Self-Presentation Online

Introduction

The previous chapter suggests that friendship has become a powerful emblem of interpersonal democratisation during late modernity. ‘Friendship’, as an idea and set of practices, is used to navigate both intimate and casual ties in the framework of increasingly diverse channels of communication. Social network sites have further reconfigured the apparent flexibility, informality and conviviality of friendship through the public display of personal connections. The type of social media engagement articulated on social network sites promotes a new form of friendship administration (Ellison et al. 2011b). This chapter explores the ways people are managing their personal connections online within personalised networked publics by investigating the ways in which sites are used by participants to present the self. It considers the techniques available to users for managing the public display of the personal and to navigate the uncertain and often risky boundaries between ‘personal’ and ‘public’.

Studies of the display of the self on individual site profiles highlight the challenges of balancing private and public information. Styles of self-presentation and the formation and organisation of tight or loose social settings become paramount (Papacharissi 2009). To address these issues, this chapter explains the significance of personal identities being extended digitally into public cultures. The concept of networked publics helps to understand how personal communities are articulated online as public modes of interaction. The chapter shows how social network sites mediate interaction and facilitate the creation of personal identities and networked publics.

The public presentation of personal associations on social network sites has come to represent an individual’s social identity and status.
(Donath and boyd 2004). Yet, unlike an ordinary web page, the identity might be contested and modified by interactive onlookers. Conceptions and changing presentations of ‘self’ and ‘other’ are analysed in the context of these new kinds of mediated personal ties. The work of Mead and Goffman is drawn on to understand the reconstruction of the ‘self’ and ‘other’ in the framework of online social ties. This chapter explains how a symbolic interactionist approach can inform debates about networked identity by assessing Mead’s concept of the ‘generalised other’ and Goffman’s idea of the self as a process of dramatic interaction. Given that the self is being articulated and negotiated in highly visible ways through online media, the ‘public personalisation’ of the self almost inevitably involves the renegotiation of the boundaries between personal and the public.

**Imagined audiences and third-party information**

As social network site engagement generally entails semi-public messages of mutual acknowledgement, status confirmation and relationship affirmation (boyd 2006b), it can be assumed that a ‘public self’ is being displayed mainly for one’s own social circle. However, site participants are also regularly tracked and ‘checked out’ by a range of former acquaintances and looser associations. In these ways, sites are designed to display real-world identities. This doesn’t mean that it is impossible to invent an online identity but, importantly, the site tools encourage us to communicate features of our offline selves. This process contrasts with the virtual identities constructed in certain online networks such as massively multiplayer online role playing video games where players are expected to assume the role of a character or avatar. Self-representations formed on social network sites are generally constructed to reflect offline selves. Public access to personal and looser connections inevitably involves a staging of personal status and identity (Donath and boyd 2004). For instance, in a study of Twitter, Alison Hearn (2008) found that social media is used to carefully construct a ‘meta-narrative and meta-image of self’. Personal profiles are expected to be highly managed as multimedia online identity presentations.

Social network site engagement can, then, be viewed as a form of impression management that involves an explicit construction of the social self (Tufekci 2008). Interestingly, these practices of online self-presentation ‘heighten people’s consciousness of the ways in which their identities are socially constructed’ as Stefanone, Lackaff and Rosen