

Social Presence as Presentation of Self

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Abstract

This paper distinguishes between two different social presence concepts: social presence as projection of the other and social presence as experience. The concept is further explicated by relating it to presentation of self [1]. This is illustrated by excerpts from ongoing qualitative research.

Keywords ---social presence, copresence, mediated communication, mobile phone.

1. Two senses of social presence

Definitions of social presence are wide-ranging. However, analysis of numerous definitions suggests there is an underlying confusion between two closely related, but different usages of 'social presence'. The difference is subtle. Firstly, and in line with Short et al., [2] social presence is used for the sense or perception of another, that is, the projected presence of a person. Secondly, social presence is used for the experience of being present, that is, socially present in an environment which includes another. The former is the 'sense of the other', the latter, the 'sense of **being** with the other'. At first sight these appear to be simply two sides of the same thing, but this is incorrect. The former is intersubjective, and refers to social presence as projection or presentation; the latter is subjective, the phenomenological experience of being present socially. The first is closer to Short et al., the second is closer to copresence, and is about being with others. This explains how copresence may be conflated with social presence.

Short et al. [2, p. 65] introduced their "hypothetical construct" social presence in the first, projected, sense. It is "the degree of salience of the other person", and is related to the transmission of cues through the medium. Although, Short et al. introduced social presence from the perspective of the receiver in the interaction, the term is also used in a more active sense, from the perspective of the sender. This first person perspective is typically found in learning theory literature [e.g. 3] changing social presence from a passive transmission of cues to an active accomplishment of the sender, a presentation of self.

The second sense of social presence is an experience, the sense of **being** with another rather than the sense of another. For example, Sallnas: "Social presence refers to the feeling of being socially present with another person at a remote location", [4, p. 22]. Figure 1 shows the difference between the two senses of social presence.

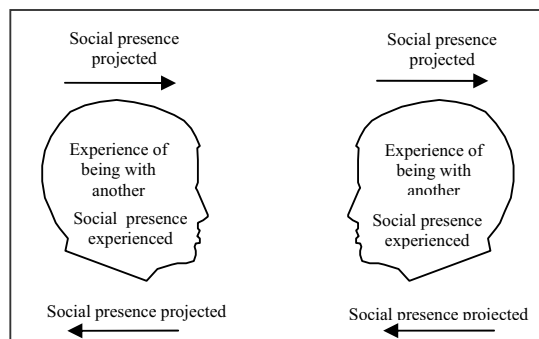


Figure 1: Two Senses of Social Presence

Garau [5] notes that the concepts of social presence and copresence are confounded; this occurs when social presence is used in the second sense of being socially present with another. One way to distinguish social presence and copresence is to use the distinction between the first and second person. Taking experienced social presence, there is a difference between my subjective experience and your subjective experience. These distinctions are relevant to social presence, but less relevant to copresence. Whereas I might, unilaterally, experience being socially present with another, copresence is a **mutual**, symmetrical relationship. On this definition, one-way media enable social presence, but not copresence; the unilateral use of web cam with instant messenger would increase social presence, but only bilateral use would create copresence. Copresence refers to the **mutual** awareness of each other by the participants in an interaction.

The remainder of the paper is concerned with social presence as defined by Short et al. [2], i.e. as a projection.

2. Social presence and presentation of self

Short's concept of social presence is strikingly similar to Goffman's [1] presentation of self. Introducing the concept of social presence, Short et al. [2, p. 64] relate it directly to the presentation of self, commenting that on the telephone "negotiators are likely to be less concerned with the presentation of the self". On the telephone there is a reduced capacity to transmit cues such as "facial expression, direction of looking, posture, dress and non-verbal cues"; this reduces the social presence of the medium. This also reflects the similarity between social presence and presentation of self, for Goffman these cues are expressions given off in the presentation of self.

This paper suggests that the presentation of self helps to illuminate the concept of social presence. Unlike social presence, which assumes that there is a holistic combination of cues that is perceived as projected, albeit depleted by mediated channels, Goffman recognised that both are constructions. The social presence of an individual is not invariant, but is a performance created through expressions and directed at the maintenance of a particular perspective. Presentation of self is adapted to the situation, including roles, context and social norms. Furthermore, the self projected depends not only on the various cues, but on their classification by the recipient as intentional or unintentional. These complexities mean that the projected self perceived by the other participant may be different from the intended presentation of self.

The complexity of presentation of self challenges the simplicity of social presence, which is treated as a straightforward construct, sent and received either directly in face-to-face interaction or with some loss through mediated channels; the element of joint construction and collaboration in interaction is ignored. Goffman also claims that both the projection and the reception of cues are **deliberately** adapted for different channels. Although most research on social presence has been done with strangers, the salience of the other is likely to be less dependent on cues when people already know one another. In this case, cues may serve more as reminders and less like the ‘building blocks’ of a holistic perception of the other.

1. Research

This section briefly describes ongoing research which illustrates how an exploration of expressions given off can provide a more sensitive analysis than social presence. The research explores the **perceived** affect of medium on communication, focused on two media which coincide in a single device, mobile phone calls and texts. The research consists of 32 ethnographic interviews. Respondents were all regular users of mobile phones, over 21, equally split between men and women, and included different social classes and work statuses. A number of techniques were used to elicit the personal constructs used to categorise communication channels, for more details see [6].

Although, respondents did not seem to have any holistic conception corresponding to social presence, the items of the original Short et al. [2] scale were frequently used spontaneously. For instance, the warm–cold, sensitive – insensitive dimensions were sometimes used to explain choice between channels. ‘Social’ was also used, but it was contrasted with work rather than unsocial; personal was frequently used but rarely contrasted with impersonal. The research also suggests that these are not simple concepts suitable for linear scales. For instance, personal was used in at least three different ways. It usually meant ‘intimate’ but was also used to mean ‘private’ and ‘characteristic of a person’. The contents of mobile phones are personal in the sense of being private. Phone calls are also personal in the sense that voices are **personally** distinctive, and specific to a person (like handwriting in a letter). However,

respondents frequently used personal in the sense of ‘intimate’. Even in this specific usage, respondents were often unable to categorise text messages as more or less personal than phone calls, because the two media are intimate in different ways. The lack of copresence meant that people could safely say more intimate things in a text message; on the other hand, phone calls are intimate because response is concurrent and spontaneous. This illustrates how linear comparison of media on these dimensions is inappropriate.

The research also explores how control over cues given off varies in the two media, and how these are **deliberately** used in the presentation of self and construction of social presence, for instance, in the exact timing of a text message.

3. Conclusions

This paper distinguishes two different concepts that are conflated under the term ‘social presence’, social presence projected and social presence as experience. Projected social presence is related to Goffman’s [1] presentation of self. The concept of presentation of self suggests that social interaction is more complex and multi-dimensional than that assumed by social presence theory, and recognises the active involvement of an individual in the projection of self.

The paper also briefly describes ongoing research on mobile phone calls and text messages. This research suggests that although respondents do not have any holistic conception corresponding to social presence, the dimensions of ‘social presence’ **are** relevant to the differentiation of media. However, they are complex constructs and consequently linear scales are inappropriate.

Qualitative research can be used to explore how expressions given and given off are used in the projection and interpretation of self. This approach improves understanding of the interactional effects of mediation and facilitates comparison of communication channels.

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