

Dynamics of Online Identity Construction

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In this modern, or better said, robot-like era of technology I call myself upon Marshall McLuhan's words, saying that the technologies are the "extension of the human". Similar to the way previous media dissolved social boundaries related to time and space, the latest computer-mediated communications media seem to dissolve boundaries of *identity* as well.

If identity is a network of interactions where the true importance lays not in simple existence but in transformation; in representation and construction of meaning, than the key question under examination here is - What role does Internet use or non-use play in building and transformation of this identity, in answering the 'who am I' question? Is it simply a transmission tool in which the only significant factor is the level of use, or does it in some way conform to a differential model?

The medium and the genre have particular features which may play a part in phenomenological shifts in the sense of self, leading some webpage authors to experience the Web as possessing particular potency as a means of self-presentation. This is related to the involvement of social media in changing relations between *public* and *private*; between the identity characteristics and the values of the new social structure based around the web, such as individual freedom or open communication.

In the light of such concerns, the following lines will develop a discussion about the fluid concept of identity, by making a comparison between its previous construction through the static content of the personal homepages, and the dynamic one today, through social media. Furthermore, how the increased element of interactivity into CMC and the network-like communication has influenced this change of identity construction. And finally, raising the question about the extent to which SNS are part of our lives, and where are we headed with this kind of communication.

So all of you, welcome to the wild side of cyberspace culture, where magic is real and identity is a fluid. But let us take this one step at a time - before delving into the complexity of this essay's title, let us first examine the notion of identity itself.

What is Identity?

Traditional psychological understandings describe identity formation as a stage of development, occurring during the teenage years, but also reactivated at key life milestones such as parenthood or decline at old age (Ericson 1974 cited in Zhao, S., Grasmuck,S., & Martin, J., 2008). Identity is an important part of the self-concept- the totality of a person’s thoughts and feeling in reference to oneself as an object (Rosenberg, 1986), a part of the self “ by which we are known to others” (Altheide, 2000, p.2 cited in Zhao, S., Grasmuck,S., & Martin, J., 2008). The construction of an identity is therefore a public process that involves both the “identity announcement” made by the individual claiming an identity, and the “identity placement” made by others who endorse the claimed identity. Also an identity is established when there is a “ coincidence of placements and announcements” (Stone, 1981, p. 188 cited in Zhao, S., Grasmuck,S., & Martin, J., 2008).

More informational understandings of identity derive from Goffman’s (1959) analyses of social interactions in face-to-face encounters, and various situational motivated presentations of the self (or selves), that focus on the information that is conveyed through speech and gestures as well as dress, possessions and associations , in ways that allow applications of these analyses to contexts beyond the real face-to-face encounter to, for example the simulated world of real-time interaction in text-based Internet chat rooms (Bruckman 1993; Reid 1994; Turkle 1995 cited in Zhao, S., Grasmuck,S., & Martin, J., 2008).

Identity and Cyberspace

In the realm of cyberspace we become arbiters of the identities and positions paraded before us. Of course, our existing cultural ties have a considerable impact on who we choose to identify with us, but we cannot ignore the co-presence of other identities, which call into question the construction of our own. Texter has identified the Internet as the first stage in the construction of a virtual reality, towards the manufacture of identity without the corporeal body:

"The social construction of the body becomes clear in cyberspace, where every identity is represented [for Baudrillard, simulated], rather than ‘real’. The consensus of cyberspace is a precarious one; identification is entirely contingent, based on a consensual agreement to take one’s word for it." (Texter, 1996: 3, cited in Spittle, S., 1997)

Texter suggests identity in cyberspace is often about ‘passing off’, offering up a fluid sense of self, projected onto an imaginary virtual body.

Perhaps what the Internet does, by removing the visual cues that partly gender us, is open up possibilities for experimentation and play with existing manifestations of subjectivity.

"On the one hand, it is fluid, never completely secured and constantly being remade, reconstructed afresh. On the other hand, it only exists in relation to what it is not, to the other identities which are its other."

