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Abstract

Past studies mostly suggest that virtual community be the platform especially applicable for private exchange because people express themselves through hiding their real images and identities in online interaction. On the other hand, the anonymously private opinions at cyberspace are easily cited and forwarded as public ones because of the powerful search engines and hyperlink connections of internet. We consider that both public and private aspects coexist in the interaction of virtual community. This study is conducted as an interpretive research and uses the views of "front region" and "back region" in dramaturgical theory to unobtrusively observe a virtual community. We analyze the data upon hermeneutic circle to find out that the point of reference of the stage in virtual community is shaky. The virtual community can be both public and private channel at the same time just as the front region and back region overlapping. We also expect that the administrative team of every virtual community recognize the subject matter and elaborate an appropriate online environment for their members.

Keywords: virtual community, internet privacy, dramaturgical theory, interpretive research, hermeneutic circle.

1   INTRODUCTION

Past studies mostly suggest that virtual community be the platform especially applicable for private exchange (Aiken & Alonzo, 2004; Armstrong & Forde, 2003; Baird, 1998; Bowker & Tuffin, 2002, 2003; Broom, 2005; Correll, 1995; da Cunha & Orlikowski, 2008; Galegher et al., 1998; Leimeister et al., 2008; Philippson, 2001; Ross, 2007; Turner et al., 2001). However, this study considers that the interaction in virtual community is both public and private. In online interaction, people, by hiding their real images and identities behind computers, do not have to face to each other. Thus, people easily treat the virtual community as a channel out of the real world to express secrets, construct ideal images and establish social relationship which cannot be fulfilled in the real world. On the other hand, with the powerful search engines and hyperlink connections of internet, the anonymously private opinions at cyberspace are easily cited and forwarded as public ones. Furthermore, the real identities of the people who express the opinions sometimes might be even exposed. It, therefore, demonstrates the public and private aspects in the interaction within virtual community.

Many studies observe online interaction in the light of dramaturgical theory (e.g.: Bowker & Tuffin, 2002; Broom, 2005; Correll, 1995; da Cunha & Orlikowski, 2008; Dominick, 1999; Ellison et al. 2006; Fayard, 2006; Panteli & Duncan, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002a,b; Ross, 2007; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Vaast, 2007; Wynn & Katz, 1997) which sophisticatedly interprets the face-to-face interaction by using the metaphor of the theatre performance. However, these studies do not notice that the situations of online interaction are different from that of the face-to-face interaction. For example, people usually communicate in written format which has little social cues in online interaction. On the contrary, there are abundant body languages and background messages in face-to-face interaction to define the situation upon interaction.

This study is conducted as an interpretive research and bases upon the views of "front region" and "back region" in dramaturgical theory. We unobtrusively observe a virtual community, Bookworm Club (alias), and analyze the data upon hermeneutic circle by iterating between the interdependent meaning of parts and the whole (Klein & Myers, 1999, Myers 2004). In addition to focusing on thick description of both public and private aspects in online interaction, this study also properly supplement "front region/back region" views in dramaturgical theory which is based on face-to-face interaction and does not involve the online interaction upon writing.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the "front region/back region" views in dramaturgical theory and the studies related to privacy and publicity at cyberspace. Section 3 describes the research setting and method used for data collection and analysis. Section 4 discusses our findings regarding the coexistence of privacy and publicity in virtual community. And, the conclusion is in final section.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Dramaturgical theory and the metaphors of front and back regions

Dramaturgical theory (Goffman, 1959) uses the metaphor of the theatre performance to explore social interaction. Various social situations and their settings are seen as the stages and everyone on a stage is the actor as well as the audience of other actors. Actors play their roles upon different scripts which might be the norms, rituals, obligations or expectations in their social settings. "Front region" is the place where performances take place, and "back region" is the place where the actors release from their roles and freely present their own selves which might contradict their roles on the stage. According to dramaturgical theory, should the back-region behavior be exposed to the audience, the actor' previous efforts on impression management would thus be in vain. Therefore, the actors must avoid the audience's participation in back region. In addition, when the actor plays multiple roles in different situations, the audience in different situations should be segmented. Thus, the audience will not witness improper behavior such as that happens in the back region. Dramaturgical theory also suggests that the front region at this performance might be the back region at that time, "in speaking of front and back regions we speak from the reference point of a particular performance, and we speak

of the function that the place happens to serve at that time for the given performance (p. 127)" (Goffman, 1959).

