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## **Issue No. 18 2010 — The Face and Technology**

GUI Faces / Sticky Ethics  
By *Laurie Johnson*

Two years ago, in an article published in *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics*, I attempted to lay groundwork for an ethical framework for computer mediated communication (CMC) based on the work of Emmanuel Levinas and, in particular, a redefinition of the concept of the “face” – the article was titled “Face-Interface, or the Prospect of a Virtual Ethics” (Johnson) – on which the ethical relation described by Levinas hinges. The article developed the argument that in the engagement of the user with a user *interface*, the technology of CMC provides the example we need of the “bringing my self forth, beyond the surface projected as my exterior limit” (54) that forms the basis for an ethical framework. The present essay is in many respects a return to that article because, in the two years since that article appeared, research into CMC seems to have undergone a paradigm shift, perhaps not easily recognisable to those in the midst of conducting this research, but one that may force the prospect of a virtual ethics to be reassessed. My

argument here will be that the conclusions drawn in the previous article continue to hold good, precisely because the paradigm shift I describe has followed a direction that is matched to the general principle that was articulated there as a necessary precursor to an ethics of the virtual: as the object changes, then so does the locus of the phenomenological investigation on which any ethical framework is to be founded. Equally, any contingent framework also proves to be fundamentally “sticky” – that is, it clings to a notion of *adherence* rather than to an assumption of *inherence* – which, I contend further, is a crucial feature of any truly *ethical* ethics.

This notion of a “truly ethical ethics” is one that may strike the reader as somewhat redundant, in these terms at least, so it will require a brief word of elaboration. One question that should be asked of any ethical framework is whether or not it establishes in *a priori* fashion that a given entity, practice, or structure is *inherently* either ethical or unethical. The abiding premise on which this paper stands is that we do a disservice to people or things if we prescribe in closed off fashion, in advance, that they possess the singular quality of being either ethical or unethical. To put this in the most direct manner, we should insist only that actions or relations shall be described as ethical-unethical; people or things shall not. “Actions or relations” should be understood in this context as ephemeral phenomena, such as an act carried out by an individual agent or specific relationships between agents in the here-and-now of the act of interrelating. When we talk of an “entity, practice, or structure,” on the other hand, we refer to an understanding that things pre-exist these ephemeral actions or relations and are seen as possibly pre-determining them. For example, an agent carries out an action so is viewed as being prior to and determining the action; this agent also uses a given method and possibly adheres to a set of pre-ordained rules. If we presume that any of these pre-existing people or things are inherently ethical, then we risk being unable to adequately assess each individual action as being either ethical or unethical on its own terms. The same should apply, I contend, to the ethical framework itself: it must not be presumed that “ethics” – the study of ethical conduct – is itself inherently ethical; rather it must be conducted ethically in each instantiation. When, under the aegis of “ethics,” I study what another person does, my conduct must also be ethical inasmuch as it is responsible to this Other in the very specificity of his or her Otherness from me. Reducing the Other to the quality of being inherently ethical or unethical denies the Other this specificity, and is therefore not an ethical way to conduct my study of what this other person does.

The point is made here not by way of any attempt to single out the ethical frameworks of other theorists as failing this test. Rather, this notion of an “ethical ethics” is being used here because this paper seeks to demonstrate that the terms around which discussions of the ethics of CMC have revolved invariably present the participants with a situation in which they will automatically fail this test of inherency. CMC has, by definition, been viewed in these discussions as the opposite of face-to-face (FTF) communication and, as such, as not including any direct encounter with the face of another person. Accordingly, CMC has invariably been regarded as a practice in which ethics cannot inhere, devoid as it is of the encounter with the “face” – Levinas, for one, being very clear about the pre-ordinance of this encounter as the basis for an ethical relation with the Other. Yet it is difficult to be programmatic about the Levinasian face since, as I have argued elsewhere, the concept of “face” was never programmatically defined by Levinas; rather, it was presented in different ways in different contexts, but always ultimately in so far as it could be used to explain the fundamental and necessary “alterity” of the Other:

The otherness of the Other is always an otherness within a relation between two. This fundamental principle, once established, becomes the conceptual grounding on which Levinas builds the whole of his ethical framework. Alterity is nothing more nor less than what conjoins me to the Other as a responsible being, since it is the presence of the Other as another and the necessary recognition that I am therefore one in a relation with one other that allows me to come into knowledge of myself. Thus, I am wholly responsible to the Other for my being. (Johnson 51-52)

