

# **ACKNOWLEDGING THE NARCISSIST AND VOYEUR: THE EMERGING NEW DISCOURSE OF THE AWAY MESSAGE SYSTEM**

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The Away Message, a trademark part of America Online's Instant Messenger (AIM), has evolved in importance as instant messaging has emerged as a vibrant and dominant discourse, particularly among teenagers and young adults. AIM, originally created so that people could converse with each other online, enables each of its users to choose a personal password (to "sign on" to the AIM system) and screen name and to form a buddy list to "instant message" (IM) other system users.

The Away Message, a relatively new AIM feature intended to designate when a user is not online, has changed the AIM system from being a discourse of conversation to a mode of self-expression. Specifically, this change results from the user's ability to write a personalized Away Message and from the "Info" button, which allows each user to check another's Away Message without actually IMing the user.

In this article, I argue several, interrelated points by analyzing the Away Message system and by conducting a small study of users. First, by drawing on theories of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, I suggest that the Away Message constitutes a system in that its users willingly engage in a jointly private/public experience that thrives through group participation. Next, I argue that as a self-perpetuating system, AIM enables the emergence of what I am calling the dual roles of voyeur and narcissist. Finally, I argue that AIM has emerged as a dominant social power, revealing, challenging, and even recreating the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century conversation.

## **The Development of the Away Message**

Originally, AIM was introduced as a method for conversation, relying on visual rather than oral language. This new discourse became a mode of personal identity through types of language and written style. Yet IM maintained the basic framework of "real" conversation, in which people speak and listen to each other.

The Away Message was initially intended to act as a visual answering machine. When activated, "I am away from my computer right now" signaled the person's absence. Soon, however, AIM enabled each user to write a personalized Away Message. At first, users began to IM others just to see why they were away and what exactly they were doing. But eventually, the Away Message began to indicate one's absence from AIM as well as including anything and everything the Away Message writer chose, becoming more of a mode of self-expression. Moreover, the more recently created "Info" button allows users to view another person's Away Message without actually IMing them, leading users to view more than converse.

The AIM system became even less conversation-dominant when the "yellow notepad" symbol, existing next to a user's screen name on the buddy list, was created to denote when that person was

“away.” Therefore, there are presently two types of members on a user’s buddy list: those available for conversing and those asking to be viewed.

Based on my experience as an AIM user and the experiences of my high school and college-aged peers around the country, I suggest that the viewer has become more common than the conversation-alist within the AIM discourse; the majority of people on my buddy list (and those buddy lists of my peers) now have a yellow away message symbol next to their names, suggesting that the system’s purpose has dramatically changed over time.

### **AIM as System**

As it becomes more pervasive, AIM accrues power and grants its users additional liberties. Because it is a system that allows its users to access and be accessible to a large audience, the system exhibits the merging of the private within the public. This type of system mirrors Foucault’s *panopticon*. The system has an unknown power controlling certain systematic conventions, such as the creation of the personalized message and the “Info” option, and maintains power over the participants within that system. Overall, the panopticon “arranges things in such a way that the exercise of power is not added on from the outside, like a rigid, heavy constraint, to the functions it invests, but is so subtly present in them as to increase their efficiency by itself increasing its own points of contact” (206). Thus, the Away Message, like the panopticon, operates on an internal system of power; the power is internally controlled through subtle, gradual changes to the system. When an AIM user signs online, he willingly engages in the system, knowing that, just as he can check others’ Away Messages, his “away” status may be viewed.

The panopticon, often referred to as the “seeing machine,” is really a system of observation in which anyone within the system can exercise the power of surveillance (Foucault 207). It resembles the Away Message system in that all participants have both the access and knowledge of the system’s discursive power, “subtly arranged so that an observer may observe, at a glance, so many different individuals,” while “also enabl[ing] everyone to come and observe any of the observers” (207). Thus, each member of the Away Message system can view an unlimited amount of Away Messages while knowing that any Away Message she leaves are equally subject to unlimited viewing.

Yet, ironically, like in Foucault’s panopticon, the exercise of power is tolerated rather than questioned within the Away Message system. And even more surprisingly, the aim of the panopticon is not to exercise power but rather to strengthen social forces (Foucault 208), similar to the role that Away Messages play within this university-aged subculture. Most users are aware of their participation within the AIM system, but they justify their behavior because all other members within the system unquestionably exercise this same power. Bourdieu also acknowledges the person’s choice to act within a system and to even grant the system the right to speak for him even though he may doubt its right as a common phenomenon by recognizing that “the power of a discourse depends less on its intrinsic properties than on the mobilizing power it exercises—that is, at least to some extent, on the degree to which it is recognized by a numerous and powerful group that can recognize itself in it and whose interests it expresses” (188).

