A Social Mirror for Your Mediated Self
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> More than two thousand years after a ruler, Augustus, used for the very first time the minting technique to bring his face to the people, the possibilities for getting one's picture shown in public have increased many-fold. Print media, TV and the Internet have teamed up and have made the motto of the hippie generation of late 60s San Francisco — "Expose yourself!" — a reality.
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> - Hubert Berda, from *How People See Themselves*[1]

Introduction

When we present ourselves to others we often have notions of how we would like to be perceived. We also form estimations of how we are actually being perceived. When we are in a face-to-face (FTF) context we rely on many verbal and non-verbal cues to both shape impressions and estimate how effective we are in our effort. Furthermore, the synchronous nature of collocated interaction allows for instant feedback in response to a given expression. These characteristics of FTF allow for frequent, often non-explicit, social feedback about our self presentation. In many computer-mediated contexts, receiving social feedback can be difficult and time consuming. Many computer-mediated communications are asynchronous; all rely on limited bandwidth. In some cases, such as personal home pages and blogs, a person may know very little about who is viewing their presentations let alone how those observers perceive them.

Our project seeks to design a tool which helps people receive social feedback about their online personas. While online personas typically consist of many elements in a variety of media we focus on one central form of expression: the personal photograph. In some contexts, such as online dating and social networking sites, the personal photo is one of the first pieces of personal information a stranger encounters; it not only occupies a privileged position on the presenter's page, but acts as the linkable representation of the presenter on friends' pages as well as search result pages. In both scenarios, a person's full persona is almost always accessed by first selecting a photograph of the individual. As such, much may depend on the first impression formed from the photo. Given this prominent role, we feel the personal photograph requires extra attention as individuals

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[1] Burda, Hubert (2006). How People See themselves. The Edge–196, 11/9/2006, available at <http://www.edge.org/documents/archive/edge196.html>

attempt to present themselves online. Our tool, CoY (Comments on Yourself) provides one potential way for people to do so.

Conceptual Grounding

Even in FTF contexts individuals do not necessarily have a good sense of how they are being perceived. In *The Presentations of Self in Everyday Life* Erving Goffman distinguishes between the expressions we knowingly "give" versus the expressions we unknowingly "give off."[2] Goffman's insight suggests that individuals not only have to estimate the interpretation of signals they knowingly communicate but also the interpretation of signals they unknowingly send.

Goffman's work influenced the work of later social psychologists who investigate "impression management." In *Self-Presentation: Impression Management & Interpersonal Behavior* Mark Leary echoes Goffman by distinguishing between the impressions we hope to make and impressions we end up making.[3] Leary also reports on the many behaviors that can serve an impression management role. These can be verbal expressions – such as self-descriptions, attitude statements, and public attributions – nonverbal behaviors – such as emotional expression, physical appearance, or gesture and movement – or social associations – as Leary states, "People are truly known by the company they keep."[4] In other words, any *observable* behavior can play a role in shaping impressions.

When impression management is conducted through media, impressions are still shaped and formed, but the process by which they are formed can takes more time.[5] Asynchronous communications, by definition, insert a lag between the sending of expressions and the receiving of feedback. Additionally, media formats shape and restrict the types of cues that can be sent – cues revealed through behaviors such as gesture aren't available in written expressions of text, for example. This lag and restriction of cues could allow for greater control over impression construction. People can spend more time

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[2] Goffman, E. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. New York: Doubleday, 1959.
[3] Leary, M. Self-Presentation: Impression Management & Interpersonal Behavior. Westview Press, 1996.
[4] Ibid. p. 26.
[5] Walther,J.B.(1992).Interpersonal effects in computer-mediated interaction: A relational perspective. Communication Research, 19, 52-90.

constructing their expressions; plus there are less observable behaviors about which the presenter has to be self-conscious.

Yet fluent expression with, and interpretation of, media depends on the media literacy of both the sender and the receiver. People may have less experience knowing how to effectively communicate with visual texts like photographs. Plus, some computer-mediated presentation spaces, such as Facebaook and MySpace, do not reveal who is making observations of someone's self presentation. Many people may observe self presentations without providing any feedback as to how they interpreted it. Most of the feedback channels built into these systems, such as comments and messaging options, require explicit action on behalf of the audience.[6] FTF situations, on the other hand, allow presenters to receive feedback whether or not the observer intends to reveal cues about their interpretation.

Design Description & Rationale

Our system, CoY, allows users to submit their photographs with the goal of receiving feedback on how they are being interpreted. Users may realize the importance of a photograph that effectively conveys a certain message, but may lack confidence in their ability to effectively judge how their photo will be received. CoY offers such users the opportunity to "test" their photograph before using it, a process that we hope will provide them valuable insight into how their photo represents them. Interpreting users are presented with a photograph and asked to rate the subject on a characteristic – "Do you think this person is intelligent?" These ratings are then aggregated to provide feedback to the presenter.

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[6] As an interesting side-note, many corporations, celebrities and "public figures" have long relied on recorded media for impression management and "self" presentation. So too have individuals in the form of letters and, perhaps, the exchange of artifacts like photographs. What seems to be new, thanks to the Internet, is the ability for individuals to use recorded media for "broadcasting" self presentation -- where mediated self-presentation can extend beyond a pre-determined audience. Those who have long relied on recorded-media for this purpose have many tools at their disposal for soliciting feedback (user studies, focus groups, ratings). The ways by which individuals can get similar feedback to their self presentations with recorded media is one of the driving inspirations for this project.

