

# Social information

## *A informação social*

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### Abstract

Based on Erving Goffman's work, the article aims to discuss a definition of information centered on the type conveyed by individuals in a multimodal way, encompassing language and body in situations of co-presence, where face-to-face interaction occurs, and influencing inter-subjective formation of the self. Six types of information are highlighted: material information, expressive information, ritualized information, meta-information, strategic information, and information displays. It is argued that the construction of this empirical object tends to dissolve the tension among material, cognitive and pragmatic aspects, constituting an example of the necessary integration among them. Some vulnerable characteristics of the theory are critically mentioned and it is suggested that the concept of information displays could provide a platform to approach the question of the interaction order in its relations with the institutional and social orders, and consequently, to reassess the scope of the notion of social information analyzed.

**Keywords:** Goffman. Social information. Social interaction.

### Resumo

*O artigo, baseado na obra de Erving Goffman, apresenta uma noção de informação social que se centra na informação transmitida pelo sujeito de modo multimodal, envolvendo a linguagem e o corpo em situações de copresença em que ocorre interação face a face, com reflexos na formação intersubjetiva do self. São destacados seis estatutos do conceito que aparecem interligados: informação material, informação expressiva, informação ritualizada, metainformação, informação estratégica e exibições informacionais. Argumenta-se que a criação de tal objeto empírico para o campo da Ciência da Informação tende a dirimir a tensão entre aspectos materiais, cognitivos e pragmáticos, constituindo um exemplo de integração necessária entre eles. Mencionam-se criticamente alguns pontos vulneráveis da teoria apresentada, sugerindo-se que a ideia de exibição informacional possa constituir uma plataforma para abordar a questão da ordem interacional em suas relações com a ordem institucional e social e, conseqüentemente, para reavaliar o escopo da noção de informação social analisada.*

**Palavras-chave:** Goffman. Informação social. Interação social.

### Introduction

Part of the tension that permeates the field of Information Science considers the types of qualifications used to construct the object of study. From this point of view, the field of study has been classified under the categories of paradigms, conceptual models or projects, roughly following the physical-syntactic, cognitive-

-semantic or social-pragmatic categorization (Capurro 2003a). Although the physical focus of Shannon (1948) often serves as a criticizable starting point, many of his assumptions prevail in information system projects. The ascription of a cognitive nature to information in situations of mental or behavioral dilemma (Dervin, 1983; Belkin, 1990) is one of the canons of the field. More recently, it seems certain that the trends emphasize the experiential

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and social-pragmatic aspects with a focus on interaction (Wersig, 1993; Capurro, 2003b; Araújo, 2012).

The pertinence of classificatory schemes is less relevant than the need for debate. The resolution (or reduction) of the tension among physical, cognitive and social orientations should undergo integrative approaches, such as research projects, communicative action, pragmatics, certainly furthered by advances in linguistic studies. In this article we intend to temporarily leave aside the epistemological issues dealt with abstractly, although they are relevant and useful, to address the construction of an empirical object in an area rarely discussed in Information Science: Social Information. For this purpose, we will refer to one of the authors who has most explicitly addressed the issue from an empirical-analytic perspective: Erving Goffman.

Thus, based on the work of Goffman, this paper seeks to show the multifaceted status of Social Information which, in the very process of its construction, weakens opposition between matter, cognition and social practices. Before we proceed, some clarifications are necessary. Goffman is interested in face-to-face interactions in which the subjects are in the immediate presence of each other, consisting of a gathering. According to Goffman (1999, 2010a, 2011), it is always a matter of several interaction orders (physical, visual, linguistic etc.) to which the author attributes a statute of autonomy that he considers fundamental in the development and reconfiguration of the self and whose rules he seeks to study. Therefore, the focus is the importance that bodies acquire in situations of co-presence, and the study of Social Information and its effects on an idea of identity based on socio-interactive roots.

In "*Stigma*", Goffman (2008) characterizes Social Information as the information that the individual conveys directly about him/herself. Stigma is presented as an informational and sociological problem in that it interferes with the perception of social categories and attributes, highlighting those who are stigmatized and obliterating the others. This creates an uncertainty in the informational assessment of the individuals and it may cause anxious unanchored interaction, and in extreme cases we reduce

the chances in life (of stigmatized individuals) since we rationalize their alleged inferiority ideologically. Thus, the most immediate result of stigma is that it may lead to a virtual social identity that does not converge with the real one - in this respect, Goffman understands social identity as the initial framing of an interlocutor in the interaction process, which includes disparate attributes such as honesty or occupation.