The “face” of the Other was not always in Levinas’s work the flesh and blood visage of a human interlocutor – though it became synonymous with a human face with ever greater insistence when he sought in later works to abstract the ethical relation via the notion of “proximity,” for example – and at various times it served more generally as a term to describe any aspect of the relation to the Other through which “I” am brought forth into language. In other words, the face is more generally that to which I respond when I am enjoined to do so in order to come into knowledge of myself. Using the Levinasian framework as a starting point, then, we must ground all thinking of the virtual within the phenomenal. This is to say that we establish a need for a phenomenological approach to CMC “rather than treating the computer as an incidental component in the recession of the human interlocutors from one another” (Johnson 52).

The task of the present paper is to examine whether the phenomenological imperative for which I have argued elsewhere is by its nature going to run up hard against established epistemological frameworks in CMC studies. The notion of an ethical ethics on which the present paper is grounded helps us to pinpoint the problem with this established approach to CMC, since dismissal of the potential for CMC to enable ethical relations between two people is based on the *a priori* distinction between CMC and FTF: they are seen as being inherently different. The possibility of an ethical encounter in CMC is thus closed off in advance. Yet it could also be argued that attempts to counter this presumption by insisting that there is a “face” present in CMC, run the risk of similarly failing the test of presumed inherency precisely because they rely on a negation of terms, taking as true that which is held to be false in the opposing argument. Our goal must therefore not be to argue simply that CMC is an inherently ethical space by virtue of possessing the thing that Levinas argues is at the core of the ethical encounter. Instead, we should be seeking to study each instance of use of CMC as a field of interlocution, with a view to finding whether or not it meets a number of prerequisite conditions for ethical conduct. We look, that is, to whether or not each instance of the use of CMC *adheres* to a set of broadly defined ethical principles. If the lack of the “face” has been problematic in the attempt to identify CMC as an ethical space, it is because we have for so long simply assumed in the field of CMC studies that there is no “face” in CMC. Our sense of the ethical possibilities for CMC have thus become fundamentally “stuck” in a principle of inherency, whereas an ethical ethics of CMC will seek only to be “sticky” – looking to adherence anew in each instantiation – rather than stuck. This, then, is our challenge here: to demonstrate that within CMC studies in recent years, we are witnessing a paradigm shift that will enable us to develop a suitably “sticky” ethics of CMC.

Evidence of the traditional distinction in CMC studies can be found by undertaking even the most cursory inspection of the literature. In the 1970s and 1980s, a suite of models were developed by communication researchers to explain the behaviour of users of CMC. Social presence theory (Short, Williams and Christie), information richness theory (Daft and Lengel), and reduced social/context cues theory (Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler and McGuire),

for example, contributed each in their own way to explaining how interpersonal communication via computer directly differed from FTF communication, invariably with the example of CMC – email, ICQ relay chat, MOO or MUD, and so on – seen as lacking in comparison with what communication studies had been telling us for years about FTF communication. For this reason, these earliest theoretical responses to CMC within communications research are known collectively as the *deficit* approaches to CMC, which according to Crispin Thurlow, Laura Lengel and Alice Tomic usually characterise CMC as “impoverished, impersonal, ineffectual and emotionally cold” (47). The deficit approach was relaxed by a number of models developed in the 1990s in the wake of the work of Janet Fulk, Charles W. Steinfield, Joseph Schmitz, and J. Gerard Power in 1987 on social information processing theory, which holds that the patterns of use adopted in CMC are directly influenced by social contexts such as the role played by “significant others in an individual’s social field” (Zack and McKenney 253). The point of social information processing theory is that users of CMC in structured networks such as an organisational communication setting tend to shape their communications online according to the same structural rules they apply offline: an email to a superior will be as deferential as would be the speech of the individual in any FTF meeting with the same person, for example. The theory was expanded from the organisational domain to more general interpersonal relationships in 1992 by Joseph Walther, whose “relational perspective” drew from a longitudinal analysis of CMC use to demonstrate that the “negative relational effects” on which earlier CMC research focused was in fact “confined to narrow situational boundary conditions,” whereas long-term interlocutors exhibited positive relational behaviour by developing individuated impressions through verbal or textual cues accumulated across a number of CMC interactions (“Interpersonal” 52).

