Framing Political, Personal Expression on the Web

Matthew W. Wilson
University of Washington, USA

INTRODUCTION

The World Wide Web, as a collection of Web sites, Web services, and Web-enabled technologies, is a space of expression and contestation—a social construction of sorts. Additionally, the Web, as a locus of investigation, is gaining attention from scholars in the social sciences, feminist and critical theorists, as well as more recent poststructural re-conceptualizations across many disciplines. One unifying interest is precisely the topic of this article: How might we recognize what is considered *political* and *personal* in a virtual space? To what sense can we distinguish political and personal expression online? This article frames the diverse perspectives for interrogating political and personal expression on the Web, while offering considerations for why these sorts of projects are at all necessary or useful.

The determinacy of virtual, Web-based locations as political and/or personal is a complex endeavor. Does a pro-choice posting to an anti-abortion online discussion group constitute a political act? What is potentially meant by "political"? Several discussion forums or news groups contain categories like "politics" or "government and politics" (see *Yahoo! Groups* for example); and yet, such groups may or may not be perceived as "political". This perception of "being political" is dependent on certain philosophical tensions about what can be considered political in certain spaces and times. Other Web sites seek to build politics through the Web, via such movements as e-democracy, online deliberation, or public participation geographic information systems (Davies & Novack, forthcoming; Dragicevic & Balram, 2006). However, while building politics is certainly political, surficial analysis of such online-coalition building endeavors may resist or gloss the multiple political implications for constructing a politics. Therefore this entry contains a discussion of politics and "the political"; each as a perspective has certain methodological and empirical contingencies. Namely, how do we study online interactions? What sorts of data might we collect? Furthermore, how are we, as researchers, already implicated in our studies of online interactions?

This entry proposes a diversity of approaches in studying interactions within the Web as informed by both the information sciences and the humanities and is organized into four sections: first, a background section which contemplates more traditional debate in political theory made relevant to studies of the Web; a second section which proposes (post)modernist and poststructuralist framings for researching personal and political expression; third, a section offering future research questions in this research area; and finally, conclusions that reflect upon research on the Web.

BACKGROUND

While certain academic traditions analyze political encounters as separate from those situations that are supposedly personal, critical interruptions in these traditions have shown that the personal and political are quite interrelated and inseparable, if not fictitious designations of expression. Most obvious of these critical interruptions are the women's and GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) movements, with the blurring of these boundaries as central to an active social movement. These interruptions highlight the co-constitutiveness of the political and the personal, and render suspect analyses that enforce a strict dualism. Therefore, it may be as no surprise that analyses of interactions on the Web are similarly complex—given that the Web is simultaneously coded as personal and political, public and private. Identity and embodiment—or what constitutes the "self"—are intriguingly negotiated in virtuality, making a mess of any rigid enforcement of public/private, political/personal evaluation of online culture. This section explores these public/private, political/personal frameworks as a background for studies of interaction on the Web.

Publicness and Privateness

Social interaction over the Web, or what Steven Johnson (1997) argues is an "interface culture", is acutely part of everyday life, although admittedly this is not the case for everyone. Out-of-the-box high-speed, wireless networking allows computers and mobile-computing devices to find use across the space of the home, from the kitchen refrigerator to the bedroom Web-enabled television, and throughout the local neighborhood, within grocery stores, cafés, and

while walking the sidewalks of busy metropolitan streets. Johnson's central thesis is that our contemporary culture is one of *interfaces*—a rearranging/repackaging/refiltering of digital data to serve various information consumers. Web sites like *WifiMug.org* point computer-savvy-sans-caffeine users to local coffeeshops, which have free wireless Internet access, and handy power outlets. Others, like *BlogHer.org*, collect women-authored Web-logs (or blogs), to build a sense of "women-friendly" online political community. What about contributing to online discussions on transportation planning while sitting in bed could be experienced or reinforced as a public, political act within a place coded as private? Furthermore, how might we theorize the privateness of certain discussions of personal violence, in a supposedly public, online forum? The Web is certainly a site where that which is coded public and private meets in virtual contradiction. Analyses of online interaction that seek to code separately what is considered public from private, are engaged in projects that frame their observations by a certain transformation of expression, *pace* Habermas (1979), from the private to the public individual. The Internet, some argue, enables this transformation of expression, from private mobile devices into actively participating citizens of a public (Stromer-Galley, 2003a, 2003b). However, these sorts of framings are a slippery slope, susceptible to a problematic dualism of the political and personal.