2.2 The privacy and publicity at cyberspace

As the definition of privacy, we loosely define it to be the state which usually avoids public notice but only exchanging between close relationships. Although the privacy at cyberspace is considerably questioned (Bakardjieva & Feenberg, 2001; Cranor, 1999; Donaldson, 2001; Froomkin, 1999; Gotterbarn, 1999; McCreary, 2008; McGinity, 2000; Poritz, 2007; Wynn & Katz, 1997), past studies on virtual community still consider that is the place especially applicable for private exchange. For instance, the minority describe their experience of discrimination through online interaction and show their difficulty on national identification (Baird, 1998); the individuals with stigma preferred interacting with others in similar situations in virtual community without exposing their real identities (Correll, 1995); the people suffering from special diseases exchange their complaints about the medicine with other patients and share their anxiety which they do not reveal to their families (Broom, 2005; Cummings et al., 2002; Galegher et al., 1998; Leimeister et al., 2008; Turner et al., 2001); the physically disabled temporarily neglect their imperfection in reality and get along with others equally in virtual community (Bowker & Tuffin, 2002, 2003); the criminal gangs may even be anonymous in virtual community to share their measures to avoid the legal responsibility (Armstrong & Forde, 2003; Philippson, 2001).

The metaphors of front and back regions are usually compared to publicity and privacy in those studies of online interaction. For instance, the patients of prostate cancer pretend to be calm and trust the profession in front of the doctors; however, they reveal their suspicion of the doctors' prescriptions in virtual community (Broom, 1995). The lesbians usually hide their sexual orientation in real world to avoid social pressure, but they have to release their stress and seek for emotional support in virtual community with other lesbians (Correll, 1995). The employees complaint the management team online when they encountered the organizational acquisition. After releasing their emotion in virtual community, they are more likely to adapt to the change in real life (da Cunha & Orlikowski, 2008). The London cabbies-in-training share their embarrassing experience on the road and tease officers of Public Carriage Office in virtual community (Ross, 2007). All of these researches treat the incidents in real world being the performance in front region and the online discussion being the back region behavior.

However, these studies rarely mention that the virtual communities do not only serve as back regions for releasing emotion or expressing true self, but also must be considered as a kind of front regions. For instance, the members in the lesbians' virtual community sometimes further contact with each other by private e-mails or meetings to avoid the conversations being overheard in their virtual community (Correll, 1995). In workplace, cafeteria or rest rooms, many employees secretly applaud the bold online critiques on the management team, but they never leave any words in the virtual community (da Cunha & Orlikowski, 2008). In the examples above, the discussion in the virtual community is suspicious to be exposed in front of the public and turns out to be the performance in front region. The exchange in real world becomes the back-region behavior because of its avoiding the examination of the all members in the virtual community. Unfortunately, the phenomenon which involved both front and back region behavior at the same time and in the same place is neither noticed nor elaborated in the said researches.

In her research on online video conferences, Fayard(2006) suggest that the boundary between front regions and back regions is collaboratively constructed. Being on camera or off camera defines the participants being in front region or back region, yet the specific role of each participant will influence his/her behavior. Thus, one can be spatially in front region but functionally in back region. Besides, Papacharissi(2002b) observes the personal web pages by front region and back region views. He regards the display of the web page as a performance in front region, and the techniques (including information technology or visual design) for making the web pages as a back-region behavior which supports the expected effects of the performance. Likewise, Winter et al. (2003) probed into

corporate web pages and treated the display of the web page as the performance in front region which can positively influence the potential customers' impression on the firms. The techniques for making the web pages then referred as back-region behavior which supported the expected effect of the front. Although Papacharissi's and Winter's researches focus on the web pages instead of virtual community, interestingly, both of them treat cyberspace as front region and the performance is in public. Their findings are different from most of the studies on virtual community which referring online communication to private channel. These researches inspire this study when reflecting on the publicity and privacy of the online interaction.

Based on what have done in the past, this study aims at properly supplement "front region/back region" views in dramaturgical theory which is based on face-to-face interaction and does not involve the online interaction upon writing; we also critique the argument that concerns virtual community as a secret space for private talk.

3   RESEARCH SETTING AND METHOD

This study observes Bookworm Club (alias) which was founded in June 2003. This virtual community aims to discuss the children's illustration books in various languages and share the children's learning of foreign languages. Linda (alias), the founder, her daughter studied in the elementary school at that time. Thus she was interested in collecting the children's illustration books of different countries and read with her daughter. She then founds Bookworm Club to share those books with others, and acquires more information from online discussion. The community is open to everyone who is interested in the issue but most of the current members are the married females with at least one or more children. Most of the interactions in this community are in written format and asynchronous mode. Linda devoted much time in early stage of foundation to participate in the discussion and response to inquiry. Her enthusiasm attracted nearly 800 members in less than six months. By November 2008, there had been around 5000 members.

