

Chapter 8.3

Public Intimacy and the New Face (Book) of Surveillance: The Role of Social Media in Shaping Contemporary Dataveillance

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, social media have become an important avenue for self-expression. At the same time, the ease with which individuals disclose their private information has added to an already heated debate about the privacy implications of interactive media. This chapter investigates the relationship between disclosure of personal information in social media and two related trends: the increasing value of subjective or private experience as a social currency and the evolving nature of automated dataveillance. The authors argue that the results of the extended ability of individuals to negotiate their identity through social media are contradictory. The information revealed to communicate the complexity of one's identity becomes an extensive source of data about individuals, thereby contributing to the functioning of a new regime of surveillance.

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INTRODUCTION

Since their first inception in 1997 (with SixDegrees.com), social network sites - such as *Facebook*, *Friendster*, *Orkut*, and *MySpace* - allowed users to create online profiles about themselves and connect with other users. Starting with MySpace, user profiles on social network sites were no longer limited by preset categories determined by the network owners (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Today, the types of information that users can post on their social network accounts are virtually limitless. A few examples include: age, educational status, favorite music bands, movies or books, current mood, a detailed list of daily activities performed, relationship status, likes and dislikes, and hobbies.

According to Liu (2007), an important consequence of this characteristic of social media is that social network sites have become very suitable venues for self-expression and identity formation. By

enabling users to list their own interests, hobbies, social preferences, among other forms of information, social network sites empower individuals to go beyond the traditional tokens of identity, such as profession and social class, to engage in what he calls “taste statements” (p. 253) and more freely communicate oneself to others. And according to Evans, Gosling, and Carroll (2008), what individuals have to say about themselves in social media does not fall on deaf ears: a person who views the online profile of another person usually forms impressions that are congruent with the profile owners.

However, the same feature that enables individuals to freely communicate their identity to their social networks also leaves traces of data in unprecedented detail. As such, the main purpose of this chapter is to discuss these two related trends and their implications for intimacy, social relations, privacy and identity in contemporary societies. Following a brief overview of social media, the chapter begins by arguing that increased transparency is one of the defining characteristic of the *new individual* in contemporary societies. Next, the chapter focuses on how social media, in a world of transparency, enable individuals to communicate their multiple identities to others. In the final sections, the chapter focuses on the privacy implications of this heightened transparency by discussing the characteristics of a regime of surveillance that increasingly relies on an automated collection, collation and interpretation of the data individuals reveal and by summarizing the role that social media play in this regime of surveillance.

BACKGROUND

According to Barnes (2006), *social media* is an all-encompassing term that describes loosely organized online applications through which individuals can create personas and communicate with each other. Especially since 2003, social

network sites (such as MySpace, Orkut, Facebook, and LinkedIn) have become extremely popular. For example, in 2007, Facebook had close to 100 million and MySpace had more than 100 million unique visitors (Comscore.com, 2007). Weblogs or blogs are another form of widely used social media. By the end of 2007, there were an estimated 67 million blogs worldwide (Rappaport, 2007).

This rising popularity of social media, within which individuals reveal minute details of their lives, is closely related to the transformation of society’s expectations about what constitutes an acceptable form of information. Noting this transformation in individuals’ expectations about the type of truth that the media should make available, several commentators suggest that an important characteristic of current culture is the elevation of individualism around mid-1960s and the subsequent rise of the subjective and intimate experience of individuals as the guarantor of truth (Cavender, 2004; Corner, 2002). Commenting on this transformation, social theorist Beck (1994) points out that there has been a shift in individuals’ relationship with institutions. Accordingly, whereas in early modernity, meaning and identity were grounded on somewhat loyal reliance on institutions and structures, starting with late 20th century, the locus of meaning shifted to the individual. The self became the primary agent of meaning.

Within this context, by aiding the circulation of the intimate, social media are quickly becoming a platform for self-expression and creation of meaning. However, the audiences for these attempts at self-expression via intimate disclosure are usually not limited to a few friends or potential friends. As such, the ease with which users reveal their personal information, while using social media, has triggered a heated debate over the privacy implications of social media in general and social network sites in particular (Solove, 2007; Viegas, 2005). Researchers have focused on a number of issues including: social media users’ ability to limit who has access to identification

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