Thus, Social Information is more or less permanent information on subjects - as opposed to their moods, feelings and intentions -, and reflexively transmitted by the body - that is, transmitted by the person through bodily expressions in the immediate physical presence of other person in agreement with other expressive means. Ferreira (2009) provides a significant example of Social Information by showing a photo of a keloid scar on the arm of a transvestite in a prostitution zone in *Belém*, in *Pará* state. The example shows how spurious information, which may have originated for several reasons, may have symbolic interpretations that are crystallized socially and acquired during an interaction (as if they expressed something substantive about the situation itself), stigmatizing an individual.

### **The material status of information**

Goffman (2008) explains the nuances of the idea of personal identity that he uses. In a foreground, personal identity is supported by positive marks or an identity support - the concept includes an identity document, record or badge, for example, or the modus operandi of a thief in the store. In the background, it refers to the complete set of known facts about the person (a complex set of information).

The contrast between personal and social identity emphasizes the informational status of social interactions, since it forces the stigmatized person to manage Personal Information versus Social Information that seems to be causing tension. Thus, in general, noting that all people suffer pressures similar to those of stigma at certain times or in certain areas of social life, individuals must constantly manage information, whether to avoid or reduce tension between identities, to deal with the images that are being created during interaction, or to face a certain amount of information about themselves that is given *a priori*.

Therefore, material information includes pictorial and written records, various types of signs and symbols, as well as the known facts about an individual. It is material in the sense that it intends to be based on conditions that transcend the situational context; however, it can only have a meaning within the situation. Sometimes it is used strategically and may even be false - ultimately, document falsification. In the same way as any other of the informational dimensions, they form the self (for example, a uniform used by a proud porter of a sophisticated hotel).

### **Informational confrontations: strategic information**

When coping with information that constitutes identities, there may be room for some level of conflict when one realizes that the individuals who have a secret defect must deal with information that could potentially discredit them. Goffman (2008) describes some of the techniques frequently used to manage personal identity. One obvious strategy is to hide or eliminate signs that symbolize the stigma. Another cover-up strategy is to show signs of a less significant stigma (e.g., to dissimulate deafness by means of pretending distraction). In this sense, one can devise a set of strategies that do not really aim to cover-up the problem, but rather to mask it by making an effort to restrictively show the defects that are more directly related to the stigma. Finally, maybe the discreditable individual decides to 'come out into the open' only to a certain group, in search of specific support, or even to fully reveal the secret.

The information that conflictly erupts in social situations can also be seen in the dramaturgical analysis of interactions that Goffman (2009) draws. The representations are made by groups and delimited to certain settings - the façade where the interaction takes place (foreground region); the background region frequented only by members of the group; or the outside region, unaware of the interaction that unfolds. The roles in the representations vary according to the function that the individuals fulfill, the information they have and the location of the setting. The actors, in the front setting, know a lot or everything about the situation, trying to define it for the audience. People in the audience evaluate the façade, performance and informational load of the actors, seeking to diminish the gaps in the situation -

gaps which are known to always exist -, and redefine it. Within this context, displacements between settings, information and functions are eventually perceived, resulting in the emergence of conflicting roles that highlight critical types of information. A middleman in a deal, for example a real estate broker, may have a destructive secret about the actions of the seller. There are specialized functions in training actors, and those who play the roles may have strategic information about the performance of the actors - such as mercenaries who teach guerrilla techniques to armies, or public relations professionals. An informer may sell strategic information about the performance of the team of which he/she simulates being a part. The shill pretends to be part of the audience to enthusiastically applaud the representation of the team to which he/she effectively belongs.

Goffman (2009) describes further examples of discrepant roles. But the fundamental issue is clear. The definitions of social situations are always open to a certain limit. The information within this context is handled strategically, as it is in a game (in Mead's sense). The scope of strategic actions can be broadened. For example, as situations are representationally defined by the actors within institutional settings, one can study the manipulation of information to maintain the secrets of the institutions based on Goffman, as Souza *et al.* (2009) have done.

Thus, as the definitions of the situations are always in dispute, genuinely naive actors are rare. There is an understanding, which is not necessarily rational and not always conscious or explicit, that the presentation of the situation does not correspond to the 'truth' of what is being experienced. A representation is normally expected, and the people involved search for flaws and contradictions. Therefore, a truthful presentation of the reality of the situation is not expected, but an acceptable, believable performance is. And to achieve such a performance, appearances are concealed, discordant facts are hidden or reinterpreted, and situations are strategically reconfigured.

### **The inflection of informational statuses: meta-information**

When trying to understand the use of Goffman's concept of information, our approach initially focused

on the representational aspect that is present in the terms social and material. However, one soon realizes that information is always understood situationally and appropriated by interactional processes pragmatically. Strategic games usually constitute conflicts between the personal and social identity of stigmatized individuals and usually elaborate tense definitions of the situation. Through these processes, the subjects, as Goffman (2009, 2010b, 2011) defines them in his interactional scheme, inevitably express themselves in linguistic and bodily manners, as they are immersed in situations experienced in co-presence. In this multimodal form, the information incorporates a dual reflective nature: information about the acting subject and information about itself.

