THE STRANGER TRANSFORMED: CONCEPTUALZING ON AND OFFLINE STRANGER DISCLOUSURE[1]

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Disclosures, secrets, and stranger associations have long intrigued social researchers. In this article I consider the transformation of stranger associations with the use of mediated communication. I consider how non-mediated and mediated forms of stranger associations vary based on characteristics such as synchronicity, distance, ease of break, permanency of break, and stranger shopping. In addition, I propose the concept of "strange making technologies"—those that create for acquaintances and intimates that particular tension between remoteness and distance that Simmel identified as unique to the form of the stranger. Furthermore, I suggest that this strange making quality that is particularly strong in Internet communications has both the potential to deepen and dismantle already established relationships.

INTRODUCTION

In the limbo of flight, we often catch glimpses of people's lives. Disclosures made while neither here nor there flow as easily as the air across the wings of the plane. On one such occasion, I was traveling on a commuter plane that had just taken off from a small airport in Eastern Wisconsin. I watched as the Western shores of Lake

Michigan began to take on shapes more commonly seen on aerial photos and maps.

The woman sitting next to me had long blonde hair, and a rounded face that balanced large glasses. She was perhaps in her mid twenties. She rummaged in her purse and extracted a pack of gum from which she pulled a stick and offered one to me. And so began our encounter.

Alice was traveling to a conference. I was returning home to Colorado after visiting my parents in Eastern Wisconsin. She was giving a talk at the conference that was on AIDS. I had recently worked part time as a health educator talking mostly about Hepatitis and HIV. We exchanged notes on current research and findings on AIDS research. And then Alice told me, to my surprise, that she was HIV positive. And then I mostly listened.

She had been traveling around giving these talks for some time now. Alice and her son were both positive. They were both doing well with the drug regime that had become a part of their daily lives. Most of the people in the small Wisconsin community where she lived with her son and parents did not know that she was positive. Alice recalled, with a quick laugh, a conversation with one local woman. The woman was relaying a concern about AIDS and a relief that they didn't have to deal with that in their little community. Alice suggested to the woman that perhaps HIV just was better hidden in their little town.

The plane descended into Chicago and our conversation quietly ended. I wished her luck as we packed up our belongings. We parted to catch our connecting flights. In this chance encounter in the sky above of Eastern Wisconsin, I had shared in the private life of one woman. In disembarking that plane and walking down our separate concourses, we solidified my role as the stranger—safekeeper of shared hopes, dreams and fears.

Months after my plane encounter with Alice, I sat at my desk at my campus office. The building was quiet—most everyone had gone home. I turned to my computer and started to click away at entries in various Usenet newsgroups. Remembering Alice, I began to open postings from people in various HIV and AIDS groups. Some people were sharing their experiences on various drug regimes. Others talked about risk factors involved in unprotected sex. One man asked if anyone could pass on any research on cleansing HIV infected sperm so that he might safely impregnate his partner. And still others engaged in a rather lengthy discussion about an AIDS hoax and questioning the actual existence of the HIV virus.

These people discussing HIV and AIDS on the Usenet are part of the transformation of the stranger. They are specialized in their strangeness. Their encounters share some of the characteristics found in my encounter with Alice—but they are also unique in what they bring to the social form of the stranger.

This essay seeks to develop an analytic model that can facilitate the comparison of on and offline forums as they relate to the social form of the stranger. The model is developed to capture the nuanced elements that are central to stranger interaction. In doing so, it provides an organizing point for a growing body of literature interested in comparing disclosure and relationships across co-presence and mediated communication forums.

SIMMEL'S STRANGER

Social researchers have long been intrigued by the nuances of disclosure and secrets (Bok 1982; Goffman 1959; Marx and Reichman 1984). Simmel in particular drew attention to stranger revelations and the characteristics of those encounters. Concerned with analyzing properties of physical space and social interaction, Simmel penned "The Stranger" (Simmel, 1908/1950)—a now well-known footnote to a much longer untranslated work (Levine 1977; Levine 1985).

In "The Stranger," Simmel drew attention to degrees of closeness and remoteness that are characteristic of all relationships, but are found in "a special proportion and reciprocal tension" in a form of the relation he called "the stranger" (Simmel 1908/1950 p. 408). The stranger is part of Simmel's broader "form(al)" sociology, taking its place with the dyad, triad, and superordination among others. But Simmel also mentions the characteristics of his stranger that bring on the tension and patterns of disclosure.

