WHY THE INTERNET MAKES BUYING A CAR LESS LOATHSOME: HOW TECHNOLOGIES CHANGE ROLE RELATIONS

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Drawing on ethnographic data collected over a two-year period in two car dealerships, this paper employs role theory and a dramaturgical analysis of sales encounters to show how the internet has changed the relationship between car salesmen and their customers. The paper explores why Goffman's dramaturgical approach to analyzing encounters provides a way of analyzing technologically occasioned changes in the interaction order of a work system that allows students to grapple more holistically yet systematically with the social and material aspects of such change.

In a world enthralled with tweeting, texting, social networking and shopping online, to proclaim that the internet and technologies built on it are changing the way we live is hardly news. Only a catatonic could miss the almost daily pronouncements by high-tech evangelists that some new internet tool is ushering in another brave new world. Academic literatures in medicine (Demaerschalk et al., 2012; Ross, Sepper, & Pohjonen, 2010), business (Turban, Lee, King, Peng, & Turban, 2009; VanHoose, 2011), engineering (Kühnle, 2010; Smite, Moe, & Agerfalk, 2010), the sciences (National Research Council, 1999) and the social sciences (Castells, 1996; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002) testify to the same story, albeit less passionately. But even though the internet is rapidly becoming as infrastructural as electricity, there is surprisingly little research on how it is altering work systems or the work that people do. Studies of email's use (Barley, Meyerson, & Grodal, 2011; Dabbish & Kraut, 2006; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991) and distributed teams (Hinds & Bailey, 2003; Hinds & Kiesler, 2002; O'Leary & Mortensen, 2010) are exceptions, and even this research pays more attention the experiences and performance of individuals and groups than to work systems or the way work is done.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that we know so little about how the internet affects work aside from the difficulties people have coping with flooded inboxes and collaborating with people they never meet. Email overload and distributed teams are among the internet's best known consequences because so many people experience them regardless of employer, industry, or occupation. More importantly, changes occasioned by infrastructural technologies like the internet accrue over the long haul, are maddeningly diverse, and are often occupation-ally specific. The telephone, for example, had very different ramifications for rural farmers than it did for merchants in cities (Fischer, 1992). The internal combustion engine's implications for livery drivers (who became taxi drivers) were substantially different than they were for blacksmiths (who went out of business). Accordingly, there is no reason to expect the internet to alter the work of academics or doctors in ways even remotely akin to how it shapes what purchasing agents or car salesmen do, however significant those changes might be for each line of work.

Faced with such heterogeneity, social scientists have three options. The first is to move up levels of analysis until they can elide differences in context. This is precisely what most research on the internet does. Rather than ask how the internet has affected the daily work of car salesmen, travel agents, or academics, scholars ask how the internet has influenced patterns of automobile sales (Ghose, Mukhopadhyay, & Rajan, 2007; Kuruzovich, Viswanathan, Agarwal, Gosain, & Weitzman, 2008; Viswanathan, Kuruzovich, Gosain, & Agarwal, 2007; Zettelmeyer, Morton, & Silva-Risso, 2006), the structure of the travel industry (Buhalis & Zage, 2007; Lang, 2000), or the breadth of a researcher's scholarship (Evans, 2009). In fact, much research on the internet even seeks to span industries by speaking broadly about e-commerce, long tails, and mediated communication. Second, researchers can opt for producing a corpus of situated studies of how the internet has altered work in this or that workplace. With enough studies, we might find general patterns. But given the current emphasis on making theoretical if not generalizable contributions in every paper, aside from the efforts of an occasional ethnographer, any widespread move toward empirical nominalism of a concerted sort is unlikely. Finally, researchers can seek to develop perspectives that focus less on the effects of a specific technology, than on the processes by which technologies
(including those of the internet) bring about change in a line of work or the organization of a production system. The agenda would be less to reveal what the internet does to any particular occupation than to help researchers decide how, when, and where to look for changes that might occur.

This paper plays the third approach off the second. Drawing on role theory and Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis of encounters, it proposes an approach to studying how technologies change interaction orders or systems of role relations and role playing and, by extension, work systems. The narrative first sketches a framework for studying technologically occasioned change in role relations in a line of work or a workplace. It then illustrates the framework’s utility with ethnographic data on how the internet has been altering the work of car salesmen and the tenor of their encounters with customers. The paper ends by exploring the implications of a dramaturgical approach to studying technologically occasioned change in a work system.

A ROLE-BASED PERSPECTIVE ON HOW TECHNOLOGIES CHANGE WORK AND ORGANIZATIONS

As organizations began to adopt computers and other computational technologies, organizational scholars gradually became dissatisfied with existing approaches to studying technology. Contingency theory (Gerwin, 1979; Harvey, 1968; Perrow, 1967; Woodward, 1958) and even socio-technical systems theory (Emery & Marek, 1962; Rice, 1963; Trist & Bamforth, 1951), once it fixated on autonomous teams, seemed unable to account for variations in organizing that were sometimes occasioned by identical machines. Accordingly, by the 1990’s students of technology began to jettison deterministic theories of technological change in favor of a philosophy of social construction and to study how specific technologies were construed and used in situ to understand how they might trigger diverse outcomes (Barley, 1986; Fulk, Steinfield, & Schmitz, 1987; Orlikowski, 1992, 1996; Poole & DeSanctis, 1990). The shift had two major consequences: In addition to encouraging an ontological shift, constructionists advocated studying concrete, situated practices that emerged as people used specific artifacts and software (Boczkowski & Orlikowski, 2004; Leonard & Barley, 2010; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). Emphasizing the concrete, however, had an unanticipated side-effect. Studying practices led scholars away from asking how technologies alter work systems and the structures of organizations in which they were deployed. Agency and interpretation came to the fore; work systems and social structures faded into the background. If the contingency theorists had cast their eye at too high a level of analysis by focusing on the alignment of types of environments with production systems, the constructionists ratcheted their resolution down to where it was difficult to see larger patterns of organizing. Ideally, one would like an analytic approach that preserves the constructionists’ concern with the concrete, while linking situated action to meso-level, if not more molar, changes in organizations and occupations.

Put differently, analysts need a way of leveraging action and structure simultaneously. Giddens theory of structuration has offered one such lever (Barley, 1986; Orlikowski, 1992; Orlikowski & Robey, 1991; Poole & DeSanctis, 1990). Role theory offers another. Roles (or more precisely, the patterned ways in which people play them) allow us to pivot from an ongoing stream of action to a more ordered world of social structure. As the Chicago school sociologists understood, role is a Janus faced concept: it simultaneously looks in one direction toward the individual and in the other toward the social order (Becker & Strauss, 1956; Hughes, 1937). Unlike structuration theory, which at best provides a broad ontological perspective, role theory, especially as developed by interactionists like Goffman (1959, 1961b) and Turner (1968, 2006), tells us what to look for empirically. In other words, role theory provides analysts with a set of concepts with which one can structure observations.

ROLES, TECHNOLOGIES AND INTERACTION ORDERS

Barley (1990) was the first to propose a role-based theory of how technologies change work systems and organizational structures. To devise a strategy for documenting when and how new technologies change organizations, Barley linked Nadel’s (1957) theory of relational and non-relational roles to network theory’s dictum that every organization’s structure is a network inscribed by the relations among its members. Specifically, he argued that technologies trigger change by altering workers’ non-relational roles: the tasks they perform and how they perform them. Such changes may then lead to changes in the nature of the interactions workers have with members of their role set (the people with whom they interact while doing their work) as well as who comprises the role set. If role relations change in either way, then the social network may change and, if it does, one can say the technology has altered the work system. Changes in role relations are, therefore, key to changes in work systems.
Using a combination of ethnographic and social network data, Barley illustrated his analytical approach for linking changes in patterns of practice and interaction to changes in structure by showing how computerized imaging modalities (like ultrasound and CT scanners) challenged professional dominance in radiology departments. Historically, the production and interpretation of x-rays was bifurcated: technologists produced films and radiologists interpreted them. With the arrival of computerized modalities, the separation of production and interpretation broke down. Technologists who operated computerized modalities could not produce medically viable studies without understanding something about how computers functioned and, more importantly, without being able to interpret images as they produced them. Because many radiologists initially knew little about the new images or the technology, role relations morphed. Relations between radiologists and technologists who operated computerized modalities became more collaborative and technologists acquired more autonomy. As these differences solidified, radiology departments split into two work systems: a hierarchically organized main department run by administrators and the computerized departments run by radiologists where relations were more collegial and reciprocal.

Subsequent studies have occasionally offered role-based accounts of how new technologies alter work systems. Edmondson, Bohmer, and Pisano (2001) examined the deployment of minimally invasive cardiac surgery at 16 hospitals. They showed that successful implementations occurred when relations among surgeons, nurses, technicians, and anesthesiologists became less hierarchical and more collaborative. In one of the few studies of how the internet alters role relations and, by extension, work systems, Schultze and Orlikowski (2004) studied an online quoting system deployed by WebGA, a firm that assisted independent insurance agents in determining which insurance companies offered the best policies and prices for the clients the agents served. To WebGA’s chagrin, the tool allowed agents to generate their own quotes, thereby bypassing WebGA’s representatives. As a result, the technology decreased the frequency and altered the tenor of interactions between service representatives and agents. Ironically, this change undercut the benefit that agents once saw in working with WebGA’s service representatives.

Nevertheless, role-based studies of how technologies alter work systems remain relatively rare. One might argue that their rarity reflects the fact that such studies usually involve ethnography, which is too time-consuming for most scholars. Irrespective of whether studying changes in roles requires fieldwork, role analysts also face difficult epistemic problems. First, to the degree that role-based studies focus on patterns of relationships defined largely in network terms, one risks losing sight of how the technologies alter the tenor of the actual interactions that constitute the ties among members of a role set. We learn who interacts with whom and potentially about what, but not how they enact their relationships. To study how people play their roles we need a way of documenting repetitive patterns of typical encounters.

Second, role-based studies have at least implicitly treated new technologies as exogenous shocks that break a prior social order. In fact, analysts—even those who hope to avoid technological determinism and who appreciate that the actions of people and the particulars of a context will shape the chain’s unfolding—often construe technology as a trigger in a causal chain. Barley’s model, in particular, is sequentially causal. He proposed a sequence leading from changes in technology, to changes in tasks, to changes in role relations, to changes in network structures. If the chain is broken, the work system is unlikely to change significantly. Such a model may be useful for studying the implications of discrete, physical machines like CT scanners or even techniques like surgery whose occurrences can be identified and counted, but it is less viable for studying technologies that lack tangibility or even ostension. This is precisely the problem posed by the internet.

The internet is a cover term for a complex, pliable, changing and every-expanding portfolio of tools, information, and media that alters the grounds on which we act in situations where we previously would have acted differently. There is nothing mystical about the internet’s capacity to reground action; the phenomenon is entirely practical. It involves our ability to do things that, in similar situations, we could not have done so easily before the internet. For example, before the internet it was impossible to communicate instantaneously as well as asynchronously across time and space. Before the internet, it was difficult to access vast bodies of information without leaving one’s chair to visit a repository. Before the internet (and smartphones) one could not resolve disagreements over facts during a dinner conversation with one’s spouse in a restaurant. (Of course, this may still be ill-advised.) With the internet, people now have easy access to information (e.g., what a particular car cost an automobile dealer in Tehachapi, or knowledge that there is a specific person in Tonapah who wants to start a relationship with a person more or less like you) that they previously could not have found.
To analyze such regroundings, we need concepts for grappling with how technologies are enrolled in the day-to-day fabric of social action such that they reconfigure the web of constraints and opportunities that shape our behavior in specific contexts. In other words, we need a way to map what Orlikowski (2007) has called “constitutive entanglement:” how the social and material entwine. Actor-network theorists (Eriksson & Goldkuhl, 2013; Latour, 2007; Ribes, Jackson, Geiger, Burton, & Thomas, 2013) and students of sociomateriality (Leonardi, 2013; Orlikowski, 2007; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008) have attempted to grapple with such entwining. Actor-network theorists do so by reducing technologies and humans to analytical equivalents, known as “actants,” and by studying their joint contribution to a system of action. In the process, however, actor-network theory sacrifices our everyday understanding of the differences between technology and people in ways that sometimes border on the anthropomorphic. Furthermore, actor-network theorists do not focus on roles and situated interactions. Advocates of socio-materiality, on the other hand, offer a useful ontology, but little guidance about how to deploy the ontology empirically. Their analyses tend to gravitate to the micro-practices of how people use technologies rather than to people’s interactions with each other, which role theory takes as the building blocks of all social organization. What would be useful are concepts and schemas that allow us to unravel how new technologies become entangled with the social such that they reconfigure what Goffman (1983) called an “interaction order”: the situated, patterned, and recurrent ways of behaving and interacting associated with a particular context. Ways of behaving toward others, which constitute the relational aspects of roles, are precisely what are lost in most previous research on technological change, sometimes even that which attends to roles.