In the early 1990s, Martin Lea and Russell Spears were also overturning the deficit approach to CMC through a re-examination of “de-individuation,” a concept that had in previous research been associated negatively with disinhibition but in their view was linked instead to social and normative factors associated with group polarisation (283). In the years that followed, Walther, Lea and Spears, and many others following their lead, generated research in support of the contention that CMC was actually superior in many ways to FTF rather than being in deficit by comparison with it. In 1996, Walther expanded the relational perspective into a fully formed model of “hyperpersonal interaction” recognising that in CMC the user has increased ability to shape or conceal aspects of self-presentation in comparison with FTF communication. Lea and Spears were more circumspect with regards to ascribing either a positive or a negative value to this newfound superiority of CMC and focused instead simply on demonstrating the “hidden power” of CMC (“Panacea”), explaining boundary-formation in CMC (Postmes, Spears and Lea), or examining the “power of influence” exercised in virtual groups (Spears, Postmes, Lea, and Wolbert). If the earlier approaches to CMC can be characterised as inhering in a deficit approach, I think it is fair to say that the newer wave of studies undertaken in the 1990s contributed collectively to what we may call a *surplus* approach, in which suspicion or even panic about CMC gave way to newfound optimism or at least open-mindedness with respect to its potential rather than its limitations. From a generation of deficit approaches to a second generation of surplus approaches, then, it seems that there was a fundamental revolution in CMC studies during the 1990s and beyond.

Yet both approaches are grounded in a shared premise: regardless of whether one sees CMC as inferior or superior to FTF communication, both hold true to the fundamental belief in the difference in kind between the two types of communication. A comment like this may indeed seem so banal as to barely warrant mentioning: surely this is like saying that astronomers and

astrologers, while disagreeing over the interpretive value of stellar bodies, nevertheless both hold true to the belief in the existence of stars. My contention would be that such an observation about CMC research is not as banal as this example suggests. Rather than disagreement between two explanatory models in relation to the observed properties of the same object, as is the case with the example of astronomers and astrologers, the disagreement between the deficit and the surplus approaches in CMC research amounts to that over the comparative value of properties possessed by objects belonging to two mutually exclusive classes of objects. Needless to say, this is a logical fallacy: the class of objects identified as CMC excludes direct interlocutory modes of communication (there is no face to whom one speaks directly), just as the latter excludes the former (there is no computer to mediate between the two speakers in face-to-face interlocution); there are, therefore, no properties that could be said to be common to the objects of both classes; so the attribution of relative value is never based on direct comparison of common properties. A counterargument could be mounted on the basis that surely both are in fact subsets of the class of communicative practices, so the objects in both share a property of being forms of communication and comparison can be made on the basis of how each performs the functions of any act of communication. This would be – or, indeed, should be – true of how a comparison of CMC with non-CMC or of FTF with non-FTF modes of communication may proceed directly. Yet in the terms with which I have just now spelled out these classifications, we see precisely why the observation above is not entirely banal: the premise shared by proponents of either the deficit or surplus approaches to CMC is faulty on the basis that it presumes there are only two types of communication on which to base relative value claims.

This idea that there is only either CMC or FTF communication seems entrenched in the literature, and is characterised by a trope of direct competition between the two. The use of the word “versus” has become something of a commonplace in studies of CMC from both the deficit and surplus camps, used often in the titles of articles and, in the last decade, appearing with ever more increasing frequency as a statement of the scope of the research. Starr Roxanne Hiltz, Kenneth Johnson and Murray Turoff’s 1986 article, “Experiments in Group Decision Making Communication Process and Outcome in Face-to-Face Versus Computerized Conferences” is an example from the early deficit approaches, while Andrea Hollingshead, Joseph McGrath and Kathleen O’Connor’s contribution from 1993, “Group Task Performance and Communication Technology: A Longitudinal Study of Computer Mediated Versus Face-to-Face Work Groups,” is an example from the transitional period during which the surplus models prompted by the work of Walther and Lean and Spears were gaining acceptance. The trope of direct competition acquired significant leverage in 1997 with the publication of Prashant Bordia’s “Face-to-Face Versus Computer-Mediated Communication: A Synthesis of the Experimental Literature” in the *Journal of Business Communication*. Bordia’s article has subsequently been heavily cited, as it provides an accessible and brief account of the major work being done in CMC studies up to that point. Of even more importance than its value as a survey of past literature, though, is the idea that Bordia’s decision to use the trope of direct competition to represent this literature was a key factor in delaying the paradigm shift that we are chiefly concerned with here. I will explain this observation shortly. Suffice to note here that since 1997, the phrase “face-to-face versus computer-mediated” has proliferated in CMC research articles as a statement of the scope of the research. It is as if the phrase has become synonymous with the entire field *qua* Bordia’s synthesis of the past literature. Recent examples of titles spanning the past decade bear this out: “An Experimental Analysis of Face to Face Versus Computer Mediated Communication Channels” in 1999 (Barkhi, Jacob and Pirkul); “Communication Patterns in Computer Mediated Versus Face-to-Face Group Problem Solving” in 2001 (Jonassen and Kwon II); and

