Online Life and Online Bodies

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INTRODUCTION

Bodies are often claimed to be irrelevant to online activity. Online space, or activity, is frequently described as if disembodied, and often this absence of visible bodies is said to contribute to freedom from social pressures around gender, race, and body type (Reid, 1996). However, without bodies, people could not access the Internet, and online there are continual references, directly and indirectly, to bodies, so the term disembodied references a particular type of "ghost" body. Therefore, rather than accepting ideas that naturalise dislocating life online from bodies, it is necessary to explore the situations in which this occurs. Another commonly used body metaphor is the cyborg: the melding of human with machine. In both cases, the body is usually taken as underlying what is happening and as a referent for authenticity.

BACKGROUND

Bodily Referents

In online discourse, signs of the body, such as emoticons (or "smileys" as they are also called), written emotions (*kiss*, *hug*, <smile>, or acronyms such as ROFL [roll on the floor laughing]), and so forth are quite common. These emoticons substitute for gestures and seem more usual in informal situations. However, out of the vast range of emoticons depicted in dictionaries of such things, only three are commonly used in the West: the facial representatives of **:)**, the smile, indicating good humour; **:(**, the frown, indicating sadness or disappointment; and **;)**, the wink or wry face, an indicator of knowingness or irony, which is sometimes taken as flirtatious. **:-)**, **:-(**, and **;-)** are equivalents. In Japanese communication, it appears that far more signs are used, as well as "innovative punctuation" (Nishimura, 2003). Stories suggest that Western emoticons were not originally understandable, or easy to use, in Japan (Pollack, 1996), and neither were Japanese emoticons in other Asian cultures (Koda, 2004). As Katsuno and Yano (2002) write, these emoticons (*kaomoji*) reassert "bodily presence on the computer screen thereby readdressing what has often been called the cybernetic condition of 'leaving the meat behind'" (p. 206).

This variation indicates a need to investigate why particular body signs are deployed in particular cultures and abandoned in others. The most obvious problems that Western smileys deal with involve aggression or the resolution of irony (Dibbell, 1994). Folklore claims that the **:-)** was directly invented by Scott Fahlman (n.d.) after a joke about a physics experiment in a lift was taken seriously. Crystal (2001) also points out that Western emoticons may be simply expressing rapport, or indicating worries about the effect the text might have.

Appropriate use of these textual gestures may not only vary from culture to culture, but from group to group, and part of fitting in and building group identity involves learning to use them appropriately. Some people, mainly Western males, seem to be quite hostile to their use altogether, seeing people who use them as being linguistically lazy.

These indications of emotional or bodily states are commonly associated with gender in that Western women are widely supposed to be more at ease with emotions and use more emoticons (Witmer & Katzman, 1998). Women may also be required or need to use them to express bodily deference or attenuation in dealing with men (Gurak, 1997). Krohn (2004) suggests that along with gender differences, there may also be generational or authoritative boundaries.

Online communication is often hard to resolve; there is no immediate feedback or body language that might frame conversation, and as a result, references to the body off-line are taken as referents for private emotional states and truth states. In support of this, it seems that messages given off-list

or off-line (in private) are more likely to be considered authentic than messages received on-list or online. As Kendall (1998) writes, people "privilege offline identity information over information received online ... This allows them to continue to understand identity in the essentialised terms of a persistent and consistent self, grounded in a particular physical body" (p. 130).

As well as the more temporary emotions, moods such as anger, mourning, sex, or so on can be generated by repeated postings of the same type. These moods then act as a way of framing and resolving communication, either deliberately as in Netsex, or sometimes accidentally when a whole group may seem overwhelmed by flame.

History of Ghosts

In the West, the person and his or her typing body are often alone, cramped, and restrained, although there is nothing inevitable about this particular bodily usage of computers. As Haraway (1989) remarks, "our machines are disturbingly lively and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (p. 152). This off-line constraint can contrast strongly with personal boundaries online that can appear fluid as long as there is no pain. Bodies are sometimes described as extended through the wires, which could easily contribute to a sense of disembodiment (Marshall, 2004).

However, the use of metaphors of disembodiment may have some other function or cause, and it is possible this is interconnected with the history of ideas of the nonphysical, the spiritual, or the ghostly, which might in turn be connected with the gendered history of the Net. A common point made in feminist critiques of Western philosophy and ideologies (e.g., Goldenberg, 1990) has been the tendency of male theorists either to denigrate the body and to praise transcendence, or to derive the world from a set of disembodied categories or processes, while simultaneously constructing the female as an inferior, passive, and physical body.

Whatever the precise history of this split, the ghost becomes more ethereal as this process becomes more pronounced. During the 20th century, the boundary was loosened and the ghost became more solid (Finucane, 1982), while now it seems to be ethereal again. Minds are often described in terms of computer programs, and people use these models to suggest that immortality can be achieved by downloading one's mind and memory into a machine (Moravec, 1990). In science fiction, there are many examples of personalities or spirits being active in computers or computer networks. Such theories tend to imply bodies are discardable and not part of our being.

This emphasis on people as minds could also be linked with the constant attempts to characterise the new elite supposedly dealing with immaterial information as knowledge workers rather than physical service workers or the valueless unemployed (who tend to be ghosted from political action). In some ways the idea of the information economy also ghosts, or displaces, the material basis of power.

If such seems plausible, then as the Internet was built and first colonised by Western males seeking dominance or proficiency via the supposed excellence of their mental, creative, or administrative abilities, it might be expected that they used the Internet to emphasise etherealization as part of their construction of their male, or elite, identity. Hall (1996) writes,

Bodyless communication, then, for many men at least is characterised not by a genderless exchange but rather by an exaggeration of cultural conceptions of masculinity—one realised through the textual construction of conversational dominance, sexual harassment, heterosexism, and physical hierarchies. (p. 158)

It could be expected that some women would be apprehensive with these exclusionary constructions, and Taylor and Saarinen (1994) wrote that their female students using e-mail were:

much more uneasy about the "out-of-body" experience they are having than the men. Cynthia and Kaisu are obsessed with email and yet are deeply disturbed by the evaporation of the material and the absence of face-to-face. The men in the class are much less bothered by all of this.

People could also fight against the disembodying through the use of emoticons or the expressiveness of their bodies.

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