This study selects Bookworm Club as research setting because one of the researchers has been members in this virtual community for more than five years and has in-depth understanding with the community culture. The researcher's sensibility with the situations would enhance the data collection and analysis. Although unconscious and unintended bias might exist for a researcher with long membership in that community, three researchers triangulate our findings regularly and we do discipline ourselves not to post anything considering intended inducement.

We unobtrusively observe Bookworm Club and conduct the data analysis by hermeneutic circle. The reason of collecting data by unobtrusive observation is that we concern the observed targets might modify their online behavior once they find out they are being observed. Therefore, only few members know the progress of this study. As to the research ethics upon unobtrusive observation, Allen et al. (2006) suggested that "Manual, nonautomated access of information on publicly available web pages should be acceptable without special permissions or actions (p. 607)". This study fully matches the principle of research ethics. Moreover, in this paper, we replace the real name of the virtual community and the personal online nicknames by the alias because of privacy concerns.

Data collection and analysis was conducted between September 2006 and August 2008. The researchers had been logged on to the community for at least five times per week and at least three hours per time. We browsed over 10,000 pieces of the discussion and had informal interviews with the members for about 20 hours. This study was conducted as an interpretive research which involves three hermeneutic circles by iterating between the interdependent meaning of parts and the whole (Klein & Myers, 1999, Myers 2004). The three circles are shown below:

- The first circle: The researchers participated in Bookworm Club with the lens of dramaturgical theory. The written interaction in virtual community was treated as theater performance. In this circle, one characteristic was significant: comparing with face-to-face interaction, virtual community interaction was not strict with the statements. For instance, some members shared their privacy online with strangers, which they might even hide from their families and the closest friends in face-to-face interaction. In virtual community, they descried the incidents in detail and

revealed their true feelings. Thus, the private talk in virtual community was highlighted which led to the second hermeneutic circle.

- The second circle: The researchers focused on private talk online and carefully browsed each discussion in the case community. After reading most of the articles and the responses, the researchers recognized the phenomenon contradicted to that in the first circle. As to private talk online, although privacy was shared in virtual community, some people might aware those statements was exposed to the public and suggested to eliminate the content to avoid the privacy being spread out. The phenomenon of both public and private interaction coexist in virtual community was highlighted which resulted in the third hermeneutic circle.

- The third circle: The researchers interpreted the public and private interaction in the case community by the lens of front region and back region in dramaturgical theory. We found that the front region and back region behaviors were coexistence in the online interaction. This phenomenon was not explained by dramaturgical theory because it rarely happened in face-to-face interaction. Therefore, we properly supplemented the theory in order to apply the dramaturgical theory to online interaction.

4 FINDINGS AND THEORETICAL INTERPRETATION

We propose three situations in view of front and back regions to illustrate Bookworm Club's different functions for members' online interaction.

- The statements in Bookworm Club are the front-region performances and the criticisms in other online space are back-region behavior.

Sophia (alias) is a school teacher who acts the role as a professional in Bookworm Club. She suggests parents that learning foreign language is easy and it depends on the efforts and multi-lingual environment. The famous teachers or popular cram schools are not necessarily for children to learn foreign languages. She declares that the debates on this subject matter in Bookworm Club "*are not worthy of further discussion*". Besides, Sophia keeps emphasizing that her son is a talented student and is tutored by the professor of mathematics. She questions the approach that most of children learn their math in primary school but refers her son's special learning experience to "*the unique competence of my family*". No one opposes Sophia's statements in Bookworm Club. However, members of Bookworm Club criticize Sophia in the other similar virtual communities and personal blogs. Some people indicate that Sophia is arrogant and some challenge her profession. Someone even suggest that her statement is not reliable.

In this case, Bookworm Club is the front region for the performance. Sophia acts the expert who offers advice and guidance on educational matters. Her statements are publicly posted in the community which can be accessed any time by anyone who is in need. According to the scripts, which may be the norms of this community, members should show respect to the experts. Any obtrusive offend or opposite view must be avoided to sustain the authority of the expert. Sophia's interaction with the other members is thus the front-region behavior. On the other hand, other similar virtual communities and personal blogs provides a free space for members to express their angers and uncomfortable. Those online spaces serve as the back region for actors to release from the roles' expectation.

