ENCOUNTERS ON THE SOCIAL WEB: EVERYDAY LIFE AND EMOTIONS ONLINE

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INTRODUCTION

"Encounters are everywhere, but it is difficult to describe sociologically the stuff they are made of." (Goffman 1961: 19)

Encounters also happen online nowadays and, yes, they are still difficult to describe, even though it is sometimes easier to observe them—and obtain data about them—than in the past. The internet is crucially "shaping the interactions people have with one another" (Johns 2010: 499). With the recent explosion and popularity of Web 2.0 services and the social web, such as Facebook (FB), Twitter, and various other types of social media, internet users now have at their disposal an unprecedented collection of tools to interact with others. These modes of online sociability allow users to pursue social encounters with variable levels of involvement, attention, and activity (Papacharissi and Mendelson 2010). For many of us it is now difficult to imagine our social relationships without access to the internet. The social web plays an important role in relationships among internet users (Boyd 2006), with the expression, management and experience of emotions being key to the maintenance of these relationships.

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The aim of this paper is to contribute to the analysis of how people communicate in the social web, describing how six Spanish internet users interact and manage emotions online and discussing how informants describe their online interactions. It does so from the individuals' perspective, not from the social web service perspective. This is a complex and challenging approach given that the unit of analysis is not the internet application but it is rather the individuals' perspectives. It intends to show the complexity of social interactions we are facing as human beings. In preparation, I conducted an "expanded ethnography" (author 2011) about social contact on the social web that focuses on participants' interactions. Social contact refers to contact with others for purposes of sociality (Zhao and Elesh 2008). This entails a comprehensive collection of ethnographic data anywhere the informant is interacting with others. The ethnography targets mainly social network sites (SNSs) but it also includes email, Instant Messaging (IM) systems, chat rooms, and any social web application that allows people to communicate with each other. The current trend for social web applications is to unify different services in the same place. For instance, FB supports email, synchronous chats, feeds, and walls that allow for different kinds of communication (one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many). Web-based email clients nowadays offer chat options, group meetings and presentations besides email services. This research analyzes conversational encounters that occur in front of an audience and interpersonal interactions that occur more privately via email or one-to-one IM.[1] Although for clarity I use the categorization in Table 1, in practice participants and services constantly cross category lines (Baron 2010). For example, in FB the same application can be used as an asynchronous email or as an IM service.

<Table 1: Type of communications in social web services>

This article is organized into six sections. First, I review the appropriateness of Goffman´s approach to study the social web. Second, I present the methodology. Third, I analyze the daily online communication routines of the informants. Fourth, I extend the encounter construct according to the data generated. Fifth, I go on to define social web encounters. Finally, the paper concludes that properly focused gatherings can take place in the social web and finds evidence of the emergence of an online emotion culture.

GOFFMAN'S FOCUSED ENCOUNTERS

Goffman's "presentation of self" (1951) is a widely used theoretical framework to explain how identities are constructed symbolically online. This framework is often cited in the literature concerning the presentation of personas online (e.g. Donath 1998; Boyd 2004, 2007; Hogan 2010; Miller and Arnold 2001; Robinson 2007). In this paper I make use of the many riches available in the interactionist theoretical tool kit, engaging with a key work by Goffman that has been crucially underappreciated in explaining social interaction in the online realm: *Encounters* (1961). *Encounters* is one of the most instructive works for understanding and analyzing emotions in social interactions and my proposal is to expand this notion to online "encounters". Thus, this paper draws on Goffman's theoretical foundations to scrutinize how conversational encounters are structured and to expose how people perform and manage emotions online. In other words, it focuses on social interactions on the social web in order to examine whether such interactions require an extension of Goffman's theory.

Emotions are part of every aspect of human life. There is a growing body of research that deals with the role of emotions in online relationships (Castells 2009;

Holmes 2011; Maloney 2012; Thelman 2010). Even emotional body expressions are implicated although they may not be visible to others (author, under review). Hence, the implications of online copresence remain under-theorized (Zhao and Elesh 2008), and so, as a result, does the emotion culture emerging from interpersonal relationships online.

When people connect to the internet one of their most frequent activities is interacting with others. This allows for the definition of these interactions as online conversational interactions or "encounters" (Goffman 1961). The perception of conversation is unproblematic when people interact synchronously through email or IMs. Yet it is difficult to fix boundaries between conversational encounter and activity before an audience when we talk about SNSs. In this research, and following the Goffmanian approach, I analyze conversational encounters online only, focusing on the people involved independently of the application in which the encounter takes place. I observe the encounter examining the kind of communication the application allows (one-to-one or many-to-many).

I find that most of the conversations on SNSs can be considered as such encounters. As one participant in the study argued, publishing something on your FB wall or Twitter timeline is like shouting and waiting until somebody replies. When nobody answers the encounter does not happen. Most of the time participants published things that they believed to be interesting (Liu 2007) and that publication often led to replies from people who shared this very interest or concern. At other times people attracted attention and prompted an encounter by trying to stand out. In the participant's words: "I need somebody to pay attention to me." Participants in this ethnography are aware of the fact that they are communicating in front of a large number of people and performing in front of an audience, but they also know that

very few of the other users will read their posts and messages and even fewer will reply. When a reply happens the conversational encounter is instigated.