Dramaturgical analysis. On this score, Goffman’s (1959, 1961a, 1967, 1974, 1981) essays on encounters, interaction rituals and forms of talk are helpful because they provide a schema for analyzing the ways people play roles vis-à-vis each other and how settings and artifacts (including technologies) support and limit role-playing. Over his career, Goffman sought to understand why social life is so well-ordered and to reveal why encounters of particular types (a lecture, a game of checkers, and so on) unfold so similarly regardless of who is involved.¹ The key, for Goffman, did not involve understanding individual-level sense-making as occurs when people attempt to comprehend the unexpected, but rather sense-making and behavior that is contingent on a “definition of the situation” or what he later called a “frame” (Goffman, 1959, 1974).²

Although definitions of a situation are sometimes negotiated on the spot (as when we explicitly ask each other, “What’s going on here?”), they are not usually constructed de novo and they are not unconstrained. Constraints arise from how activity is embedded in and arises from a context. Once we classify some goings-on, we generally know how to act precisely because we treat it as a typical case of some social scene. Goffman argued that frames are layered contexts that configure the lines of action that participants can take in a particular type of encounter. Importantly, these layers include the “physical framework,” by which Goffman meant artifacts and natural phenomena, and the “social framework,” by which he meant the other actors who are present as well as the institutional setting (such as a theater, a church, a lecture) that provides specific rules for acting (Goffman, 1974: 21–25). People cannot ignore the physical framework any more than they can ignore the social. As Pinch (2010) recently pointed out, Goffman understood that people take into account a setting’s material artifacts as they enact encounters. In fact, technologies assist people in defining a situation and in playing their roles accordingly. Once a situation is defined, people engage in “guided doings” (Goffman, 1974: 23); they construct a line of action within the confines of the possibilities set by physical and social frameworks. It is doubtful, for example, that one would skateboard down the aisle of a church, especially while a priest is delivering a sermon. The frame, “attending church,” largely precludes such activity. One could conceivably skateboard down a sidewalk while listening to the same sermon on an iPod. Re-groundings involve changes in frame.

Like other dramaturgical sociologists (Messinger, Sampson, & Towne, 1962; Turner & Edgley, 1976; Wilshire, 1982), Goffman argued that encounters, interaction rituals, and other “guided doings,” once

¹ Although some scholars claim that Goffman was primarily interested in the construction of selves and identities and the negotiation and maintenance of face, his agenda was ultimately to explain the social structure of everyday life (Collins, 1988, 2004; Giddens, 1987). I draw on Goffman’s structural agenda in this essay.

² One should not confuse Goffman’s use of “frame” with its use by contemporary institutional theorists who often use the term as a synonym for a logic. Among institutionalists, frame has the connotation of a rhetoric, concept or ideology. In Goffman’s terminology, frames define classes of situations which exist at a much more situated level of analysis. Goffman used frame in the sense of a picture frame, a set of cues or parameters that differentiates the situation from its surroundings and that defines acceptable lines of action within the context.
framed, can be usefully viewed as theatrical performances. The dramaturgical eye draws the analyst’s attention to specific elements of the encounter and its setting that support and structure the unfolding line of action. \textit{Scripts} are the pivotal element of any dramaturgical account. A script organizes and typifies interaction by defining how parties to an encounter should play their roles. The vast majority of encounters have scripts even if they are as minimal as the two-turn exchange of greetings among strangers acknowledging each other’s presence on a sidewalk. One can think of a script as the plot of a recurrent activity that defines the essentials of the parts that participants must play. Consider going to a restaurant (Schank & Abelson, 1977). When we go to a restaurant, the stream of action unfolds in a relatively predictable order: the maître d’ greets us; we ask for a table; the maître d’ seats us; the waiter greets us at the table and hands us a menu; the waiter asks if we’d like something to drink; and so on through dessert and paying the bill. As Garfinkel (1967) demonstrated, when scripts are breached—as would occur if the waiter immediately asked if we would like dessert—we become disoriented, even anxious or angry.

Scripts are both cognitive and behavioral phenomena. Cognitively, scripts are expectations about how things ought to go, given a definition of the situation. When our expectations are fulfilled we have the sense that “nothing-out-of-the-ordinary-is-going-on-here,” although we are not likely to be aware that we are experiencing a sense of the usual. Behaviorally, as the dramaturgists emphasize, scripts are loosely prescribed sequences of behaviors and interactions associated with types of encounters. People enact or play their respective roles by making key moves at appropriate points in an interaction’s unfolding (see Pentland, 1992). A script’s enactment is supported by, and may often require, a specific stage (a restaurant in the evening), a set of props (tables, plates, candles, a corkscrew), supporting actors (bartenders, bus boys) and sometimes an audience (other diners). When an encounter’s dramaturgical elements change, scripts may change and when scripts change, by definition, the interaction order has changed. For example, asking customers to pay before they eat food that was cooked before they ordered it and then asking them to seat themselves and bus their own tables, turns a fine restaurant into a fast food establishment.

Scripts unfold through \textit{moves}, the actions that a second party takes in response to a first party’s actions, that in turn serve as clues and cues for the next actions the first party should take (see Collins, 2004). Moves are strategic in intent; through them actors hope to achieve objectives. Encounters also vary by their \textit{footing}, the stance that actors assume toward each other as they make their moves. Footing sets the tone of the encounter. When you hand an immigration official your passport, you engage in roughly the same behavior as when you purchase a movie ticket: in both cases you hand a legal document to someone in a glass booth who then offers admission beyond. In the case of immigration, however, you present yourself as a \textit{suppliant} for admission which the official can question and deny. In the case of going to a movie, you present yourself as a \textit{customer} and you do not expect to be denied admission unless the show is sold out. To appreciate the difference in footing one need only consider the relative propriety and the consequences of expressing irritation at the ticket taker versus an immigration official.

As mentioned above, other dramaturgical elements of an encounter support and shape the scripted line of action and the moves by which actors play their parts. Like plays, encounters always occur on some \textit{stage} often in front of some \textit{audience}, which might be present or imagined. The stage is bounded in time and space, demarking the region within which an encounter of a particular type can and should occur. Usually, settings have front stages that are available to the audience and back stages that are not. Moreover, stages usually contain \textit{props} that buttress the line of action and the actors’ performance of their roles. Stages and props are the material artifacts (some of which may be considered technologies) that actors employ as they play out encounters of different types. One of Goffman’s key points is that actors cannot sustain an encounter of a given type without the right stage and the right props. If you change the props or the stage, you risk changing the definition of the situation. For instance, one cannot play chess without a chessboard and chess pieces, however contrived or even imaginary they might be. Similarly, to dine in a restaurant requires the presence of tables, chairs, plates, forks, knives, and spoons. In restaurants people do not stand or eat with their hands. At picnics they may. The point is that technologies and other artifacts structure our definition of the situation, the scripts that guide the encounter, and the way we play our roles.

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3 To argue that encounters are rituals or theatrical performances is not to say that actors are somehow disingenuous or that their actions and interactions are contrived, although the scripted aspects of encounters do make possible the kind of dissembling that drew Goffman’s attention to confidence artists.
It is important to note that scripts, roles, moves, props, stages, and footing implicate each other. They operate jointly to define the situation and, hence, the line of action that the situation warrants. To see how this works, consider again encounters with immigration officers and people who sell tickets at movies. Even if you assume the footing of a supplicant, if you make the mistake of handing the immigration officer official documents known as money, you may find that there are worse possibilities than being denied admission to the officer’s homeland. Of course, in some countries, presenting the officer with money might speed entry, as long as you make the move properly. In contrast, handing a ticket seller your passport is likely to invoke little more than puzzlement and under no circumstance would it land you a better seat in the theater.

In sum, a dramaturgical analysis of technological change differs from other approaches to studying technology. Rather than make the technology the center of attention it shifts attention to the system of actors, actions, and interactions in which the technology is embedded. We are no longer simply interested in how a technology changes the way we do some task, a pattern of communication, how people conceptualize the technology, or even the practices that emerge around a technology’s use. Instead, dramaturgical analysis attends to the entire milieu that flows from and sustains a definition of the situation and plausible lines of action. If anything, it is the script rather than the technology that lies at the core of the analysis. The analyst’s job is to determine whether the presence of a technology has somehow reconfigured the scripts, the stage, the props, the moves that actors make, and the encounter’s footing in ways that sustain a different line of action. Because scripts, by definition, encode role relations, dramaturgical analysis therefore brings the playing of roles to center stage. Furthermore, from this perspective internet technologies are analytically no different than any other technology; to have social consequences, using the internet must reconfigure some combination of the scripts, moves, actors, footing, props, and stage that structure an interaction ritual to transform the way a type of encounter unfolds.

To appreciate how a dramaturgical approach might assist us in studying how technologies alter role relations and the work systems they inscribe, let us explore how sales encounters unfold when customers purchase a vehicle over the internet instead of in person.

METHODS

Background: How Americans Buy and Sell Cars

Americans buy new and most used cars from a dealer, a retailer franchised to sell one or more manufacturers’ vehicles. Dealers purchase new vehicles from the manufacturer at a “dealer’s invoice price” plus a “destination charge” (the cost of shipping the vehicle to the dealer). Once the vehicles arrive, the dealer displays them on a “lot” surrounding the dealer’s buildings. Dealers can offer cars to buyers at any price, but most offer new cars at the “Manufacturer’s Suggested Retail Price” (MSRP, also known as the “sticker price,” which can vary widely by the “options” on a vehicle) plus a destination charge and other incidental costs.

In the U.S., purchasing a new car is a nearly unique shopping experience. Whereas Americans readily pay the asking price for most goods, they expect to negotiate when purchasing a car. As one website oriented to educating would-be car buyers puts it: “Buying a new car is more like haggling for a donkey in Marrakech than buying a refrigerator at Sears.” In general, buyers can expect to pay somewhere between the invoice price and MSRP, although dealers may sell overstocked cars at less than invoice and models in high demand at more than MSRP. Thus, the car buying game has historically been one in which the car salesman attempts to extract a price as close as possible to the MSRP (because commissions are tied to the size of the difference between the selling and the invoice price), while the customer attempts to purchase the car closer to the invoice price.