Along this line, it is assumed that Goffman (1974, 2009, 2010a) clearly distinguishes two basic types of Social Information (although, throughout his work, he does not consistently use the vocabulary that expresses them). Goffman (2009) shows that when in the presence of others, individuals seek information about them or gather information that they already have. The motivations are practical: one needs to define a situation, give a suitable impression, and find the best course of action to get the answers one wants. One never has a complete idea of the situation, no matter how much one knows about the situation or the people involved. In everyday situations, one cannot have full access to the others and grasp intentions and feelings. The world is established in steps synchronized with the others' steps, in a reflective process (Mead, 1934). The most that one has from the other is that which is externally offered (or smuggled) in the interaction. Thus, during these interactive processes, the subjects can transmit or give off (convey or emit) an expression. The transmission concerns verbal symbols and substitutes, used purposely to provide information that is conventionally linked to these symbols. It is communication in the strict sense. The emission corresponds to a wide range of actions that can be considered symptomatic of the actor and reinforce or contradict the message being expressed. These nonverbal and presumably unintended actions are constantly monitored by the interlocutor, who compares them with oral speech and other expressions of the informant. In this subtle game between transmission and emission, the fundamental asymmetry of the communication process occurs as it is usually easier to detect

discrepancies between different items of information transmitted and emitted than to emulate behaviors. Goffman (2010a) adopts a different terminology, but maintains the contrast between the two basic types of information. A subject can provide information by means of language or substitutes, such as written information or signs and pictorial gestures. But the individual can also express it through meanings attributed to incidental events associated with it - in this sense, the individual perspires information, which is embodied in the informant.

From the contrast between linguistic and bodily information, two central aspects emerge naturally. The first is that the two informational types do not perform alone. As a rule, linguistic signs during face-to-face interaction are expressed in a modulated way. Much additional information, conflicting or not, follows what is said explicitly. Secondly, given mutual communication monitoring and expressive shuffling, there is a natural exchange between the sender and receiver during face-to-face interactions. In short, there is richness of information flow and ease of feedback - in convergence with the 'invisible college' of Palo Alto (Bateson, 1987; Watzlawick *et al.*, 1993; Winkin, 1998). Thus, first of all, meta-information refers to an informational property derived from the definition of Social Information itself, which involves meetings and face-to-face interactions. Just as one cannot communicate, one cannot give off or transmit pure or isolated information.

### **The procedural-ritualistic status of information**

Up to now, we have seen how one-sided interpretation of strategic information in Goffman (1952; 2008, 2009) easily gives way to expressive and reflective aspects. The aim now is to show that socially, strategically, reflectively and expressively modulated information is prominently molded in interactional celebrations. The interactional order requires an innate respect for the sacredness of each other, which causes a certain ritualization of information.

Goffman (2011) argues that subjects maintain a posture - a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts that expresses their view on the social situation experienced and the participants -, during interactions. The pattern

that co-players suppose the subject has adopted, serves for him/her to claim a positive social value, the façade. The individuals maintain composure when, despite the unforeseen, the missteps, the goofs, manage to circumvent the situation and are not ashamed of their façade. To be effective during interactional transactions, the individuals must have convenient posture, attitude, behavior and appearance, which demonstrate that positive social attributes can be assigned to them - in our society, discretion, honesty, vocal and bodily control, self-control, composure under pressure, and others. Deference is the appreciation that an individual demonstrates towards another. It implies rituals to which people are extremely sensitive; small interactional fissures can spoil the whole representation.

In everyday relationships, the subject, configured for his/her posture and composure, moving through significant advances and withdrawals, arises as sacred even if only precariously. To express deference, presentation rituals take place (when the standardized form of contact denotes respect); or avoidance rituals are used (when the personal living space of the subject is preserved, in the Simmelian sense). In ritualistic games, deference and posture are interconnected, and in an embarrassing situation, one individual often assists the other player (for instance, lying or pretending not to perceive gaffes), thus showing involvement in the ritual and commitment to the situation (similarly, within the dramaturgical metaphor, teams mutually support each other during representation, even when the contradictions and artificiality of the situation are evident). The shame of the interlocutor becomes the subject's own shame. Embarrassment appears as an admission of the importance of interactional ritual.