The stranger for Simmel was the potential wanderer as in his example of the trader of the early American West. Simmel's stranger was also implicitly male. Writing in 1908, Simmel used the pronouns "he" and "his" and "him" as he referenced this social form. Particularly in 1908, and even today, characteristics like mobility, objectivity and detachment summon a masculinized image of a stranger. Yet disclosure and connectedness, also elements of the stranger, are feminized characteristics. The entire form of the stranger then was a melding together of male and female interaction patterns. In the early 1900s, where interaction patterns were more rigidly gendered, it should not be too surprising that deviation took the form of a male traveler who did not belong in more than one way.

Simmel's stranger was also one of co-presence associations defined so by boundaries of physical space, proximity and distance. Simmel described several characteristics of the stranger: not belonging, mobility, objectivity, and abstract commonalty. Together these traits contribute to the feelings of attachment and detachment that occur simultaneously in a stranger association (Table 1).

Table 1: Characteristics of Simmel's Stranger

1. Not belonging	Create tension between closeness and remoteness
2. Mobility	
3. Objectivity	
4. Abstract commonality	

The stranger's "not belonging" is established by his absence of physical presence in a particular locality or group at its beginnings. His mobility is marked by his fluidity of association: the likelihood that he will leave the area and discontinue the possibility of association. The objectivity of Simmel's stranger is assured by a lack of long-term personal investment into the happenings of the group into which he has stumbled. Free from the everyday customs and constraints of the group, the stranger invites disclosures that may be socially dangerous if made to insiders. And finally, the commonalties that the stranger establishes are abstract in nature such as nationality, race or occupation. "...These common features extend beyond him or us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people" (Simmel 1908/1950 p. 406).

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE STRANGER

Simmel's social form of the stranger can certainly still be found in this era as it was in his. Yet changing forms of association, many made possible by new information technologies, transform not only the real potential for with whom and when we may have a stranger association, but also may amplify the degree of intimacy and distance found in stranger associations. In addition, the information technologies themselves may become "strange making" devices and contribute to perceived distancing and increased disclosures between those who are already intimates.

For Bogard (1997), the technology of cyberspace itself is the stranger and creates the tension between closeness and remoteness. "Like Simmel's stranger, computers, too, are in a sense objects that 'come today and stay tomorrow'—they are 'traveling machines' who never leave..." Trust is placed in the technology itself. "The stranger... is not the individual message bearer anymore, but the entire message bearing system" (Bogard 1997 p. 10).

To some extent then, we can understand each communication technology as creating varying degrees closeness and remoteness.

But how does this happen? What are the characteristics of the technologies themselves that present us with variation of strangeness? Here, Simmel's work gives us clues for discovering the nuances of strangeness embedded in the technologies and the norms around how we use them. Later in this section I will consider how the characteristics of Simmel's stranger discussed above may be translated to analyze the creation of strangeness by different communication technologies. But before moving on to that analysis, let us first consider the groundwork—patterns of disclosure.

Successful disclosure is a process that requires consensus and cooperation between actors (Montini, 2000). It requires an actor willing to listen, hear and invite revelation. It requires an actor willing to tell. While co-presence interactions rely on physical proximity and appearance in the initial stages of interaction and move incrementally into disclosure, online relationships rely on an inverted development process (Merkle, 2000). Without disclosure online, there is little if any relationship possible. Place and appearance in co-presence interactions allow us to make assumptions about one another. Online disclosure is mandatory to even begin formulating conceptions of one another. Research suggests that revelation online is accelerated largely due some level of anonymity online (Wysocki, 1998). Walther (1996) argued that in some contexts, participants in online communication could become more intimate than had they interacted in co-presence. Online we can more carefully engage in impression management and idealize our counterparts. And while women in co-presence have been found to self-disclose more about their fears and weaknesses than men (Griffin, 1990), Merkle and Richardson (Merkle, 2000) speculate that these differences will be less likely to occur online.

Extrapolating from this earlier research, we might then expect that disclosure is greatest between "the stranger" (not to be confused with all strangers in the everyday use of the word stranger) and between intimates. Between acquaintances, degrees of disclosure are much lower than for either of the former (Table 2). Full trust has not been developed between acquaintances. Unlike "the stranger", a long-term relationship is being negotiated with acquaintances. Particular care is taken in each bit of self that is disclosed.