Because haggling is foreign to Americans, many find purchasing a car to be stressful. Homes are the only other purchase about which Americans expect
to negotiate and, in this case, most buyers and sellers hire agents to do the haggling for them. Although being a salesman of any type carries stigma in the U.S., few salesmen are perceived to be less prestigious or trustworthy than a car salesman. Nakao and Treas (1994) found that a nationally representative sample of Americans gave car salesmen a score of 25 on an occupational prestige scale ranging from 1 to 100; lower than the ranking of all other sales occupations except pushcart vendors (22), telephone solicitors (21) and newspaper peddlers (19). A search of JSTOR for articles in academic business journals that contain either “car salesman” or “automobile salesman” in their text provides further evidence of the occupation’s perceived moral stature. Of the 72 papers that met the criterion as of 2011, 53 percent (38) were published in the Business Ethics Quarterly or the Journal of Business Ethics or had words like “trust,” “truth,” “ethical,” “credibility,” “lies,” and ”puffery” in their titles. In a 2009 Gallup Poll, only Congressmen were rated as having lower ethical standards than car salesmen. Americans believe that car salesmen routinely take advantage of customers, a belief not without warrant (Browne, 1973; Jacobs, 2001; Lawson, 2000).

In the mid-1990s, websites began to appear offering car buyers an alternative to negotiating face-to-face with a salesman. In 1995 Autobytel became the first website for researching and purchasing automobiles online. Autobytel’s business model was:

...to empower the car buyer while providing dealers with a more efficient sales process. The company would offer the buyer, at no charge, pertinent information, such as the dealer’s true cost, and an online request form detailing the car and desired options. A local participating car dealer, which would pay a fee to Autobytel, would then contact the buyer with a no-haggle price, and offer an opportunity for a test drive. Dealers would benefit because Autobytel sales were essentially found business. Moreover, these leads would be less expensive than the cost of generating customers through traditional advertising, as well as resulting in a reduction in labor costs. Because advertising and labor account for about 60 percent of most dealers’ operating expenses, these savings were large enough that a significant discount could be passed on to the buyer.

In 1997 General Motors became the first automaker to announce it would sell cars online. Costco entered the online market for autos in 1998 as an “affinity group” that negotiated prices with dealers on behalf of its members. By 2007, 67 percent of all car buyers had used the internet to research their purchase, 27 percent said that the internet had influenced their purchase, and 12 percent bought from a dealer recommended to them by an internet site (J.D. Power and Associates, 2007). By the same year, 94 percent of all dealers in the U.S. had an internet site (J.D. Power and Associates, 2007). Morton et al. (2001) reported that buyers who used independent car buying sites paid, on average, 2 percent less for their car than did customers who bought from a showroom. The same researchers (Morton et al., 2003) also reported that the internet eliminates the well-known tendency for dealers to charge minority customers more than Caucasians in face-to-face encounters (Wise, 1974). Although these and other studies (Ghose et al., 2007; Viswanathan et al., 2007; Zettelmeyer et al., 2006) imply that the internet must somehow alter the social dynamics of the sales encounter, they do not tell us in what way or how.

Data Collection

Two primary research designs allow analysts to identify how a new technology changes work practices and work systems. The strongest design is to study the same work system longitudinally, before and after the technology’s adoption. The second approach is comparative: to study a work system that employs the technology and one that does not, ideally within the same organization. Even stronger would be to replicate the comparison in two or more similar organizations to avoid confusing site-specific dynamics with the effects of the technology. The current study adopted the latter approach.

The data were collected by participant-observation in two car dealerships in a metropolitan area in Northern California over an 18-month period...
between February 2006 and October 2007. One dealer sold Chevrolets and the other Toyotas, although both also sold related brands (GMC trucks and Scions, respectively). Each was ranked by its manufacturer among the top 10 dealers in its region by sales volume. Both had separate staff for floor and internet sales. The Chevrolet dealer employed six floor salesmen and two internet salesmen, while the Toyota dealer employed eight salesmen of each type. Internet sales constituted a larger portion of the sales at the Toyota dealership.

Floor salesmen at both sites worked the showroom and the lot, the stages on which they encountered customers. They and their managers had offices on the edges of the showroom, where the dealers displayed several of the manufacturer’s most recent models. Both dealers displayed the remainder of their inventory on parking lots adjacent to their showroom and, at the Toyota dealership, on the roof of the building. At both sites internet sales occurred backstage out of sight of the showroom. At the Toyota dealership, internet sales occurred on the second floor adjacent to the business offices. At the Chevrolet dealership, they occurred in offices on a back hallway on the first floor. Although the internet sales staff at both locations occasionally worked the floor, floor salesmen never handled internet sales.

We did not set out to compare floor and internet sales; in fact, we began the study unaware of how strongly the internet shaped sales encounters. Our initial agenda was to compare how Toyota and Chevrolet dealers operated, believing that we might find differences analogous to those that others have found in how the two manufacturers design and make vehicles (MacDuffie, 1995; Womack, Jones, & Roos, 1990). Our intent was to write about how sales cultures differed by manufacturer. Accordingly, during the first nine months of the study we focused almost exclusively on floor sales. During this phase, three doctoral students conducted field work at both sites. The researchers usually situated themselves in the dealers’ showrooms, where salesmen waited for an “up”: a chance to serve a customer. When a customer arrived, the researchers accompanied the salesman from the start of the sales encounter until the customer left. When not shadowing salesmen, the researchers talked with the sales staff about their work, their careers, their experiences selling cars, how the dealer and the manufacturer worked together, and the procedures the dealer used for ordering automobiles, financing sales, and tracking information. In addition, the researchers attended weekly sales meetings and interviewed owners, sales managers, and finance managers. Although observation focused primarily on floor sales, the researchers fortuitously documented several internet sales.

After spending several months reading, coding, and analyzing the fieldnotes from the first phase of the study, we concluded that there were no important differences in how Toyotas and Chevrolets were sold. Unexpectedly, however, there did seem to be salient differences between floor sales and the internet sales that we happened upon. Moreover, the differences seemed consistent across the dealerships. We were struck by our sense that encounters between customers and internet salesmen evinced little of the tension and animosity that often marked floor encounters. We also noted that price seemed to be the first topic of conversation in internet sales while it was usually the last topic of conversation during a floor encounter. At the time, however, we had not observed enough internet sales to confirm that the differences occurred with regularity or what they implied for relations between customers and salesmen. All we knew was that the differences between floor and internet sales could not be explained by whether customers had consulted the internet before contacting the dealer. Many customers who visited the dealers’ lots had previously spent time on the internet researching cars and arrived fairly well informed. Accordingly, we shifted our attention to comparing internet and floor sales.

To rectify the scarcity of data on internet sales, we again took to the field during the summer of 2007. During the second period of data collection we focused explicitly on comparing the dynamics of floor and internet sales encounters. The three researchers involved in the second phase of the study (one of whom had participated in the first) concentrated on documenting sales encounters by shadowing both floor and internet salesmen from an encounter’s start to finish. When agreeable to both customer and salesman, we tape recorded the encounters. We subsequently transcribed the tapes and integrated the transcripts into the observers’ fieldnotes to produce a narrative that included a verbatim record of what customers and salesmen did and said.

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9 We encountered only two female salespersons in the course of our study, which is consistent with the gendered nature of auto sales (Lawson 2000). This paper uses the masculine term, “salesmen,” to emphasize the demography of the occupation and to simplify the syntax.

10 Internet sales were part of direct sales, which also included “fleet sales,” that is sales to companies that bought vehicles for their business. We observed only one fleet sale in the course of our study.

11 Throughout the paper words in quotations signify slang terms employed by auto salesmen.
Data Analysis

The analysis draws heavily, but not exclusively, on the data collected during the second phase of the study. Data from the first phase inform the general discussion. We documented 61 floor encounters from start to finish, half at the Chevrolet dealership (31) and half at the Toyota dealership (30). Because the Chevrolet dealer was less heavily committed to internet sales, our data on internet encounters are skewed toward the Toyota dealer. We observed and recorded 23 internet encounters: 19 at the Toyota dealership and four at the Chevrolet dealership. Because we could find no significant differences between the floor or internet sales across the two sites, aside from the infrequency of the latter at the Chevrolet dealership, the paper combines the data from the two sites.

To prepare for coding we read the fieldnotes multiple times. We then met to devise an initial set of codes for chunking the text. Although we used Goffman’s dramaturgical imagery as a general guide for coding lines of action, we had no preconceived notions, for example, of what moves we would find. In this first pass we flagged all passages that pertained to a particular floor or internet encounter so that it would be easy to separate sales encounters from the remainder of the fieldnotes. For each encounter, we then coded the major steps in the encounter’s flow: for example, greeting the customer, taking a test drive, making an initial phone call, negotiating, leave-taking and so on. These codes allowed us to identify the typical stages in a floor or internet encounter’s unfolding (its script).

Next, for every encounter, we flagged as a “sales move” any part of an interaction in which a salesman said or did something to influence the customer’s perception of the vehicle, learn more about the customer, persuade the customer to purchase the car, and so on. At the same time we flagged as a “customer move” any part of an interaction in which the customer said or did something to influence the salesman, end the encounter, or shape how the encounter would unfold. We also coded passages that described points in the encounter at which the interaction became awkward or seemed in danger of breaking down; for example, long unbroken silences and moments when a customer or a salesman contradicted what the other had said or challenged the other’s integrity or truthfulness as when one of the parties accused the other of lying. Awkward moments disrupted the smooth flow of turn taking or punctured the aura of respect that people in interaction normally grant each other.

Having flagged such passages, we met to talk about the various passages we had flagged and to develop a preliminary system for classifying sales and customer moves as well as different types of awkward moments. On the next pass through the data, we categorized moves and awkward moments. The categories of sales moves, customer moves, and awkward moments that are that pertinent to this paper are listed in the three panels of Appendix A along with definitions and examples from our fieldnotes.1

12 Desiring a more balanced proportion of internet encounters across the two sites, we repeatedly visited the Chevrolet dealer at various hours of the day and on various days of the week explicitly to observe internet sales. However, the area was rarely staffed when we were on site. If we were examining statistical or interpretive rather than structural differences across the two sites, the smaller amount of data on internet sales at the Chevy dealer would have posed a significant problem. However, because we focus on the scripts of sales encounters and because internet sales at both sites followed identical scripts, the analytical problem is less serious. Nevertheless, the small number of observations of internet encounters that we were able to observe at the Chevy dealer represents a potential limitation of this study.
The subsequent ethnographic descriptions of floor and internet sales weave key customer and sales moves, stages, props, and supporting actors into narratives of the scripts by which the two types of sales encounters typically unfolded. The analysis then substantiates that the tenor of floor and internet encounters differed by examining how customers reacted to each and by examining the relative frequency of moves and awkward moments that we observed. The analysis then draws on the data to offer a succinct dramaturgical account of why the internet altered interactions between salesmen and customers, before outlining how research on technology and organizing might benefit from dramaturgical analyses of role relations.

SALES ENCOUNTERS

Floor Scripts

Waiting for an up. Except on particularly busy days, floor sales were a waiting game. Each dealer maintained a rotation schedule that listed the names of the salesmen on duty in repeating sequence. Whoever’s name appeared next on the list was “up,” with the right as well as the duty to take the next customer. Once a salesman had taken his or her “up,” the top name was crossed off the list regardless of the encounter’s outcome, and he or she waited until the name again floated to the top before taking another customer.

Aside from assuring that every salesman had an opportunity to sell and reducing conflict over who would serve a customer, the system of “ups” had several notable consequences. The most obvious to a casual observer was that salesmen spent considerable time loitering around their stages, the lot and the showroom, waiting for an encounter to occur. Although salesmen sometimes filled their time by doing miscellaneous tasks that the dealer needed done, studying the manufacturer’s literature, or reviewing the dealer’s current inventory, more often than not they passed the time by watching TV, smoking, and talking to each other. Second, loitering in twos or threes contributed to some customers’ perceptions that salesmen lay in wait, ready to pounce on them the moment they arrived. Finally, because salesmen earned most of their money through commissions, they detested “wasting an up” on a “looker” or “drooler,” a window-shopper who had no intention of buying. Floor salesmen, therefore, often delayed initiating encounters, because they thought that if they waited, “droolers” might reveal themselves as such and leave the lot before the salesmen wasted the “up.” When it was clear that the salesman could no longer delay, he approached the customer even if he suspected the customer was a poor prospect.

