

# **Situational transformations: the offensive-izing of an email message and the public-ization of offensiveness**

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This paper raises concerns about the tenor of 21<sup>st</sup> century interaction by identifying a tendency whereby relatively innocuous, canonically private communication is transformed into public communication deemed offensive enough to attract institutional or legal sanction. To understand examples of this tendency, it applies Goffman's architecture of interaction to email communication and proposes the notion of situational transformation to encapsulate reframing processes involving footing, face and participation framework. Through these processes (to which, it is shown, the email medium is especially vulnerable) and a discourse of civility, the private becomes public and opposition becomes offence.

**Keywords:** interaction, email communication, participation framework, face, footing, frame, public/private, civility

## **1. Introduction**

The bulk of this paper is framed as a peculiar kind of detective story: not a whodunit but a howdunit. It investigates the following bare facts: (1) a man sends an email message to his local council; (2) the man is warned by the police that if he sends another message like that, he could face a criminal charge. Given that the message was not abusive or threatening, and that this incident occurred in a supposedly democratic society (Britain), we have to ask why. How did (1) result in (2)?

In attempting to answer this question, the paper ransacks Goffman's architecture of interaction and considers the nature of interaction by email and public dispute in 21<sup>st</sup> century western society. Thus, like Haugh (2010), who also bases his discussion on an offensive email message, on the empirical peg is hung a sizeable amount of theoretical and applied material. Indeed, the paucity of available information on the incident (see section 2) means that I can offer no more than a plausible explanation for what happened. The main thrust of this paper is what's on the peg.

The most theoretical strand in this paper involves an expansion of the ground covered by Goffman's architecture through its application to a medium for which it was not intended. This allows its limits to be tested. There are also benefits the other way. Approaching email communication as if it were face-to-face interaction foregrounds certain aspects of it.

Another strand, then, is email as interaction. The interactional aspects of computer-mediated communication (CMC) have received much attention recently, including journal special issues (Androutsopoulos 2006; Locher 2010), and there have been attempts to use aspects of Goffman's work (e.g. Miller 1995, Marcoccia 2004, Frobenius et al, forthcoming). However, remarkably little of this research uses email, and that which

does focus on lists and discussion groups (e.g. Harrison 2000, 2007, Alpay 2005). Perhaps because it is a comparatively long-established form of CMC, the email medium is no longer striking. The last substantial paper devoted exclusively to it was Baron (1998). And yet person-to-person(s) email must surely be the most ubiquitous form of CMC. Moreover, as Locher (2010: 2) observes, it is used for a vast variety of purposes, from the most informal to the most formal, to the extent that it is doubtful that an ‘e-mail language’ exists (Androutsopoulos 2006: 420). This ubiquity and variety, demonstrated well by Bou-Franch (2011), is my cue to consider email not as a medium imposing its own distinctive *practices* but rather as just one of many types of configuration of participants and setting, CM or otherwise, that imposes certain interactive *restrictions* and privileges certain interactive *possibilities* over others. This paper is not about what email *does* do but rather what it *can* do to interactants.

The more applied strands concern the enactment of public debate and dispute, the distinction between the private and the public, and ultimately the flavour of interaction in 21<sup>st</sup> century western societies. The string binding these strands together are the processes of reframing and embedding which I call situational transformation. This notion, it is proposed, can provide both a plausible solution to the detective puzzle and also a means of exploring two current trends in norms of communication: a lowering of the verbal ‘offence-threshold’ and a shift in the public/private frontier. Sections 2 and 3 set the scene for the detective story in sections 4-6. Section 7 generalizes from the investigation to discuss the trends and their synergy.