Political and Personal

Central to the popular critique that "the personal *is* political", feminists have challenged the public-private dualism as misrecognition of the political status of supposedly private, personal acts. As Nancy Fraser (1992) argues, that which is "private" is conceptualized within public-private frameworks as some "prepolitical starting point" (p. 130). The moment requiring critical intervention occurs when the public-private dualism discriminates personal claims as separate from and irreconcilable with political claims. Feminist political geographers Michael Brown and Lynn Staeheli (2003) offer a framework to organize these diverse critical interventions into three moments of "the political": the distributive, the antagonistic, and the constitutive. These three moments are essentially research perspectives, and can be appropriately translated to online interaction research. The *distributive* is an interrogation of which individuals and groups have unequal access to certain resources; studies of Internet and interface accessibility are good examples of the distributive approach (e.g., Servon, 2002). The *antagonistic*, Brown and Staeheli continues, is a recognition of the oppositional conflict which structures the political, similar to studies of partisan-politic Web forums (e.g., Stromer-Galley, 2003a). Finally, the *constitutive* research perspective looks to analyze the productive dimension of the political; research which analyzes the assertion of identity by appropriating

online discussion forums might take a more constitutive approach (e.g., Wincapaw, 2000). Each of these perspectives on political research is also interestingly contingent on the collections of interfaces, protocols, software, and hardware within our constructed and engineered (Web-based) spaces of interaction. The following section discusses these emerging spaces of interaction, and then proposes two ways of framing expression within these spaces.

METHODOLOGICAL-THEORETICAL FRAMINGS FOR INTERNET RESEARCH

Methods of analysis of political and personal expression over the Internet are especially complex due to the dynamic and differential development of Web-based systems. Those interested in social studies of the Internet should consider new developments in interaction design, particularly the advancement of *Web 2.0*, but must remain conscious of the differential development of Web-based systems, from the simple-yet-elegant, HTML Web sites (such as *Craigslist.org*) to the more interactive, AJAX Web sites (such as *Flickr.com*). The Web, with its various interfaces of carefully designed interaction, privileges, and constrains various methods of online research (Cherny & Weise, 1996; Crampton, 2003; Davis, 1999; Graham, 1998; Kitchen, 1998; White, 2006). Web developers explicitly construct certain operations and logs of data collection within their Web sites; researchers may or may not have access to these datasets, and furthermore, may or may not be able to analyze the data even as it becomes accessible. However, beyond the data acquisition dilemma for online interaction research, researchers should additionally consider the nuanced implications of interface and interaction design.

Web sites have become more interactive, with recent developments such as *Flickr*, *Blogger*, and the suite of *Google* Web-applications. Many of these more recent developments fall under the paradigm of *Web 2.0*. This ethos of Web development focuses intensely on the design of interactions—leading toward not only technical or programmatic changes in Web software development, but also (more importantly) advances new concepts in user interaction (Garrett, 2002, 2005). Web sites architected from a notion of *Web 2.0*, follow design protocols that create a seamless experience for users; Web pages have the look and feel of a computer desktop application, with interactive menus and nearly instantaneous feedback. Clicking controls on the Web page no longer require jarring page reloads; instead, components within a Web page update and change, never requiring the user to adjust to a new page or layout. Beyond aesthetic and cinematic changes to the interaction design, *Web 2.0* also introduces such technologies as RSS (Rich Site Summary) feeds, which employ XML (Extensible Markup Language) standards, allowing users to be served with vari-

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