“Face-to-Face Versus Computer-Mediated Communication in a Primary Setting” in 2005 (van der Meijden and Veenman) – these are but three examples from very different perspectives on the field, all relying on the same trope to locate their specific focus within a broader map of CMC *versus* FTF communication.

The effect of this trope of direct competition is thus to lock in a paradigm: the two are different – indeed, they are mutually exclusive – but are also inverse elements of each other. The properties of objects in each class also include, that is, the direct inverse or negative of the properties of objects in the other, the result being not just two mutually exclusive classes but a *dichotomy* with perfect inverse complementarity. New studies in CMC in the past decade have therefore been confronted immediately with a need to stake their claims on either of two opposing terms, where nary the twain shall meet. It is not hard to establish in logical terms why this is a false dichotomy, since it relies on two discrete inverse elements to establish difference between two sets of terms: one is mediated and the other is unmediated *and* one assumes the presence of the face while the other assumes the presence of a computer. It could be argued that these are very much dependent elements, since it is the presence of a computer that introduces the element of mediation; thus, remove the computer and you remove the mediation. Yet I maintain that the two elements are discrete, because it is possible to think of examples of at least the two other available classes of objects in which only one of the elements is inverted: unmediated communication involving a computer would be any practice wherein a simple human-computer interaction is involved, without a second human interlocutor (automated telephone operators, game command screens, and so on); and face-to-face mediated communication, where mediation refers to the conveyance of data rather than dispute resolution for the sake of equivalence here, could involve the use of a messenger, the use of an interpreter or even cross-cultural communication more generally. The classes excluded by the trope of direct competition can in this way be shown to be of sufficient scale as to warrant attention, but the fact remains that invariably where the objects identified here are included in the research, the elements are inverted only in accordance with the trope. Thus, automated telephone operators or games are treated as examples of CMC, even where the communicative act is not designed to include a second human interlocutor.

The shared premise to which I referred above comes down to this fundamental error in logic, then: it conflates two discrete elements (computer + mediation) into a single term and opposes it as the inverse to another term comprising the conflation of two discrete elements (face + unmediated *viz* “to-face”). In new research being undertaken in CMC studies, though, I think it is possible to see that the terms in which this error is expressed, and the trope of direct competition through which the error has become compounded, are undergoing significant review, albeit as an implicit effect rather than as an explicit intention of the research in question. The change has come about due to the fact that researchers have become increasingly interested in the role played by the face – or at least a graphical representation of a human face – in CMC. Before looking at some of these studies and the nature of the paradigm shift that I think is underway, we should note that the long standing dichotomy on which the previous paradigm was grounded hinged persistently on the idea that communication via computer was not a graphical environment. From Bordia’s influential publication of 1997, we find this as one of the initial explanations of the distinction between the two modes:

Unlike FTF or audio communication, the medium in CMC is primarily textual. There are no nonverbal cues to embellish meaning or social context cues regarding gender, age, or status. Not only can the absence of cues hamper

communication efficiency, but it seems to create a semblance of anonymity and lack of awareness of the social context. (100)

Recall once again that this item was published in 1997, and note also that the eighteen studies that Bordia synthesises date from the period 1985 to 1994. Along these lines, it is also worth noting that graphical user interfaces (GUI) were already cornering the domestic personal computer (PC) market by around the date of the earliest publication covered by Bordia: following the initial commercial trials of a GUI interface in the Xerox Star 8010 in 1981 (Norman 316), Apple launched the relatively unsuccessful Apple Lisa in 1983 (later rebadged as the Macintosh XL) and then the very successful Apple Macintosh – which was launched via “a dramatic Orwellian commercial during the Superbowl football game in January 1984” (Allan 10/22) – and IBM followed suit with the development of TopView in 1984, which was overtaken in the PC world by Microsoft’s now ubiquitous Windows, released in 1985 (Allan 12/18-19).

