

Chapter 6

Social Networking Sites (SNS) and the ‘Narcissistic Turn’ The Politics of Self-Exposure

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ABSTRACT

The advent of the Internet hailed the ability of users to transform their identity and expression and articulation of the ‘self’ through their digital interactions. The Internet in its early days enabled the user to re-define identity through the text-based environment of the internet without declaring their offline persona or identity. In comparison new social software like Facebook have brought about a narcissistic turn where private details are placed on a global arena for public spectacle creating new ways of connecting and gazing into the lives of the others. It raises new social issues for societies including the rise of identity fraud, infringement of privacy, the seeking of private pleasures through public spectacle as well as the validation of one’s identity through peer recognition and consumption.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet in its early days signified the re-birthing of the individual and most prominently the ‘self’ as technology enabled the user to re-mediate identity through a text-based environment. Anonymity and virtuality constituted a form of ‘avatarism’ where individuals could re-invent their presence online without declaring their offline persona or identity (See Donath 1998; Froomkin 1995). In comparison, new social networking sites (SNS), such as

Facebook, signify a ‘narcissistic turn’ where offline identities are publicized online and constructed through a multimedia platform to create new forms of self-expression, gaze, spectacle, and sociabilities. Equally, social networking is embedded within a new economy of sharing and exchanging personal information between friends and strangers. The sharing and communication of personal details have reached unprecedented levels with the proliferation of e-commerce and social networking sites in recent years (See Szomsor et al. 2008; Geyer et al. 2008; Strater & Richter 2007; Stefanone 2008; Lampe et al. 2006; Joinson 2008).

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This marks a shift from the earlier 'virtuality' discourses of the Internet which perceived anonymity and the ability to transform identities online as a form of empowerment whilst raising the tenuous issues of trust, intimacy and deception. The increasing popularity of social networking sites, on the other hand, emphasizes the narcissistic tendency in the human condition manifested through an exhibition of the self through photos and other multimedia content. The publicizing of personal details on a global arena for public spectacle creates new ways of connecting and gazing into the lives of others. It raises new social issues for societies, including the rise of identity fraud, infringement of privacy, the seeking of private pleasures through public spectacle, as well as the validation of one's identity through peer recognition, connection and consumption online. The ability to connect with offline networks through online self-profiles and content and additionally the possibility of inviting audiences to be part of the 'friends' list celebrates the declaration of offline identities.

The politics of self-revelation on the Internet creates the need to understand new forms of computer-mediated behavior which are emerging and may have implications for the ways in which users construct and express their identities. The creation of profiles and the ability to make connections through these constructs indicate how these become a form of social capital in forming connections and communion with a wider imagined community offline and online. This chapter examines the phenomenon of self-exposure through social networking sites on the Internet and discusses how the emergence and popularity of these sites reflects a shift in debates about identity discourses on the Internet on a theoretical and societal level. The chapter also delves into the social and legal implications of self-revelation and, more specifically, how social networking sites create risk communities where an awareness of risks exists along with the urge to reveal in order to make contact and connections with

others. Social networking sites function through complicit risk communities which highlights both the narcissistic strand as well as the postmodern hazards that lurk in the online environment.

THE EARLY DISCOURSES OF THE INTERNET

The term *cyberspace* was coined by science fiction writer William Gibson in 1982 to capture the nature of a space both real and illusory. This duality is one of the fundamental reasons why investigations of online spaces are complex and multi-dimensional. Early writings on the Internet portrayed the new medium as constituting a virtual space which was divorced from offline existence (Miller and Slater, 2000: 4). Miller and Slater (2000) define *virtuality* as the capacity of communicative technologies to constitute, rather than mediate, realities and to form relatively bounded spheres of interaction. These discourses often portrayed the emergence of new forms of society and identity (Rheingold, 2000) in which the 'virtual was often disembodied from the real' (Miller and Slater, 2000: 4). This disembodiment represented a form of escapism from real society where individuals could invent, deconstruct, and re-invent their identities. As such, cyberspace created fluidity in terms of identity as well as a form of release from the confines of the real world.

From this perspective Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) represents an unusual form of communication, as it does not fit into the conventional distinctions between public and private, and direct and mediated communication. (Diani, 2000: 386). CMC stands in a somewhat ambiguous relationship to other forms of communication. Its private and public nature is unclear. In line with the nature of communications on the Internet, there is also the question of how people establish identities in cyberspace. Because of the fact that we are not physically present on the Internet and because we can present many dif-

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