

The invisible technologies of Goffman's sociology from the merry-go-round to the internet.

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Abstract

Erving Goffman is not usually thought of as sociologist of technology. In this paper I argue that Goffman's early studies are replete with materiality and technologies. By paying more attention to mundane and invisible technologies, such as merry-go-rounds, surgical instruments, and doors, I argue that Goffman's interaction order can be shown to be materially and technologically framed, staged, and mediated. Important notions such as "role distance," "front stage," and "backstage" turn out to depend crucially upon materiality and technologies. When it comes to studying the internet there is thus, in principle, no fundamental distinction to be drawn between online and off-line interaction; both are forms of performed,

staged, and mediated interaction. I show how Goffman's notion of copresence can be extended to the study of the internet and speculate as to what a sociology of material performativity, which combines interactional sociology with the insights of Social Construction of Technology, might look like.

ESSAY

The Invisible Technologies of Goffman's Sociology

From the Merry-Go-Round to the Internet

TREVOR PINCH

Old technologies live on alongside new ones. Often the old technologies become invisible, just part of the stuff of life while attention is focused on a subset of technologies deemed new and interesting. For example, David Edgerton points out that whereas the Second World War is often seen as the crucible for new technologies from microwave radar to the atomic bomb, the extensive role of horses in the war is frequently overlooked.¹ These invisible, mundane technologies are my focus here, and I wish to address how making such technologies more visible might contribute toward our sociological understanding of technology.

In thinking about the future of the history of technology for the fiftieth-anniversary SHOT conference, I remain convinced that because of technology's deep embedding in society, the sociology of technology has much to offer historians. Much of the contribution of the sociology of technology over the last decades has come from focusing on innovation and opening up the black box of design.² Even the recent turn toward users has been framed

Trevor Pinch is professor of science and technology studies and sociology at Cornell University. He is grateful to Ron Kline and Rachel Prentice for helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay. This paper was first presented at SHOT's Fiftieth Anniversary Conference in Lisbon on 12 October 2008.

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1. David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900* (Oxford, 2006).

2. See for example Donald MacKenzie, *Inventing Accuracy: A Historical Sociology of Nuclear Missile Guidance* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); Wiebe E. Bijker, *Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs: Toward a Theory of Sociotechnical Change* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); Trevor Pinch and Frank Trocco, *Analog Days: The Invention and Impact of the Moog Synthesizer* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor J. Pinch, eds., *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the History and Sociology of Technology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987); and W. E. Bijker and John Law, eds., *Shaping Technology/Building Society* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).



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