can turn to the most important question of this article: in which ways does the addition of technologies to existing situations affect the ‘definitions of situations’, and, in turn, identity? In which ways do technologies shape the everyday interactions we have with one another, and through these interactions, the ways in which we express and experience ourselves? These questions will be answered in the last part of this article.

4 Technology, situations, and identity

As I argued above, using ‘situations’ as the central unit of analysis in studying identity enables us to see what the advent of technologies in general, and ICTs in particular, may have on daily practices, on role-taking, and essentially, on identity. My central claim is that the ‘definitions of situations’ change because technologies have an effect on ‘what is going on’ in situations in several ways. Thus, they affect the formation, expression and experience of identity.

Before looking into the changes brought about in the ‘definitions of situations’ by the advent of new technologies, we need to establish what *kind* of situational changes technologies cause: do they interfere with situations on a script level, e.g. do they create new situational action cues within given contexts? Or are they rather physical and informational additions to the environment that may affect existing scripts but do not function as such themselves? Roger Silverstone states that technologies always have ‘double articulation’: they are both “*material objects located in particular spatio-temporal settings*” and “*symbolic messages located within the flows of particular socio-cultural discourses*” [11]. Thus, technologies have both a material expression and a script effect.

What, then, is the effect of technologies on the ‘definition of situations’? How do such definitions change through the advent of technologies, particularly ICTs? Firstly, the presence of ICTs *alters the boundedness of situations*, as Joshua Meyrowitz argues [13]. The seclusion and separation of situations through physical distance and physical boundaries, such as walls and enclosures, is removed, at least in part, by ICTs: information that was previously kept out of situations by such barriers may now enter them through technologies, such as computers, telephones, televisions etc. Situations thus become more ‘permeable’ [13] because their boundaries are weaker. In consequence, the advent of ICTs leads to the destabilization of the ‘definitions of situations’: because we are ‘always connected’ through for example mobile phones and PDAs, our ‘definition’ of the situation we find ourselves in may change the instant the phone rings or an email is received on

the PDA. Whereas only a few decades ago physical seclusion meant social seclusion as well, in the days of mobile and ubiquitous computing this is no longer the case.

A second point refers to Goffman's distinction between '*front stage*' behaviors and '*back region*' behaviors [9]. As stated at the beginning of this article, Goffman points out that people play out '*performances*' when they are in front of an audience, for which they want to create a favorable '*impression*'. This is labeled as '*front stage behaviors*'. When there is no audience present individuals (or teams of players) can relax, let down their guard, and rehearse for future performances. Goffman calls this '*backstage behavior*'. With the advent of electronic media, Meyrowitz argues, the clear distinction between 'front stage' and 'backstage' as separate regions, each with their own repertoire of behaviors, starts to crumble [13]. Using a home telephone to conduct work-related business opens the private 'back stage region' of the home temporarily into a 'front stage area'. Similarly, displaying 'private' ('back stage') behaviors on television in front of a large audience turns them into 'front stage behaviors'. Meyrowitz concludes that the merging of front stage and backstage behaviors leads to a host of new behavioral practices, which he labels as '*middle region behaviors*' [13]. These clearly affect the 'definitions of the situation'. Who we are in each situation, and what we show of ourselves, has become all the more fluid in the current age of mobile technologies, where the boundaries between public and private behaviors have become even more blurred.

Thirdly, there is the *decreased relevance of our physical presence* in situations. Through the use of ICTs one doesn't have to be physically present in a situation anymore to participate in the social interactions of that situation. 'Being present' in a situation literally is no longer related to one's physical location, but has rather become an *informational* property: being 'present' means being 'tuned-in'. Thus, we can be physically present in one situation, and socially present in another – a notion Kenneth Gergen strikingly calls 'absent presence' [5]. Thus, whereas 'physical place' and 'social place' were once interwoven with one another, these two aspects of situations have come undone with the spread of electronic media [13].

Lastly, I argue that ICTs, particularly mobile technologies, have changed the *function* of the situations we find ourselves in: a train may function as a (semi-) personal space when we use it to have intimate discussions over the phone, and a park may function as an office when we sit on a bench to work on a laptop. Whereas such situations were previously clearly seen as *either private or public*, they now may be both of these at the same time, or one or the other in rapid succession. Alterations in the function of places and spaces again leads to a destabilization, or at least an immense expansion of the 'definition of the situation', caused by the advent of electronic and mobile technologies.

Summarizing the argument one could say that the destabilization of the 'definition of the situation' in relation to ICTs is caused by changes in the following processes: the boundedness of situations, the emergence of 'middle region behaviors', the uncoupling of social and physical place, and the fluidity of spatial function.

In which ways do these four types of destabilization affect human identity? At the beginning of this article I argued that we use ‘definitions of situations’ to come to terms with ‘what is going on’ in a specific context, to ascribe meaning to that context, and to choose an appropriate course of action, a role, within that context. With Goffman I stated that identity may be viewed as the totality of all of the roles we play throughout our lives. Thus, the ‘definition of the situation’ forms the starting point for role choices, and hence for the construction and expression of identity. Having established this fact, it becomes easy to see that changes in the ‘definition of the situation’, for example as a result of the advent of ICTs, have a profound impact on human identity. After all, when the ‘definitions of the situation’ change, role choices and cues are affected, which in turn has an effect on identity.

The advent of ICTs has had, and will continue to have, a definite impact on human identity, since the range of roles we may choose from in specific situations expands along with the increase in possible ‘definitions of the situation’. Since the amount roles to choose from is destabilized and increased tremendously in each specific situation, the bandwidth for choosing stretches as well, thereby creating a double effect: on the one hand individuals get more freedom and flexibility to choose roles in given situations. At the same time, however, this places an ever-bigger burden of choice on these individuals. The sum total of all the roles we may play in life is enlarged, thus dramatically expanding the necessity for human beings of merging the vast amount of separate roles they play into some form of a combined self. ICTs thus function both as mechanisms of liberation yet at the same time also help corrode coherent and simple senses of self. Therefore, it is too simplistic to view the effects of ICTs on situations as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ – their complexity calls for a more nuanced analysis. With this article I hope to have made a small contribution in entangling that knot.

5 References

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