Online encounters, then, can be considered as focused encounters or encounters that occur when individuals agree to sustain a single focus of cognitive and visual attention. In Goffman's definition:[2]

> For the participants, this [encounter] involves: (1) a single visual and cognitive focus of **attention**; (2) a mutual and preferential openness to verbal **communication**; (3) a heightened mutual relevance of **acts**; (4) an eye-to-eye ecological **huddle** that maximizes each participants opportunity to perceive the other participants' monitoring of him. Given these communications arrangements, their presence tends to be acknowledged or ratified through expressive signs, and a "we rationale" is likely to emerge, that is, a sense of the single thing that we are doing together at the time. Ceremonies of entrance and departure are also likely to be employed, as are signs acknowledging the initiation and termination of the encounter or focused gathering as a unit. Whether bracketed by ritual or not, encounters provide the communication base for a circular flow of feeling among participants as well as corrective compensation for deviant acts. (Goffman 1961:18)

Interaction in focused encounters is generally strategic and, moreover, it is regulated by norms (Goffman 1967). A lot has been said about these strategic interactions in face-to-face encounters but there is a need to define them in online social contexts and conceptualize the cultural systems emerging from the social interactions online (Campos Castillo and Hitlin 2013).

METHOD

The arguments made in this paper are based on ethnographic data regarding participation in SNSs (such as FB, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tuenti, Hi5, Flickr, and Spotify); IM systems and email; and ethnographic field notes and interviews. More specifically, I have conducted an expanded ethnography (author 2011) that examines the usage of applications such as FB or Twitter by six informants during the research period. The contribution of this paper lies in its theoretical development. The small

sample serves as an exploratory and illustrative application of the theory, using an innovative method.

This research focuses on users instead of focusing on specific social web applications (Johnson, Hyysalo and Tamminen 2011; Mendelson and Papacharissi 2010; Tufekci 2008). This approach echoes Marcus' (1995) multi-sited ethnography by applying a user-centered approach (Bakardjieva 2004; author 2011). This particular kind of ethnography uses offline and online techniques to offer a full account of the participants' social interactions. It utilizes observation, participation, and entry and exit interviews since private interaction cannot be observed. It analyzes interactions in synchronous and asynchronous systems and explores one-to-one and many-to-many communication systems. This research approach facilitates a holistic analysis of the way in which the social web operates within society in everyday life.

The Selection of the Sample

The sample was composed of six frequent internet users. The idea of what might constitute a "frequent user" is aptly summarized in the statement of an interviewee in a Spanish newspaper: "I have a virtual life. I spend the day in front of a screen and managing a keyboard. Even with my friends I speak through email. There are many people living in this kind of bubble" (Foguet 2009). This implies that there is variation in the extent to which people are keeping and setting up interpersonal relationships online. I used two main selecting criteria: first, participants who are keeping or setting up different kinds of interpersonal relationships online—with colleagues, friends, family, acquaintances and/or unknown people, and second, the participants must use more than two internet applications or services. Additionally, I purposely selected the sample to cover different genders and ages: the sample

includes two younger individuals (a 20 year old male and a 24 year old female), two middle-aged individuals (a male aged 35 and a female aged 31) and two individuals above 40 (a male aged 41 and a female aged 54). Even though the analysis is not specifically concerned with demographic differences in this exploratory study, I chose this sample in order to have some variety in terms of the profiles of internet uses. The sample was small as following users online is a time-consuming task: frequent internet users produce a large amount of data and in-depth analysis was required.

All informants are Spanish as ethnography and in-depth analysis require high language fluency and this is the researcher's native tongue. In Spain, in 2008, 49 per cent of Spaniards reported that they used the internet to communicate with others. In 2010 this percentage had grown to 56 per cent (Eurostat 2012). Focusing on Spanish internet users, the services most frequently used by them were email (85.6 per cent), IM (52.9 per cent) and chat (47.0 per cent), whereas participation in SNS (9.5 per cent) increased strikingly (50 per cent in 2010). 22.9 per cent of the overall population (Fundación Teléfonica 2009) used email to communicate with friends and family and 13.1 per cent used an IM service. These numbers confirm that interpersonal relationships are created and maintained among Spanish users on the internet and that communicating with others is apparently one of the main activities users engage in when online. The data also verifies that people use more than one internet service and sustains the sample selection.

The researcher's simultaneous role as observer and participant is essential (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 24), not only in terms of familiarity with the setting but also with regards to facilitating access to informants. My experience with online interactions is long-standing and derives from various contexts, both professional and private. I work remotely teaching online, geographically distant from my colleagues

and my students. As a person who keeps interpersonal relationships online using different services for various purposes I found it easy to gain access to informants. I accessed two informants from my work environment. As I also live away from my family and many of my friends, I use a wide range of the online applications to communicate and keep in contact with a large number of people on a daily basis. I accessed one participant in a similar situation whom I first met face-to-face in a meeting of Spanish people in the UK. Another participant was accessed after time spent observing a chat room. The other three informants, one above 40 and two under 30, were accessed using my online contacts as gatekeepers.