As Figure 1 depicts, floor encounters usually unfolded according to a script parsed into three scenes known to salesmen as: “landing the customer on a car,” “taking a test drive,” and “doing the paperwork.” Each scene usually occurred on a different stage: on the lot, in a moving car, and in the showroom, respectively. In each scene salesmen and customers engaged in a set of scene appropriate moves. Although customers could end encounters at any time, in practice, most floor sales were terminated at one of three transitions: just before the test drive, just after the test drive, or during the paperwork when it became clear that the customer would not buy or that the dealer and customer could not agree on a price. Salesmen almost never ended an encounter once it began, but they could accept without protest the customer’s definition of the encounter as over. Alternately, they could attempt to extend the encounter, if they thought the odds of a sale were high enough. The decision to do one or the other was always determined in situ.

Landing the customer on a car. Encounters began when a salesman greeted the customer, introduced himself, and asked an opening question designed to reveal the customer’s preferences for a model or a specific vehicle. Although salesmen sometimes opened encounters with small talk (“Great weather we’re having today!”), they quickly moved to questions that established the encounter’s footing as one between a salesman and customer: “Welcome to (Dealership’s name). How may I help you?” or more directly “What are you looking for today?” Such questions set and signaled the encounter’s footing: the salesman was the gatekeeper to any car a customer might want to view, drive, or buy. As gatekeeper, the salesman became the dominant participant in the sales encounter.

Salesmen examined customers’ responses to opening questions for clues about their readiness to buy, what they might be able to afford (“What are you driving now?”), and how the encounter was likely to unfold. Occasionally a customer voiced an interest in a particular vehicle in a specific color with particular options and even at a specific price, especially if they had seen a vehicle advertised in a newspaper or had made use of the internet. More commonly, customers simply announced that they wanted to look at a particular model: a Suburban, a Camry, an Impala, and so on. The remainder did not know exactly what they wanted and told the salesman that they were simply “browsing,” “looking at cars,” or “doing research.” A few even attempted to avoid the encounter with such moves as turning their backs and walking away from the
salesman, continuing to look at cars without acknowledging the salesman’s presence, speaking to each other in another language without indicating that they knew English, and in one case, running quickly back to their car and driving away.

Assuming the customer did not immediately end the encounter, the salesman soon began guiding the customers through the lot (occasionally the showroom) to a vehicle (or vehicles) similar to the one in which they had expressed interest. Although dealers sometimes had the precise vehicle a customer wanted in stock (the right model in the right color with the right options), in most cases they did not. Frequently, customers did not know what color or options they preferred, which gave the salesman leeway. In any case, the salesman’s objective at this point was to “land the customer on a car”: to focus the customer on a vehicle and persuade him or her to “take a test drive.”

Landing a customer on a car unfolded around two entwined lines of action. The salesman would “show” customers one or more vehicles by drawing their attention to the vehicle’s features and by answering questions about those features or the vehicle’s performance. In other words, the salesman used vehicles as props to support moves that spurred the interaction forward. At the same time, the salesman attempted to establish “rapport” by learning more about the customer and by highlighting similarities between the customer’s and salesman’s lives and preferences. The particular moves in the conversation’s unfolding depended on the salesman, the customer, and the vehicle being shown. For example, if there was a child seat in the customer’s car, a salesman might engage in conversation about children. Salesmen often asked customers where they lived or how they planned on using the vehicle. Then, they might express familiarity with the location or talk about how they used their own vehicle similarly, for instance, driving an SUV to ski resorts. The following excerpt from our fieldnotes provides the flavor of such conversations.

A couple, in their late 20’s, walks into the showroom. Robert (the salesman) greets them. Mark, the husband, tells Robert they want to look at Highlanders and 4Runners. They mainly want
to sit in the vehicles so that he and his wife, Beatrice, can narrow their choices. Robert asks if they need something they can take off-road, to which Mark replies that Beatrice is “a SUV kind of gal.” Robert opines, “That’s because she has a sense of safety.” Robert asks if this is their first time at the dealership. Mark says, “Yes.”

Mark asks Robert if Beatrice can see the Highlander, so Robert leads the couple to the elevator and we head to the roof. In the elevator, Robert says that his goal is to save the couple time and money. As soon as we’re outside, Beatrice sees a 4Runner, gasps, and says, “I like the dark grey.” She asks, “Can I look inside?” Robert opens the 4Runner and Beatrice sits in the driver’s seat. Beatrice tells Robert that she drives a Jetta, so Robert says the 4Runner must be a “bit of a shock.” Beatrice agrees and says the front is very long and high and that there isn’t as much visibility. Robert then shows her the height adjustment lever on the seat and they fiddle with that for a bit. Robert tells Mark that he would be “happy to arrange for you to drive any one of these models.”

Beatrice gets out of the car and we walk to the back door of the 4Runner which Robert has opened. Sounding skeptical, Beatrice remarks that she needs space for two dogs. Robert asks if they are going to tow anything and Mark says no, he only needs a bike rack. Robert says they might want to look at the Highlander then, and tells the couple, “We have a lot of them downstairs (on the main lot).” Mark tells Robert that they would like heated seats but he knows that those usually come with higher end models that also come with leather. Mark asks if he can get higher-end features without the leather, to which Robert replies that they need to sit down and look at their options. He adds that it can be confusing researching cars online because sometimes a website says something’s available but it turns out that it might be available in Nebraska but not California.

Walking back to the elevator, Robert asks about their dogs and Beatrice says they have Labradors. Once we’re in the showroom, Robert tells the couple that the Highlander on the floor is the 2008 model but they have very few of these. Robert leads the customers to a red Highlander on the lot and opens the door for Beatrice to climb in. Robert says that the Highlander is really easy to drive. Beatrice says that she felt so tiny in the other car and that “this one is definitely better.” She gets out of the car and we walk to the back of the SUV where Robert shows them how to fold down the back seats. Beatrice goes back and sits in the driver’s seat again and Mark sits in the passenger’s and they begin to talk in French.

Mark starts talking about test-driving and says that the best thing would be to drive the two models (this and 4Runner) back to back. Mark asks about the changes between the ’07 and ’08 Highlander. Robert explains that the ’07 was built on a Camry chassis and the ’08 is built on the Avalon chassis, which is “wider, longer, and more comfortable.” Beatrice looks at the two models and says yeah that there’s a “huge difference. I like the new model.” Robert adds that “the body style is a bit more European” and asks if they have 10 minutes to drive this one. Mark asks if it is possible to drive it back to back with the 4Runner. Robert says it is and gets their driver’s licenses to copy. . . .

_Taking a test drive._ Landing a customer on a car always ended with the salesman asking customers (or vice versa) if they would like to take a vehicle for a test drive. The vehicle to be driven was always a version of the model in which the customer was interested, but it might be a different color or have different options. If the customer assented, which happened in a third of the floor encounters we observed (20 of 61), the salesman would ask the customer for his or her driver’s license, photocopy it in the showroom, and retrieve the keys to the vehicle from a locked key box. Depending on whether the customer was alone or with friends or family, on the preferences of the latter, and on the size of the vehicle, the salesman might sit in the passenger’s seat beside the driver or in the backseat. During most test drives, the salesman continued to build rapport, answer the customers’ questions, and call the customer’s attention to additional features, usually the controls on the dash including the sound and navigation systems. Conversations during test drives also focused on how the customer experienced the interior and the quality of the ride. Most test drives lasted no more than 15 minutes. The following passage documents Mark and Beatrice’s first test drive:

As soon as we get in the car, Beatrice says, “I love that new car smell!” Mark tells her that she shouldn’t think of that when deciding which car to get. Beatrice then looks at the touch-screen navigation display and asks what it is. Robert says it’s the navigation system and Beatrice responds, “Oh my God! I want that! I really like that!” Robert says that it only comes in the Limited and then says that he think...
someone’s making an offer on the dark grey ’08 model from earlier. He says they may get some more in tonight but you can never tell what color they’re going to be.

Robert (who drove the car off the lot) pulls into the parking lot of a tennis court and Beatrice gets behind the wheel. Robert tells Beatrice, “You have a lot of seat adjustments” and proceeds to show her all the adjustments. Beatrice says it’s “too many buttons.” Once we start driving, Robert says, “These have a power rear door.” He adds that there is a button to the left of the steering wheel to open it and that Beatrice can open the door, call her dogs, have them hop in, close the door, and go. Robert tells her she’s also got a backup camera, but Mark says that doesn’t come on the one they want so she shouldn’t consider it . . . (After returning to the dealership, Robert takes the customers on a test drive in a 4Runner. At the end of the 2nd test drive, Mark has decided that he likes the larger 4Runner and Beatrice thinks she likes the Highlander better) . . . Beatrice turns to Mark and asks, “Do you want to think about it?” Mark tells Robert that maybe they just need to test drive the vehicles a few more times. They make a plan with Robert to come back tomorrow to look at the cars some more. (Toyota Fieldnotes)

Doing the paperwork. If given the chance, after a test drive salesmen asked customers if they would like to go to the office “to do the paperwork,” a euphemism for “would you like to negotiate price, talk about financing, and buy this car?” More often than not, customers precluded the salesman’s asking by indicating that they were not buying today and by thanking the salesman for his time. Of the 20 floor encounters that involved a test drive, 35 percent (7) proceeded further. Thus, roughly 1 out of 10 floor encounters (7/61) made it to the point of price negotiation.

Negotiations always occurred on the periphery of the showroom at the salesman’s desk. The salesman’s first act, once seated, was almost always to enter the customer’s demographic information into the computer, which allowed the dealer to check the customer’s credit score. The salesman also reviewed the features the customer wanted, quoted the customer a price, asked if the customer wanted financing, and if so, told the customer the terms on which the dealer would finance the vehicle (an interest rate that depended on the length of the loan). At this point, haggling usually ensued, with the customer and salesman making offers and counteroffers. Haggling could become quite tense with the customer and salesman evincing increasingly less patience with each other.

Paper and pens were critical props when haggling. Salesmen wrote down numbers for the asking price and interest rates on loans. They often wrote in large letters, underlined numbers to emphasize points, and crossed off numbers as the negotiation proceeded. Some salesmen used the “4-square method.” They drew lines to divide the paper into four quadrants. In the first they wrote the sticker price, in another the value of the customer’s trade-in, in the third the down payment the customer was offering, and in the fourth the monthly payment. Paper served not only as a record, it provided salesmen with a tool or prop for negotiating and making points as well as observable evidence of where the negotiation stood.

During negotiations salesmen employed a number of moves that they believed increased the odds that a customer would agree to a price. For example, they might simply ignore a customer’s comment if it threatened to sidetrack or derail the negotiation. If the customer indicated that the initial price was too high and made an unreasonable counteroffer, the salesman would inevitably inform the customer that he would have to consult the sales manager. At this point, the salesman would leave the customer and retreat into the recesses of the showroom, the backstage, where the sales managers had offices. Although the salesman would inform the manager of the customer’s counteroffer and the manager would suggest a price somewhere between the initial quote and the customer’s offer, salesmen often purposely delayed returning to the customer for five to ten minutes. It was common for salesmen to leave customers alone repeatedly during negotiations. The salesman would sometimes announce why he was leaving and at other times he might not. Regardless, leave taking confused customers and sometimes made them uncomfortable, as illustrated by the following snippet from a negotiation with an Indian couple who were interested in purchasing a Corolla:

After a few minutes Jeff (the salesman) returned from checking on whether the dealer had a Corolla with a sunroof (which Jeff already knew they didn’t have) and asked the customer if he had to have a Corolla with a sunroof, because “right now we don’t have one with a sunroof.” Once the husband said that a sunroof was not necessary and asked again for the monthly payment, Jeff told the customer the annual interest for loans of various lengths. But he did not provide a monthly estimate. So the customer again asked, “How much is going to be the monthly payment?” Jeff confirmed that the customer
wanted a 5-year loan and explained that he had to run the data through a computer to get a monthly estimate. He again left the customers alone in his cubicle without taking leave. The wife asked her husband, “Where did he go?” The husband responded, “I don’t know.” (Toyota Fieldnotes)

Another common move, used when a negotiation seemed stymied or an encounter seemed to be unraveling, was to enlist the aid of a supporting actor, another salesman. Sometimes, the two double-teamed the customer. More frequently, the original salesman “turned” the customer; the first salesman handed the customer over to the second, who often specialized as a “turnover guy.” Because the reason for “turning the customer” was never explained, the change often bewildered customers. The new salesman hoped to use the bewilderment to redefine the encounter’s tone and tempo. If the encounter had become strained, the second salesman might try to establish a less contentious relationship. In most cases, however, the second salesman’s job was to “turn up the heat” which was difficult for the first salesman to do if he had established rapport.

