

CAN YOU EVER KNOW YOUR TRUE SELF?

The question of who is the self is one that has been asked by writers and philosophers for millennia. We might ask ourselves what makes a person the person they are? Is it the clothes they wear, the way they walk, the friends they have? What happens to past versions of ourselves that we can't remember? And, key for studying the media, do people look at us the same way we look at ourselves? Hannah Arendt, a German philosopher, suggested that 'nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a spectator' – by this she meant that we all change who we are when we are being watched. This is an idea that Erving Goffman, a Canadian researcher, wrote about in the 1950s. His ideas, explored in *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), were perhaps the beginning of the rise of self-help books. He encourages us to think about who we are and how we might understand ourselves in a world of social media and electronic communications.



KEY IDEAS

Goffman had many ideas but perhaps his most famous is that of the *Front-stage* and *Back-stage* self. He wrote that we are all acting for others to give the best possible impression for the situation. We wear certain clothes, behave certain ways and use particular language; this he called the *Front-Stage*. He also suggested we have an *Back-stage* self, one that people don't see and one that is more truly us.

Goffman wasn't suggesting that we are lying when we are *front-stage* but that we naturally know how and when to adapt our behaviour. It isn't so simple though, we don't have so much control over the way in which people view us. The 'performance' we give *Front-Stage* is only what we **give** to the other person, or 'audience'; what we **give-off**, might be totally different. The audience might see something different. For example, you might be wearing new trainers that you think make you look good and because they were expensive, rich. However, someone looking at you might think that you look like a bit of a show off, that is the impression you **give-off** – and you can't change how people think. In the digital age, where we spend hours crafting our online personas, some people spend a lot of effort to try and control the impression they **give-off**. Goffman's work can help us to think about whether the way we present ourselves on social media is a true representation of ourselves, or whether we are trying to make a better image for people to look at through the pictures we post and updates we make.

KEY READINGS

Baym, N. (2015). *Personal connections in the digital age*. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Buckingham, D. (2008). *Youth, identity, and digital media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Available from: bit.ly/2EeC5I3.

Goffman, E. (1990). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* London: Penguin.

Turkle, S. (2017). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. 3rd ed. New York: Basic Books.
Available from: bit.ly/2WMSn2f.

ACTIVITIES

Open one of your social media accounts, take a look at the content you have been posting, pictures, comments, thoughts or maybe even videos, and write some thoughts about the following:

1. Who do you think is looking at your posts the most?
2. Is there anything you wouldn't want your parent or teacher to see?
3. Have you ever changed or removed a post because of the way people reacted to it?

How do these answers compare to how you act in real life? Are you different online?

Now work with a partner, give them a link to your social media account. Try the following:

1. Write five 'facts' about your partner, only using their social media account.
2. Quiz your partner about these, how many are true?
3. Discuss: was your partner truthful on social media or were they showing another version of themselves?

Now swap.

Extension Activity: Goffman was writing before the internet. Do you think his work applies to social media? Write 3 reasons why it does, and 3 reasons why it does not.