## **2. The data, the story and the questions**

*Setting: The small community (less than 1,000) of Bausley-with-Criggion on the English-Welsh border.*

*Early 2006: The governors of a local school request the community council that a recycling bin be installed in a public car park next to the school.*

*Subsequently: S, a resident of the street opposite the car park, hears of this plan from a neighbour.*

*Around 2 April: S sends an email message to the council indicating he and his neighbours are unhappy about the proposal and arguing that the bin should be sited on school property instead. His message also contains as a postscript a quotation from Niemöller (“In Germany, the Nazis first came for the Communists and I did not speak up because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak up...” ).*

*4 April: The police are informed of S’s message and its contents.*

*1-2 days later: At 07.50, a policeman visits S at his home and gives him an informal warning that his message has offended the council and that if he sends a further message of that kind he could face a charge of harassment.*

This information was gleaned from two newspaper articles, one local and one national, the texts of which can be found at [DOI](#). The message itself is not available but fortunately, the articles contain two quotes from it (discussed at length below). There are contradictory indications in the articles as to whether it was just one member of the 9-strong council acting independently who instigated police involvement or more than one<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Indications that it was just one councillor are the quoted disclaimer by the council vice-chairman (see [DOI: M13](#)) and the remark that perhaps ‘someone’ did not understand the point of the quotation ([DOI: E1](#),

However, even if it was just one councillor, in such a small community, s/he must at least have discussed the email message with fellow councillors beforehand and taken action with at least their felt support. Almost certainly, the offence which both articles report being taken at the message was taken by several (if not all) of the councillors. Working on this assumption, my empirical investigation takes three incremental steps: Why did the councillors take offence (section 4)? Why did they take *enough* offence to do something about it (section 5)? Why were the police called in (section 6)?

### **3. Theoretical apparatus**

#### **3.1. Discursive impoliteness**

This paper does not attempt to identify anything classifiably offensive in S's message. It follows the discursive approach to im/politeness (initiated principally by Eelen 2001 and Watts 2003 and developed in significant ways by, inter alia, Mills 2005, Watts 2008, Haugh 2007, 2010), which rejects essentialist notions of politeness or rudeness and instead emphasizes participant evaluations of behaviour. This evaluation has reflexes: explicit comment and observable response. This study makes use of a stark example of the latter. The discursive approach also stresses the variability and contestability of these evaluations and the norms which serve as their criteria. The obvious alignment of the press articles with S's side (i.e. they present his message as *not* really offensive) exemplifies such a contest.<sup>2</sup> At the end of this paper, I generalize this contested evaluation to ongoing contests in social norms – and there I enter the contest myself.

#### **3.2. Email communication**

From Herring's (2007: 13-17) 'medium factors' of CMC, I extract the following relevant facts: email is asynchronous (recipients do not need to be open to communication when messages are sent); it has 1-way transmission (messages are composed before the channel of communication is opened); it operates through only the text-visual channel; an email message has persistence (it remains available to the recipient for as long as s/he wants). Finally, email involves *private-messaging*: only those selected by the sender receive a message. There is nothing in an email message which entails the direct participation of anybody else.

Herring's scheme is designed to circumscribe CMC. This paper, however, needs to compare email with other forms of interaction. I therefore identify the following additional, synthetic features:

- Email messages can be composed and sent to numerous recipients simultaneously over global distances with minimal physical effort at effectively no cost. The persistence feature means that the same goes for forwarded messages. I refer to this feature as *ease-of-expedition*.

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E4). Indications that it was more than one are references to 'councillors' (DOI:M9), 'the council' (DOI:M10), 'members of a community council' (DOI:E1) and 'the community council' (DOI:E6). The number of councillors, and the fact that there was a Clerk to the Council through whom messages were routed, was gleaned from the webpage of Bausley-with-Criggion Community Council, <http://community-councils.powys.org.uk/bausley/> accessed on 25/2/09.

<sup>2</sup> Evidence for this alignment: The headline of one article is a quote from [S] himself; [S]'s side of the story is reported at length in both articles, often in direct speech (M4, M7, M9-12, E5-6), whereas a voice from the council gets only two short paragraphs (M13-14).

- Like all technologically-mediated communication, email is *dislocated* (participants are not in the same physical arena). When combined with text-visual channel only and 1-way transmission, this means that email communication is *disembodied* (see Goffman 1963: 14-15).