In these refined movements, the informational emphasis shifts to conducts. Goffman (2011) defines a rule of conduct as a 'guide to action'. This rule is established not by its efficiency, low cost or pleasure, but because it is fair or appropriate in social situations. Conducts, as it turned out, idealize the image of the subject and at the same time, portray the commitment to his/her image, acquiring informational and communicational value. The act determined by a rule of conduct becomes communication. Even inaction or breach of the rule, due to its negative value, maintains the nature of

communication. Anyhow, any mechanical conduct in the representation of ritualized information does not imply a required mechanics in its use in concrete experienced situations, particularly in its relation to other informative dimensions (for example, an excessive salute may become maximal expression of scorn and irony).

However, Goffman (2011) claims a separate status for the interaction and communication orders. Mixing up these orders is the basic error of psychiatrists when they assume that inappropriateness in the situational conduct is somehow a pathology in communication. The argument may seem paradoxical, since communication was previously associated with conduct. Thus, one might think that there would be something in the information order that would transcend the merely situational aspects, establishing ties with the institutional order (maybe this is the case with the concept of hyper-ritualization on informational displays, as addressed below).

### Informational displays

For Goffman (1987), in "*Gender advertisements*", the ceremony occurs in social situations when there is a gathering, and it may doubly refer to statements of social arrangements and presentations of ultimate truths about men and the world. In ceremonies, social divisions and hierarchies are depicted 'microecologically' through the use of small-scale spatial metaphors. On these occasions, an iconic representation takes place directly, an imitation of that which subjects consider dear to them and which informs their existence. A simple and fixed element of the ceremony is called a ritual - conventional and superficial acts through which an individual demonstrates respect for others.

However, beyond this concept of ritualization akin to Durkheim (2003), there is another one. Certain emotionally motivated behaviors are formalized. These behaviors are exaggerated, stereotyped, disconnected from the original context of use, and as they spare the subject from performing the whole act, they consist of a utilitarian sense of ritualization, according to Goffman (1987) a display or exhibition. The displays do not communicate in a strict sense; they do not enunciate something through a symbolic language designed for a specific purpose, but provide an alignment of the subject

in the situation. As far as Goffman is concerned in this work with gender, understood as correlates of the culturally established categories of sex, gender displays refer to conventional representations of these correlates.

Goffman (1987) pursues characterizing the displays and providing several categories, which he used to analyze commercial photographs. Some examples are the 'feminine touch' - women caress and hold objects at the edges, while the men firmly grasp them in a utilitarian way. In 'licensed withdrawal' women become emotionally absent from the scene, looking outside the photo frame with a dreamy attitude. The 'ritualization of subordination' indicates, through framing or relative position, the fragility or subordinate position of women.

The displays seem to be hyper-ritualized. Extracted from daily practice, they are exacerbated in advertising, providing an amplified view that is naturally accepted by the public. The hyper-ritualization may occur because it belongs to the make-believe world of ads, because it provides some narrative economy, or because it is inserted in edited advertisements that had the unrefined, ordinary everyday actions removed. The fact is that it shows an unusual use of social information, arising from behavior, but without reaching the expressive status of signs, and being manipulated according to the situation with greater or less consciousness, but usually appropriately in view of the purpose.

### Approaches to some critical aspects of Goffman's work

The foregoing presentation, as a selective reading with specific purposes, necessarily omits some problems in the work of Goffman (and possibly its informational reflexes), which are worth highlighting, even if only briefly, in that they are part of the topic of interest.

The assumption of the autonomy of the interaction order is problematic. Goffman (1999) suggests the existence of a weak link between the social and

interactional orders 'loose gearing'. Burns (1992) criticizes the inconsistency with which the topic is treated in the work of Goffman, highlighting that social order seems to be understood as a set of rules to be followed and not a result of human action itself. Giddens (1987), however, believes that beyond Goffman's own assertions, we can infer the meaning of social order when considering the various contexts (institutional, linguistic etc.) of co-presence of actors who determine their unique space-time trajectory. Anyhow, the informational statuses arise ambiguously in confrontation with institutional and macro-social issues, requiring an exegesis from the scholar (as has been suggested, the notion of informational displays may indicate a pathway).

Another issue can be perceived in Goffman's emphasis on classifying and socially regulating the body. Schilling (1993) believes that this may indicate a certain dualism, meaning that the body is circumscribed by the mind. With regard to the topic of interest, the problem would be perceived when, emphasizing the autonomy of the interaction, Goffman incidentally derives certain information and communication autonomy that is detached from situational behaviors. Again, the approach to the issue could go through sedimentation of body-constructed meanings that originate displays.

### Final Considerations

The dimensions of the information portrayed, or their various statutes, seem to be entangled by definition because they express themselves synchronously in face-to-face situations of interaction and feedback, as the typical case of body information with its marked degree of meta-communication. Through this multifaceted view, the approach by Goffman of social-informational interactional processes seem to demand an integrated perspective, which argues against paradigmatic or partial views of the concept of information, dealing with an object of study neglected by Information Science and suggesting empirical methods to investigate it.

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