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# 'Flawless': the Staging of Pandemic-Driven Remote Interviews and the Polishing of The Onlife Persona

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## Abstract

With the perpetuation of COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, the requirement for job-seekers to engage in remote-online interviews is becoming yet another 'new normality' we must negotiate. This short intervention will nonetheless consider the variables of such novelty arguing the implications of being judged, both remotely and vocally, from a screen. Such consideration will engage in the approaches and dangers in light to also of our ever-englobing online presence: the onlife.

*Keywords: Great Resignation; remote interviews; AI mood recognition; onlife; algorithms; metaverse; online recruitment; social distancing; COVID-19*

Ireland, as many other western countries, has become a place where we may no longer detach the physical persona may from its virtual elements. This perspective has been introduced by Luciano Floridi with his neologism 'onlife' - whereas the online and the life of the subject/user have become the same thing (Floridi, 2015). This agrees with the still relevant formula 'The Medium is the Message' (McLuhan, 1967) – whereas with technological changes the deliverance of the message changes. Within waging war on the COVID-19 pandemic significant new sets of 'understanding' and 'delivering' the message have taken place which need to be addressed. Indeed, the physical entity has more than ever been required to step back and leave space for the virtual equivalent. While restricted to physical distancing, the everyday activities found a necessarily (albeit comfortably prolific) ground in the net - the virtual infosphere – where, with greater confidence than ever we could commute all sorts of shopping, searching, watching, clicking, scrolling, commenting and reviewing.

The labour market and job seekers just as well found its (forcefully) accommodating soil within its online recruitment pages. If it is decades since job seekers have scanned for work on specific search engines and web-publicised posts, with the pandemic restrictions a true novelty emerged: the necessity of interviewing candidates remotely and online. Such condition has created a fundamentally new dynamic of self-presentation and remote judgment – and perhaps changed the very *message* of performance and presentation. This short article will attempt to make consideration on this aspect, using my personal experience as a job seeker in 2021 as a case study.

*Skimming the online footprint*

Several aspects which are already discussed elsewhere will be necessarily left out: one well-known area is the use of optimized algorithms in the evaluation of candidates (Guerry & Feyter, 2012) and the somewhat time-consuming application forms (Zielinski, 2016), an issue that has been considered and raised already before the pandemic - though it developed to become an ever-increasingly deployed and supposedly more sophisticated in judgment (Higginbotham, 2021). Also, the issue of being misled online into believing the 'real you' is another person altogether can be related to the idea of catfishing (Suler, 2015) – which appears as a form of onlife hoax. Nonetheless, once the 'real' encounter takes place loses its 'effect'. Instead, an aspect that is not strictly novel yet is ever more significant for applying to the job market is the dazzling effect of our online presence - the social media and networking - the quality of the information, the data involved. This is important, as with the pandemic no physical encounter with candidates is allowed: the online persona and its onlife merge - becoming central and essential elements- at least theoretically. Indeed, this piece concentrates on the personal considerations that have been raised in trying to deal with such a novel presentation of the self.

The online persona - in light of an online interview - would have become a central and unavoidable element of consideration. Thus, apart from the preparation of a clear, relevant, coherent, and concise curriculum vitae that represented my (meticulously organised) work experience - a great deal of time was perceived as necessary to 'skim' and 'polish' one's online persona. This could concern all the internet noise and footprints a user has left around, through social networks, blog posts, reviews, articles, magazines. To do that, a satisfying (albeit frustrating) tool was to vary search engines, looking up one's name -through different platforms, servers, and devices. Every time, new results would come up, showing different variations of the same persona. Old profiles and obsolete social platforms would appear, to which credentials were long lost and forgotten. One particular 'selfie' was recurring, not offensive in any manner yet not professional, to which appeared no simple mode for getting rid of. More than that, paranoia stroke with the fear of by giving too much concern to the picture, albeit trying to cover it, would only increase its visibility ratio. Many companies offer services that indeed polish the online presence, but luckily this was in no way necessary in this case. It is important nonetheless to notice the dedication - almost equivalent to the work-related CV - to build and offer a mint, well-shaven, clean, and friendly online persona. All profile pictures were re-evaluated, with an insistent request to friends to offer an opinion. A coherent LinkedIn profile was set up, with a certain urgency in trying to connect and produce as much relevant content as possible, keeping in mind the informal advice that a 'stale' social account is possibly worse than not having one at all. But yet, in such a pandemic era, not having one at all did not seem any longer an option: the onlife persona, again, seems to be a requirement to which, in absentia, could offer no alternative of judgment. One had to be fully engaged or simply appear as a 'not economically viable' asset.