Table 2: Ideal Type Co-Presence Disclosure Pattern
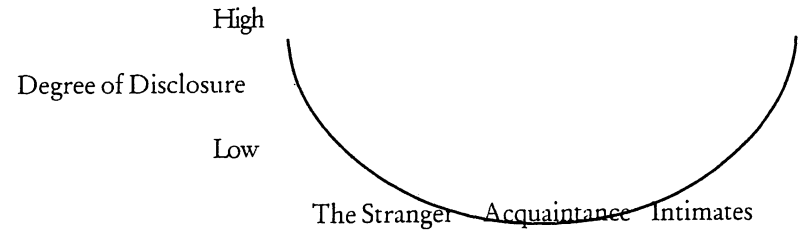
When information technologies are introduced to mediate interactions, the likelihood for disclosure will increase as compared to that which occurs in analogous co-presence interactions (Table 3). While this pattern is present for new online acquaintances (Wysocki, 1998), it also may also hold true for more intimate relationships particularly when difficult topics are at hand (Cullen, 1995). Of course there are many variations on these patterns. At least one occurs when fear of third-party surveillance makes mediated disclosure appear more dangerous than face-to-face (Marx 1990).

Table 3 Ideal Type Mediated Disclosure Patterns
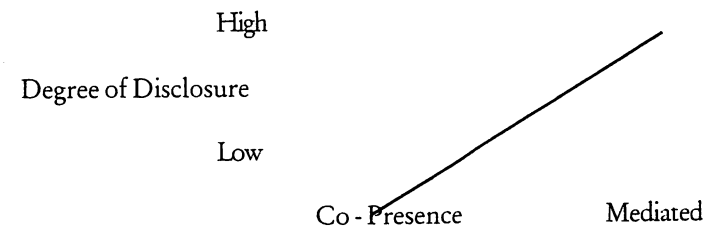
The basic characteristics of Simmel's stranger (not belonging, mobility, objectivity, abstract commonality) assist us in comparing disclosure in mediated communication and the co-presence stranger of Simmel's formalism. Yet to fully develop a comparative model that spans co-presence and mediated strangers, Simmel's characteristics require greater specificity and extension.

Table 4: Extending Simmel's Stranger Characteristics

Simmel's Characteristics	Interaction Quality	Extended Model
Not belonging	Safe Disclosure Space	(a)Synchronicity
Mobility		Spatial Separation Anonymity Ease of Breaking
Objectivity	No Personal Investment	Spatial Separation
Abstract commonality	Connection	Stranger Shopping

The characteristics of not belonging and mobility can be understood as factors contributing to a perceived safe space for interaction. Safe space is constructed in mediated communication through variation in the **synchronicity** of exchanges (temporal separation), as well as actual and perceived **spatial separation** between those making the exchanges. In addition, the spatial separation generates an assumption of objectivity. Unlike Simmel's stranger who maintained the control over mobility or locking in safe space, the strangers of mediated communication generally share this control. Control over safe space comes in the form of perceived and actual **anonymity**. How easy is it for a stranger to intrude into another's everyday life once the association has been broken? Marx (1997) reminds us that anonymity must be understood on a continuum with familiarity. In this paper, real anonymity is related to the power to maintain a mediated relationship apart from the rest of one's life. It involves the degree to which one can keep oneself from being found

again if one chooses. Perceived anonymity facilitates impression management and the separation of front stage and back stage presentations of self (Goffman, 1959). For example, text-based or written types of mediated communication may offer the greatest control over constructing gender, race and class—and the degrees of anonymity that this offers. Also related to mobility, is the **ease of breaking** an association at any time . This is partially based on social costs of initiating the break. Will you appear rude and will you have to deal with the ramifications of that rudeness?

Finally, the co-presence stranger interaction described by Simmel requires someone to wander into your life; yet online all actors retain agency to seek out and find stranger interactions. Online, an acceptance of abstract commonality is traded in for specialized commonality above all as online explorers search for someone to hear their story. Online forums can facilitate shopping for a specialized stranger: a person who meets specific criteria such as recently working through a divorce. Because some mediums tend to facilitate **"stranger shopping"** better than others, individuals can be much more selective about the stranger to whom they choose to disclose. So while objectivity may remain because the stranger is not involved in one's everyday life, specialized commonalities may provide hope for better understanding from a selected stranger.