The point of this brief history of the early emergence of GUI technology is that a key basis for the distinction between CMC and FTF *circa* 1985 to 1994 and as articulated in a highly influential article in 1997 is that “CMC is primarily textual” when in fact a GUI revolution had already radically altered the computing landscape by the start of the period during which these studies were being conducted. From 1985 onwards, the PC and, with it, the vast majority of communicative practices covered under the rubric of CMC acquired at least some graphical component. Yet the earlier studies from the period covered by Bordia could be excused for not conceiving of CMC as graphical at least on the basis that their focus was principally on human-to-human communication which, for the most part, could be covered under email and instant messaging, both of which had long predated the advent of graphical interfaces. Space precludes detailed discussion of the development of GUI components in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but I hope the reader with even a vague sense of the history of computer games or the internet will appreciate the observation that we have for considerably longer than the last decade been witnessing the emergence of a range of primarily graphical interfaces for both human-computer interaction and human-to-human interaction via computer. While email and instant messaging, for example, may remain “primarily textual” it is fair to say that these tools have long since ceased to uniquely characterise the range of objects included in the class of CMC. Furthermore, even within any tool that could be described as primarily textual, GUI components such as emoticons, animations, and graphical avatars have become increasingly common. Thus, even in those pockets of CMC that remain primarily textual, Bordia’s summary of the medium as having “no nonverbal cues to embellish meaning or social context cues regarding gender, age, or status” has long been under siege by the technology itself.

For all this, however, we have noted the persistence of the trope of direct competition, perhaps in no small part due to Bordia’s own summary of the field at a time when the technology already seemed to have exceeded the terms of the distinction. Researchers did in fact become interested in the role of graphical components of CMC in the late 1990s, but the studies along these lines that I have encountered from that era seem to reproduce the trope of direct competition even as they concern themselves with issues of the representation of a face or any other graphical representation of an interlocutor within CMC. For example, John Bowers, James Pycock and Jon O’Brien presented a paper to the conference of the Special Interest Group on Computer-Human Interaction in 1996 in which they analysed social interaction in collaborative virtual environments (CVE) and found *inter alia* “systematic problems with turn taking and participation in such environments” and proposed technical

developments “to enhance interactivity in virtual worlds” (58). Thus, properties attributed to FTF interactions for collaborative purposes (turn taking and participation) are given a positive value and where the CVE environment diverges it is seen as problematic. The technology is seen as needing to be enhanced in order to bring it closer to these positive attributes. While less inclined to attribute positive values to either mode, Anne Lantz in her 2001 article, “Meetings in a Distributed Group of Experts: Comparing Face-to-Face, Chat, and Collaborative Virtual Environments,” explicitly concerns herself with “the difference between face-to-face, chat, and CVE meetings,” which is duly borne out by the data (111). One of the most significant figures in the emergence of the surplus approach, Joseph Walther, also engaged with the graphical components of CMC in 2001, in “Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words? Photographic Images in Long-Term and Short-Term Computer-Mediated Communication,” an article written with Celeste Slovacek and Lisa Tidwell. While they are intent on examining “the interplay of media properties as they interact with other, social variables,” the trio nevertheless express their research problem in a form that by now looks deeply familiar:

In other words, when, if ever, does the presentation of communicators’ photographs help or hinder their communication in online conferencing, compared to the impressions and relations that are built solely on the basis of text-based communication? Which is better, a picture or a thousand words?  
(106)

Phrases such as “help or hinder,” “compared to,” and the blunt “which is better” are of course exemplary of the trope of direct competition.