The Field

Initial research included observing and participating in several social web services (FB, Twitter, Gmail, Spotify, LastFm, LinkedIn, IRC Chatrooms and Flickr). I first observed how people use these. This first observation lasted six months and allowed me first to select and contact the sample and, later, to observe how the sample interacted with others.

This first phase was followed by a participant observation phase that lasted six more months. An entry interview with each informant initiated this part of the data collection. After initial online contact I conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Then I started observing my sample in every social web service they used, consequently taking an overt research position. I also interacted with all informants on the social web during the data-gathering period.

During the following weeks I recorded sequentially all online public interactions each participant had, registering both text and multimedia data. I used screen shots directly from the web services to keep a record of all visual data. Where

interactions contained a video, a sound or a link, I recorded these too. I used qualitative data analysis software. My private interactions (emails and chat conversations) with informants were not registered due to ethical considerations and quotations from these interactions were not included in the paper. However, they informed the field notes and theoretical reflexions. I conducted an exit interview to finalize the participation phase and data-gathering process.

The aim of the first interview was to learn about the users' performance on the internet and the applications they use. I also gathered their addresses and nicknames, which allowed me to familiarize myself with participants. Hence the relevance of doing this first interview face to face. The interview covered topics such as modes of connection; physical spaces for connection (home, work, studies centre, public spaces such as a cyber-cafe); devices used (desktop computer, laptop, mobile phone, etc.); and the schedule and frequency of connections. Second, participants were asked about the kinds of relationships they maintain on the internet—work or study mates, friends, family, acquaintances, people known face to face or not. The second round of interviews was more open and—informed by the observation and participation phase—customized to each participant, thus taking the shape of ethnographic interviews (Spradley 1979). This second set of interviews had the purpose, among others, of covering non-public interactions and exploring the emotional dimension of the interpersonal relationships in which users engaged online. Both interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

To ensure appropriate ethical treatment all participants were informed about the goals of the research during the first interview. Second, I requested informed consent and assured them of my respect for privacy and anonymity. Third, I did not include any information unless I had acquired informed consent for collecting and

using it. Last, I informed participants about the results of the study. Despite all these measures, it is essential to recognize that not all the subjects who were observed could be informed. There were many individuals that, while interacting with my sample, were co-observed. While they certainly provoked reflections and notes, I did not use their textual or multimedia data.

Data Analysis

All the data generated (field notes, multimedia data registered from the websites, and interview transcripts) were coded, first in an exploratory way that allows the development of categories and taking into account the theoretical framework proposed. These organized categories were then used in a second coding stage. Data analysis followed an iterative analysis process including joint analysis of multimedia data (images, songs and videos) and written text (Pink 2007).

Regarding the limitations of this study, in focusing on one specific user instead of a group it was impossible to analyze all the groups and social networks he/she belonged to or the dynamics in these groups. I have to acknowledge the inability to come to generalizable conclusions based on such a small sample. Limitations also concern the risk of altering the performance of the users/participants by interacting with them online. At the same time, however, a key advantage of a small sample resides in the ability to keep in touch and interact with participants even long after the research has been conducted, allowing for results to be checked and widened.

To sum up, the key strengths of this approach are its capabilities to, first, analyze complex social interactions; second, avoid an artificial division of problems; and

finally, prevent research from focusing on one specific web service and account for the fact that users rarely perform in one unique application.

DAILY ENCOUNTERS ONLINE

'I log on the internet for the pure pleasure of talking' (User 6)

All six participants[3] in this research displayed a frequent connection routine: they usually opened social web applications as soon as they connected to the internet. User 1 connects every morning when he wakes up, reads the newspapers online and checks his various email accounts. After that, he goes to work by train. He is connected via his smartphone during the commute. In fact, we had more than one conversation while he was commuting. He arrives at work and is permanently connected from a desktop computer with email, SNSs and IM open all the time. In his own words: "I am never more than a click away from being online."

User 2 connects to the internet on a daily basis. She does so while studying both from home and from university. She connects to FB and Messenger if she has time to chat and connects regularly to Skype to talk to her family, who live far away.

User 3 connects very regularly too, being a young woman who is actively involved in social media although living close to her family and friends. She mainly connects from work. In the past, she has used a smartphone to connect to the internet but gave this up for a while for financial reasons. However, she went back to using it at the end of the study.

User 4 works and studies journalism, so again is highly involved with media for work. He is very active on Twitter and FB although what he uses most is email. He uses IM as well. He connects from different places: home, work and university as

well as from his smartphone when commuting. He also recognizes that he always has the possibility of being connected.

User 5 is connected all the time through a smartphone, disconnecting only during the night while sleeping. Moreover, he connects at home and everywhere he finds an available Wi-Fi connection. He is one of the most active key participants.