### 3.3. *Goffman in email*

Below are very brief summaries of the relevant concepts. (For a fuller summary, see O'Driscoll 2009.)

*3.3.1. Participation framework.* Individual occasions of 'focused interaction' are encounters involving *ratified participants* who "jointly ratify one another as authorized co-sustainers of a single ... focus of visual and cognitive attention" (Goffman 1964: 135). When there are more than two of these, we may need to distinguish between addressed and unaddressed participants. Some encounters are inaccessible to anyone else. But there are others involving people who, while not partaking of this mutual ratification, are aware of it. They are *bystanders*, who can become privy to the doings of the encounter, either by accident (*overhearers*) or surreptitious intent (*eavesdroppers*).

*3.3.2. Footing.* Goffman's exploration of footing emphasizes change. The nearest he comes to a definition is: "A change in footing implies a change in the alignment we take up to ourselves and others present as expressed in the way we manage the production and reception of an utterance." (Goffman 1981:128). This emphasis assumes some state to change *from*, aspects of alignment which participants bring with them to an encounter. Thus a change in footing also involves "an alteration in the social capacities in which the persons present claim to be active" (1981: 126). In this paper, I take footing to include both these 'pre-set' and also the 'during' aspects. It refers to the positioning of participants relative to each other resulting from the interactive roles which the situational context has bestowed on them (the pre-set aspect) and which are reinforced, refined or altered by specific moves within an encounter (the during aspect).<sup>3</sup> S's e-mail message involves one such alteration (see section 4).

*3.3.3. Face.* A vast amount of scholarship, including whole edited volumes (e.g. Mey 2003, Bargiela-Chiappini & Haugh 2009, Haugh & Bargiela-Chiappini 2010), has focused on this concept. Here, I use a rather simple Goffmanesque (1967: 5) description. It is the image of self which a participant finds him/herself projecting as a result of other participants' understanding of his/her footing.

*3.3.4. Frame.* The subjective perception of what sort of encounter is taking place activates assumptions about what should and shouldn't go on in it. These "principles of organization which govern events . . . and our subjective involvement in them" (Goffman 1974: 10) comprise a frame.

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<sup>3</sup> To the extent that these moves have an attitudinal component, footing has a relation to sociolinguistic perspectives on the notion of stance (see Jaffe 2009). It refers to something much larger than the specific interactional move which, following Stivers (2008), is designated 'alignment' in Conversation Analysis.

3.3.5. *Embedding* occurs whenever, for example through the use of pronouns, we introduce a *figure*, “who belongs to the world that is spoken about, not the world in which the speaking occurs” (1981: 147). More relevant to this paper is the fact that embedding can involve footing, participation frameworks and frames. “What nature divides, talk frivolously embeds, insets, and intermingles. As dramatists can put any world on their stage, so we can enact any participation framework ... in our conversation” (Goffman 1981: 155).

#### 3.4. *Situational Transformations*

Hodge & Kress (1993) define their concept of transformation as “a set of operations on [deep structure], diluting, substituting, combining, or reordering a syntagm or its elements” (1993:10) which “may transform one model [of relations between entities and processes] into the form of another” (1993:34). Here I borrow and distort this critical linguistic concept and, instead of predicating it of lexico-grammatical categories of discourse, I apply it to the roles of interacting participants. Situational transformation is:

a set of operations on *situational reality*, diluting, substituting, combining, or reordering a *participation framework* or its elements, which may transform one model of *participant roles, faces and frame* into the form of another.

In referring to ‘situational reality’, I do not claim objective, immutable realities. Nevertheless, there are aspects of participant roles that, either by consensus (e.g. Goffman’s ‘social capacities’) or physical circumstances (e.g. whether there are bystanders), are givens that constitute the default starting points for encounters. The processes I describe below could perhaps just be regarded as cases of reframing; but this term is used in the literature predominantly about discourse or cognition, whereas I circumscribe something more radically interactional. They may also be seen as shifts from one level of phenomena to another; in this respect they exemplify the notion of scale-shifting as introduced into sociolinguistics by Blommaert (2007). I present situational transformation as a specifically interactional reflex of scale-shifting and as reframing by specific means - what happens when an embedded feature breaks free of its subordination to the larger pattern and takes it over. In this case, the road from email message to warning visit from the police is achieved by three such ‘steps’ of transformation.