COMPARING STRANGERS

In order to better understand the transformation that occurs between non-mediated and various mediated associations, we need to consider each independently and in comparison with the others. In this section I consider how co-presence association compares with letter writing, and telephony, as well as e-mail and non-mail based Internet groups. I take as points of comparison those characteristics of transformation discussed above: synchronicity, spatial separation, anonymity, ease of break, and stranger shopping (Table 5).

Table 5: Mediated and Non-Mediated Strangers

	synchronicity	spatial separation	anonymity	ease of break	stranger shopping
Simmel's Stranger of Co-presence	high	low	low	low	low
Letter Writing	low	high	high^	high	low
Telephony	high	high	high^	high	low
E-Mail Groups	low*	high	high^	high	high
Nonmail Groups	low*	high	high	high	high

* The time delays for exchange are generally low compared to overland letter writing, but even the slight delay offered by most Internet forums compared to telephony creates a greater degree of safe space.

^ Each of these has a caveat to the relative degree of anonymity it has to offer. Letter writing and e-mail may reveal an address which counters otherwise high anonymity. Telephony offers less control over anonymity because of what is revealed in a voice. Auxilliary technologies like Caller ID also impinge on telephonic anonymity.

LETTER WRITING

The classic stranger of letter writing is the pen pal. Letter writing perhaps offered clues to some of the dynamics that would be amplified with information technologies yet to come. Pen pals have found each other through common friends or acquaintances, matching services of specialty magazines ranging from *Teen* and *Australian Coin Review* to *Diabetes Forecast*, and classroom projects. For many years teachers have used pen pal projects as a means for connecting their students with those in far away places. The "any soldier" letter writing campaign of the Gulf War made many civilians privy to the trials of American soldiers stationed in the Middle East. On parchment sent across miles, intimacy and distance were melded in the medium itself.

Compared to the co-presence stranger, the pen pal of letter writing offers a great deal of safe space because of temporal delays with overland mail and the geographic space between strangers. While anonymity in letter writing is generally high, there is also an aspect of ambiguity in this regard. As a text-based medium, letter writing offers a high degree of control over presentation of self. Yet letter writing also involves knowledge of the recipient's location or address. Unlike the stranger of co-presence passing, the letters of pen pals find their way in a very physical sense into the private life of the other. The pen pal knows exactly where you live. Ease of breaking the correspondence is high and carries few immediate social repercussions. Yet even months or years after correspondence is broken, letters or the pal in person may track you down and impose himself or herself into your everyday life. Finally, specialty magazines and other pen pal matching efforts may offer some prospects for stranger shopping. But for the most part, real ability for stranger shopping is very low with letter writing.

TELEPHONY

Telephony imposes itself directly into the private space of the home or office. It pinpoints individuals with synchronous exchange that demands disruption of other activities. This characteristic may help explain why we don't just pick up the phone and call just anyone. Most of us would also think it odd for someone to call us and say: "You don't know me, but I just called to talk." Telephone manners and norms discourage the use of telephony for engaging the stranger.

Telephony's stranger is found in the phone sex professional, or the phone psychic and in those who staff suicide and sexual assault hotlines. As they set themselves out to play the role of the stranger, interaction with them via the phone is to various extents normatively acceptable.

In a scene from a *Reality Bites*, Winona Ryder plays Laney, a young woman in despair over career and love fallout. In the film, Laney spends days watching TV, chain smoking, and talking to a collection of phone psychics while on a self-created living room therapy couch. While even her best friends have lost patience for her unending blues, her cadre of phone psychics remains active and loyal companions. "My best friend, I feel like I lost him forever," she reveals. And in a moment of irony, Laney even finds herself playing stranger for another psychic, offering advice over a lost love: "I know you're afraid. But you've gotta find him and tell him how you really feel," she tearfully encourages her psychic.

The synchronous exchange of telephony is countered by physical distance between strangers creating mixed feelings of near and far. Telephony transfers the human voice with rich and unique blends of intonation, pitch, pace, and accent. In some ways, it simulates the feeling of co-presence. In *Reality Bites*, Laney cradles the phone between her shoulder and her head—the way one might hold the head of a loved one. But Laney also illustrates how easy it is to break off these very intimate conversations. When confronted by her friends holding a huge phone bill, she hangs up the receiver as we hear the psychic in mid-sentence advice giving.