Lastly, User 6 is a housewife who uses the internet for socializing and mainly chatting in chat rooms or via IM. She uses the internet purely for socialisation with others and for maintaining relationships for their own sake (Giddens 1992). She connects exclusively from home and from her computer. She is connected all the time when she is at home. In a nutshell, she describes her daily routine thus: "Other people switch on the TV, I switch on my computer." Besides shared connection routines, all participants also communicate with a wide range of relationships (friends, family, acquaintances, colleagues, and people unknown face to face) as part of their everyday routine.

EXTENDING THE ENCOUNTER CONSTRUCT

I now analyze the nature of online encounters, element by element (Table 2), in order to identify the ways both in which Goffman's concept is useful and in which it needs to be adjusted in order to adequately describe social interactions online. In doing so, I am also studying how copresence[4] is built in online encounters (Zhao and Elesh 2008; Campos-Castillo 2013).

<Table 2: Characteristics of face-to-face and social web encounters>

Attention

In online encounters on the social web the visual action, described in Goffman's analysis, is there. However it is unperceivable by the other interactors as it happens behind the screen. There is no eye contact and, probably because of this, the cognitive focus of attention takes a relevant role in online encounters. In this section, thus, I am going to describe the first Goffman's element (1) in online encounters from the participants' interactions. There are two important aspects in the "single visual focus of attention": the focus of attention and its singleness. A discussion of these two aspects of the online encounters will follow.

Attention and involvement

Online encounters could potentially occur at any moment as users can be lurking but not interacting. Online conversations in many-to-many applications less often involve a specific individual in the initial phase of the communication act. Whilst this constitutes a very open method of communication, the open process simultaneously implies a clear objective of communication in itself (Giddens 1992). One key issue here, then, is to develop strategies for both: to gain or focus the attention of others and to let them know that you are focused on that encounter. The encounter becomes increasingly focused on the topic after the often loose initial phase. An illustration appears to be in order here. User 1 usually publishes on SNSs about technology. Being a "hipster" (Haddow 2008) is part of the identity he wants to convey to others. During one observation he has a very successful conversational encounter: several people reply to his publication and a conversational encounter takes place on FB about an academic paper on the relationship between eating chocolate and the improvement of maths performance. Another successful encounter occurs when he publishes "VERTIGO is what you feel when you are eight years working in the same place. You feel RELIEF when you realize that there have not

been two days alike."[5] User 3 publishes gossip about a former fellow student and it turns into a very lively and busy conversation. Finally, User 6 publishes a very provocative sentence—"a woman with good manners is looking for a man to remove them" (User 6, field notes)—in chat rooms in order to catch others' attention and instigate private chats, usually with great success. These examples illustrate that attention is organized around topics and that the most successful ones tend to be either funny and provocative or emotional, everyday, personal facts. From a theoretical standpoint, this model implies a different way of initiating encounters.

Verbal and multimedia focus

Not only verbal elements structure attention. Multimedia elements, such as videos, music or pictures, play a relevant role in online encounters. The use of audio-visual signs complement and add expressivity to the plain-written text. Previous research has shown that typical gestures in face-to-face encounters are replaced by other audiovisual signs online, such as emoticons. These are used extensively to communicate socio-emotional information online (Fullwood and Martino 2007; Walther 2006) and help focus participants' attention. The participants tended to use emoticons, the like, or the retweet extensively as expressions of their feelings and empathy. They published a large number of photos and also shared songs, videos and links. For instance, during one week User 1 posted 82 times on social web services, used 22 emoticons, liked 11 comments, retweeted 7 tweets and posted 6 songs. User 5 expressed this in terms of a strategy to empathize with his contacts, recognizing that emotive communication is sometimes easier through videos or songs. This predominantly visual aspect is increasingly shaping interactions in SNSs. Moreover, I observed successful encounters ignited by, for instance, a musical clip. User 4 wrote, "I love this song. It gives me good vibes," and published the song. That started a

conversation in which eight people participated and User 4 replied to comments four times.

Multiple, synchronous and asynchronous, divided and undivided attention

The meaning of a "single" focus of attention is also challenging in online environments as the focus of attention is often shared, even when the participants are only logged onto a single application. Individuals in the sample constantly multi-task in front of a screen and are multi-situated (using several internet services that allow for interpersonal communication at the same time). I observed participants' simultaneously being involved in more than one conversational activity. In these situations tensions can emerge. All six informants here report that they usually chat synchronously and simultaneously with two individuals. Paradoxically, they admit to feeling disappointment when they realize that the other's attention is shared with another person or a Twitter stream, etc. Informants consistently report that they can perceive whether the interlocutor is focused or not, based, for instance, on the speed of writing. User 6 reports that her slow typing represents a disadvantage, as conversation partners do not think she is paying them enough attention. User 2 said: "I hate [it] when somebody is clearly not paying attention to the conversation. It really gets on my nerves". In synchronous applications a successful encounter means undivided attention, although even the participants recognized being constantly tempted to multitask: "Yes, I can do both things [referring to reading news feeds and chatting] at the same time and pay attention to the conversation" (User 2). Meanwhile, this multi-involvement is not problematic for encounters in asynchronous applications. Hence, both divided attention and undivided attention are features of the online encounter, depending on the kind of communication (synchronous or asynchronous).