Throughout the negotiation, salesmen employed a variety of verbal moves aimed at pressuring the customer into accepting the dealer’s price. The most common was to create a sense of urgency or scarcity by telling the customer that this was the only vehicle with the options they wanted, by implying that if the customer took more time to think about the purchase, the dealer might sell the car, or by telling the customer that the salesman could not guarantee as good a deal in the future. The following excerpt from a floor encounter illustrates how salesmen created urgency and scarcity:

Andy (salesman): I will do this for you. If you want to buy right now, I’ll throw a figure on you and this is it. (He showed Yinyu a piece of paper with a price written on it.)

Yinyu (who was interested in a Malibu): Not now, I cannot. Wait until Saturday.

Andy: Listen, this business is like a stock market! You came in today, if you want something you should buy today, because tomorrow I don’t know what is going to happen. If tomorrow is going good, it might not be like today. We haven’t sold a car yet today. We need to make a profit, so we’re willing to sacrifice, to open up our till. Saturday is a very busy day and we don’t drop down a lot on prices. Today, during the week, the first sale of the day, we’ll work with you. (Toyota Fieldnotes)

When customers made lower than acceptable offers, salesmen often implied that the customer’s offer was insulting because it was unreasonable to expect a dealer to sell below cost. A common move was to tell the customer that the manager would not like the offer or that the dealer made little money selling cars:

John (salesman): (The customer is negotiating for a Camry. He has just told the salesman that he wants a price of $20,000 “out the door.”) So you want a car for $20,000 out the door, right? Well, we can’t do anything about tax and licensing. You have to pay that no matter what.

Customer: Exactly.

John: You know I’m not the President. I can’t do anything about your taxes. If you want a $20,000 car, then you should be looking at an $18,000 car. You add all this up and that’d basically be what you’re looking at.

Customer: Yeah.

John: This car retails for $21,000 alone. So you basically want the out-the-door cost to be less than what it retails for. I don’t know whether you’ve bought Toyotas before, but they don’t have too much profit, especially a base model, $20,000, I just don’t see that happening. Where are you getting this idea that you can get it for $20,000? (Toyota Fieldnotes)

Customers rarely endured such moves passively. Most expected salesmen to pressure them to buy a car at a price higher than they thought they should pay. Many came ready to do battle or at least protect themselves from too easily falling prey. A significant number came armed with data from the internet, which salesmen routinely dismissed as inaccurate. It was also not uncommon for customers to be accompanied by a spouse, a parent, a sibling, or a friend. These others often served as a skeptical voice for their companion who was negotiating the deal. In almost every case, companions who played the skeptic did so by depreciating, parrying, or contradicting a salesman’s statements or suggestions. For instance, when a salesman asked a customer interested in a Tahoe if he “needed any other features like Bose or leather,” his wife immediately quipped, “Do you mean need or want?”

14 Bose is the maker of a higher quality sound system than the one with which the vehicle was normally equipped.
Another move customers employed during negotiations was to mention another dealer’s quote to imply that they could get a better deal elsewhere. On occasion, customers threatened to take their business elsewhere. Customers also sought an upper hand in sales encounters by disparaging dealers, manufacturers, and car salesmen, although they rarely disparaged the dealer they were currently visiting or the salesman to whom they were talking. Disparaging comments occurred in a quarter of the floor encounters we observed. Their gist seemed to be, “We are warranted in not trusting people who sell or make cars.” The following passage provides a sense of the kinds of disparaging comments that customers made during sales encounters:

Paul (the customer) told Andy (the salesman), “I don’t want any black interiors. I don’t want any white ones either.” Andy responded, “OK,” and after a few moments said, “They are really good trucks. Chevy really did a good job this year.” Paul shot back immediately, “It’s about time!” Paul is examining the manufacturer’s brochure on the Silverado and says, “Long-life rear axle fluid. Could I get short-life rear axle fluid?” He snickers, “Why would you even put that down? Who would want anything else?” (Chevy Fieldnotes)

If a customer and salesman agreed on a price, a deal was struck. Of the 61 floor encounters we observed, 5 (8 percent) resulted in a deal. Only if the deal was closed did the salesman and the customer actually do the paperwork, which included a bill of sale, registration forms for the division of motor vehicles, applications for dealer sponsored loans, and other incidentals.

Internet Scripts

As Figure 2 illustrates, internet sales followed a radically different script. Although some customers bought a car over the phone before seeing it, most successful internet sales involved two encounters: The first on the phone, the second face-to-face. During the first encounter internet salesmen could make no use of the stages on which floor encounters occurred and could not use the vehicles and other props (such as displays and brochures) on which floor salesmen relied. Moreover, the two encounters typically occurred on different days.

The phone encounter. Internet encounters began when customers contacted a salesman via one of three channels. Most internet customers were referred to dealers by brokers. Some brokers were internet businesses whose services were free to everyone, for example, Autobytel.com, Autotrader.com, and Edmunds.com. These sites allowed customers to specify the vehicle they wished to purchase, the options they wanted, and their price range. The sites provided invoice costs and price estimates and referred customers who wished to be referred to dealers in their area. Dealers paid a fee to the online broker for each referral. Other brokers, such as the American Automobile Association, Costco, and credit unions, offered services only to members. These affinity groups typically negotiated standard discounts with specific dealers or manufacturers. In either case, the broker sent the customer’s request for a price quote to a customer relationship management (CRM) system (a database) to which dealers subscribed. Customers who did not use a broker typically sent emails directly to the dealer expressing interest in a vehicle. Others occasionally contacted the dealer by phone. The internet sales force logged email and phone inquiries into the same CRM system that received requests from brokers. Regardless of the channel by which an inquiry arrived, the internet sales force called such information “leads.”

Upon a lead’s arrival, the internet salesman contacted the customer, always by phone and often by email as well. The salesman’s objective was to engage the customer in conversation and determine in what vehicle he or she was interested. If customers could not be reached by phone, salesmen left voice mail messages, recorded the attempt in the CRM database, and subsequently called again. The following excerpt from our fieldnotes illustrates the kind of voicemail messages that salesmen left:

Hi, this is Ed from California Toyota. I sent you out an email quote and I wanted to make sure that you received it for the Camry CE. If you’ve already bought your Camry, then congratulations! I’d appreciate a courtesy call either way, because then I can give you the appropriate attention. If you are still in the market, I’d like to answer any questions you have about the Camry and the different packages available and even check on availability of colors. My phone number is 000-000-0000. Thank you. (Toyota Fieldnotes)

15 Although the term, “leads,” is commonly used in many types of sales, it was never used by floor salesmen, because they rarely had prior knowledge of who might be interested in purchasing a vehicle and when they did, the customers were called “referrals.”
Internet salesmen considered theirs to be a “volume” business: to be successful one had to reply to (and repeatedly follow-up on) a large number of inquiries. Volume was important because most requests for information or a quote did not evolve into a sale. Internet salesmen attempted to contact each lead until they connected with the customer, if only to learn that the customer was no longer interested. Internet salesmen at the Toyota dealership estimated that they processed ten times more customers than the floor salesmen.

If a salesman managed to connect by phone and if the customer was still interested, the subsequent conversation covered four topics. First, the salesman confirmed the model, color, and options that the customer preferred. As in floor sales, the dealer often did not have the vehicle that the customer wanted in stock. Accordingly, the salesman attempted to interest the customer in vehicle close to what customer requested or to “switch the customer up or down” to another model. If the salesman was unsuccessful in getting the customer to consider a vehicle in the dealer’s inventory, he, unlike floor salesmen, often turned to an online database that listed all vehicles in the inventories of nearby dealers that he was free to quote, acquire, and sell.

Second, once the customer showed interest in a vehicle, the salesman told the customer the invoice price (in contrast to the MSRP) and then quoted a final price by indicating how many dollars above (and sometimes below) invoice he or she was willing to sell the car. In other words, unlike floor salesmen who began with the MSRP and worked down, internet salesmen began with the invoice price and worked up. Unlike floor salesmen, the internet salesmen had to reel in their customers. Moreover, it was pointless to quote MSRP because most internet customers already knew MSRP as well as the invoice price. Accordingly, they began at the breakeven price and worked up, knowing that few customers would deny the dealer the right to make any profit. Also unlike floor salesmen, internet salesmen set prices using databases of costs to guide their judgment. Only on rare occasions did internet salesmen consult with a manager before quoting the customer a price.

Third, after discussing price, internet salesmen broached the topic of rebates and financing, giving...
the customer a choice between one or the other. Finally, if the conversation was progressing well and the salesman thought the customer was likely to buy, he or she attempted to convince the customer to make an appointment to come in and look at the car. The following excerpt illustrates how phone encounters unfolded:16

(“pause” indicates the customer is speaking.) The phone rings and Mike picks up the receiver: “This is Mike Glenn from California Toyota Direct Sales. How can I help you? (pause) Yes, this is direct sales. (pause) You’re interested in a Sequoia 2-wheel drive SR? (pause) Who am I speaking with, please? (pause) Have you been here before? (pause) Are you just starting the process? (pause) So you’re looking to get this pretty quickly?”

Mike begins to thumb through the price guide (a white binder that contained a sheet of information on each vehicle in inventory). At the same time, he searches for the vehicle in Advent Connect (an online database that indicates prices, monthly payments given various terms of financing, and the like). Mike finds the vehicle and reads the customer the information, “MSRP on the vehicle is $37,769. Invoice cost is $33,511.” Mike also quotes the delivery cost. The customer indicates he has found a different price online. In response, Mike explains that websites like Edmunds.com and KBB give an invoice price but also say that dealers may incur additional costs. He then goes back to the price guide and tells the customer, “We sell it for $300 over invoice. So, we sell it at $33,811.” He also tells the customer that there is a $2,000 rebate on the Sequoia, so the final cost, $31,811, is “about a $6,000 discount off the vehicle” (meaning MSRP).

“What would you put down? (pause) $4,000. (pause) It depends exclusively on whether your credit would be an issue. (pause) 720? (the customer’s credit rating) That’s fine!” After explaining the cost of fees, registration, and sales tax, Mike quotes the customer a total cost of $36,649. (pause) “Let’s look at this a different way,” Mike says, “Your monthly payment would be $957.” Mike realizes that this doesn’t sound right and immediately corrects his quote to $728.52 per month with 48 months’ financing.

Mike tells the customer: “The Sequoia is a pretty well loaded vehicle, so that’s not a bad price! The sticker’s at 36. With rebate it’s 31 and with the low interest rate, you definitely save a lot.”

The customer expresses interest in a Sienna LE (the customer hinted the price of a Sequoia is a little high) to which Mike responds, “A Sienna might be a great alternative. We have aggressive marketing on the Sienna. Five to six thousand off.” (Looking at the price guide again) “We sell Siennas for $200 under invoice.”