#### 4. *First transformation: footing and face*

Why did the councillors take offence at S’s email message? Both articles foreground the Niemöller text which S pasted into it: both quote it in full, both mention it in their opening paragraphs and, indeed, imply that its inclusion was the cause of offence (see DOI: M1, M9-10, E1, E5). However, it is not plausible that the councillors took offence at its mere inclusion. No doubt they found it highly incongruous and formed an unflattering impression of the sender. But bizarre irrelevance by itself is not a realistic provocation.

If the quotation did indeed contribute to the offence taken, it is because other features of the message cast it in a particular light. This is where the first transformation is involved. The default footings in this dispute are as follows: S and the school governors are opposing parties (about where to site the bin); the council (responsible for deciding the site) is the judge, a ‘neutral’ third party. This is how S himself avowedly viewed the

situation. His explanation for the inclusion of the quotation (DOI: M7) both positions the council as arbiter and also attributes to it the special moral responsibility of protecting the weaker party.

However, at least one part of S's message – the extract quoted in DOI: E3 - does not recognize these situationally determined alignments. It reads:

- (1) This issue will not affect any one of you involved with the decision making and I ask you for a little empathy.

Several features of this extract project a negative attitude to its addressees. First, notice the negative proposition. As has been repeatedly noted (e.g. Leech 1983:101, Givón 2001: 371), negative propositions presuppose their positive counterparts are salient. But in this context, there is no obvious reason why the possibility of the councillors being personally affected should be relevant. This proposition is therefore a non-observance of the maxim of relation (Grice 1975). S's readers probably took note of this intrusive content, generating the implicature that S regards the question of their self-interest as relevant to his case. Why? One inference they could plausibly draw is that S believes they typically make their council decisions not in the public interest but out of self-interest.

This possibility is supported by the second feature of note. The presence of the conjunction 'and' linking the two clauses indicates that the first clause must be interpreted as support for the request in the second, as a reason why it can be granted. This reason is the councillors will not be personally affected, resulting in the implication that if they *were* affected, S would have less confidence in them granting his request.

Third, the precise object of the request - for 'a little empathy' - is marked in this context, where in British English one would more normally expect a request for 'your consideration / understanding'. When asked for a quantity of it (rather than 'your' empathy), therefore, readers may infer that S believes they do not normally possess it - indeed, that they lack it so completely, all he can hope for is 'a little' of it.

Thus S, albeit without direct attribution, paints his addressees in a bad light. Given the default expectation that people do not present *themselves* in a bad light, S has positioned them and him in opposition: they do not have empathy whereas he does (otherwise he could not ask for it); they do not act in the public interest whereas he does (see the plural 'us' in (2) below and also DOI: M5).

This change in footing is achieved through implicit insulting attributions which its recipients might well have judged offensive. It is made the more face-engaging, therefore predisposing recipients to actually *take* offence, by personalization. One aspect of this is the request for the personal affective quality of 'empathy' (rather than for the case-specific processes of 'consideration' or 'understanding'). Another is that both the clauses in (1) refer to "you", the second of which is not syntactically necessary and the first of which is especially personal by indexing individual second persons ("any one of you"). The only other available direct quote from S's message (DOI: M6) is also instructive in this regard. In this, he invites the council members to

- (2) visit us and see for yourself how it would affect us

Again, the phrase "for yourself" is propositionally redundant and again it is a rather marked singular form. In Blommaert's (2007) terms, this personalization 'downscales'

the councillors from the collective institutional level to an interpersonal one, pulling them off the pedestal of law-governed authority.