### *Polishing the virtual in-person remote persona*

With the proximity of the much-awaited interview date, much consideration was given in effectively how to present oneself to remote, on-screen judging committee - all without the use of handshakes, small talk, ice-breaking 'throat clearing', etc. Indeed, close to the appointed date, I realised that potentially the interview would not only take place remotely for me - but

also for all the members of the evaluating team - who also were in separate rooms: a 'winning' vibe of a candidate's performance was to be based not on a committee – but to single, isolated individuals; who could not influence – nor incentivise – each other. Interestingly, and here this seems telling, the internet had no clear answers. Very rare, before the pandemic, 'totally remote' interviews were regularly taking place. Blog and article entries related to 'how to dress for an interview' or '10 mistakes not to make', albeit dated only a bunch of months back, did not engage in the reality of not meeting in person - not shaking (“firmly”) hands, not feeling the bad-breath, or the over-abused cologne - knowing the person before you, and being known before them. Instead, one finds himself in the odd condition of having to make up one's mind all alone about what is valuable, what effective - the necessary impression - to the risk of making a fool of oneself. By everything being online, it came as a natural consideration that as one's online presence had to be flawless and conspicuously judged (again, perhaps not all - one can never know); also, my on-screen - while talking - presence had to be mint. Sharp: HD with no glitches.

Immediately the question of the 'right spot' where to have the conversation arose - with such space needing also a flawless internet connection – and furthermore to be performed with a perfectly reliable computer: Just as my interview which supposedly needed to be mint, responsive and clear – so too the tools I used. Also, the sounds were important - doorbells needed not to ring, nor phones. Perfect silence was essential. In this light, the pressure of a perfect performance appears to be as demanding as ever: a minimal voice delay in the connection, or any sort of incident, could potentially influence the entire evaluation.

This is central when realising that it was not simply a persona to be judged: it was, and still is, your onlife engagement: you as an entity on a screen - an actor who plays the part of the perfect employee. Just as in films, all lights and make-up and background could, and need, to be perfectly managed and programmed. Even the choice of the right outfit, a typical concern of any candidate, becomes more than ever central - *should I wear a tie or not? should I shave? Wear glasses or contacts?* - to the evident extent of 'what looks better on camera?'. It appeared clear that the one-shot engagement with the committee was no longer a question of that half an hour interview - but of an instant impression: a first glance of 'on-screen' dazzle - crispiness, in-synch reaction and confidence across all the technological variables.

### *False promotion management*

*A posteriori*, trying to grasp the effect of what the first impression of you would offer, the number of variables that could have indeed modified or enhanced on the behalf of the interviewed stand out. Let's begin by considering the social media presence. A lot of effort had been put into place to try to deliver an online 'pleasant' appearance, coherent, professional. But also, friendly, sporty, healthy, 'social'- as well as international and - why not? - multicultural – with a required pinch of exaggeration. Profile pictures needed to show all that but may also *pretend* all that. After all, the first impression is all – and impression management, going back to Goffman (1959) is a central element of presenting oneself. Indeed, by 'manipulating' the impression of yourself, who can recriminate for falling for it? For your not being what you appeared online? While it is evident that 'you are checked out' – albeit relatively anonymously, as in the case of the LinkedIn searches – who can admit he actually *checked you out*? Having a picture with a child may be particularly misleading – though

I do not suggest it is always a boost. HR or an interviewer may believe you are a family member - and thus discriminate one as a committed individual. Particularly in case females, such child-bearing pictures may offer the bias impression of having already 'done their part' - and thus have low probability of requesting another maternity leave. If the issue is raised, one could simply admit that it is a picture of a niece - a cousin: the variables are in the eye of the beholder. Likewise, the same may take place discriminating real mothers: total control of all information, again, appears as the necessary strategy.