Situatedness of the online encounter

Despite the possibility of multiple focuses of attention and multi-situatedness, each online encounter is a situated activity. Each single encounter takes place in a specific setting (e.g. on a FB post or in a chat conversation) embedded with social affordances (Hogan and Quan-Haase 2010) and around a single focus of attention (e.g. the previous comment about a job anniversary). Going beyond the description of this element in the social web, I observed that participants value control over their attention (Turkle 2011): in other words, they value the lack of constraints on when and where they are being involved in an encounter. By extension, participants like controlling others' attention—when they get other participants' attention they value involvement in the encounter according to the social affordances of the online setting (with divided or undivided attention) and, consequently, adjust their expectations from the encounter.

The data show that, in online encounters, the participants' copresence is acknowledged through focused attention and is achieved by expressive signs and the emergent sense of doing something together. The level of attention is synonymous with the level of involvement but attention does not need to be synchronous and undivided in the social web.

Communication

To use the term "verbal" for online interactions seems controversial, as these are mainly text and audiovisual-based communications. I argue that expressiveness, as an element embedded in talk, can also be analyzed in online "talking" (Baron 2010). The analytical consideration of online talk as verbal communication is logically inherent to Goffman's framework. First, the expressiveness of the person is

the medium through which information about the individual—his/her status, mood, intentions, etc.—is conveyed to others (Boyd and Ellison 2008; Whalter and Parks 2002). Second, information about the individual is conveyed in interaction through expressive messages (Hardey 2002). Third, expressions given and given off in interaction provide a flow of information (Joinson 2003; Whitty 2008; Whitty and Buchanan 2010). Fourth, although there is no physical copresence there are opportunities for encounters, as argued in this paper.

Openness, pure sociality and argumentative communication

Openness to "verbal" communication is essential in online everyday encounters on the social web given an objective of communication, or a purely social aim (Giddens 1992). Publishing something in SNSs assumes a willingness to talk about it. User 1 also explained that posting in SNSs is sometimes "my way of telling to the world that I am sad, or happy, or tired," so the possibility of letting all your relatives know how you feel is a vital opportunity provided in SNSs, overcoming spatial location and redefining situatedness in encounters. During observation, such statements as "Please, stop the world" (User 1), "*User 2* is eating poo" (User 2), "Never was [it] so difficult to make a programme" (referring to a radio programme emission after one colleague died) (user 4) are common and usually provoke a large number of replies. Besides, every time the participants manage to start a conversation they actively reply to their interlocutors, providing evidence of an open attitude to communicating. User 5 observes: "I think that communicating online requires more words. Besides the emoticons and these things, it needs more communication [...] you probably will need a second message or a second tweet" to convey emotions. Hence, openness is promoted by two elements. First, an open attitude to communicating one's own feelings is more likely to prompt encounters. Second, the need for more

"words", or extremely "argumentative" communication, in Baym's terms (2010: 51), given the lack of facial and gesture cues.

Immediacy

According to the interview data, another feature that facilitates openness of communication is the immediacy provided by the social web. Immediacy clearly is one of the main factors driving online communication, posting, opening chats or sending emails. User 1 says that: "I never will say 'let's wait until tonight (to communicate something) as I could see you face-to-face then.'" This immediacy is amplified by the connectivity provided by mobile devices, creating a constant connection (Wajcman 2008) with others and imprinting a sense of **continuous copresence**. Informants usually shared real-time information about where they were or what they were doing at a given time, which led to online encounters (e.g. "I have just arrived to see (*title of a movie*) and I find the pictures of this afternoon's demonstrations. We have changed but not much" (User 4)).

Self-disclosure

Last, the self-disclosure prompted by the medium (Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons 2002; Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs 2006; Joinson 2001) also impacts openness. Some participants report that it is easier to have intimate conversations online than face to face. Users 1, 3 and 6 recognize that, depending on the topic of the conversation, they prefer using IM over face-to-face options. User 1 asserts that there are things that he was ashamed to explain face to face. This leads him to prefer online communication on some occasions. He also prefers it on occasion because of the time lag the medium provides, which he can use to consider his answers carefully.

To summarize, in advancing Goffman´s theory **the establishment of copresence for an online encounter must presuppose at least one individual**

willing and able to communicate with an individual who already has shown his/her willingness to participate. It is characterized by its openness and its purely social aim. Participation in an encounter on many-to-many communication sites is, in principle, a voluntary act as the expectations of securing participation are quite low. In one-to-one communications, the expectations are higher and, consequently, there is a commitment to answer.

Acts

This element refers to the "the order and kind of contribution being determined by shared appreciation of what the task-at-the-moment requires as the next act" (Goffman 1963: 90). Hence it is understood as the coordination of attention and response that signals the mutual commitment of the participants in the encounter. Consequently, once the encounter has begun, the lack of attention will constitute its termination.

