
Facebooking in “Face:” Complex Identities Meet Simple Databases

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Abstract

Online systems often struggle to account for the complicated self-presentation and disclosure needs of those with complex identities or specialized anonymity. Using the lenses of gender, recovery, and performance, our proposed panel explores the tensions that emerge when the richness and complexity of individual personalities and subjectivities run up against design norms that imagine identity as simplistic or one-dimensional. These models of identity not only limit the ways individuals can express their own identities, but also establish norms for other users about what to expect, causing further issues when the inevitable dislocations do occur. We discuss the challenges in translating identity into these systems, and how this is further marred by technical requirements and normative logics that structure cultures and practices of databases, algorithms and computer programming.

Author Keywords

Online identity; social networking sites; Facebook; performance; gender

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

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Introduction

For a drag queen, getting into “face” is an act of putting on the make-up, clothing, and the mindset of the drag identity. Although this is an extreme example of assuming a new form of identity, the concept of a “face” is widely used in both professional [6] and personal circumstances.

This panel brings together researchers who contrast the rich, situated ways identity is enacted in our day-to-day lives with the relative “one-size-fits-all” models used by online social networking sites to discuss how we can move forward to design systems that encompass rich identities

Our discussion starts from the premise that no technology is neutral, where values are always-already embedded into the design of any given technology [3,7]. This is not to say that these values are always intentional or damaging to users, only that technologies reflect the assumptions and norms of the people who design them. One recent example of the divergence between intended and actual use of a social media platform is Facebook’s announcement in October of 2014 to revise their longstanding policies on real name use. This change was the result of a coordinated effort among drag performers and their allies to protest the threat to close Facebook accounts of hundreds of drag performers who were using profile names that did not correspond to state issued ID. In this panel, we seek to open up discussion of how identity norms are coded (figuratively and literally) into the design of online platforms, offering an agenda for a more pluralistic and complex conceptualization of identity.

Many systems have been designed with relatively simplistic models of identity: e.g. a professional identity

(LinkedIn), or a straight-forward social identity (Facebook). These models work acceptably for many straight, cisgender, upper-middle-class white males, but quickly break down for anything more complex. These systems not only make rich performance of identity difficult for the individual actors, but also make it complex for the viewers of such performances. As individuals resort to using complex, coded actions to “fit” into the model [2], this makes it more difficult for others, especially newcomers, to understand and become part of the community.

The assumption that we must be public about our identity in order to maintain integrity [4] can be harmful in other ways. For example, people who are in recovery from addiction or alcoholism often participate in anonymous communities (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous) to achieve abstinence from problem behaviors. In these communities, anonymity is a matter of personal privacy *and* group unity [8]. Anonymity is viewed as a spiritual principle and every meeting includes a reading of the phrase: “anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities” [1]. While being in recovery is frequently at the absolute core of a recovering person's identity, the representation of this aspect in online environments is inherently nuanced and must be treated with respect for the principles of anonymous fellowships [8].

Programmers who work to code identity also encounter a host of challenges within the confines of social media giants’ structures and databases. Coding practices shape how identity ought to be programmed, in particular a desire to make the code simple with as few exceptions as possible. Gender is just one example of an identity category that loses nuance when translated

into social media software. Coding gender as a binary is a common practice yet competing constructions that position gender as a fluid spectrum are increasingly common in modern society. Discussions about alternative gender coding practices and, particularly, Facebook's recent re-coding of gender are met with a great deal of resistance. This is unsurprising considering that non-conforming gender identities, outside of the binary, remain extremely marginalized and subject to violence and other forms of policing [5]. Normative logics that structure the programming of identity categories ought to be interrogated alongside the implications of these programming decisions and subsequent limitations for identity creation online. Beyond this, however, alternative gender coding practices face many other obstacles. These include programmer's desires for 'clean design,' requirements of systems that collect data about gender in binary categories for broader purposes of monetization and surveillance, and the culture and trajectory of social media start-ups that aim to build large networks as quickly as possible, making changes to databases technically difficult.

Panelists

Mark Handel (Moderator) is a researcher at Boeing Research and Technology. Independently, he studies disclosure of safer sex practices among MSM in real-time dating sites and apps, as well as discourse about what constitutes "safer sex" in the age of Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP).

Rena Bivens is a Banting Fellow in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University. With a focus on social media software, gender, and violence, her research unravels how normativity is

produced and contested over time. The software-user relationship is of particular interest. Critical communication theories, science and technology studies, and feminist and queer theory influence her work.

Oliver L. Haimson is a PhD student in Informatics at UC Irvine. His research focuses on how people represent changing and faceted identities on social media. In particular, he studies transgender people's experiences with self-representation and disclosure as they change gender on social networking sites.

Jessa Lingel is a post-doctoral research fellow at Microsoft Research where she works with the Social Media Collective. Her research concentrates on information inequality and technological distributions of power. She has spent the last year conducting a qualitative investigation on the use of social media in Brooklyn's drag community.

Svetlana Yarosh is an Assistant Professor in the Computer Science & Engineering Department at University of Minnesota. Her research falls primarily in the area of Human-Computer Interaction, with a focus on Social Computing. She designs systems that enhance strong-tie social relationships to create stronger families, support individual health and wellbeing, and provide a stage for personal and community growth. Most recently her work has focused on the role of anonymity in online communities for recovery from addiction and alcoholism.

Jed R. Brubaker is a PhD candidate in Informatics at UC Irvine focusing on digital identity, social media, and human centered computing. His interests are

particularly focused on issues of identity and representation and the often invisible distinction between us and our data. His dissertation work focuses on death in the context of social media as a way of exploring the design assumptions and consequences of contemporary digital identity architecture.

Panel Structure and Format

Our goal in this panel is to spark a discussion about what constitutes “identity” and how identity gets encoded in many different ways in online systems. Although a portion of the panel will be dedicated to a traditional question / discussion format, we have planned several exercises to make session more interactive as well as to spark thinking about identity in ways that are immediately relevant.

One initial exercise will partition the audience into different groups based on seemingly simple aspects of their identities that may in fact be more complex. Most of these facets will be lightweight in nature, e.g. researcher vs. practitioner, preference for quantitative or qualitative methods, or whether one prefers zero- or one-based arrays when programming. This allows people to explore how seemingly small things may have a large impact when encoded in a system. In addition, by focusing on aspects of identity that are relatively innocuous, we hope to establish a level of trust between participants to further the discussion about more controversial topics.

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