(Texter, 1995: 18, cited in Spittle, S., 1997)

Personal Home Pages and Identity

The Web is a medium which represents a radical departure from previous modes for the ‘presentation of self in everyday life’ (Goffman 1969 cited in Chandler, D. 1997). The medium of web pages offers possibilities both for the ‘presentation’ and shaping of self which are shared neither by text on paper or face-to-face interaction. On the Web, the *personal* function of ‘discovering’ (or at least clarifying) one’s thoughts, feelings and identity is fused with the *public* function of publishing these to a larger audience than traditional media have ever offered. (Chandler, D. 1998)

The fundamental technical difference between the medium of speech and that of writing is that writing is *automatically recorded*, web pages introduce another key feature: what is written on a web page (and stored on a web-server) is *automatically published* on a global scale. (Chandler, D. 1997). Consequently, home pages are a medium in which conventional relationships between *public* and *private* are visibly in the process of transformation (Kelly 1995). The very name ‘home page’ is revealing in this context. John Seabrook comments that ‘a home in the real world is, among other things, a way of keeping the world out... An online home, on the other hand, is a little hole you drill in the wall of your real home to let the world in’ (Seabrook 1995; see also Seabrook 1997, 15). (Chandler, D. 1998)

In particular, personal home pages can be seen as reflecting the construction of their makers' identities. Creating such pages offers an unrivalled opportunity for self-presentation in relation to any dimension of social and personal identity to which ones chooses to allude. Such a virtual environment offers a unique context in which one may experiment with shaping one's own public identity. (Chandler, D. 1997).

The asynchronous nature of home page presentations of self makes them more comparable to textual forms (such as letters - and indeed more private forms such as diaries) than to speech interaction (such as face-to-face or telephone conversations). Also unlike interpersonal communication, the potential mass audience of home pages makes them distinctively different from traditional forms of self-presentation, making them more comparable to mass media (Chandler, D. 1997). As an early example of this is Yahoo! GeoCities, which is a web hosting service founded by David Bohnett and John Rezner in late 1994 as Beverly Hills Internet (BHI). And its original form allowed people to select one of the cities in which to place their web pages. (Lunch.com, 2009)

The *content* of personal home pages can be recognized as drawing on a palette of conventional paradigmatic elements, most notably: personal statistics or biographical details; interests, likes and dislikes, ideas, values, beliefs and causes, friends, acquaintances and personal 'icons'. Creating a personal home page can be seen as building a virtual identity insofar as it flags topics, stances and people regarded by the author as significant. Sherry Turkle notes that in a home page, 'One's identity emerges from whom one knows, one's associations and connections' (Turkle 1996a, 258, cited in Chandler, D. 1998). More boldly, another commentator declares: 'Show me what your links are, and I'll tell you what kind of person you are' (Miller 1995 cited in Chandler, D. 1998)). Where such links are to the pages of friends or to those who share one's interests this can be seen as involving the construction of a kind of 'virtual community' by home page authors (Rheingold 1995 cited in Chandler, D. 1998)

Taking the metaphor of the personal homepage as literal, its décor, fixtures and fittings are representational of the constructed identity. According to Turkle (1995) cited in Lesley, T. and Thelwall, M. 2005, its different rooms (or sites) are located within the world-stretching connected nodes, yet are accrued and stored under one address (via a process of bricolage).

These hyperlinked 'rooms' are extensions to the identity of the author to aid in its construction, since such rooms are considered to be of some personal or social importance to the individual author (Erickson, 1996 cited in Lesley, T. and Thelwall, M. 2005). Thus the personal homepage and its outlinks portray the author's personal perception of salient people, issues and pursuits, and therefore portrays the social logic that gives the visitor the opportunity to meet with the author's multiple personae.

However, from a more constructionist perspective, it can be argued that each link presented —whether intended for communication or not — illustrates the evolution of virtual communities amongst authors (Rheingold, 1995 cited in Lesley, T. and Thelwall, M. 2005) and therefore the evolution of the focal self. Identity emerges from whom a person knows, or is associated with (Turkle, 1995 cited in Lesley, T. and Thelwall, M. 2005) and so any link can be considered significant no matter what the author's intention; significant in the sense that selves can develop and can be maintained through the very presence of these links (Miller, 1995 cited in Lesley, T. and Thelwall, M. 2005).

