Chapter 4
Constructions of Banksy:
Issues of Identity in the Age of Social Media

Cheri Lemieux Spiegel
Northern Virginia Community College, USA & Old Dominion University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how multiple, often competing, identities of the street artist Banksy are constructed through a variety of media. It uses actor network theory and activity theory to trace and analyze the contexts, or networks, wherein Bansky's identity is constructed. Banksy's identity is of particular interest because he is an anonymous figure, and he actively abstains from social media. This examination of how he is constructed online sheds light on the agency that individuals have in constructing their identity in digital spaces. The insight from this investigation should be of great relevance for all professionals as they consider the non-professional writing they do, or chose not to do, beyond their office walls, within the public domain.

INTRODUCTION

In the age wherein businesses and teenagers alike regularly share their Twitter names and suggest that others "Facebook" them, the understanding of private and public selves is becoming notably blurred. Furthermore, issues of identity construc-

tion in this age of social media have become more important than ever. For one, identity construction in digital spaces gives space for individuals to mediate the disconnect between who they are and who they wish they could be. As Sherry Turkle (2011) explains, "These days, insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and protect ourselves from them at the same time" (p.

xii). Additionally, corporations are allegedly monitoring employee social media pages (Liebowitz, 2012); while multiple employees have been fired for their confessions on social media (Pike, 2011); and scholars use Twitter to self promote, network, and distribute resources with students, as well as share student work with the online community (Veletsianos, 2012).

These activities all shape their user's perceived identity in the online domain. This fact ought to give social media users pause when they consider the material they share, comment upon, re-tweet and "like" in these public venues. The question of which social media to participate in, to what degree, under what name or alias, and with whom is of great concern for all professionals as they consider the non-professional writing they do within the public domain. A number of scholars have begun to wrestle with these issues. They have explored how cultural identity is formed in social media (Sullivan, 2010), how corporations can use social media to successfully market their brand (Volmar, 2010), and how social lives and relationships have been reshaped as a result of the use of this kind of media (Brown, 2011). Most of these authors assume participation in social media. One question that research into these platforms has yet to fully explore is: what happens when one purposefully abstains from social media in an effort to control the way he or she is constructed online?

It is this question that this chapter explores, by tracing the online identity construction of a public figure who purposefully elects to abstain from social media. It works to explore the identity construction of an individual whose identity is considered elusive, even offline, and whose ethos is already associated with criminal behavior: Banksy. The infamous street artist Banksy is known only by this name, which is certainly an alias. This alias presumably stands in for a real-life person. Great research and speculation have gone into attempting to identify Banksy. These efforts have not been fruitful. Collins (2007) reported in *The New Yorker* a summary of what we do know

about Banksy's identity in real life: "Banksy likes pizza, though his preference in toppings cannot be definitively ascertained. He has a gold tooth. He has a silver tooth. He has a silver earring. He's an anarchist environmentalist who travels by chauffeured S.U.V" (para. 1). This list goes on and contains many contradictions as it continues.

It is quite difficult to make definite claims about the identity of the real-life Banksy. However, the real-life Banksy is not the one of greatest concern in this chapter. Instead, this chapter is concerned with the multiple identities of the street artist Banksy that are constructed in the online environment. These identities are largely articulated without the input of the real-life figure himself. Instead, they originate from experiences throughout the digital world. As Turkle (1995) explains, "in the story of constructing identity in the culture of simulation, experiences on the Internet figure prominently, but these experiences can only be understood as part of a larger cultural context" (p. 10). For this reason, this chapter uses actor network theory (ANT) and activity theory to trace and analyze the contexts, or networks, wherein Banksy's identity is constructed. The examination of how he is constructed online sheds light on the agency that an individual has in constructing his or her own identity in digital spaces, even when he or she elects not to self-compose an identity in certain social media spaces.

BACKGROUND

ANT, as Callon (1999) explains, "was developed to analyse situations in which it is difficult to separate humans and non-humans, and in which the actors have variable forms and competencies" (p. 183). It proves useful in this chapter's exploration precisely because ANT provides a means for separating human and non-human agents. To understand the means in which identity is crafted, one needs to be able to separate the individual whose identity is under construction from the identity itself, as

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