Telephony also requires one to think on one's feet. There is less time to think about how one is presenting herself. Unintended aspects of self may seep into the performance. Hotline operators, as specialized strangers, are already prepared. For the battered woman calling into a domestic violence hotline, she is not a stranger to the hotline operator. The operator has heard her words before spoken by many other women. To this extent, there is a power difference between the caller and the operator. The latter knows too well her own lines, as well as what to expect from a caller.

Synchronicity and voice may also contribute to the eeriness we feel in the phrase "when a stranger calls". While anonymity is high, again there is an ambiguity in this factor. While you don't know the person on the other end of the line, you come to know their voice. The phone assists in this way of reconstructing the tension between remoteness and closeness. As long as we understand telephony's stranger as that of hotline operators and others that must be sought out, breaking the connection is as easy and permanent as hanging up the phone. Although now "caller ID" adds another dimension to that scenario.

Compared to Internet forums, stranger shopping is still relatively difficult with telephony. Hotline operators expect a certain type of disclosure. They are specialized strangers and sometimes paid to listen. However, I am told that there are services to meet others in "telephone chat groups". One calls into a service and is connected to an ongoing conversation on some topic or another. Yet deciphering individuals out of a chorus of phone voices must certainly be difficult. Additional impediments of large group discussion also apply. Perhaps this is one reason that this type of forum has not been widely adopted.

INTERNET

The stranger has been further transformed with the introduction of Internet technologies. Possibilities for encountering the stranger expand and ambiguity of strangeness is amplified. While telephony's primarily one-to-one format curtailed its use for stranger encounters, many Internet tools provide one-to-many forums that have been compared to cafes or cocktail parties. In these forums, engaging a stranger in a conversation is not only common—but also expected. The stranger of the Internet varies slightly depending on the forum in which we find her.

On the Internet, much interaction is loosely organized within millions of groups. For analytic purposes of differentiating the stranger in each, we can understand these groups generally as either e-mail or non-e-mail based groups. The low synchronicity (but higher than letter writing), high spatial separation, and generally high anonymity contribute to blend of near and far unprecedented in other types of stranger association.

While most exchanges have low synchronicity compared to those of telephony or co-presence; delays are significantly less than those experienced in letter writing. Synchronicity is experienced both technologically and normatively. Technologically, exchanges may be delivered within seconds of being "posted." Normatively, there is a range in the experienced synchronicity of an exchange. Those who use email as part of their job may check for new messages many times each day. Others who use email more casually may check once a day or even once a week.

While the degree of physical space separating Internet strangers may be unknown, much greater spatial separation is experienced than in co-presence exchanges. In addition, anonymity of the Internet stranger exchanges is generally high. But here lies a difference between e-mail and non e-mail based exchanges. E-mail, like letter writing generally leaves one's "home address" on each piece of correspondence. It also comes to a place we consider private and our own: the "email box." One generally accepts a lower degree of anonymity when engaging the stranger via e-mail versus non e-mail based groups. Of course there are technological "solutions" to this anonymity problem including "anonymous remailers" and manipulation of the "from" address of an email. Yet these practices are not in the everyday repertoire of most email users. In addition, as with letter writing, the textual basis of this communication allows us to some extent to construct our strangers how we please. As long as they generally stay within the characters they construct for themselves, we can imagine them how we like—in a way that meets our needs.

Breaking communication with Internet strangers is relatively easy from a technological stance. For e-mail based groups, it involves "unsubscribing" oneself from a list. The chatter from that particular group of strangers will no longer fill your mailbox. For non-mail groups to which one "travels" to for discussion—like going to a favorite coffee shop—one need only to discontinue those visits.

One of the most obvious "advantages" of the Internet for stranger interactions is the ease with which one can be selective about engaging the stranger. In fact, there are usually very few active participants in most Internet forums compared with many others who quietly observe the exchanges. A particular stranger of interest sometimes draws out these "lurkers".

For example, one Spring, 1997 Usenet post endorsing spanking as a form of discipline for children drew a poignant response from an abuse list reader to which it was cross posted. He wrote:

> In your warm and fuzzy world of hugs and Sunday papers, you knew nothing of hiding in closets for most of your childhood because you didn't know when you were going to be beaten and molested next. That was how I spent my childhood. I physically flinch when I see a parent strike their child in anger.

