Chapter 4
The Language of Technoself:
Storytelling, Symbolic Interactionism, and Online Identity

Federica Fornaciari
University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

ABSTRACT

The goal of this chapter is to suggest theoretical means to address a fundamental question, what strategies do people use when presenting their selves online? This implies another question, how do people react to the context collapse when shaping their online profiles? The chapter analyzes the concept of identity and provides an analytical approach to the presentation of self online where traditional contextual and non-verbal cues lack. It tackles the issue of self presentation online through the frameworks of symbolic interactionism and narrative theory. The initial hypothesis is that individuals create online selves based on their offline selves; they attempt to shape online personas using similar communication strategies than in the offline world, but do so lacking traditional social cues, and this may generate dissonance for individuals who struggle defining the features of an imagined audience.

INTRODUCTION

The study of identity and presentation of self is crucial in society today particularly because new online technologies may generate a context collapse, "an infinite number of contexts collapsing upon one another into that single moment of recording" (Wesch, 2008, para 5). Context is fundamental for inferring norms and expectations, and for deciding which social mask(s) to wear; there is a need to look into the presentation of self online to investigate how individuals perceive the context collapse and how they react to the fact that information online is potentially shared with everyone, transported everywhere and preserved for all time. In particular it is important to consider that, "the need for variable self-presentation is complicated by increasingly mainstream social

media technologies that collapse multiple contexts and bring together commonly distinct audiences" (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 2). New technologies reflect society; the study of context collapse and its relationship to self-coherence are fundamental issues in the future of identity research to help explain technology's intertwinement with human identity.

Context collapse online may be a problem for individuals when they have to decide how to present their selves but have no access to situational and contextual information. Personal homepages, Facebook profiles and status updates, blog posts, and tweets are all texts crafted and published online to communicate with *someone*, with an audience that is partly real and partly imagined. It is not realistically predictable who will read the information published online. Professional and occasional writers struggle to determine a sense of their audience; students, often, do not realize that their online profiles are (or will be) potentially accessible for faculty members or future employers. Holding an online presence always implies that a variety of audiences may have access to the same content. Facebook and other social network sites grant some level of control over access; blogs and personal websites are created to spread information and reach a larger audience. Different online domains have different features that may include some level of audience control, but context collapse always applies to some extent. There is a sense of understanding the boundaries of one's online audiences, although these boundaries, in reality, are blurring. Actual readers, on one hand, are present only in server logs, wall messages, or comments. The imagined audience, on the other hand, exists only as it is written into the text, through stylistic and linguistic choices (Scheidt, 2006).

Studies of self-presentation online have shown that individuals are attentive to their audience, although clear information about the audience is often lacking (boyd, 2006b; Ellison et al., 2006; Marwick & boyd, 2011). The goal of this chapter is to suggest theoretical means to address a fundamental question, what strategies do people use when presenting their selves online? This implies another question, how do people react to the context collapse when shaping their online profiles?

To approach the problem I will explore the frameworks of symbolic interactionism and narrative theory. I hypothesize that individuals create online selves based on their offline selves; they attempt to shape online personas using similar social masks and communication strategies than in the offline world, but they do so lacking traditional social cues, and this may generate dissonance for individuals who struggle defining the features of an imagined audience. In both frameworks, narrative has a role in shaping one's identity and, I argue, these theories should be integrated to achieve a better understanding of the process of identity formation online.

BACKGROUND

The Identity Concept

Identity is a pervasive term in academic, political and popular discourses today, and it is necessary to remember that modern concepts of self and identity are rooted in theoretical and philosophical traditions. Identity, intended in individualistic terms, is a concept that draws from classical scholarship; Greek philosophers defined the self by opposing it to others (Constantakopouloua, 2005; Gudykunst, 2005; Hall 1998). In a famous passage of the Phaedrus, Plato compared the soul to a chariot:

We will liken the soul to the composite nature of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. […] the charioteer of the human soul drives a pair, one of the horses is noble and of noble breed, but the other quite the opposite in breed and character. Therefore in our case the driving is necessarily difficult and troublesome. (Phaedrus 246a–254e)

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