In the light of these considerations, we now have a possible reason for the councillors to take offence at the Niemöller quotation. Despite his oppositional stance, S continues to recognize them as the powerful party (he ‘asks’ them for help rather than demands it). Thus they have been positioned as bad, unconstrained by institutional norms, powerful and in opposition to the writer. And the Niemöller quotation speaks of the need to oppose a group who are notorious exemplars of the similarly unconstrained bad and powerful. The inference that councillors might have drawn, therefore, is that S likens *them* to Nazis.

However, whether they *actually* drew this inference does not matter here. There is enough motivation for their offence-taking without it, not only because of the negative qualities attributed to them but also because, as Haugh (2010: 10-11) argues, just as important as the perception of intention to attack face in taking offence is the perception of the intention to violate norms. Whatever else they inferred from the use of the quotation, it is very likely they read it as a violation of the norms for an email message to one’s local councillors.

##### **5. *Second transformation: participation framework and face salience***

But why did the councillors find S’s message *so* offensive as do something about it. Why didn’t they just shrug it off? The next transformation pertains to the participation framework holding when the message was sent and read, in which a framework embedded in parts of S’s message appears to have been accepted by addressees as if it were the *actual* framework.

There is an inherent uncertainty in email messages about their accessibility. Canonically, they are inaccessible, email’s categorical feature of private messaging being supported by its emergence in the historical context of person-to-person written correspondence which has become, over the last few centuries, firmly established as ‘private’ (see O’Driscoll 2010). The possibilities of eavesdropping (e.g. hacking, server-alerts) and sending-in-error (creating overhearers) notwithstanding, there are not supposed to be any *unratified* participants. However, many others can become privy to a message through subsequent forwarding. To some extent, the same is true of traditional written correspondence. Letters can be stuffed into the wrong envelope (overheard), intercepted en route (eavesdropped) and passed around and on to others (forwarded). But email’s ease-of-expedition (see 3.2 above) makes its participation possibilities vastly wider.

To what extent do authors of email messages engage with these possibilities? Letter-writers in times past appear to have done so, even after confidentiality took over from accessibility as the norm (see O’Driscoll 2010: 280-285). Given their vastly greater possibilities for dissemination, we might expect some of this ‘public’ flavour of the language of letters in earlier centuries to be found in email messages.

And that is exactly what we find in S’s message. It was sent to 9 addressed participants (the councillors) and one unaddressed one (the Clerk to the Council). In principle this was the sum total of participants. But the two extracts from his message indicate that S does not use forms of expression corresponding to this limited set. Consider his requesting phrase in (1) above. In the context of written communication to a

small, limited group of readers in 21<sup>st</sup> century British English, the main-clause declarative “I ask you for” is marked. Default formulations are those such as “I would like to ask you for” and “I would be grateful for”. Merrison et al (forthcoming) found great variety of request formulations in their corpus of student email requests but only a tiny proportion (3%) even included the word ‘ask’, let alone with the syntax employed by S. S’s chosen form, on the other hand, has none of this conventional indirectness. It is a performative speech act. And that is exactly what it connotes to British readers – oratorical performance. It is a contextualization cue (Gumperz 1982: 130-152) for a formal, somewhat ritualistic gathering of a sizeable number of participants.<sup>4</sup> With 1-way transmission, so that recipients can attend but not at once respond, S has activated what Beeman (2010: 122-123) calls a “minimal performance frame”. This ‘public-ization’ of the framework is also evident in (2) above. Notwithstanding S’s avowal (DOI: M5) that he is acting alone, in twice using “us”, he not only appropriates the role of representative but evokes a group of supporters present with him.