The Internet allows these hidden strangers to observe and get a "feeling" for others before even engaging them in conversation. The degree to which this type of stranger shopping is possible and practiced is unprecedented among other types of stranger interaction.

In addition, the Internet creates for the first time the possibility for the "mass stranger". Selecting a stranger to whom to disclose is not really necessary. Commonly, individuals post a generally addressed disclosure with the knowledge that someone, but often no one in particular, will be "listening." One woman in a Jewish/Christian interfaith marriage non-mail group just wanted to know that someone was listening to her feelings about a recent Jewish wedding she attended. The wedding had been very touching and she was feeling very deeply for the first time what she had given up when she chose to marry a man who was not Jewish:

> Watching the ceremony was very moving for me and in some
> ways depressing. I am Jewish and my husband is Catholic.... I
> am more just getting my feelings out than really looking for
> advice or suggestions.... I am attempting to get through this
> "on my own" because I don't want my hubby to feel bad.

This one-to-many format that is possible now for anyone with Internet access is one of the Internet's unique offerings. Coupled with the power of one-to-many association, the tensions of near and far in the Internet create "intimacy in the mass." Nestled at one's desk, hot tea in hand, Van Morrison singing in the background and dinner on the stove one can feel cozy "speaking" to hundreds of people at once.

The extent to which Internet strangers remain strangers is ambiguous. Without audio cues of telephony that may hold clues to ethnicity, gender and class, Internet strangers have more leeway in their presentation of self. Some ethnographic research of online forums suggests that it is common for individuals to present an "authentic" self in Internet forums (Kendall 1998). Yet, of course, people do assume "pseudo identities."

Barnes (1996) writes that the most publicized case of false imaging dates back to 1982. In that case, a New York psychiatrist presented himself in a CompuServe forum as Julie, a homebound disabled woman. Julie became a trusted and brave online companion for this group of women online. They were inspired by how Julie faced her own struggles with her disability. In turn, they were devastated when they found out Julie's true identity.

Writing about the case of Julie, Turkle (1995) pointed out the online normative distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable identity play. In cyberspace, people expect identity play in many MUDs and chat rooms where people create characters such as "Eor the he/she donkey". In other forums, such as the CompuServe group in which Julie existed, people expect an authentic presentation of self. They don't expect a "lie" anymore than I expected the woman sitting next to me on the plane to be dishonest about being HIV positive.

But the twisting of identity is certainly easier over the Internet. Not only because of the reliance purely on textual cues, but also because of the safe space involved. This includes the ability to quickly disconnect from the interaction if the identity play becomes too much. Does it matter that our "imagined strangers" are not really at all as we thought them to be? Obviously it did to Julie's companions. Perhaps it also matters to those who don't "know" their strangers as well Julie's friends knew her. If one discloses her struggles living with HIV to an online stranger she believes to also be HIV positive, she may likely also feel betrayed if she finds out that the person does not have the virus. Even with the stranger, there are elements of closeness—along with remoteness—that maintain the form. So especially on the Internet, where we shop for these particularities of closeness instead of the abstract commonalities of Simmel's stranger; we may leave ourselves open to experiencing greater feelings of betrayal when faced with the "unauthentic stranger."

STRANGE MAKING TECHNOLOGIES

The tension between remoteness and closeness that contributes to stranger disclosures is recreated with a slightly different mix for acquaintances and intimates via mediated communication. "Technology intensifies the emotional level of many relationships," suggests Gergen (1991) in his exploration of "The Saturated Self,"(p. 69). Turkle (1995) suggests that Internet interactions and emergent identities are part of a larger pattern toward fractionalized selves. Rapid cycling through different identities did not used to be as easy as it is now.

But these different presentations of self (Goffman 1959) are not necessarily reserved for strangers. Through its strange making capacity, the Internet amplifies emotional intensity and the revelation of another aspect of self to co-presence intimates and acquaintances. Movement between non-mediated and mediated spaces of interaction, creates schizophrenic disclosure patterns.

Mediated association constructs the "feeling" of distance and safety between people who are anything but estranged. As discussed above, the strangeness is in the medium itself. Through varying degrees of distance and closeness created by mediated communication, the tension found in the form of the stranger is recreated. In this sense, the information technologies themselves act as "strange making" mediums. The tension inherent in the mediums is central to the transformative effects they may have on established interactional norms of any given relationship.