“Let’s see if we can schedule a time?” Mike gives the customer his number and asks if he would like to come in Saturday, Monday, or Tuesday. (pause) “That’s cool! Just give me a shout and let me know.” Mike again tells the customer his name and number. (Toyota Fieldnotes)

The face-to-face encounter. Customers who agreed to an appointment arrived at the showroom like other car buyers. But when a floor salesman greeted them, they asked to see the internet salesman with whom they had spoken (or his designated proxy) by name. In response, the floor salesman or manager paged the salesman on the intercom announcing that the customer was waiting in the showroom. On being contacted, the internet salesman went to the showroom, greeted the customer, and inquired whether the customer wanted, as one salesman always put it, “to see the car first or talk about the numbers?”

Most customers chose to confirm the terms of the deal before examining the vehicle, in which case the salesmen led the customer backstage to their cubicle. With the customers settled into chairs and the salesman in front of his terminal, the salesman confirmed the vehicle in which the customer was interested and went through the pricing, just as he had done on the phone. Often they turned the monitor so the customer could see it, suggesting that they were hiding nothing from the customer. Once customers indicated that they were satisfied with the price, salesmen asked if they would like to examine the vehicle. Most did. The salesman then took the customers directly to the lot where they examined the vehicle together as the salesman called the customer’s attention to the vehicle’s features and answered the customer’s questions. The salesman then invited the customer for a test drive. Regardless of whether the customer decided to see the car or talk numbers first, once the customer agreed to the purchase, the encounter moved to the final stage: completing the paperwork at the salesman’s desk.

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16 In the case of phone calls, observers had access to only the salesman’s side of the phone conversation and the salesman’s account of what the customer had said.
In sharp contrast to floor sales, internet sales were marked by a conspicuous absence of haggling. As a consequence, internet salesmen almost never used the moves and ploys observed on the floor. In fact, the only moves that internet salesmen employed with any frequency were those targeted at neutralizing customers’ attempts to use quotes from other dealers as bargaining chips. When customers attempted to use another dealer’s quote, internet salesmen sometimes offered to match the lower price, if they believed the quote was accurate—a behavior we never observed on the floor. More frequently, however, they explained why the other quote was not believable. Occasionally they suggested the customer should take advantage of the competitor’s price even though they were sure the quote was inaccurate:

(\textit{Rob (the salesman) and the customers (a man and his wife) are sitting at Rob’s desk.}) Rob tells the customer, “The invoice price for a Camry LE is $19,890.” He turns his screen so the customer can see the inventory of LE’s on the lot as well as their invoice prices. He points to the screen and says, “I’ll sell you any of these at cost.” “Is that better than the Costco price?” asks the customer. Rob explains, “The Costco price is a preset percentage above the invoice price. Since I’m willing to sell at invoice, the Costco price is bound to be higher.” The customers talk together in their native language. The husband then asks, “How about a quote on the SE?” Rob looks back to his computer and reads off the screen, “I have 4 SEs left. Those I’ll sell for $300 above invoice.” The customers talk quietly in their native language. The husband asks, “What’s your best price on the LE?” Rob answers without hesitation, “That was my best price.” The customer responds, “At another dealership, I got a quote for $18,850. I’ll even tell you where. It was Other-Side-of-the-Bay Toyota.” Rob looks surprised and says, “Really? I’ll be right back.” He leaves to consult with the internet sales manager. A few minutes later, he comes back and sits down next to the computer, “What was that price again?” The customer looks up the email quote on his Blackberry and tells him the same number. Rob says, “If that’s true, I suggest you drive over there right now and get that deal. But, I’ve been selling cars for a long time, and I bet they won’t sell you that car for $18,850.” The customer looks back to his Blackberry and rereads the email. A moment later, he says, “Oh, wait, they quoted me a \textit{CE (a package with fewer options).}” Rob smiles and replies, “Ah, you gotta’ compare apples to apples.” (\textit{Toyota Fieldnotes})

In sum, internet encounters inverted the script of a typical floor encounter. On the floor, salesmen showed customers vehicles and took them on test drives before negotiating a price. In an internet encounter, customers and salesmen settled the price at the start of the encounter, usually on the phone before the customer even came to the dealer. Internet sales were, therefore, more transparent for customers in the sense that they had a reasonable idea of what they would pay from the beginning, thereby eliminating much of the uncertainty and anxiety that plagued floor encounters. In Goffman’s terms, the internet shifted the footing of the sales encounter: rather than casting salesmen and customers as antagonistic negotiators, internet salesmen assumed the role of a giver of price and information while customers became price takers. In short, the footing of the sales encounter resembled that of the selling and buying in most other retail outlets.

\textbf{THE DIFFERING TENOR OF FLOOR AND INTERNET ENCOUNTERS}

Because of these differences in footing, props, staging, and scripting, the tenor of the interactions between salesmen and customers were noticeably different in floor and internet encounters. The difference was captured by the relative frequency at which salesmen and customers employed moves designed to gain advantage over the other and by the relative frequency of awkward moments during the course of an encounter. Table 1 displays the number and percentage of floor and internet encounters during which we witnessed various moves made by salesmen, moves made by customers, and the occurrence of awkward moments.\footnote{The definition of each move can be found in the second panel of Appendix A.} As the first panel of Table 1 indicates, floor salesmen were more prone than internet salesmen to employ moves designed to pressure customers.\footnote{The percentages in the tables and the text are offered as evidence for the warrant of the claims being made. They should be interpreted as a descriptive accounting. Hence, no statistical tests are offered or are appropriate.} Floor salesmen more frequently:

1. Told customers they could not offer a lower price because they needed to make a profit (21 percent vs. 0 percent);
2. Attempted to create a sense of urgency and scarcity (23 percent vs. 9 percent);
3. Deprecated other manufacturers’ vehicles in which customers might be interested (16 percent vs. 4 percent);

\footnote{The percentages in the tables and the text are offered as evidence for the warrant of the claims being made. They should be interpreted as a descriptive accounting. Hence, no statistical tests are offered or are appropriate.}
4. Dismissed or ignored customer’s comments (23 percent vs. 0 percent);
5. Double teamed customers (11 percent vs. 0 percent); and
6. Turned customers over to another salesman (16 percent vs. 0 percent).

The only move employed more frequently by internet salesmen was neutralizing data that customers had acquired while researching vehicles on the web (30 percent vs. 8 percent). Overall, one or more of the 10 sales moves in the first panel of Table 1 occurred in 61 percent of the floor encounters, but in only 43 percent of the internet encounters. If one disregards neutralizing internet data, the floor and internet percentages would fall to 52 percent and 13 percent, respectively.

Differences in customers’ moves across floor and internet encounters were not as pronounced as the differences in the salesmen’s behavior. In other words, the effect of selling over the internet had a stronger effect on how the salesmen played their roles than on how the customers played theirs. This is what one would expect given that the salesmen set the footing of the encounter as the gatekeeper to the vehicle. Floor salesmen had most of the setting’s resources at their disposal. Customers had few, except for information and their ability to walk away. Nevertheless, we observed two important distinctions that are documented in the second panel of Table 1. During floor encounters, customers were far more likely to disparage automobile dealers and manufacturers (25 percent vs. 0 percent). In contrast, customers who bought through the internet

### TABLE 1
Moves and Awkward Interactions in Floor and Internet Sales Encounters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sales Moves</th>
<th>Floor Sales (N = 61)</th>
<th>Internet Sales (N = 23)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All dealers tell you the same</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to buy or not?</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager’s not going to like that</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to make profit/commission</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create urgency</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depreciate alternatives</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignore customer comment</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double team</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turn the customer</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutralize internet data</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any sales move</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Customer Moves</th>
<th>Floor Sales (N = 61)</th>
<th>Internet Sales (N = 23)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disparage dealer or maker</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignore salesman’s comment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative comment about car</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obstraining about price</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threaten to go to another dealer</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use internet to check truthfulness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use other quote to bargain</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deal is unacceptable</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any customer move</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Awkward Moments</th>
<th>Floor Sales (N = 61)</th>
<th>Internet Sales (N = 23)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customer confrontational</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer contradicts salesman</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer hangs up the phone</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer implies salesman lies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame break</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrupting</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapport building fails</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salesman is rude or belittling</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salesman confrontational</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salesman contradicts customer</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salesman implies customer lies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any awkward moment</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
attempted more often to use another dealer’s quote to bargain (30 percent vs. 16 percent) and to use internet data to test a salesman’s truthfulness (13 percent vs. 3 percent). In general, making disparaging remarks about automobile dealers and manufacturers was a more vituperative act than using information to negotiate a better deal.

The relative frequency of awkward moments that occurred during the flow of interaction offers additional evidence on how the tenor of floor and internet encounters differed. As mentioned earlier, awkward moments called into question, however fleetingly, the civility of the encounter. The third panel of Table 1 displays the incidence of twelve kinds of rupture that we observed in sales encounters. With the exception of long and uncomfortable silences (18 percent vs. 0 percent), no single type of awkwardness differentiated floor and internet encounters as strongly as did the moves employed by salesmen and customers. This is to be expected. Sales and customer moves were legitimate within an encounter culturally defined as a negotiation, whereas awkward moments were more personal, had the feel of a faux pas and, in their most egregious form, threatened to transform a negotiation into a dispute. Nevertheless when summed across encounters, awkward moments of one kind or another were twice as common in floor sales (43 percent vs. 22 percent).

Because we were primarily interested in how customers behaved during sales encounters, we did not systematically interview customers about their reactions to an encounter. Nevertheless a number volunteered assessments of their experience. In general, their comments were in line with the relative differences in moves and awkward moments. Customers perceived floor encounters to be more stressful, contentious, and threatening. Although such comments rarely focused on the salesman with whom they were interacting, the comments we heard on the floor were always critical:

Joan began by saying that [the car buying process] is horrible and she absolutely hated it. “When I go to a dealership and they see a single woman walking in, they won’t talk straight. They won’t answer my questions.” Her husband nodded and he added, “It’d be good if the buying process were streamlined and the people straightforward. Just come out and provide reasonable options for the customer to choose from.” (Chevy Fieldnotes)

Many customers who bought through internet sales also anticipated an unpleasant experience, but they noted that it had turned out better than they expected. In particular, customers told us that they felt more in control and less intimidated than they thought they would:

Kevin looked online at Autotrader.com. He went to other dealers and dropped by (the Toyota dealer) last night to check the condition of the vehicle listed by internet sales. He called ahead to make sure the car was still here. He test drove it last night, but since the car was a little more ($2,000) than his budget ($20,000), he had to go home and think about it. He went back online last night after he visited the dealer and looked at how “comparable” the other cars were. “These guys weren’t pushy,” and Kevin appreciated that. He added, “Some people are real pushy.” (Toyota Fieldnotes)

One upshot of the inverted sales script and the less contentious tenor of the sales encounter was that internet salesmen were responsible for a significant percentage of the dealerships’ sales. At the Toyota dealership internet sales accounted for 50 percent of the sales. At the Chevrolet dealership, where internet sales were not as heavily emphasized, internet sales still accounted for 25 percent of all sales. Internet salesmen estimated that 80 percent of the customers who arranged a face-to-face encounter eventually bought. Of the 10 face-to-face encounters we observed, 4 or 40 percent resulted in a sale, and several more ended on the hopeful note that the customer would buy within a few days to a week. Regardless of whether the rate was 80 percent or 40 percent, the yield for encounters that had begun with the internet was much higher than the 8 percent we observed for floor sales.

