

Chapter 37

Sporting Safe in the Liminal Sphere: “Tactics” and Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Facebook, like any other social networking site, troubles the traditional categories of private and public spheres. As it complicates (and transcends) the distinction, it can be called a different space, or a liminal space, which falls somewhere in-between private and public spheres. The author argues that this recognition of Facebook as a liminal sphere has important implications to the (re) definition of public and private spheres and to the ways rhetoric should work or be used in the Web 2.0 sites like Facebook. The author also proposes that Michael de Certeau’s notions of “strategy” and “tactics” can be powerful rhetorical tools to deal with Facebook’s liminality and to enhance the rhetorical performance of self in Facebook and other similar new media forums.

INTRODUCTION

Most of the Web 2.0 interfaces and Facebook in particular complicate the distinction between the private and public spheres. Put against the traditional criteria of private and public spheres, Facebook is elusive. As a public sphere, it facilitates or has potential to facilitate public participation in debates about the matter of public interest but an analytical examination reveals that its democratic potential is, in fact, limited. Such a potential is constrained by factors, such as digital access (linked to income, class, and infrastructure), digital

literacy, and the users’ rhetorical skills. The powerful late capitalist and corporate interests driving this interface also undermine its designation as a public sphere. In addition, critical-rational debate is hardly feasible in this space by virtue of its participants being usually a self-selected group of people, and interactions among them mostly being on personal issues rather than on those of public or national interests. Therefore, the debates or interactions therein are likely to have incidental impacts, if any, on the national or public policies.

Is Facebook a private sphere? No definite answer again. Facebook is institutionally promoted

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as a private sphere citing its customizable privacy setting, which allows its users control over their data and information. The privacy setting, for instance, leaves choice up to the users who they want to be friends with and what postings they want to share online. This provision makes Facebook look like a perfect private sphere. But again, a closer look at the networked knowledge community (NKC) complicates this view too. Friend circle in Facebook usually goes beyond intimate friends and families and includes colleagues, co-workers and the people in profession. Since the NKC crosses multiple circles of relationships, the user's privacy gets into stake. The privacy is at risk also because of Facebook's recently introduced privacy policy, which makes most of the users' profile information publicly available. Moreover, the users' involvement into any other Facebook applications like games and quizzes make their information automatically available to third party Websites and, interesting enough, for such an export to take place, involvement need not be necessarily of user himself or herself. Participation of any of his/her friends is enough for that to happen. Equally interesting is the fact that every bit of posting—deleted or untagged—or any activity as simple as a click on profile is saved in Facebook databases and is trackable by Facebook's authorized individuals even after the deactivation of the account.

Clearly thus, Facebook troubles the traditional categories of private and public spheres. As it complicates (and transcends) the distinction, it can be called a different space, or a liminal space, which falls somewhere in-between private and public spheres. I argue that this recognition of Facebook as a liminal space has important implications to the (re) definition of public and private spheres and to the ways rhetoric should work or be used in the Web 2.0 sites like Facebook. I also propose that Michael de Certeau's notions of 'strategy' and 'tactics' could be powerful rhetorical tools to deal with Facebook's liminality. To theoretically ground my chapter, first of all, I invoke here the

scholarships on public and private spheres, and the Web 2.0 technologies. I then situate Facebook in the debate over private/public distinction or their blurring, and attempt to re-conceptualize private and public spheres in post-Web 2.0 contexts. I wrap up this chapter with some observations about the ways to deploy Certeau's notions of 'strategy' and 'tactics' in an effort to enhance the rhetorical performance of self in Facebook and optimize its other potentials.

PUBLIC SPHERE AND PRIVATE SPHERE

In its original formulation, the term public sphere referred to a social realm where dialogues, debates and discussions on the matter of public concern took place. It mediated private sphere and the sphere of public authority i.e. the state. Primarily critical of the state, public sphere was the realm of discourses, governed by the idea of participatory democracy and public opinion. According to Jurgen Habermas (1991), the propounder of the concept, public sphere was:

[t]he sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. (p. 27)

For Habermas, public sphere was a sphere between civil society and the state where "critical public discussion of matter of general interest was institutionally guaranteed" (p. xi). Criticality being its major part, public sphere also had interesting institutional criteria: disregarded status (p. 36), rational argument, openness of topics for discussion (p. 36), inclusivity (p. 37), questioning of "absolute sovereignty" on the belief that the public opinion alone could discover the "natural

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