Personal Identity as Digital Commodity

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Introduction

In light of "the late capitalist economy where anything and everything is potentially commodifiable" [1], the fact that online social platforms foster a market ideology that commoditizes personal identity as a sellable good has been addressed in recent scholarship [2, 3]. This logic is, at the same time, counterbalanced by a popular faith in the Social Web [4] as the new ground for personal affirmation [5]. Web 2.0 has continued to be portrayed as the symbolic materialization of *enterprise culture* [6], in a time when the employment scene seems futureless, marked by increased uncertainty for both companies and employees and devoid of any guarantees of economic success or job security. Against the pervasiveness of self-commodification online, regular individuals have the option of leveraging the market logic themselves. This affirmation needs to be placed against the wider cultural background of recent years.

In little over a decade, individuals' digital immersion has spread to become a global social phenomenon, attesting to the fact that society's new habitat is the *re-ontologised infosphere* [7]. Individuals themselves are described as informational entities [8] embedded in this engulfing network of bits, with every piece of personal information available online carrying relevant identity cues [9]. Commercial Internet companies interested in reaping identity data from real individuals have been the first to harvest this realization. While they made social networking online increasingly compelling for participants, they operated a discrete change: reframing privacy "as something users opt into (rather than out of)" [10]. From a space of infinite possibility for anonymous identity play [11, 12, 13], the privately owned Social Web was recast around new ideals of transparency [14, 15].

The massive sharing of personal information that occurred with the widespread adoption of platform logic, corroborated with the "persistence", "replicability", "scalability" and "searchability" of digital information [16] contributed to the discretionary availability of large quantities of personal data online. Along with "communication power" [17], individuals gained great communication vulnerability. Online, flattened contexts allow for both audiences and information to aggregate, displaced from their intended temporal and spatial delineations [18]. Any search engine can bring together authored, co-authored, ambient or random personal information for an unintended audience, free to subjectively re-create the individual's identity from its digital parts. Our increasingly digital culture [19, 20, 21], where surveillance is embedded in the very process of social interaction, both rewards and sanctions individuals based on who they appear to be online. Under this context, self-promotion has been presented as a normalized practice online [3].

While self-promotion as self-commodification has been the subject of vocal critique in the academic world [1, 22, 23], a popular culture fueled by both the personal development literature genre and a growing marketing practice embraced it as *personal branding* [10, 23]. For the individual user engaging in self-branding, the Social Web is valorized as enabling the alignment of self to enterprise ideology [2]. Yet, while online and offline identities increasingly merge in social and commercial ways [24] that leave little room for incongruity, the extent to which individuals are aware of both who they are in the infosphere and their possibilities to strategically manage their online selves is questionable.

Methods

The overall goal of my research was to shed light onto the individual practices that shape self-identity communication online, in light of a normalization of self-promotion practices, brought about by Web 2.0 ideology. Aiming for a theoretical sample [25], my orientation was towards the most representative group of individuals for the identity online phenomenon. Informants needed to be, on the one hand, biologically mature and thus credible to talk about self-identity on and offline, and, on the other hand, frequent and savvy users of multiple digital platforms, spending a minimum time of 3 to 4 hours a day engaged in online activities, irrespective of terminal technology or online platform. My 20 informants ranged in age from 21 to 35 and came from various professional backgrounds. Sample size was established as a result of theoretical saturation [25]. I conducted 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews in the homes of my informants, with an average duration of one hour and thirty minutes. The loose discussion guide used as instrument included projective techniques and verbal protocols. Prior to the actual interview, each participant was required to fill in a personal journal over a period of a week. The journals had a pre-set format, prompting respondents to answer (with text and images) specific points, ranging from personal information to online habits, to actual web pages accessed over the given period of time. All 20 interviews were filmed and then transcribed. Simultaneously, the text was continuously perused for thematic similarities and differences that ultimately enabled the grouping of the data set into concepts and then larger categories, using both emic and etic codes.

Results and Discussion

The study was based on the theoretical assumption that identity online is a forming part of individuals living in our digital culture [24]. Yet, my findings revealed that the large majority of my informants did not acknowledge that the traces they leave online (intentionally or not) can be subjectively corroborated by various third parties to form the individual's identity narrative. Nor that, in the face of

this reality, could or should they make strategic use of the online medium's affordances to craft a strategic personal presence online. One is able to observe a disarming ingenuousness in user's perception of the Social Web as an environment for authentic self-expression. Although the projected self is, to some extent, edited, this practice is grounded on false assumptions. Protective self-presentation [26] is dismissive of the fact that real and *imagined audiences* [18] can differ and information can at some point aggregate and become available by searching. Identities online thus appear to be published rather then publicized.

While these results emerged out of a qualitative approach, and lack the support of quantitative validation, they encourage compelling threads for discussion. They seem to have surfaced an inequality in the system of sharing, an inconsistency between emerging social realities and actual user practices, which leaves the individual in a clear disadvantage. Commercial interest as the pervasive logic of Web 2.0 is, most often than not, one-sided. This creates an unfair imbalance between commercial entities' proven perception of individuals as products to be sold and individuals' disoriented perception of their own role and potential within Web 2.0 economy, at least in the country where this study has been conducted.

Conclusions

While established economies may have granted individuals an advance in understanding technology's consequences in regard to responsible self-identity communication, in less developed societies, individuals seem to be left exposed. Romania's *tendential modernity* [27] is historically based on the adoption of forms without substance [28]. In other words, institutional and social efforts towards modernity are undermined by a superficial understanding of its adoption process.

Extrapolating this logic to the online medium and to our current discussion, individuals were fast to adopt an *onlife* [8] way of living, without a pragmatic awareness of Web 2.0's affordances and pitfalls as technologies of self-construction.

In Romania, frequent users of the Social Web are yet to be educated on the implications of their presence in the new infosphere in order to have the capacity to evaluate the option of engaging in strategic rather than random representations of themselves.

Acknowledgments

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