AS EVER AND NEVER BEFORE

By Caroline Nevejan

Can you break up with your boyfriend, ask your employer for a raise or get results of a medical test by way of SMS? Should an international organization pay for 50 airplane tickets to bring its employees together when launching a new campaign? Should one log the chat of one's children or monitor the people they meet? Some of these questions will sound silly, while others will give reason to debate. The new ways of communicating facilitate a being present in other people's lives as was never possible before. Depending on how one relates to another person and depending on whether one can act and interfere, we have come to accept a variety of media that make it possible to trespass centuries old frontiers of time and place. An SMS, an email, a chat, a phone call or a videoconference, have the potential to change our life profoundly. In these new 'presence-designs' fundamental issues of trust surface, as ever and as never before.

That night I was passing through a dark alley; I heard my footsteps bouncing the walls. It seemed as if someone else was also walking the alley. Slow and heavy steps sounded at a distance and I saw a man approaching. I checked out the situation. How am I? I am not wearing high heels, I wear a simple jacket and I am in good condition. How is he? He looks rather old, but still strong. He does not smile or anything, he seems to be in his own world. He is very heavy though and rather athletic. He must hear or see me by now. Why is he not communicating? I check my speed of walking and his speed and without consciously making a calculation I realize that I have only a few seconds to make up my mind. Shall I run? Shall I scream? Shall I say Good Evening? Do I trust this guy? Do I trust myself? Do I trust the situation? And before answering this, I make up my mind and walk the other way. When I hear him speed up, I just run…

The moment that I decide to run is the moment that I settle for a certain amount of information about the situation to base my actions upon. I hear the rhythm of the footsteps, I see his appearance, I feel my own state of being, I know things get out of hand in alleys regularly, and based upon all this information I decide to run. In this situation, as in many others, I make a trade-off between the different inputs I get. My senses have limited perception, my body has limited action potential and my knowledge is never complete. Yet at a certain point I settle for a certain truth upon which I base my trust or distrust and decide to act. In the media landscape and in the many kinds of communications that surround me, I make similar trade-offs. As a result I trust or distrust what is in front of me and as a result I tune and pitch my presence in specific ways.

Being a professional on the market in 2008 one needs to establish one's presence online to be credible for employers and clients: handling and presenting one's archive, one's past and one's future possible connections and plans. In online social network environments like Hyves, FaceBook and LinkedIn it seems normal and beneficial to give as much information about one self as possible to establish one's authenticity online. Even in dramatic environments like Second Life, congruence of character seems unavoidable to obtain. Others will be able to confirm the fact that I truly exist, that my information is correct and that I am the persona I pretend to be. People trust each other's judgement and trust the link-to-link-to-link-to-real-life situations. And so not only our habits, but also our identities merge into a common denominator, which can be known by anyone at anytime in anyplace.

What if my mobile phone shows me that the guy in the alley is 'a friend of friend of a friend'? Shall I run?