The councillors, I suggest, went along with S’s public-ization,<sup>5</sup> so that the negative characteristics with which they have been attributed (section 4) have been publicly attributed. O’Driscoll (2007) argues that the size of a threat to face is a product of the amount of change to face predicated and the extent to which face is salient at the time. S predicated a radical change to councillors’ faces: acting out of self-interest and having no empathy (and perhaps being Nazis) is a drastic divergence from those they would wish. If they had construed this message as private and had not anticipated future face-to-face dealings with S (making the salience of face debatable - see O’Driscoll 2011: 24-28), they would have felt little face threat. But once they have accepted a public participation framework, in which they are public figures identifiable by all those ‘present’, face becomes very salient and the threat to it very great. In such circumstances, doing nothing risks the inference by imagined witnesses that they accept the faces predicated for them. Some sort of perceptible reaction, the councillors felt, had to be taken.

### **6. Third transformation: frame**

I have suggested how recipients of S’s message took enough offence to respond. But why did they consider that the appropriate response was to have the police threaten S with legal action? Such a response is not self-evident, not just because S’s message contains no explicit insults or accusations but also because they are elected representatives. It is a time-honoured tradition in North Atlantic politics that when such people appear before the public, they should expect a degree of unmannerly voicing of opposition and heckling (see e.g. Baldwin’s 1955: 99 advice to would-be politicians in the 1950s USA and Marr’s 2008: 237 comments on 1960s Britain).

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<sup>4</sup> A search of the British National Corpus shows that, when in declarative form in a main clause (as with S’s use), “I ask you for/to” appears in such contexts almost to the exclusion of any others. For this search I am grateful to Brian Walker.

<sup>5</sup> Thinking in terms of scale (Blommaert 2007) offers a motive for this interpretative move by the councillors. As we have seen (section 4), S’s personalization of them downscales them (by symbolically stripping them of their role-based authority). If they feel thereby threatened, upscaling the interactive situation (from private to public) gives them greater scope for retaliatory action.

There are signs, however, that this tradition is losing ground. A striking British example occurred at the 2005 conference of the Labour party, in government at the time. At one point during a speech in which the Foreign Secretary was attempting to justify to delegates the presence of British troops in Iraq, Walter Wolfgang, an 82-year-old party veteran, shouted “nonsense”. Immediately, two large men appeared and forcibly removed him from the hall. When Wolfgang attempted to re-enter, he was arrested by police under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

The reader may find this story shocking. So did the British media and public. The Labour party recognized it as a public relations disaster and apologized profusely and publicly to Mr Wolfgang. Likewise, it is clear from the press articles (DOI: M13-15, E1) that both the council and the police attracted criticism for the response to S’s message made under their auspices. These cases exemplify an ongoing contest about the dominant frame for public encounters between holders of public office and their constituents. Levinson (1992) attempts to capture very much the same idea as frame with his notion of ‘activity type’, in his elaboration of which he stresses the pre-eminence of “constraints ... on the kinds of allowable contributions” from participants (Levinson 1992: 69). The contest can be simplified into two models. In the traditional model, the politicians have to earn the approval of their constituents and the free expression of views, including occasional jibes at the former, is valorized. In the model suggested by S’s case and the Wolfgang story, decorum takes priority over free expression and possibly insulting attributions become inadmissible (see Tracy 2008 and 7.2 below).

The councillors seemed to have adhered to the decorum model and thus rated S’s message outside the bounds of the admissible. From this perspective, what is already (in their eyes) offensive becomes dangerous and the possible effect on them of S’s bizarre postscript can be reconsidered. They experienced it as not just irrelevant but also unseemly and ‘wild’. A person who uses language which is both irrelevant and unseemly is often regarded as somewhat mad, and madness in a public context can sometimes be considered dangerous. And if the councillors really did believe they were being publicly likened to Nazis, the decorum model provides all the more reason to call in the police.

## ***7. Conclusion: implications and applications***

My explanation for a bizarre email message and the bizarre reaction to it of some elected officials on the English-Welsh border is no more than plausible. There are myriad contextual possibilities involving personal agendas and ‘cognitive statuses’ which, as Kecskes (2010) argues, we need to consider if we really want to account for a piece of language adequately. Fortunately, this paper does not have this ambition. Rather, I use this plausibility, plus the bare fact that the message caused its sender to be threatened with a criminal charge, to generalize from it to the wider world as an example current trends in communication practices.