At a time when CMC studies seemed to want to collapse or at least reconsider the old dichotomy, then, the trope of direct competition persisted for a number of years past what would have seemed to be its expiry date. Bordia’s publication was no doubt a key to this, but we cannot overlook the importance of the fact that the new research into the presentation of faces and bodies in CMC was in many cases undertaken by the same people who had been proponents of either the deficit or surplus approaches (such as Walther) or were students of the same people. Whereas the technology may seem to have been changing in the blink of an eye, academic careers are for life. The onus on researchers at the end of the last millennium seemed to be on coming to terms with the graphical components of CMC at least in the terms with which they had been familiar for over two decades. Alternatively, researchers who wanted to avoid dealing with graphical components became increasingly mindful of needing to specify that the focus of their work was limited only to “text-based” CMC (see, for example, Garrison, Anderson and Archer; Hancock and Dunham; Herring; Jacobson; Tu – all published within the 1999 to 2002 timeframe). It is only in the last few years, I suggest, that the paradigmatic dichotomy between CMC and FTF has begun to relinquish its hold on CMC studies. I will briefly outline a number of studies that seem to me to collectively signal the decline of the old paradigm. Sriram Kalyanaraman and James Ivory offer a small glimpse of this new order in a paper they presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, 2006, “The Face of Online Information Processing: Effects of Emoticons on Impression Formation, Affect, and Cognition in Chat Transcripts.” Despite the seemingly innocuous nature of their topic, the authors correctly, in my opinion, claim that their “findings have several interesting theoretical implications and offer a promising direction for future CMC research” (6). Their work seeks to extend previous studies into emoticons which were “restricted to impression formation effects, examined emoticons as text-based symbols, or have been confined to e-mail conversations” and they offer instead a

more “holistic” analysis of emoticons in chat rooms in terms of gender bias and topic context (1-2), resulting in “a nuanced understanding of the effects of emoticons” (6). Importantly, the authors retreat from any compulsion to draft comparisons with FTF communication, and they do note that the use of emoticons constitutes a “non-verbal cue” (1).

Moving from emoticons to a more dynamic graphical representation of a face, Jeremy Bailenson, Nick Yee, Dan Merget, and Ralph Schroeder published a paper on “avatar realism” in the journal *Presence* in 2006, in which they compared levels of disclosure, emotional recognition and “copresence” in CVEs with three different levels of audio and graphic functionality. Importantly, from the perspective of this paper, the authors develop an explanatory model “for considering representations of humans that is not limited just to digital avatars” (360) for the purpose of enabling comparison between types of avatars ranging from a photograph to real-time virtual representations. In the same vein, Jun’ichiro Seyama and Ruth S. Nagayama produced a study in 2007 in the same journal dealing with “The Uncanny Valley: Effect of Realism on the Impression of Artificial Human Faces.” Their study was oriented toward a problem identified in the field of robotics, where it was previously believed that a human would develop an unpleasant impression of a humanoid robot with an almost perfect human appearance. Using a range of images from clearly non-human (a doll, a basic computer graphic, or a cartoon) morphed by degrees toward a clearly human face, the authors tracked how viewers responded to each image, and found that the “uncanny valley” predicted by roboticists – “too high a degree of human realism evokes an unpleasant impression in the viewer” (337) – could only be confirmed where the image possessed an abnormal feature such as enlarged eyes. The authors recognise that their findings are “applicable to any type of human-like object, such as dolls, masks, facial caricatures, avatars in virtual reality, and characters in computer graphics movies” (337), and given the work done by Bailenson, Yee, Merget and Schroeder, the reach of these studies becomes significant. As the authors of the earlier paper noted, “both verbally and nonverbally, people disclosed more information to avatars that were lower in realism.... In other words, people emote more freely when their avatar does not express those emotions” (Bailenson, Yee, Merget, and Schroeder 368). The two studies provide fresh insight into the status of representations of human faces in terms of how the user responds to them, as fundamental components of both the human-computer interaction and the user-to-user interaction, where there is no attempt to assume any *a priori* distinction between these two kinds of interaction.