Differences in sales scripts and the roles that salesmen played in the two types of encounters were also reflected in the organizational structure of the dealerships. Both dealers bifurcated their organizations: they treated floor and internet sales as separate departments and, as previously mentioned, located internet sales at a significant distance from and, hence, out of sight of salesmen and customers on the floor. Although there was historical precedent for the separation (fleet sales were also located backstage), there were strategic and dramaturgical reasons for doing so. The dealers did not want internet encounters to contaminate floor encounters. Floor salesmen would have had difficulty successfully playing out a floor script with their customers, if the customers, struggling to whittle away at MSRP, could observe other buyers being offered a set markup over invoice by salesmen who did not use pressure tactics. Furthermore, it would have been difficult for the dealers to keep their floor salesmen motivated if they could observe internet salesmen closing more deals than
they did. In short, without segregation dealers could not have maintained, as Goffman (1961a: 26) put it, “a world of meaning exclusive” to the floor.

As typically occurs when organizations differentiate, bifurcation sustained two different sales cultures with their unique rules and roles, and nurtured latent tension between members of the two cultures, especially on the part of floor salesmen. Floor salesmen disliked the internet because they believed it made selling more difficult and reduced their ability make money. As one Chevrolet salesman put it, floor salesmen viewed the internet salesmen as the “give away guys.” Other floor salesmen told us that the internet had taken “the fun and challenge” out of selling because customers knew too much about the price that dealers paid for vehicles. Finally, because each dealer displayed the names of top salesmen prominently for all employees to see, floor salesmen were constantly confronted by the fact that the top earner of the week was almost always an internet salesman.

DISCUSSION

The foregoing analysis of floor and internet sales as scripted encounters helps us see with greater precision how and why the internet transformed the work system in which cars are sold. The internet did not directly change the salesmen’s work practices in the way CT scanners changed how radiologists and radiological technologists produced medical images of ruptured disks or kidney stones. In fact, neither the salesmen nor their customers used the internet during their encounters. If anything, it was the telephone not the internet that became central to the internet salesman’s situated practice. Instead, the internet shifted the ground on which salesmen and customers met to sell and buy vehicles. Specifically, the internet unanchored the sales encounter from its historical mooring in face-to-face interaction, thereby demanding a reconfiguration of scripted interaction during a sales encounter. The reconfiguration changed the definition of the situation in ways that required salesmen and allowed customers to play their roles differently.

Eliminating initial face-to-face interaction meant that salesmen and customers no longer shared a common stage. Consequently, internet salesmen could make no use of the props around which the floor salesmen built their performances. Compared to the lots and showrooms on which floor salesman performed, the internet salesman’s stage was invisible to the customer and impoverished: a cubicle with a desk, a phone, and a computer that allowed access to databases and email. Over the phone, internet salesmen could not turn on sound systems, raise or lower seats, activate navigational software, or even employ a new car’s smell. Because they could not show cars, take customers on a test drive, provide brochures, peruse the automobiles that customers currently drove, or even see their customers, internet salesmen were disadvantaged in creating rapport, excitement, and a sense of urgency, which significantly altered the relations between salesmen and customers. Because the customer was somewhere else, the salesman could not enlist the help of the supporting actors who played crucial parts in floor sales: the sales manager and other salesmen to whom they could turn the customer. Even the minimal obligations of civil demeanor in a face-to-face interaction were weak. Customers, in particular, were free of the obligations of leave-taking that attend face-to-face encounters. They did not need to make an excuse for taking leave (“I need to get home”) or even say “goodbye,” they could simply say “I need to think about it” and hang up the phone without repercussion. In short, internet salesmen operated without the physical and social frameworks that grounded the floor script and that enabled floor salesmen to play their traditional role.

Without a stage, props, or supporting actors and facing a new set of constraints and affordances (distanted interaction, a phone, email, and electronic databases) internet salesmen had little choice but to play their role following a different script. Given the ease with which the customer could exit an encounter and the impossibility of “landing a customer on a car,” settling on a price early in the encounter became necessary, lest the salesman lose the customer to a competitor. What the internet salesmen had available for support were databases that provided information on the features of each vehicle in inventory, what each vehicle cost the dealer, the cost of financing the vehicle, and other dealers’ inventories. Customers also came to the interaction armed with information, including fairly accurate data on the dealer’s costs. Because both parties were confined to constructing the deal entirely around information and because both parties had reasonably accurate data, internet salesmen could no longer define the sales encounter as a negotiation, so they approached it as a matter of offering a reasonable, competitive price. The salesmen assumed the stance of a price giver and played their role in a way that encouraged customers to become price takers.

The stance the salesmen assumed and the script they enacted during the phone encounter carried over into subsequent face-to-face encounters with customers. With price settled, salesmen had no need to establish rapport. They no longer needed to pressure customers, because customers usually arrived on the lot committed to buying as long as
the price remained constant, they qualified for financing, and the vehicle performed as expected. As a result, internet salesmen had no need for the armory of moves that floor salesmen have devised over the years to persuade customers to buy. With the price set, customers no longer arrived at the showroom anticipating the need to negotiate; of course, some tried, only to find the salesman unwilling. Because the footing of the face-to-face encounter had shifted to one of price giving and taking, interactions unfolded more smoothly and less contentiously than in floor encounters, with fewer awkward moments that threatened the success of the encounter. In short, the internet shifted the grounds on which cars were sold and this, in turn, altered the constraints and opportunities woven into the encounter’s dramaturgical context.

Implications for Studying Technological Change

This paper began by drawing attention to problems that scholars have faced in attempting to understand when, how and why technologies alter work systems. Historically students of technology and organizing have vacillated between operating at too high or too low a level of analysis. When the level of analysis is too high, technologies tend to disappear, as they did with contingency theory. When the level of analysis is too low, researchers risk losing sight of work systems as often occurs in constructionist studies of a technology’s use (Leonardi & Barley, 2010). Students of technology also regularly fall victim to telling stories that are neatly causal even when they try to avoid technological determinism. In the latter case, social mechanisms often replace material mechanisms (Orlikowski, 2007). As Orlikowski has argued, avoiding just-so stories that privilege the material over the social, or vice versa, requires grappling with how the social and the material are “constitutively entangled.” But such grappling is no easy task. It is one thing to propose that the material and the social are ontologically mutually constitutive; it is another to develop methods for systematically investigating that entanglement. This is precisely what the socio-technical systems theorists set out to do (Emery & Marek, 1962; Rice, 1963; Trist & Bamforth, 1951) over half a century ago. One can argue that they ultimately failed because they sought to retain a dualistic distinction between the technical and the social while looking for optimal ways to match the two (Orlikowski, 1992). More likely their efforts waned because they became committed to spreading autonomous work groups and, thus, never developed a systematic approach for unraveling how the social and the material are entwined.

Although Goffman was not a student of technological change, the preceding analysis has illustrated how the dramaturgical scaffolding that Goffman pioneered can be repurposed for studying technology and organizing in ways that enable researchers to skirt problems that have hounded previous research. First, dramaturgy’s units of analysis—encounters—fix our attention firmly on recurrent, meso-level social patterns, or interaction orders, that emerge from and guide situated action. Dramaturgy, therefore, shares with structuration theory an appreciation of the duality of structure and action, but unlike structuration theory it employs concepts that are easier to map onto a social setting: roles, scripts, moves, stages, props, supporting actors, frames, and footing. Second, in lieu of searching for causes, be they material or social, Goffman encourages analysts to identify configurations of dramaturgical elements to characterize both stability and change in an interaction order. The image is of one of interactions channeled by the structure of what he called “behavioral settings.”

The study of behavior, particularly repetitive behavior, is rare today, even among ethnographers who now focus more on interpretations and meanings than on behavior. This is not to say that the
study of behavior is more important than the study of meaning, but only that one cannot reliably map scripts or identify moves without documenting patterned behaviors in situ. It is worth noting that when Goffman (1981) wrote of “forms of talk,” he showed less interest in what was said or meant than in how the saying was done and how it was situated such that we know that we are hearing a lecture rather than sermon, or a radio announcer rather than an interviewer.

The second implication for research on technology and organizing flows from the first: the data for a dramaturgical analysis are best gathered through observation rather than interviews. As ethnographers have long understood, participants in a social scene are unlikely to be aware of the scripts they follow or the moves they make. Participants’ accounts of their behavior often differ substantially from what they do (Bernard, Killworth, Kronenfeld, & Sailor, 1985; Jerolmack & Khan, forthcoming). Moreover, identifying scripts and moves requires observations of multiple instances of a type of encounter. Otherwise, it is impossible to separate recurrent commonalities that span instances from idiosyncratic variation. In fact, whereas most social scientists seek variation in order to partial it, dramaturgical analysts seek patterns beneath the variance. In linguistic terms, one might say they are more interested in grammar than in speech.

This is not to say, however, that dramaturgical analysts are uninterested in variation, but rather that variation surfaces primarily by comparing different types of encounters or interaction orders. Thus, the third implication of using a dramaturgical approach is that research must be explicitly comparative. Ultimately, the student of technology and organizing is interested in the shape of the interaction orders that arise when technologies are or are not a part of the fabric of encounters. One can use dramaturgical concepts to deconstruct any situation in which a technology is employed, but one cannot identify differences in scripts, moves, props, stages, supporting actors, and footing without behavior data drawn from relevant comparisons.

Thus, to employ a dramaturgical approach, students of technology must either conduct before and after studies, or study settings in which technologies are and are not used. Studies of a single technology’s use in a single situation are inadequate.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, to execute a dramaturgical analysis students of technology and organizing cannot center their attention on either the technology or its users. Most current research on technology’s social implications focuses on how people use a technology. Because dramaturgy highlights roles, scripts, interactions, and role relations, it casts its net beyond the technology and those who use it to include those with whom users interact regardless of whether they also use the technology. Rather than ask how a technology alters work practices, the dramaturgist asks a more holistic question: has the technology shaped role relations within the work system in which it resides.

Two caveats are important. First, not all technologies reground encounters and the interactions that comprise them. Those that do not may change the procedures people employ to accomplish their work, but are unlikely to change scripts and roles. One need only consider the work of professors and administrative assistants to see that regrounding does not always occur even when technological change is significant. As recently as the 1980s administrative assistants answered phones, interacted with students, kept records of accounts, filed documents, and typed letters, memos, and manuscripts for faculty (who often wrote the first drafts by hand). Today, administrative assistants continue to answer phones and interact with students, but few type documents for faculty. Professors now use word processing programs to create and revise their own documents. As in the past, administrative assistants continue to manage accounts, but they do so using computerized spreadsheets and forms. As a consequence, filing no longer requires rooms filled with filing cabinets. Because of the increased efficiency of producing and storing documents and because faculty have assumed the tasks of producing documents and answering their own phones, universities now employ fewer administrative assistants and those who remain have acquired new skills and tasks, such as maintaining websites. Yet, administrative assistants continue to have roughly the same relations with faculty as they had in the past. In short, what administrative assistants do and how they do it has changed considerably, but role relations and the interaction order have not.

A second caveat is perhaps more troubling for students of technology and work. Although technological change may alter scripts and channel an interaction order in new directions, the resulting work system need not be tied to the technology’s presence. During the course of the study we documented three floor sales involving internet salesmen, two at the Chevrolet dealership and one at the Toyota dealership. These salesmen told their customers the invoice price of the car and the markup at which they would sell the car at the start of each encounter. In other words, they launched the internet script on the floor and the subsequent interaction then unfolded as a face-to-face version of an internet encounter. All three encounters were devoid of moves by the salesman to create pressure;
all three were devoid of moves by the customer to gain advantage over the salesman; and none evinced awkward moments. In fact, one was among the five successful floor sales we observed. Conversely, we also witnessed an encounter in which the customer attempted to initiate an internet script with a floor salesman at the Toyota dealership. The customer began by asking the salesman to sit down and review the options on the models in which he was interested. He also attempted to persuade the salesman to share the invoice price. The salesman reacted to the customer’s request with disbelief and anger. From that point on, the interaction became increasingly contentious and ultimately degenerated to the point where the salesman terminated the encounter, leaving the customer standing alone in the lot while the salesman walked angrily back to the showroom.