### ***7.1. Email: the public-ization of offence***

There are two characteristics of email which facilitate the situational transformations in S’s story. One is its potential to cause offence. Disembodiment means no recipient feedback during composition so that, not immediately confronted with the existential footings of the context or the faces of their recipients, and not having to face immediately

the face consequences of their words, writers can too easily stray from those which their recipients find acceptable. The danger is worse than in synchronous forms of CMC, which makes participants more mindful of immediate consequences, and worse than in traditional epistolary writing because email's ease-of-expedition and quasi-synchronicity (see Neurater-Kessels 2011: 198) mimics face-to-face interaction, encouraging writers to forget the absence of paralinguistic and extra-linguistic clues.

The other relevant characteristic is email's indeterminacy of participation framework. Categorically (private-messaging) its default framework comprises no bystanders. However, ease-of-expedition creates the potential for vast numbers to gain subsequent access to a message. This potential, together with disembodiment, can encourage writers to compose *as if* those others were already present. Finally, although email's resemblance to traditional written correspondence makes it feel private, its kinship with other, obviously accessible forms of CMC makes it feel public.

The public nature of these other forms of CMC has been institutionally recognized. In 2011, for instance, the dismissal of an employee following a 'facebook rant' against his employer was upheld by a British employment tribunal because facebook posts were not truly private and "could have been forwarded very easily with the claimant having no control over the process" (quoted in *Metro* 30/11/11). There are signs that email has been tarred with the same public brush. Davies et al (2007: 47), for example, observe that "e-mail sent to university staff is considered to be the property of the university ... and thus it cannot be seen as entirely private". See also Appleby (2006). Public-ization can result in the privately offensive being treated as publicly offensive, to the point of incurring institutional sanction. This is what happened in the case of S.

### 7.2. *The discourse of civility: offence inflation*

Neither S's story nor the Wolfgang incident (section 6) can be dismissed as the spontaneous reaction of one over-zealous individual. There was a discourse at work, the kind of discourse which "creates and re-creates the social fabric on which it is predicated; in a dialectically turning of the screw, it conditions us towards accepting the societal order" (Mey 2012: 706-707). It is a discourse which is growing in strength as a reaction (the dialectic) to the retreat of deference towards holders of public office in other kinds of situation (e.g. Clayman et al 2006). Following Tracy (2008), in her study of public school board meetings in the USA, I call this the discourse of civility. Tracy quotes a 'conduct preface' in which a School Board asserts that "it cannot tolerate personal attacks upon board members" and "We must all encourage and insist upon a more civil public discourse". OK, fair enough. But the two 'personal attacks' in Tracy's study which are interrupted and censured by the acting chair are not direct personal attributions. They are no less implicit than those contained in excerpt (1) above from S's message.

Tracy argues that while such criticism is indeed personal in that it highlights the person rather than the issue at hand, it nevertheless indexes personal qualities relevant to the targets' ability to perform their public role. As a counter to a discourse which we see causing social harm, Mey (2012) urges the proactive use of our own discourse to promote an alternative. This is what Tracy attempts. Against 'civility', she advocates 'reasonable hostility'. This is "emotionally marked criticism of the past and future actions of public persons" and is "necessary for the able functioning of democratic bodies" (Tracy 2008: 169).

The discourse of civility is fashionable in Britain too. *Charm Offensive: Cultivating civility in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain* is a work of in-depth journalism with little scholastic merit - and yet it was funded by two major academic funding bodies. It begins by mentioning “the riots in several English districts in August 2011”. It goes on: “While the causes behind the riots are likely to be myriad, and the behaviour went well beyond our subject, this report suggests that civility – the often small everyday ways in which we treat each other – acts as an important social ‘glue’” (Griffith et al 2011: 7). One implication here, caveats notwithstanding, is that a lack of civility leads to rioting. The flavour of the civility thereby invoked is a social anodyne. As Tracy (2008: 185, citing Cmiel 1994) reminds us, “the need for civility is regularly invoked by those with power to regulate those with less of it”. Moreover, as we have seen in the cases of S and Walter Wolfgang, there have been recent attempts to criminalize the lack of it. Tracy’s reasonable hostility is sorely needed.