Adopting a notion from Sherry Turkle (1996a, 260; 1996c, 173), we would suggest that home pages are objects which enable their authors to think about their identity. They can be seen as one of Foucault's 'technologies of the self' which allow us to transform the very way we think of ourselves and to change ourselves to who we really want to be (Garner, cited in Chandler D. 1998)

Internet and Performative Identities

As the technology develops, more expressive resources become available.. Electronic communication will become more and more human communication to the extent that there is more to it than just efficiently passing information to each other.

Where does this lead to in a discussion of 'electronic self'? Probably it will lead to the fact that Electronic Communication is not interpersonal interaction of the kind that Goffman was

describing. An interpretation of Goffman's work, and that of the Symbolic Interactionist school in sociology, is that self is developed and maintained, as well as presented, in interaction. (Miller, H. 1995) This might mean that this aspect of EC, at least, is not rich enough to support the interactive development and definition of distinctive 'electronic selves', or it might mean that we should wait to see what happens when people have actually grown up with the Web. (Miller, H. 1995)

From back then till now, people HAVE grown up with the Web, and on a large scale . More explicitly, the growth of the Internet has provided a gateway that connects individuals to a diversity of others (Gergen, 2001; Pini, *et al.*, 2004 cited in Lesley, T. and Thelwall, M.,2005). With this potential for increased closeness — albeit digital — the possibility for identity reconstruction is ever present (McNamee, 1996 cited in Lesley, T. and Thelwall, M.,2005), permitting the cycling through of many flexible selves (Turkle, 1995 cited in Lesley, T. and Thelwall, M.,2005).

That individuals perform their identity is not a radical concept. Developed by Goffman (1959), identity-as-performance is seen as part of the flow of social interaction as individuals construct identity performances fitting their milieu. With a heightened self-consciousness (Chan, 2000 cited in Pearson, E.2009), online environments take this construction of performance to another level (boyd and Heer, 2006 cited in Pearson, E.2009).

Meaning, there is no physical trace of communicators. These “unknown audiences” (boyd and Heer, 2006 cited in Pearson, E.2009) are represented by the language of their avatars, shaped by the architectures of their chosen online platforms.

Internet-based performances are mediated and codified — they exist as pixels on a screen. These performances exist within the imagination of users who then use tools and technologies to project, renegotiate, and continuously revise their consensual social hallucination. Users manipulate these communicative codes, with varying degrees of skill and dexterity, to create not only online selves, but also to create the staging and setting in which these selves exist. As these SNS become more sophisticated (and as users are more acclimatized)

these codified exchanges have evolved from scrolling words on a screen to avatars moving like puppets through constructed environments.

Online, these mediated environments mean that there is a blurring between front-stage and back-stage: what feels like an intimate space can be under the watchful electronic gaze of a large unknown audience, what is being acted out as a front-stage performance could have no witnesses.

The mediated nature of these spaces means that most information about the virtual self and its place in the network is given through deliberate construction of signs, linking back to this sense of online self-consciousness.

In particular, the structure of the performative spaces and settings means that each individual identity develops as part of its own node within a network. Each identity can be simultaneous performer and audience of other performances. This also implies that users choose the depth of their engagement on a performance-by-performance basis. Users can ‘look’ or ‘not look’ at a performance, they can choose to incorporate signs and tropes of other performances into their own as they see fit, they can perform or retreat as they choose, they can enter into the ‘glass bedroom’ of others, or stay outside, looking in. As noted earlier, these choices may lead to weak ties becoming strong as intimacy and disclosure increase over time with repetition of performance and engagement. (Pearson, E.2009)

This mediated and extended performative space is playful, but one in which users are also simultaneously engaging in discursive events, conversations, and informational exchanges, as well as emotional bond maintenance.

SNSs and Identity

As these Performative stages become more sophisticated (and as users are more acclimatized) these codified exchanges have evolved in the dynamism of social media. As the

most representative example of social media, the other side of the coin in this discussion are SNSs. SNSs provide the means to create and maintain ties online. Users generate much of the content on these sites. They create online profiles and exchange messages with friends, family and strangers. Users of social networking sites engage simultaneously in interpersonal and mass communication by writing for an audience that is partly known and partly invisible and/or imagined.

Users employ text and images in their profiles and blogs to describe who they are, what they like, and what they do. Through their posts, users send greetings, exchange messages, make plans, flirt, share their beliefs, values, and attitudes, people maintain contact. These features of social networking sites allow users to reveal information about themselves and their lives.