As a friend once said to me, "When my brother and I are together, we never seem to get past discussions of work and the weather. Some of our best conversations—those that mean anything—have been held over the phone."

Letter writing offers greater time delays than telephony. The delays are both in the actual transmission of the message and in the general amount of time that one has to think about the contents of the message before it is dropped in the box. Repercussions of disclosure via letter writing are cushioned by time. Yet this type of time cushion is countered by another force that may mean the letter is never put into the mail. Disclosures via letter writing are actually constrained by the normatively high amount of time it takes to construct the letter, put it in an envelope, address, seal and stamp the letter and then get it into the postal system. One may decide to tear up the letter—or never write it at all. On the other hand, in this age of quick and dirty electronic communication, the hand written letter has also taken on new meaning. The formalism of ink on paper in the creation of a personal letter now more than ever signifies importance of that particular communication. Telephony, on the other hand, is synchronous. Feedback is quick to come over the phone lines. In that sense, telephony perhaps offers the greatest tension between spatial distance and temporal closeness.

The time delays of the Internet coupled with distance and relative ease of transmission are critical for its strange making capacity for intimates. These, along with absence of the "realness" of voice, offer just a hint more safe space than telephony. As Kathy, a sociology graduate student shared:

> I told my father that I am a lesbian over e-mail. I don't think I could have told him in person, and it actually turned out very well.

The safe space is coupled with a normative ease and perhaps urgency in transmission that also makes the medium more potentially dangerous for intimate and acquaintance interaction than for conversing with the traditional stranger. Despite what the sensational headlines would have us believe about the dangers of meeting strangers online, perhaps the greatest dangers lie in indiscretions between acquaintances and intimates.

As one colleague revealed during a holiday cocktail party, "I lost my best friend because of an email I once sent." Carl had agreed

to help his friend with a project. The night he wrote the email was the second time she had not shown up to meet him. Angry and feeling exhausted with a cold, he sat down at his computer and typed out a message. Now Carl assured me that the message really wasn't "that bad." He just told his friend that he felt that she was taking advantage of him. Yet he didn't hear from her until a month or more later when he finally reached her on the phone. "She recited that email back to me!" he said. "She had read a lot more into it than I had intended." But by that time there was no explaining. They were no longer friends.

The asynchrony of most Internet communication also means the absence of feedback mechanisms of co-presence and telephony that may allow us to clarify and reword important exchanges. In addition, as Carl discovered, the written form has a powerful permanency to it. It allowed his friend to memorize and analyze his searing words in isolation from their sender. These qualities are certainly present also in letter writing. Yet Carl assured me that had he needed to put pen to paper to convey how he felt at that moment when he sent the email, the message would never have been sent.

Internet manners and advice articles almost inevitably advise Internet users to "sit on" any important or emotionally charged messages before hitting the send button. But this advice is juxtaposed against a medium that technologically and normatively corrals us into being quick and efficient with our communications. Avid e-mail users—whether they are using it by choice of by directive of a job—are confronted with sometimes several hundred pieces of correspondence each day. Technologically, responding to each messages can be fast and easy. Cumulatively, the process can be enormously time consuming. Normatively, there is a growing social expectation to respond to e-mail messages within the same day. Expediting the process, not even the same grammatical and spelling standards apply in this medium as in other written mediums. Various types of keyboard-based shorthand including "emoticons" have been developed to also assist the process (e.g. : (= sad face). So we

type what we are thinking and feeling and send it off quickly to get it done. And while emoticons can not fully substitute for the nuances created by hundreds of facial expressions, in some cases this may be exactly the point. Some users choose mediated communication to create distance between the physical and emotional aspects of communication and allow themselves detachment from the subject at hand.

In addition, embedded in the technology and the norms around its use, there is always the possibility of transmission errors. A geology graduate student discovered this danger. After reading a friend's listserv posting about the work of a prominent researcher in her field, Megan typed a scathing critique of that researcher intended for relay only to her friend. She didn't even bother to couch it in the niceties of professional language. After all, it was only going to her friend. Yet instead of sending it just to her friend, Megan sent the message back to an entire listserv of researchers in her field. It was scandalous. And some worried that Megan had limited her own career opportunities.