In the case of presenting ourselves during a remote interview - through Zoom or Meet, in any case on a screen; another set of manipulating variables may come into play. The candidate may tilt the camera to appear taller than in reality. He may enhance lightning to change the colour tone of his skin. Regarding background, one may create an entire cinematic style of setting- presenting behind oneself a neat bookshelf, or an over-the-top city skyline. This is not simply suggesting the use of digital filters - still bulky and evidently fake- but in staging relatively noticeably, though not obtrusively, an entire scenery in the backdrop. The candidate may place designer lamps, luxurious musical instruments, tropical plants, blooming flowers - feeding the impression of his personal 'good taste' and confidence - but also wealth, class, and prestige; with the underlined issue of appearing quite the opposite in another context: for example, a non-visible stain on a wall may appear more evident on a screen - and thus give an inadvertently false, run-down impression to the viewers.

### *Future professions*

If we look at the current Irish scenario, a recent article in the *Irish Independent* announced the proximity of a "Great Resignation" slowly emerging - whereas 40% of Irish workers are planning to quit and change their jobs in the next year (Lavella, 2021). It is an unsettling prediction, yet has interesting implications in light of our being still - at least throughout 2021 and part of 2022- under partial social distancing restrictions and endorsement of smart-working. How many of these new candidates within the job market will find themselves arranging for online interviews?

With the advance of such conditions of remote interviewing and online meeting, enhanced by the manipulation of background and interest, the onlife persona becomes central on an entirely new level. Its essence appears as compatible with a strict social media profile - beyond a simple 'virtual' presence. If LinkedIn offered a 'first impression' management to recruiters and scout agents on your personal and professional - albeit filtered- qualities, to which a physical interview compensated or 'revealed' its discrepancies – today with online interviewing processes such virtual pretences are further enhanced and even more 'filtered'. The management, manipulation, 'dazzling' appears to the advantage of those who better understand, promote and enhance an on-life persona. Of course, there is also a fundamental advantage towards straightforward discrimination against candidates – especially regarding racial prejudice. For such cases, up to recently it was a fundamental 'good sense' not to attach pictures in the CV – nor request them (although it is a very common practice in South America, and south of Europe among others). Yet again, the onlife persona seems to throw all such consideration out the window, as his public persona would become at the tip of a finger be exposed with any search engine.

Not only can candidate promote a falsely arranged family-oriented individuals, but the same deviating effect also can be done with profile pictures involving dogs, cats, certain books, – but even snapshots in fancy resorts, expensive holidays – arduous and adventurous treks, even a crypto-sexy poses and mild provocation. Again, none of this is professionally relevant – strictly speaking – but arguably, and perhaps this is one conclusion this article is leading to – online interviews aren't in the first place. Beyond that, two other exaggerated scenarios may be proposed considering the reality of 'onlife' job interviews. In one, future candidates could come to the extent of renting specific background 'workspaces' - an 'Office BnB' that offers perfect internet connection, next-generation devices to connect with, and a highly professional, well set, precisely lit and framed background – just for the duration of the interview. Such an aspect, requiring a physical scenario. To prevent such occurrence, another potential scenario is one where companies will begin to invest in a new form of scout recruitment, one trying to operate and deliver the TrueYou persona - as described in the dystopian *The Circle* by Eggers (2013) - whereas algorithms would judge and clarify a non-filtered version of the candidate - a 'true' self, necessary (or perhaps not at all) for creating a coherent, familiar and transparent workplace. We may suppose such system may go as far as implementing AI 'mood recognition' tools to evaluate/implement the stress or sympathy levels in the candidate, all tools already promoted for consumer evaluation (Thomas, 2018). Afterall, returning to the understanding of the Medium being itself the Message, it is a certain untold agreement that technologies are our befriended tools as long as they work. Any technology that does not work, from computers to internet connect – is a bummer – it is time consuming: requires troubleshooting and extra assistance – and ultimately costly replacement. The same appears the case with the onlife job candidate: any glitch in his performance, and hesitation on screen – appears quite parallel to the technological bulkiness. We are fundamentally, in the slightly exaggerated scenario, ever more perceived as machines. All these conditions may suddenly change or be fundamentally endorsed, as proven by Microsoft novel proposal to conduct 'Avatar' meetings – as to virtually engage with interactive variations of the self (Warren, 2021). Such approach comes hand in hand with the 'Metaverse' hybridizing of the Facebook social media experience (Thomas, 2021). All these aspects, which seem very close to reality, if not already available, give for granted the not-so-clear condition of a 'new normality' to which we must abide by; or rather take full advantage of.

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