By revealing their physical appearance, name and status, users are showing and constructing who they are. These characteristics along with their posts and the visual composition of their sites reveal their digital bodies (boyd, 2006b cited in Jones, S., Millermaier, S., Martinez, G. M. and Schuler, J., 2008), which they use to socialize online. However, even if users protect their contact information, they might still be identifiable by searching their contacts (boyd, 2006 cited in Jones, S., Millermaier, S., Martinez, G. M. and Schuler, J., 2008) and through, apparently, not sensitive information such as occupations or affiliations.

SNS provide new spaces and ways for virtual identities to be constructed, visually presented, and narrated. For boyd (2007) in boyd (2008), the act of creating and maintaining profiles on SNS serves as “an initiation rite” into these spaces, which have become an important part of contemporary youth culture.

The site design and philosophy may influence the ways users perform identity work in these spaces, but such interactions are more complex than they may appear. For instance, users may subvert, reinterpret or challenge the internal logic of the technology through such strategies as code manipulation, creative visual representation, and collective distribution of usernames and passwords, friends.

The inclusion of a Friends list on a user’s profile contributes to a collaborative depiction of his or her identity, particularly when the Friends list is understood in terms of a record of

social interactions and decision-making processes. How many friends one has, what kinds of relationships they have with the user and their connections to each other all impact on the kind of identity a user is able to portray.

Users employ technical features to develop individual style and to create a social statement through the design of their personal community Web space. Through the creative use of video and music as well as the mixing of media as a component of the user interface important to creative expression and sociality, boyd (2006b) in boyd (2008) reiterates their sentiment and suggests that use of personalizing features increases the appeal of user's sites, as well as comment on the users tastes and preferences. As far as Facebook is concerned, aside from the already mentioned standard SNS options, incorporating mini applications, has been a great hit lately. User's profiles are populated with quiz results, tests, questioners, and tons of other applications that help their identity construction.

Wikis as part of the SNSs

Interaction on networking sites presents new rules for civic socialization. Users engage in a collective process of self-regulation by following and enforcing the social norms established on the Web site (DiPerna, 2007 cited in Jones, S., Millermaier, S., Martinez, G. M. and Schuler, J., 2008).

Wikis are collaborative or cumulative knowledge endeavors that allow a user "to add material and to edit and delete what previous users have done." SNS are Web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile, create a list of "friends", view and interact with other "friends" and connections made by others within the system .

The concept of the wiki, as we currently know it, has prompted a revolution in the way we understand information and knowledge creation processes. The wiki develops some of the basic principles of Web 2.0 technologies and reflects a significant shift in contemporary understandings of knowledge, as it removes the role of the expert or hierarchy as the most valid source of knowledge, and relocates expertise within the group.

The democratic philosophy behind wikis extends connectivity to the way in which information is user-driven as contributors participate in a cycle of continual updating, shaping,

and reshaping information. While the “identity” of an individual contributor may be disguised, unknown, or revealed, there is nevertheless a “wikidentity” that comes with participation. This optimistic vision offers a real possibility of citizen subjects becoming active rather than passive consumers of information defined by the economic interests of the culture industries. (Mallan, K., Giardina, N., 2009)

In terms of Yaszek’s point about culture industries transforming experience through various strategies of re–presentation and simulation, self–representation, SNS such as MySpace enable users to “fake” identity by renegotiating “authentic” re–presentations of the self . (Mallan, K., Giardina, N., 2009)

However, the more apposite point is that the narratives of identity and agency that have traditionally been available to young people are being replaced by new ones that are the direct outcome of the larger technologically mediated world we all now inhabit. A feature of Web 2.0’s ability for connectivity is its enabling approach to identity construction that extends notions of how identity is constructed within language and discourse. The collaborative approach to identity construction undertaken in SNS provides a space whereby an identity is “assembled” by drawing on a diverse set of materials and tools. When an individual or a group constructs an online profile, the resultant “identity” gives a particular interpretation or representation. Consequently, this “wikidentity” becomes a particular, collaborative process that changes according to purpose, context, and form. (Mallan, K., Giardina, N., 2009)

After having made the comparison between identity’s previous construction through the static content of the personal homepages, and the dynamic one today, through social media, let us now see how the increased element of interactivity into CMC and the network-like communication has influenced this change of identity construction.