Some Away Messages acknowledge the existence and power of the system; this popular Away Message is generally left by those users who question or even ridicule the AIM system but think that

a public acknowledgment almost justifies the common “Away Message checking” behavior:

Today I salute you Mr. Compulsive Away Message Checker. While most people are out actually having a fun college life, you are at home reading about it on your computer screen. Right mouse click, Get Buddy Info, or the little Info box at the bottom of the Buddy List [whichever is faster]. You have people on that list you haven’t talked to in years, but you still loyally read their away messages everyday to see what they are up to [borderline stalking]. So, crack open an ice cold Bud Light, Marauder of the Mouse pad and don’t wander too far from your computer because you never know when someone’s away message may change.

This Away Message refers to the tendency of users to “check Away Messages,” a phrase that has become a normal part of speech among teenagers and young adults. While this Away Message pokes fun at AIM, its length, complexity, and content exude self-promoting intentions, while the fact that it is even in Away Message form shows that this user participates fully in the system.

### **The Narcissist and the Voyeur within the AIM System**

As a conversational system, the Away Message promotes the discovery of self-understanding while giving each user the ability to seek mutual understanding with others. Finding commonalities with other users validates each user’s choice of message. These personal messages can be viewed by a large audience, a self-promotion I refer to as the development of the narcissist. At the same time, the Away Message enables each form of self-promotion to be mutually accessible to all members of this discourse system, developing what I refer to as the voyeur.

To elaborate on these system roles, I present details and findings from my study. I collected 120 different Away Messages from a college-aged population over several weeks in the fall of 2004 and divided them into twelve different, but overlapping, categories, including “time/scheduling/event,” “personal/self-responsive/self-dominant/feelings,” “quotes,” “external/environmental,” “intended towards a specific person/group,” “reflective,” “humorous,” “abbreviations,” and others. The Away Messages were all from a random sample of the 200 people on my buddy list, collected anonymously on three separate occasions. The sample consisted of an approximately equal number of males and females aged 18-23 years, mainly from my college. It also included students from other colleges and universities, high school students, and employed and unemployed young adults.

Overall, the combination of “time/scheduling/event” and the “personal/self-responsive/self-dominant/feelings” categories dominated (e.g. “8am class can kick my...”). The prevalence of the “time/scheduling/event” category (e.g. “class til 10:45”), both on its own and in combination with another category, reflects the lingering presence of the Away Message’s original intended purpose. Additionally, the frequency of the “personal/self-responsive/self-dominant/feelings” category (e.g. “so sick :-[ ”) shows how the Away Message has developed into a mode for self-expression and an acceptable form of style and identity. Yet, the high number of “personal/self-responsive/self-dominant/feelings” shows how the narcissist/voyeur begins to dominate and reflects how familiarity of this discourse has made the questions “why are you away?” and “why are you busy?” acceptable to be asked and answered.

The emerging acceptability of the specific type of Away Message discourse is an attractive phenomenon because, while its content reflects the current social climate within a specific population, its

discourse does not necessarily always mirror reality; this disparity mainly exists due to the user's dominant existence as voyeur and narcissist. This discrepancy between the "Away Message system" and the "real world" is mainly apparent because the Away Message, in its present form, is a venue for expression in which the writer can vent, brag, hint, and reflect in a way that is tolerated and even expected but would be otherwise objectionable in real conversation.

The narcissist role, with several manifestations, has evolved as the Away Message discourse has changed and become more naturalized. Since most participants aim for viewer acknowledgment, many leave Away Messages that will garner some type of response. But obtaining viewer response is a goal that is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve as the Away Message discourse becomes more integrated into acceptability. Originally, when the personalized Away Message was still fairly new, an Away Message such as "leave something nice," which directly acknowledges the system as viewer-dominant, would probably get many responses. Now, there are a variety of response-seeking messages that try to appeal to viewers. Messages such as "dinner, errands, class, study . . . leave one to make me smile!" pair time/scheduling/event with direct response-seeking, perhaps to make the viewer feel remorseful and motivate her to leave a sympathetic message. The Away Message "leave it" treats the notion of leaving a message as common knowledge ("leave a message" has been reduced by familiarity to the verb "leave" and the Away Message can even be recognized as "it"), and expects those who view the Away Message to automatically leave the author a message—"it." Some people also treat the Away Message as a method of advertisement, directly recognizing its function as a system with many viewers, such as "i love my new pink pants." These are all examples of how the narcissist so often emerges within the system through the overt quest for personal attention. Ironically, these types of messages which directly aim for viewer attention have become permanently integrated within this discourse so that they are accepted and "normal."