- The statements in Bookworm Club are front-region performances and the complaints in real lives are back-region behavior.

Not all of the members express their opinions against Sophia at cyberspace. Some of them consider cyberspace is the place that no privacy. They have concerns to show the true feeling through online interaction. As one member of Bookworm Club does, she gossips with other member in real word meeting by saying that "*She(Sophia) always says that what we've done for our children is unnecessary and tries to show how relaxed her child is every day. She likes to boast of her talented child. It is not the fact. I know she does care. She takes much time to develop her child's academic competence. But she always says that she does nothing for her child except play with him.*"

Ironically, in spite of these words, this member keeps asking for Sophia's advice and showing her appreciation for Sophia's opinions in Bookworm Club.

Similar to the first case, Bookworm Club is the front region for the performance. The discussion between Sophia and the other members is the public statement which should fulfil the manners and the rules of politeness in this community. This member chooses to show her true feelings and secret opinions in face-to-face interaction because her conversation in real world will not be logged for anyone to read like online interaction. Therefore, the meeting in real world serves as the back region for privacy talk.

- The opinions in virtual community refer to back-region behavior and the criticism in other online space is front-region performance.

Although the critics might originally intend to complain privately, Sophia finds out those words through hyperlink connection. She posts one website address in Bookworm Club to invite the members to visit her personal blog. She writes in her blog, "*I randomly visit others' blogs and find out those awkward words about me*". She feels "*helpless and angry*". With regard to some harsh criticism, she says "*when you write that the expert is nothing better than a trained dog, you should check it out if you are capable of recognizing how this dog being trained. If you cannot, you are not better than a dog*". Sophia points out that the harsh criticism in those virtual communities and personal blogs have been lasted for a while and she will no longer tolerate the situation. Next time, she will authorize the lawyer to write the plaint and ask those critics to "*apologize to me in public for their inappropriate statements*".

In this case, criticisms in other similar virtual communities or personal blogs are exposed accidently to everyone online through hyperlink connections or Google searching. Those spaces are originally treated as back region for private complaint but turn out to be front region incidentally for public offense. Contrary to those criticisms, Sophia's statements in Bookworm Club or her personal blogs are more like back region behavior, because she admits her helplessness and indignation which are definitely not the scripts for her role as a expert in Bookworm Club.

Based on the analysis above, virtual community is both public and privacy in its characteristic, which depends on the function of virtual community serves at that time. If members reveal their secrets or true feelings which are concealed elsewhere, the function of virtual community is for privacy exchange. However, if those privacy statements are open for everyone to read at any time, the function of virtual community is a public database for information gathering. While physical setting can only be either private space or public stage at specific point of time, virtual community can be both public and private channel at the same time as the front region and back region overlapping.

5 CONCLUSION

In this study, we find that online interaction in virtual community is not only for private exchange but for public statement. As referring to dramaturgical theory, it points out that the line to divide front and back regions is based on the point of reference which defines the function of a place at specific point of time. Thus a physical place can be front region at one time but is back region at another time. However, in virtual community, we argue that the point of reference of the stage is shaky. The virtual community can be both public and private channel at the same time just as the front region and back region overlapping. In terms of space, private talk and public statement in virtual community are relative instead of absolute; in terms of time, when the time passes by, the increasing potential audience is the critical factor to turn the private talk into public statement.

Moreover, because of overlapping front and back regions in virtual community, it is difficult to separate the audience from the back region, as suggested in dramaturgical theory, to avoid the exposure of the privacy or the disillusion of the established images. According to one observed participant who has experienced the disputes of many interactions in virtual community, she writes "*there are no secrets at all at cyberspace.*" Past researches usually treat virtual community with the

metaphor of back region since the online users anonymously express their private opinions without encountering awkward face-to-face situation. However, we argue that those researches are at the risk of neglecting the overlapping of front and back regions, and interpreting the phenomenon in virtual community without recognizing in-depth meaning.

In practice, this study will hopefully provide an insight in the regulations or influence on virtual community development. For instance, the labor union constructs the intranet to enhance the employees' unity or deal with their complaints, or the experts in business circle establish exchange community to share the job and market information. Since the discussion is likely to be related to the employees' negative complaints about the organizations as well as their willingness and reasons to obtain the jobs and turn over, the confidentiality should be ensured so that the people will freely share their opinions in the community to fulfill the objective of the foundation. With the arguments in this study, the administrative team of every virtual community will recognize that both public and private characteristics coexist in online interaction, and be expected to elaborate appropriate online environment for their members.

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