With Internet communications, we have the greatest degree of safe space coupled with technological and normative impetus for knee jerk disclosure. The Internet provides a particular blend of near and far, fast and easy. It creates a socio-technical cyborg (Haraway 1991) stranger: a silicon social lubricant that is the 1990s analog to a dry martini. This cyborg self may help us strengthen intimate relationships. It may also taunt us into dismantling connections with a keystroke.

DISCUSSION

The form of the stranger rests upon a special tension between intimacy and distance. It is these very concepts—or feelings—that are technologically and experientially altered when encounters are mediated. In this article we have seen how stranger associations are transformed with the use of letter writing, telephony and the Internet. Associations vary across these mediums

based on characteristics such as synchronicity, spatial distance, anonymity, ease of break, and stranger shopping. In addition, these mediums can be considered "strange making technologies." In this sense, they recreate that special tension between near and far, between those who are acquainted or intimates. This strange making quality, which is particularly strong in Internet communications, has the potential to deepen or dismantle already established relationships.

In studying Internet stranger associations, we might ask to what degree elements of the form of "stranger" remain salient as relationships develop. Long after participants begin to refer to one another as "cyberfriends," elements of mediated strangeness are still contributing to that association. People who frequent a particular electronic forum may come to recognize and "know" in some sense others they encounter there. Yet those who we know only through electronically mediated forums can be kept at that distance and remain the stranger from our everyday co-presence interactions. They are kept—or rather we may choose to keep our interactions with them—in this safe place called cyberspace. And in distancing them, while at the same time disclosing—we maintain for even cyberfriends their role as the stranger.

Yet it could also be that while the ideal typical stranger of Simmel's time was a mechanism for escape from the gemeinshaft of small communities, today's stranger is more often part of an ongoing search for connection. Certainly there are those who take to the Internet to find their strangers and want to keep them that way. Yet the Internet has also become a means for getting to know people and creating new circles of friends. Many regionally based Internet forums also host regular co-presence gatherings. Wysocki (1996) documents this in her observations of an AOL women's craft group who also meet at conferences. Internet forums fill the need for informal public gathering spaces lost in contemporary society (Rheingold 1993).

Stranger associations exist simultaneously within the walls of your homes and that of the other. In another sense they occur some-

where outside of both. This distortion of space perhaps lends itself to the ultimate of tension between perceived intimacy of bringing someone into your home and the real physical distance spanned by the connection. With telephony, a disembodied voice exists in the room with you. On the Internet, one travels to an electronically constructed space that to some extent is neither here nor there. At the same time, conversations scroll across your computer screen which sits just feet from the spaghetti cooking on the stove and the laundry which is still sitting in the corner of your bedroom. The construction of near and far becomes further ambiguous as the stranger in a sense enters your house perhaps daily. You log onto the computer and she waits for the digital signal that you are "home" and available.

Just as identity play among online strangers may have therapeutic value (Turkle 1995), the strange making qualities of the Internet and other mediums may have similar value for interaction between co-presence intimates and acquaintances. These technologies may lend themselves to deepening relationships among intimates. They may ease communications strained by cultural and normative taboos on expressing true feelings or discomforts. In particular, I am struck by the potential for establishing bridges that used to be taken for granted: the grandmother who now communicates regularly with a granddaughter over e-mail—but who could never get her granddaughter to talk to her on the phone; people with disabilities who may be relieved at the opportunity to meet people on a level playing field like the Internet; and, of course, people whose relationships with intimates have been strained because of some past events or occurrences. The medium may be just the safe space they need to massage a suffering relationship.

In addition, these strange-making mediums may problematize associations of the already acquainted or intimate. Out of co-presence character revelations, communicated under the guise of mediated safety, can be dangerous. There are no doubt many other Carls who have injured important relationships via medi-

ated indiscretions. And the Internet, more so than any other medium, can be explosive for mistakes such as that made by Megan. The ease with which messages can be forwarded to others almost assures that especially "juicy" mistakes travel like wildfire from Internet group to Internet group.

So when we pick up the phone or sit down at our computers, we can do so with a feeling of new and wonderful means for getting in touch with friends and family. We can also be excited about the potential for encountering interesting strangers. But as we construct and relay our messages we should also be wary. After all—when it comes right down to it—some things are just better left unsaid.

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