Reciprocating social entrainment and mutual attention

Obviously, in SNSs, the main evidence of the mutual relevance of acts is the involvement in the encounter and that goes back to the relationship between attention and involvement. Above, I have reviewed the strategies used by the informants to catch others' attention. Here, I analyze the dynamics which signal commitment once the encounter has started. It is worth observing that during the interviews, participants report that most of the time, although they expect the involvement of specific contacts in specific postings, it causes neither disappointment nor tension when this is not achieved. Nevertheless, participants report distress when not receiving an answer in a direct message—or to tagging/mentioning somebody—(synchronous or asynchronous) and the strategies to cope with this include rationalizing this lack of

reply and withholding further contact until that person reinitiates it. User 6 remarks: "I know she may be too busy to answer immediately, or perhaps she is away from the computer. But she should have answered later." Similarly, not replying to a direct message is often, for the participants, the "polite" means of rejection. Thus, there is a commitment to answer a direct message (in one-to-one encounters) and in tagging or mentioning (in many-to-many encounters). On the contrary, the lack of answer is implicitly understood as a rejection.

Signals of commitment

When an informant manages to ignite an encounter in SNSs walls or feeds, a common tendency on the part of the participants is to go on commenting and even giving specific replies to each actor. Liking, favoriting, and retweeting comments are also signs of commitment. The publisher (the one who published the post which ignited the encounter) acts as moderator. Often, participants in the encounter do not know each other and although they take part in the encounter, they tend to communicate with the publisher alone. As illustration of this, one participant (User 5) posted on FB something related to politics that ignited a controversial conversation between two of his contacts. Although he is critical and used to this kind of discussion, this time he deleted the post (and the whole conversation) as, he thought, "it went too far, and it is OK when I am the one arguing with another person as I know where their personal limits are. But I don't want two of my friends, who don´t know each other, offending each other." Such social prudence means that a publisher's role is not only as the main source of engrossment in the activity but also as moderators.

Examples of embarrassment during encounters can also be used as evidence of the relevance that other participants' actions imply for one's reactions. Informants'

experiences of embarrassment indicate that other contacts' acts are important and provoke a specific response. Consistently, informants feel embarrassed when one of their contacts reveals information that they do not want on the front stage (Goffman 1959). As an illustration of this, I observed User 4's embarrassment after a contact tried to arrange a personal meeting online on their FB wall. While he frequently published what he was doing and where he was regarding his professional life, he kept his personal life away from the view of the others. The tension was resolved by defining the boundaries between personal and professional communication. He explicitly clarified to his contact, and in doing so to his whole social network, some very strict norms about what other people could say publicly about him.

Copresence online is also linked to the reciprocating social entrainment[6] and mutual relevance of acts. Online, these also need mutual attention and expressive signs to authenticate them. Consequently, engrossment in conversational activity is the key element defining mutual relevance and its cultivation is a central role of the encounter's instigator.

Huddle

The face-to-face encounter begins with the openness to mutual eye-to-eye activity. The eyes have been considered as the most important part of the body for transmitting emotion and other kinds of subtle information (Knapp 1972) and now, in online encounters, there is no eye activity.

Tagging, mentioning or sending messages

The pattern of action in encounters has been derived from observations of duration and direction of the gazes. Online there are other gestures that signal this disposition and the pattern of action is derived from engrossment in the

conversational activity. First, users need to be logged-on but, as mentioned before, that is not enough for an encounter as users can be *unofficial participants* (Goffman 1981) or *bystanders*.[7] Second, besides the obvious features of signalling the disposition of users, such as green or red signals, the ecological huddle that "maximizes each participant's opportunity to perceive the other participant's monitoring of him" (Goffman 1961: 17) is achieved with strategies such as tagging, mentioning or sending a direct message. That is to say, tagging and mentioning are the online way of "catching the eye".

Sharing huddle and continuous engrossment of the activity

Engrossment in an activity is around themes, topics and "shares". During the time period of our data collection, participants communicated with others online in many-to-many settings and made use of these strategies. Yet they usually secured encounters with a limited group of their contacts, and usually always the same ones. Thus research illustrates that although social web applications allow for a big social network, encounters very often occur within a restricted group of people within the participants' social networks (Garton, Haythornthwaite and Wellman 1997); these are the ones engaging in conversational encounters online. To illustrate this, User 1 had 134 friends on FB (now he has doubled this number) and 177 followers and 78 following on Twitter (now 861 followers; 197 following). He sustained encounters with 34 friends during observation on FB and with 23 on Twitter, most of whom were also among the 34 FB friends. User 2 had 79 friends on FB (currently she has more than 200), and she entertained encounters with only two small groups of people—one formed by colleagues and the other formed by friends from her hometown. Data from the other participants confirm this: they usually conversed with the same contacts or group of contacts. Moreover, this happens in both directions: participants also reply to

more publications from this limited number of contacts. This is related to the mutual relevance of acts (see Section 3 above).