The Influence of SNS’s in Identity Construction

When talking about the effects that CMC has on our lives, it already known that we are talking about blurred race, gender, sexual and ethnicity boundaries; that users become less

inhibited and fearless; people are free to explore the boundaries of self - feel comfortable in wide ranging roles (Communities welcoming gay and lesbian teens who are dealing with their sexuality); the question of sexuality and sexual behavior online (child pornography, pedophiles) and the validity and authenticity of the information that is out there. But this is something that can be said to be “old news”.

Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) cited in Boyd (2008) maps out the ways in which electronic media—and particularly television—affects social situations, impression management, and self-presentation. He focuses on the ways in which electronic media collapses spatial boundaries and social contexts, blurring social roles and bringing audiences together who might not normally be co-present. Because of electronic media, information and social acts lose their context and new identities, behaviors, roles, and social situations must be formed to account for the way that social structure is changed. This, in turn, disrupts public and private distinctions, boundaries between social groups, and the very essence of public life. In trying to balance different potential audiences and attract the ones that they desire, teens focus on dissuading unwanted visitors and crafting profiles that appeal to their peers, even at the expense of upsetting the audiences that they do not want. This move can be risky, especially if their profile content is upsetting to those who hold power over them, because the technology easily collapses the boundaries that allow teens to distinguish context through social group. The challenges teens face with respect to balancing different audiences mirror those Meyrowitz (1985) cited in Boyd (2008) described with respect to public figures’ facing television and radio. Negotiating multiple audiences creates context collisions and teens feel more pressure when they are forced to contend simultaneously with different audiences, such as peers and parents.

Teenagers today gather online with their friends because of a variety of social and cultural limitations (boyd 2007 cited in Boyd 2007). While the site for gathering has changed through time, many of the core practices have stayed the same. What differences exist stem from the ways in which social network sites alter common social practices. The relations and dynamics that play out in school extend into the spaces created through networked publics. What takes place online is reproduced and discussed offline (Leander and McKim 2003 cited in Boyd 2008). When teens are socializing, online and offline are not separate worlds—they are simply

different places to gather with friends and peers. Conversations may begin in one environment, but they move seamlessly across media so long as the people remain the same. Social network sites mirror, magnify, and extend everyday social worlds. At the same time, networked publics provide opportunities for always-on access to peer communication, new kinds of social pressures, public display of connectedness, and unprecedented access to information about others. As a result, technology inflects different aspects of teen sociality and peer social structures.

Peek into the future:

Clearly, different media and modes of communication facilitate and inhibit different patterns of behavior. If according to Miller (1995) 'Information about the self is explicitly stated and can be managed by the person making the communication', today, this is a collective process. As a natural product out of this, the connection between on and offline lives is challenging the notions of what constitutes as real experiences to the extent to which SNSs are part of our identity, we are all real online. For that matter, our lives become transparent and easily accessible.

What is now current in this field and it is still under research, but clearly takes its part from the cake is the new Web 3.0-Read, Write, Collaborate Live, or better said LiveStreaming. For the matter of its freshness on the media scene, there is not much information to be offered except the Wordspy's way of defining it: "An online record of a person's daily activities, either via direct video feed or via aggregating the person's online content such as blog posts, social network updates, and online photos." ; and some of the top lifestreaming web apps: Onaswarm, Lifestrea.ms, Soup, Jaiku (the service Google bought), and perhaps the most popular of them all, Tumblr. (MacManus, R., 2008)

However, no matter how new this way of communicating or revealing oneself is, there is an early, popular example of lifestreaming, the famous Lonelygirl15 (Davis, J., 2006)

In Conclusion

It is more than clear that the advent of the Internet has changed the traditional conditions of identity production. One can now be oneself, none or everyone in the space less, timeless, universal Internet world. One can each time be a different person, and loose itself in the endless opportunities of the virtual world where one can feel free of any king of judgments, take the easy way and not pay attention to the ‘real’ reality. Alienation of physically existing people, lack of emotion, human touch, out of your own skin....where are we headed? More important – **To what extent are SNSs part of our lives?**

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