While the overall concept of CoY is simple, many of the details were carefully crafted to encourage the sorts of responses we hoped to solicit, and to make the system more valuable both to the end user and to us as researchers. One design decision we made was to encourage rapid assessments, seeking to capture first impression reactions and not contemplated personality assessments. Towards this end, interpreters are asked to only rate each photo on a single adjective, instead of for example filling out a full survey. Similarly, after answering a question about a photo, the interpreter is presented with a new photo to rank, so they do not have the opportunity to form a more detailed impression of the presenter. Our concern is not how a person is perceived after a protracted engagement, but rather how they are seen at the moment of first impression, which may often be the deciding moment in whether or not to take a closer look.

Another key decision we made was to use multiple sources for the adjectives users are rated upon. Presenters are allowed in our system to suggest words that they would like to be rated upon – perhaps they are concerned with how masculine they look in a photo, or some other such characteristic. The adjectives they provide are one pool we pull from, to allow presenters to get feedback on the characteristics they are most concerned about. We also, however, pull adjectives from a test for the "Big Five" personality traits[7], which gauges such characteristics as extraversion and agreeableness, even though these are not the traits that the presenter expresses interest in. By seeking feedback on a broader spectrum of words, we hope to provide information on characteristics "given off," that the presenter did not think to ask about, as well as those "given," that they are already aware of. For example, a presenter might be very concerned with how "cool" they look in a picture, but fail to ask the question of if they also look "intelligent." This feature is also valuable to us as researchers, as it allows us to see trends across a group of users that might not be extractable if presenters were only rated on their chosen words.

Also in service of this goal, we ask presenters to fill out a brief personality survey when submitting their photo. This allows us to compare the results provided by the interpreters with the expectations of the presenters. This may be of use in judging levels

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[7] John, Oliver P. and Srivastava, Sanjay. The Big-Five Trait Taxonomy: History, Measurement, and Theoretical Perspectives. 1999.

of photo-literacy – are presenters fairly good at choosing photos? – or in determining other trends across our user base.

Areas for Further Development

There remain a number of areas we would like to investigate further, to see if alternate design choices might provide us with a product that would better serve our users' needs. A main component of these investigations would be to perform further user testing – we were only able to interview a handful of people about our prototypes. One of the most important pieces of feedback we received is that the context of the program needs to be clearer – users felt much more comfortable rating presenters when they were aware that the presenter had voluntarily entered their photo into the system for feedback.

One area in which we feel work remains to be done is in choosing the sets of adjectives we use. Are the Big Five adjectives comprehensible to interpreters, or useful to presenters? We struggled to find a set of adjectives that would be relatively applicable to all photos without being absurdly vague, and imagine that there may be better options available. We hope that the inclusion of the user-submitted adjectives may mitigate some of the vagueness of the personality trait adjectives, and have contemplated finding ways to make widely chosen submitted adjectives part of the general pool on the assumption that they are fairly broadly applicable, as a possible way to broaden the characteristics surveyed.

Another issue that we have outstanding questions about is the format of the solicitation for feedback. Our current design asks users to rate the presenter on a single word on a 7-point scale, but we imagined several other possible designs that we remain interested in. We considered a simplified version of our question, simply asking users to choose "yes" or "no" in response to a question, which might simplify the decision-making process for them. We also considered simply asking the interpreter to provide their own descriptive adjective for the presenter, an option that would perhaps invite spam and lower our ability to aggregate ratings, but might receive more detailed feedback. We also considered a number of other options, including a pairwise comparison – which of these users better exemplifies this trait? Our initial feedback generally supported something like the 7-point model, as some users were hesitant about

suggesting an adjective of their own or pointed out the potential for abuse, and generally preferred a more granular level of detail than simply yes or no.

A final important point we wish to contemplate is what additional applications this framework could be useful for. Could this sort of service provide a matchmaking service – crowdsourcing blind dates? Are there other ways that it could be made more valuable or interesting to users, without sacrificing the initial motivation? We hope to contemplate further on ways to make this service more compelling to our users.

While a number of fascinating open questions remain to be explored, we feel that we have struck a balance between a tool that is captivating and useful to different user communities – presenters as well as interpreters – and a tool that offers us insight as researchers. We hope that CoY may prove a valuable tool to improve users' abilities to communicate online, and look forward to thinking about this project further.

Appendix A: Paper Prototype

The paper prototype allowed us to quickly communicate our design intentions to potential users. The prototype walks users through the main functionality of the site: rating photos, uploading a photo, and viewing feedback on your photo. It also allowed us to present several different options for how photos could be assessed. The process of putting these prototypes in front of users revealed attitudes about making judgments of others online (people felt more comfortable voting if they knew that the person had submitted their photo for feedback). A PDF of the prototype can be downloaded from:

http://www.ischool.berkeley.edu/~christo/share/coy_pp.pdf

When viewing the PDF, a description of the page's purpose can be found in the lower right corner of the page, printed in Red.

Appendix B: Interactive Prototype

The interactive prototype allowed us to present potential users with the experience of rating multiple photos. We wanted to see if users continued to find interest after voting on several photos. We also wanted to see if users were able to make assessments of different photo-adjective pairings. At the start of our project we were unsure whether or not people would be able to make an assessment of personality characteristics based on a photo alone. We were pleasantly surprised to find that people were generally able to make assessments from a photo. We also wanted to see how quickly people would make assessments and how many photos they might be willing to weight. While our sample was too small to draw definitive conclusions, the users we observed did seem willing to rate a number of photos. They also seemed willing to make assessments relatively quickly.

The interactive prototype can be found at:
http://dream.sims.berkeley.edu/~ross/cmc/rate.php

A mock up of the process of uploading a photo can be found at:
http://dream.sims.berkeley.edu/~ross/cmc/submit.php