These four encounters underscore several points. First, an interaction order may be enacted even in the absence of the technology that initially occasioned its emergence. Second, it may be easier for the situationally advantaged and more powerful party, in this case the salesman, in whose favor the situation is stacked to modify or transform an interaction ritual. Third, and more practically, organizations might do well to ask themselves when it makes sense to transfer an interaction order from the setting where it emerged to settings where it is not the dominant line of action. The data make clear that the internet script could work just as easily on the floor as in the backrooms of the dealership. Moreover, internet salesmen typically sold more cars than did floor salesmen. What most likely kept the dealers from recognizing that internet scripts could be profitably transferred to the floor was that doing so required abolishing a long standing institution which would have violated both the floor salesman’s and the owners’ notions of “the way things are done around here.”

In closing, it is worth noting that the findings of this study pose a corrective to our knowledge about distributed or virtual coordination, currently the largest body of research on how the internet is changing work. Most studies of how people use computer-mediated technologies to interact from a distance have examined work groups whose members need to collaborate on a common task (Cramton & Hinds, 2005; Hinds & Bailey, 2003; Hinds & Kiesler, 2002). The majority of these studies indicate that distributed interaction poses significant challenges for coordination, and suggests that all else being equal, face-to-face encounters are superior to virtual encounters. Indeed, students of distributed work now advise employers to allow members of distributed teams to interact face-to-face from time to time to facilitate coordination (Hinds & Cramton, 2012). Evidence from automobile sales challenges the inherent superiority of face-to-face encounters by extending the research lens to interactions in which the parties have opposing, rather than ostensibly shared, goals. One might speculate that the relative effectiveness of interacting from a distance via computer-mediated technologies may largely depend on whether participants deem the face-to-face version of an interaction to be culturally and interpersonally noxious. This study shows that distance can mollify interactions marked by stress, wariness, and distrust. At the very least, our findings suggest the utility of examining a broader range of interactions and encounters that can be conducted either face-to-face or through distancing technologies to move toward a more contingent theory of computer-mediated communication.

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## APPENDIX A

### Definitions and Examples of Sales Moves, Customer Moves, and Award Interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Move/Interaction</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sales Moves</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>All dealers tell you the same thing</td>
<td>Salesman tells customer that no other car dealer will give them a better price.</td>
<td>“You know there’s no dealer that would sell the car, an LE model, for that. So, help us to help you. You’ve been here. You spent time here. I want to step up to the plate, just to make this transaction.”</td>
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<td>Want to buy or not?</td>
<td>Salesman asks customer if they are going to buy the car or not. (Usually after negotiating for some time.)</td>
<td>The salesman comes back after a minute and says in a soft tone, “We can do $11,600 plus tax and license.” The customer puts both hands on his lap, his shoulders tense, and breathes. He then says, “Let me get your business card. I’ll need to think about it and.” The salesman interjects, “If I do $11,500, will you buy it?” The customer smiles, “That helps.” “Then will you buy it?” asks the salesman. The customer leans back and replies, “I think very likely. 90% yes.”</td>
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<td>Manager’s not going to like that</td>
<td>Salesman tells customer that his manager is not going to like the offer the customer has made.</td>
<td>“If I go to my manager and ask them for $20,000 out the door, he’s basically gonna chew my head off for coming back because I know I can’t give it. Basically what I got to do is I got to go to that guy. See how big that guy is.”</td>
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<td>Need to make profit/ commission</td>
<td>Salesman tells the customer that he can’t go as low as the customer wants because there’d be no profit or commission.</td>
<td>The customer again asks if there are any graduate or repeat buyer discounts. After being told no, he says, “$21,431? So that’s it. Nothing below that?” The salesman replies, “I can’t do it. I don’t want to lose.”</td>
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<td>Create urgency</td>
<td>Salesman states that if the customer doesn’t buy, the price will go up or the vehicle may be sold to someone else.</td>
<td>The salesman says that he doesn’t want to put any pressure on them to buy but that the HG (the package with the smart key) only has the discounted price through the end of the day and that the price is only $300 above dealer cost.</td>
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<td>Deprecate alternatives</td>
<td>Salesman deprecates another car the customer is considering.</td>
<td>The salesman says that the Rav4 is cheaper than the CRV because the CRV comes with “a lot of extra crap you don’t need.” He also says that the CRV is based off the Civic, which is not good. He explains that Honda had to recall the Civic because of safety issues and that the Rav4 is less likely to roll over in the case of an accident.</td>
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<td>Ignore customer comment</td>
<td>Salesman ignores a customer’s statement or question.</td>
<td>After telling Lawrence that he didn’t have a trade-in, the brother mentions that he wants to see the price on the Ford F150 with the supercharger because Ford was going to give them an estimate. The salesman seems to ignore this statement and continues collecting personal information for a form he’s filling out.</td>
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<td>Double team</td>
<td>A second salesman joins the first and together they attempt to sell the customer.</td>
<td>Somewhat abruptly Anne Marie peeps her head into the office on the other side of the cubicle, and asks the salesmen there, “Would you guys help me and split a deal?” Bob agrees. Anne Marie turns to the customers and says, “We work together and Bob is good.” Anne Marie explains how the salesmen are like family.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turn the customer</td>
<td>The first salesman turns the customer over to another salesman usually to “turn up the heat.”</td>
<td>The salesman walks to the sales manager’s office. The customer waits in the cubicle, looking at the papers the salesman has left with him. Ten minutes later a man in his late 50’s named “Todd” (according to his badge) comes in and shakes the customer’s hand, “Hello, I’m Todd. I’m the floor manager. I slash the prices to make a deal. All right?”</td>
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Neutralize internet data  Salesman provides reasons for why information that the customer has seen on the web is probably inaccurate.

The customer looks like he's thinking and then says, “I got a quote from Cars.com, and I think it's $100 less.” The salesman doesn’t flinch and says, “Well, Cars.com don’t sell cars. They go through dealers like us. The price they give you is their suggested price.”

Customer Moves

Disparage dealer or maker  Customer complains or makes a snide comment about auto dealers or manufacturers.

(Talking about financing) “That’s not what I saw on TV—it said 1.99,” the customer says. “That’s for the 07s not the 08,” the salesman replies. The customer retorts, “That’s why it’s not easy to buy a car—it looks easy, but it’s not.” He is looking at the Yaris as he says this. The salesman says, “For some people it is.”

Ignore salesman’s comment  Customer dismisses or ignores a salesman’s statement.

The customer is listening expressionless as the salesman continues to talk. He just nods occasionally, but his eyes are wondering off to the trucks.

Negative comment about car  Customer makes a negative comment about the car the salesman is showing.

The salesman finds a Tahoe in the color the customer requested. The husband seems suspicious. He looks at it inquisitively and walks around the car to see it fully. “It changes on you.” It is an iridescent color that does seem to change as one moves around it. “It’s like a pimp car,” the wife says.

Obstinate about price  Customer insists on a particular price and won’t bend.

The customer wrote a number on a piece of paper and taps the paper, “We are at the max that I can go. This is my max. I won’t be willing to go beyond that. I don’t want to go beyond that.”

Threaten to go to another dealer  Customers tells the salesman that they will go to another dealer for a better price or treatment.

The customer says to the salesman, “OK. So if you don’t mind if I shop around and see what kind of deal I can get from (another dealer).” The salesman replies, “You can shop anywhere that you’d like to shop.”

Use internet to check truthfulness  Customer uses internet data to assess the truthfulness of a salesman’s claims.

The customer asks, “Do other dealerships have the hybrid?” The salesman says, “I don’t think so.” The customer then says, “I went online today and it said you had, like, seven.” The salesman shakes his head and says he doesn’t know why it said that.

Use other quote to bargain  Customer uses a quote from another dealer or the internet to get salesman to lower his price.

Customer: “Before coming here, we visited Chevy on El Camino. They were offering something like $4,500 off MSRP.” Salesman: “We can make a good deal. I want to sell you a truck today.” Customer: “Well, it ain’t gonna happen unless you make me an offer I can’t refuse.”

Deal is unacceptable  Customer tells the salesman that his offer is simply unreasonable and unacceptable.

The husband tells the salesman: “So you say, if I pay cash you can give me $500 rebate?” His wife interjects: “It’s nothing!” The husband says, “It’s not worth it for me.”

Awkward Interactions

Customer confrontational  Customer confronts a salesman’s behavior or statement, communicating anger.

Three Hispanic men are talking in low voices in Spanish as they look at Corvettes. The salesman is hovering over them, one turns and says “Man, we’re just looking at cars today—it’s not like we’re gonna take one.”

Customer contradicts salesman  Customer disputes a salesman’s statement.

The salesman explains that there’s a dual air conditioning setting, one for the driver and another for the passenger. The husband looks at it and replies that it’s for inside/outside air, not a dual setting. The salesman doesn’t say anything.

Customer hangs up the phone  Customer hangs up the phone abruptly in the middle of a phone conversation.

(a phone encounter) “Hi, is this Heath?” (pause) “This is Dan from California Toyota.” (pause) “OK. Where did you end up buying it?” (customer hangs up on Dan.)
Customer implies salesman lies
Customer suggests that the salesman is lying.
Many minutes into a long and tense negotiation the customer suddenly tells the salesman, “I think it’s used.” It is not clear why customer now believes the car is used. The salesman, indignantly, “It’s not a used car, it’s a brand new car!”

Frame break
Customers attempt to get outside of the customer/salesman relationship by stating, “I know what’s going on here.”
After looking at the cars for a short time the customer says, “I know you’re supposed to get me in the car,” and the saleswoman responds, “All I’ve got to do is find you the right car.” She adds “I’m not going to play games with you,” at which point both she and the client smile and laugh.

Interrupting
Either the customer or the salesman interrupts the other while the other is talking.
The salesman says something about an ’07 and the customer interrupts, raising his right hand in front of him, “Don’t start on the ’07 discussion—I don’t want an ’07—you are not the first one to push that so that’s why I am ticked with you.”

Rapport building fails
A salesman’s attempt to establish rapport backfires immediately.
The salesman notices the customer’s iPhone strapped to his belt and asks if he likes it. The customer says he does but the salesman tells him that he had one for a while but didn’t like the software. He adds he returned the iPhone and got a Palm instead. The customer says that he “has to like the iPhone” and the salesman realizes that the customer works for Apple.

Salesman is rude or belittling
The salesman treats the customer rudely, with sarcasm or disrespect.
(during a test drive) The salesman asks the young woman if she wants to go on the freeway but she says she doesn’t. (She has been driving really cautiously this whole time.) The salesman then jokes that she’s been holding her breath while driving and the woman replies, “That’s how I drive!”

Salesman contradicts customer
Salesman disputes a customer’s statement.
The customer asks if the salesman has any Tahoe hybrids. The salesman laughs and says that “this is better than hybrid” (referring to the flexfill engine). He starts talking about the improved gas mileage you can get with ethanol but the customer mentions that some hybrids get the carpool benefit. The salesman laughs again and says that they “don’t have the carpool thing anymore.”

Salesman implies customer lies
Salesman suggests that the customer is lying.
To a customer, “I have no problem if you say you’ll be back tomorrow, but you know, I’ve seen a lot of customers. They tell you tomorrow. They lie to you. They never come back.”

Silence
Long runs of silence in situations, coupled with an indication that the silence is uncomfortable.
The customer seems worried (about driving a Prius) and asks if everything besides putting the car in drive is normal. The salesman tells her yes, and that you actually get taught how to drive a hybrid in a class the dealer offers. This is followed by a long period of silence. [The salesman told me later he was having an off-day and didn’t feel like helping anyone.]