In this sub-section it is relevant to analyze how informants control others' access to them, as avoiding looking towards the person is not a possible strategy. Research explored the strategies used by participants to block contact (with people within their social network) without flatly rejecting others. Being in the same SNS, like being in the same region (Goffman 1963), is not sufficient to establish that others are willing to be engaged. In fact, individuals are sometimes logged on but do not want to be engaged in encounters. I never witnessed, in SNS spaces for many-to-many communication, expressions of disappointment because of the lack of involvement of their contacts, although during interviews informants acknowledged some expectations of connection. Interestingly, it was common to observe encounters which only a limited group of people, a subculture, could understand and extensively participate in. Therefore, the focus of attention again has a relevant role in the development of implicit "involvement shields" or in blocking contact (Goffman 1966).

The ecological huddle online is organized around themes, issues and "shares". In fact, the social web seemingly promotes a sharing huddle. An emergent "we" identification and flows of feeling are being reinforced in online encounters. In one sense, SNSs work by promoting this "we" feeling through the creation of groups, affiliations and, for instance, like or dislike options. This is most evident for the informants participating in applications like Twitter or LinkedIn, in which their whole social network is organized around interests (professional or personal). As an illustration of this, User 1 mainly engaged in encounters relating to technology, Users 3 and 4 in encounters about everyday professional tasks related whilst for User 5 all

were about politics and news. User 6 recognized that interaction takes place with people with whom she shared some interests and she used strategies to recognize these (as she usually talked with unknown people in chats).

To tie this to Goffman´s theory, **copresence online assumes a sharing huddle. It <u>requires strategies</u> to get others' attention as well as constant engrossment in the conversation activity while the encounter is active**.

ENCOUNTERS ON THE SOCIAL WEB

Let me now have a closer look at the unit of the encounter. The evidence presented above, and summarized in Table 2, has shown that copresence in online encounters is acknowledged through attention, openness to communication and expressiveness, and engrossment in the conversational activity within a sharing huddle. Expressive signs and a "we rationale" have a central role displacing other elements such as eye contact. Although one-to-one encounters (both synchronous and asynchronous) retain the ceremonies of entrance and departure, many-to-many encounters do not need these. In SNSs the openings and closings of encounters become redundant. Encounters begin with a statement, then proceed to commentaries by some contacts, and then finish—although indeed some never really start in the first place—when nobody is engrossed in the conversation anymore. There is no closing statement. The boundaries of the unit of encounter can hence be much looser in online communications and the acknowledgment of copresence more complex.

A ritual set which combines units of language (textual or multimedia), topics or shares (*foci of attention*), gestures (tagging, mentioning, likings), applications' affordances, and identity roles helps to manage interactions online, establishing rules of performance in an implicit way. Once these rules are fixed by the use of a

particular social web application or system, there is a set of ritualized procedures for pointing out deviance and for correcting deviant acts. Throughout this paper I pointed out several examples of how deviant acts and tensions are perceived and resolved and how informants managed their emotional response. Interestingly, participants report that their response varies according to the familiarity with the person causing tension. For example, User 6 reports that annoying attitudes and responses can be frequent in chats due to the self-disclosure and anonymity that this environment permits. She therefore tries to keep herself away from these users and applies strategies to detect them: "They are usually very young people and they write without proper spelling, so you can recognize them very easily." When they are mere acquaintances, participants remove offensive or deviant users from their social network and no longer keep in contact with them. During the ethnographic work I observed 15 instances in which participants were removed as contacts of others. However, when I asked about this it emerged that they did not consider this a problem. For example User 5, being quite vehement in his statements and used to arguing about politics and contemporary developments online, entertained some fierce political discussions with other users which even led to the termination of a contact.

Whether bracketed by ritual or not, online encounters provide the communication base for a circular flow of feeling among participants, as well as for corrective or regulative actions.

CONCLUSIONS

The physical copresence premised in an encounter by Goffman seems to be challenged by online encounters. The strategies emerging from online environments may require an extension of Goffman's work in order to conceptualize an online

emotion culture. This paper has examined how six participants in the social web interact with others and has thereby tried to expand Goffman's concept to capture online encounters. Although for Goffman, in his time, mail already embodied a reduced version of the primordial real thing (1961: 2), the findings of this research set in an online communication age do not seem to support this limited conception of encounter.

The focused encounter has been considered here as the fundamental unit of interaction on the social web with, maybe surprisingly, a great deal of similarity to face-to-face interaction. This similarity particularly concerns the structure of encounters in one-to-one communications, in which at least two persons agree to have a conversation and share some time together, although this does not necessarily happen synchronously and with undivided attention. By contrast, in many-to-many communication in SNSs, the structure of the focused encounter differs much more clearly from face-to-face situations. Conversations are less often with somebody specific in the initial phase. Whilst this constitutes a very open method of communication, the open process simultaneously implies a clear objective of communication in itself (Giddens 1992). Data suggest that online encounters necessitate a fuse to ignite them, thereby offering a purpose and hence focusing attention and establishing copresence, in this order. Attention means copresence in online settings and the level of attention is synonymous with the level of involvement. In the online encounters observed, expressions become rhythmically synchronized as the interaction happens and ignite a kind of collective emotional energy (Collins 2004, 2008).