Bailenson and Yee have continued working on avatars, and together with Nicholas Ducheneaut in 2009 published an article in *Communication Research* entitled “The Proteus Effect: Implications of Transformed Digital Self-Representation on Online and Offline Behavior” (Yee, Bailenson and Ducheneaut). Expanding on research that Bailenson and Yee had undertaken in 2007 on the role of avatar height on participant behaviour in virtual interactions, this study broadened the scope of the investigation to cover a range of avatar features in the context of the relationship between online and offline behaviour. While there remains a necessary functional differentiation between online and offline, this work is never drawn into demarcating any clear distinction, let alone constructing a scale of positive or negative values associated with either. From these examples of work involving Bailenson, Yee, and others in the last few years, we can see where the paradigm of difference and the trope of direct competition have begun to relinquish their hold on the field of CMC research. These recent studies are showing that it is possible to conceive of the role played by representations of faces in CMC without recourse to this paradigm. Freed from this paradigm, what do they tell us about the role of the face? Importantly, there is no clear delimitation of

online and offline self-representation: there is always potential for leakage between the response of the user to online faces and bodies and the behaviour of the same user offline. This is not to overturn the old paradigm absolutely by insisting instead that there is no clear difference between online and offline behaviour or even of their status as phenomena – per the phenomenological imperative for which I argued in the *Ethical Space* paper – but it does render unworkable the categorical distinction between CMC and FTF as modes of communication. Rather than CMC *versus* FTF, we now see research that is prepared to consider self-presentation along a continuum of related behaviours. This same research is also always demanding that these related behaviours are examined in detail, rather than seeking to extrapolate from observed behaviour in one object to the entire class of objects.

Can we form any conclusions, then, about the continuing validity of claims about the usefulness of a Levinasian framework for an ethical approach to CMC? If the field of CMC studies is already undergoing a paradigm shift that involves the dissolution of a distinction between CMC and FTF, and researchers are now prepared to consider the face in relation to presence and self-presentation in CMC, the Levinasian framework is no longer necessary in order to achieve the same goal. Yet the goal was not only to collapse the old dichotomy into a more fluid arrangement; the goal is ultimately to set up a robust ethical framework for CMC, which includes the demand that CMC not be reduced to a single class of objects with a single set of properties. The point is, again, that we do a disservice if we try to establish that any entity, practice or structure is *inherently* ethical. For this reason, a contingent phenomenological imperative is still in play as an adjunct to the ethical imperative: there is no single definition of CMC from which a complete ethics of CMC could be constituted, so we retain the need to engage in phenomenological inquiry into the differences between the various forms of CMC, and to investigate each use of CMC anew. It is useful, along such lines, to cling to something like the Levinasian “face” not just for the sake of distinguishing something like a face within CMC; rather, the Levinasian face is useful for the very reason that it asks us to always ask anew in each act of interlocution what it is that enjoins a user to respond in the manner of a “bringing forth” into language. A phenomenological imperative remains valid, in this sense, because even as CMC studies are becoming more open to the idea that CMC has its human face, so to speak, we do not wish to be drawn into another fallacious move by conflating a GUI representation of a face with the Levinasian face. The user is enjoined to respond within a CMC environment regardless of the absence of anything like a human face. As these latest studies in CMC are showing, perhaps, the GUI face may even represent a kind of obstacle to forming impressions of an interlocutor, which prompts us to ask if this also represents an obstacle to the formation of an ethical relation to the Other? There is clearly more work to be done in this direction. My point for now would be that we do not seek to determine in any universalising fashion a general principle of the effect of a GUI face on an ethical relation. Again, we seek to avoid declaring that something is *inherently* either ethical or unethical.

In place of a principle of inherence, as noted above, an ethical ethics requires that we abide by a principle of *adherence*, a “sticky” ethics as it were. The phenomenological approach allows the investigator in each instance to determine the extent to which an object *adheres* to the fundamental requirements of an ethical relation as described in the Levinasian framework: a bringing forth of the subject into language as a response to at least one Other in a relation between two. The Levinasian face remains a useful concept at all times in such a project as a direction finder of sorts, always the answer to hand in response to the question presupposed by this statement of principle: toward what does the subject orient the response? It is of course a contingent answer, and that is precisely its point, to be contingent within a

here-and-now of *a relation*. It is, in other words, purely relative. Investigations into an ethical framework for CMC bring this point to the surface with greater urgency, I suggest, because the field is at this very moment grappling with the question posed by the face. By this I do not mean that they are seeking the answer to the question posed by the face; rather, I suggest the latest researchers in CMC are only now coming to terms with what question it is that the face poses for them. As the old paradigm is overturned and the distinction between CMC and FTF collapses, researchers in the field face a new challenge: the challenge of the “face,” its realism, its uncanny valleys, and its protean nature. How will these researchers respond?

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