The voyeur's role within the Away Message system has evolved as the narcissist has become a more dominant and complex part of the system. Since each writer is usually also a frequent viewer, each user knows that this self-reflection/promotion will be viewed by a large audience within the system, which, if strong enough, could even influence the participant's social status outside the system. For example, Away Messages such as "baby it's you" and "I need you" are directly aimed at a specific viewer but are available for an infinite audience of viewers. They are also vague enough to attract conversation and make the curious viewer wonder about the intended "who" of this message outside of the "system"; if this user had not had a self-promotional system, the larger social world may have no idea that he was involved in a supposedly passionate relationship. This ability to act as voyeur to others' views and opinions fuels the natural human instinct of curiosity while simultaneously granting anonymity. AIM seeks a less direct but more narcissistic way by treating the unknown viewer as a member of a specific social group, transcending the more limited buddy list, which the participant uses as self-justification of how the system really is "private." Referring to each user as a "buddy" gives the illusion that all users are equal in social status, showing how the Away Message acts as a "symbol" for social integration (Bourdieu 166-67). Thus, the narcissist/writer writes of her personal endeavors in the Away Message as if the system were a popularity contest because of the knowledge that her Away Message will be viewed by a large audience.

## The Social Power of AIM

There are many ways in which the discourse of the Away Message represents a social exercise. By acting as narcissist and voyeur, each user explores his self-understanding through identification with and curiosity about others. The type of Away Message a person leaves is generally a personal and stylistic choice, yet it still has to exist in acceptable system discourse. Since the Away Message allows for integration of the private within the public, each user has to be very careful about how or in what way to present herself. Just like in Foucault's panopticon, the aim of the Away Message is "to strengthen the social forces . . . not for power itself" (Foucault 208). The system is a metaphor for the social network experienced within the subculture itself, so a user's stylistic choices for his Away Message are subject to imitation, conformity, and even social rejection. For example, it is common to use funny quotes from IM conversations or inside jokes that either refer to one specific person or a smaller social group. Most users crave recognition for their "identity," but they also want to be accepted by peers within the system because their stylistic choices will be reflected outside of the system as well. Thus, the Away Message preserves friendships and initiates a wider social network. Yet, rather than the faceless communication discourse of IM chat, the system functions predominantly on indirect communicative methods.

One way in which the Away Message exudes this social power is through its diverse and frequent change in content, based on users' increased demands for the private within the public. My study of Away Messages reveals how the Away Message's growing acceptance as a discourse has only motivated more and more people to push the limits of the system, showing how the "content" or type of Away Message is a trend in itself; yet this rapid development of "promotional" Away Messages really only reveals how the private is becoming more and more demanded in the public. Like any trend, it must constantly change to maintain viewer interest. Overall, the goal of the Away Message is essentially to obtain viewer response, which is the ultimate sign of user popularity. While it used to be enough for one to write about doing something interesting to warrant a response, the writer now relies on humor, feelings, vagueness, and other creative messages to attempt to attract viewer attention. This amplified need for attention has created the increased dominance of the private's integration into the public in terms of conversational discourse, which Norman Fairclough views as the "infusion of practices which are needed in post-traditional public settings for the complex processes of negotiating relationships and identities" (138). This merging of spheres thus seems to fuel the development of the modern conversation, in which all participants seek identity and attention in order to make, create and preserve relationships.

Some Away Messages even directly acknowledge this attention-seeking goal: "(insert away message talking about being hungover and having so much work to garner sympathetic replies here)." The private is what is demanded on a social scale within the population under investigation; yet, "the 'public' has greater prestige than the 'private'" (Fairclough 64). This increased dominance of the personal within the domain with greater social stature satisfies both the narcissist and the voyeur of every person, making it increasingly acceptable within the Away Message system.

The entire Away Message phenomenon also represents a social experience because it provides an opportunity for rebellion. While most users acknowledge the dominance of the viewer and participate in the system by revealing increasingly personal information, many are only too aware of the sys-

tem and attempt to rebel. Rebellion within the Away Message discourse stems from trying not to participate within the system; this rebellion involves being an unequal participant within the discourse, which essentially means acting solely as viewer. Ironically, rebelling against the system is most effectively and commonly accomplished by treating the Away Message just as it was originally intended. Thus, those people who constantly leave basic Away Messages, such as “Away,” “Leave a Message” and “I am away from my computer right now,” are looked upon critically by other AIM participants because they are reaping the benefits of voyeurism without reciprocation. Those that truly wish to rebel do not enter into the system at all (or they just sign on and offline sporadically), but they face social rejection.

Overall, the Away Message has emerged as a powerful and a dominant discourse within an ever-expanding young population. The language, style, and content of the Away Message is changing rapidly in order to satisfy its users’ growing identity, but it will only continue to exist as a strong communicative discourse if its young subculture of users continue to participate within the system. The Away Message’s existence as a system with high symbolic power has created the effect of what I call “removed discourse,” in which the private is integrated within the public and the system users acceptably act as narcissist and voyeur, identities that are less tolerated in the “real” social world. The dominance of the viewer has elevated in importance so much that this discursive system is beginning to resemble more of a social experience in which members must create an Away Message that is personalized but also helps them “fit in” within the system. This study only begins to touch upon the social power of this current discourse; there are still many other discursive aspects of the Away Message system to be investigated. Although it has not yet replaced actual human conversation, the growing presence of the Away Message demonstrates that it may come to define the future of conversational discourse.

## **Works Cited**

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