### 7.3. *The public-ization of private offence*

In 21<sup>st</sup> century North Atlantic society (and perhaps beyond), more kinds of communication are being treated as public (7.1) and more kinds of communicative behaviour are being rated offensive (7.2). Together, this means that more kinds of communicative behaviour are being rated publicly offensive. To conclude, I analyse here an example which indicates that this tendency has entrenched itself to the extent of becoming an explicit norm. Here is a test item from an on-line training module entitled *Diversity in the Workplace* (which I, as an employee in a British university, was obliged to take)<sup>6</sup>:

- (3) It is more appropriate to e-mail a joke than to say it aloud in the office in case others who hear are offended by its content. TRUE or FALSE.

The correct answer, the trainee is told, is ‘false’ because

- (4) E-mailing a joke that could cause offence is just as inappropriate as speaking it aloud. An e-mail is a legal document that can serve as evidence in an employment tribunal or disciplinary procedure.

The proposition in (3) presupposes the wish to avoid accidentally giving offence to overhearing bystanders. (The phrase ‘others who hear’ indicates that the possibility of offending ratified participants is not at issue.) It also assumes that email communication carries fewer risks of overhearing bystanders than the physical office setting. (4) implicitly refutes this assumption. Now, the only candidate for overhearer status is a recipient to whom the message is sent by mistake. However, (3) presents a scenario in which the sender is already wary of giving offence this way, so sending-in-error is extremely unlikely and the implication in (4) that the email setting is equally likely to be populated with overhearers is therefore wrong.

Of course, the real reason that (3) is deemed ‘false’ is given away in the second sentence of (4). But note that the connection between inappropriateness and dire consequences is not made explicit, so that the two are conflated. What started out as

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://hud.marshallacmtraining.co.uk/>

interpersonal other-consideration in (3) has become public self-consideration in (4) and words that might cause personal (i.e. private) offence have become an offence in a legalistic (i.e. public) sense.

In this way, instrumental exigencies (avoiding official censure) can impact on moral attitudes (what is considered in/appropriate). Note the odd collocations of 'saying' in (3) and 'speaking' in (4) instead of the default 'telling' of a joke, and also that (4) refers simply to "a joke that could cause offence". These features imply that the potential offence is not the hurt that could be caused by its telling in the wrong company but rather its recounting in any circumstances. Mere enunciation, denuded of context, is deemed censurable.

The blurring of norms for the public and private has been identified by Lakoff (2005) as a result of electronic media generally. She suggests the private is 'winning', in that we now apply to the public sphere standards of behaviour previously relevant only in private spheres. This is doubtless true. But I suggest here that the influence is also working the other way - and this illegitimatization of language used in an essentially private context is more disturbing. The embedding of one participation framework in another is not always as 'frivolous' as Goffman (1981: 155) characterizes it.

There is a need for a more nuanced view of the public/private distinction, as discussed by Heller (2006) and Landert & Jucker (2011). The latter propose three scales along which texts can be situated with regard to this dichotomy: accessibility, contents and style. A joke sent by email to selected individuals is to the private end of all three scales. And yet the threat of institutional censure in the training module implies otherwise. More consideration of the participation frameworks pertaining in email communication would also be valuable. How, for example, are recipients-by-forwarding to be viewed: as newly acquired ratified participants or as overhearers brought into subordinate communication (Goffman 1981: 133-134)? Alternatively, does the forwarding of a message initiate a separate encounter, in which the original message is embedded and its sender merely a figure, so that such recipients have no role in the latter at all? Exploration of such questions would not be an exercise in classification for its own sake. It has consequences for both our legal protections and the conduct of our personal relationships.

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