Hence, the organizational hub of these encounters is formed by interests and "shares" which also conform to identities. This links with the fact that informants

were more open—or pushed to be more open—because the successful encounters observed were those that promoted open communication, were more emotional and were embedded with feelings. As Goffman (1966) highlights, people engage in public rituals once they believe they have caught the public eye. Consequently, each online encounter is embedded in a gathering in two ways: first when one person sends a message to another in order to begin a conversation and second when somebody sends a message to no-one in particular and receives replies, thus establishing a conversation with a non-specific person or group of people. The first encounter assumes copresence; the second does not but builds it. Both kinds of encounters feature fixed equipment, a distinctive cultural ethos, programme and agenda, distinctive rules of proper and improper conduct, and so on according to the larger structural and cultural unit in which the encounters are embedded. Moreover, both kinds of encounters can take place on the same site.

An emerging and critical issue regarding emotion management is the need to manage expectations. Informants seem to like to control others' attention, but they also like to control the encounter.

Additionally, the social web leads to places where individuals can perform multiple roles and this sets up conflicts when the subculture of a person is not in agreement with interlocutors' subcultures. This seems to create a conflict between two different sets of expectations from the encounter. The emotional discrepancy and the potential for conflict arising from differentiated expectations promote a rigid emotional strategy for participants in this research. The set of strategies emerging in this study requires an extension of Goffman's works in order to conceptualize an online emotion culture. Results suggest that in the emerging online emotion culture it is easier to avoid emotional work—presenting emotions to others that we do not feel.

According to Turkle (2011), we do not attend to those conversations we are not interested in. Even more importantly, few participants seemed to take offense as a result of a lack of response and, when there was offence in the encounter, they rapidly adjusted their expectations.

Overall, this paper has contributed to the analysis of focused encounters online. Bearing in mind the limitations of the small sample, it suggests that individuals seek to confirm their global self-conceptions and attribute meaning through social encounters in the online realm. These encounters are context-dependent in all episodes of interaction online and are equipped with a specific set of social rules. At the same time, frequent Internet users derive distinctive meaning from online encounters and develop emotion management strategies. The apt expansion of the conceptualization of "encounter" offered in this paper enables us to start capturing the essence of social interactions online which have become such an important part of people's everyday lives.

Goffman demonstrated how, in our society, face-to-face engagements share complex properties. Nowadays, we need to add another set of complexities due to the possibility of encounters in the social web and include them in our analytical tools to study this social unit. Online encounters and the contemporaneously permanent possibility of copresence co-exist with previous ways of managing encounters and have introduced new strategies for managing social relationships.

Further research is needed, first to extend the study of the norms that prescribe how to emote and feel during online encounters along with the normative regulation of copresence, and second to check whether there are patterns, such as status hierarchies, organizing online encounters and to analyze their characteristics. Bigger samples are also encouraged to test these results in future research.

ENDNOTES

[1] We exclude organizational emails as they are often used just to communicate information.

[2] Notes, numbers in brackets and bold are mine to facilitate the reading of the paper and to follow the table 2 structure. The numbers (1), (2), (3), and (4) correspond to the sections of the analysis.

[3] See the "Tables" section for a table with the social web services each participant used during the observation and participation phase.

[4] Our sensory awareness of the other/s (Goffman 1959).

[5] The comments published by his friends are not reproduced due to ethical treatment.

[6] Social entrainment "describes the many social rhythms that are influenced by others social rhythms" (Kelly 2010: 785).

[7] Any individual present who is not a ratified member of the particular encounter (Goffman 63: 91).

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TABLES

	Synchronous	*Asynchronous*	*Both*
One-to-one	IM, VoIP	Email	
Many-to-many	Chat rooms	SNSs streams or feeds	SNS

Table 1: Type of communications in social web services

Encounters face to face and encounters on the social web		
Elements	**Features in Goffman**	**Features in social web**
Attention	Attention enabled by physical presence	Attention means involvement
	Visual focus	Verbal and multimedia focus
	Cognitive focus synchronous	Cognitive focus asynchronous and synchronous

	Undivided attention	Undivided and divided attention
	Physically situated activity	Situated by the activity itself
	Single focus	Multiple attention points and single focus
Communication	Verbal	Textual and multimedia
	Openness to communicate	Openness and purely social aim
	Visual and gesture cues	Lack of cues promotes an "extremely argumentative communication" (Baym, 2010)
	Physical presence	Immediacy and continuous copresence
	Social constrains	Self-disclosure
Acts	Single mutual activity	Reciprocating social entrainment and mutual attention
	Signals of commitment: Mutual glances	Signals of commitment: • Replying • Engrossing the conversational activity • Liking, favoriting, retweeting.
Huddle	Mutual eye-to-eye	Sharing huddle
	Catching the eye	Tagging, mentioning or sending an email/Instant message
	Based on a physical presence	Based on continuous engrossment
Definition of presence	**Co-presence**	**Continuous co-presence**

Table 2: Characteristics of face-to-face and social web encounters