Be who you want to be: The philosophy of Facebook and the construction of identity

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'Who are you?'
- Sophie's World, Jostein Gaarder

'Be careful what you post on Facebook.'
- Barack Obama

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IDENTITY, or the answer to the question ‘Who are you?’, is something that has occupied the attention of philosophers for hundreds of years. When this question was posed to the fictional Sophie Amundsen in the novel Sophie’s World, her immediate reaction was that she was ‘Sophie Amundsen’. But surely we are more than a name given to us by our parents? Would we be a different person if we had been given a different name? The idea that each person is unique is a tenet of personal identity, while ‘social identity’ refers to our roles and responsibilities. Twenty-first-century philosopher George Herbert Mead argues that the self appears through social behaviour, or that social identity affects the formation of personal identity.*

These philosophical concepts of personal identity and social identity and their influence on each other, and in particular on our sense of selves, are played out on the social networking site Facebook right before our eyes – on our friends’ pages and on our own. Throughout this article I will consider Facebook as an example of communicative identity, as a performance of the self based on already established social roles. We are who we are on Facebook based on what we already know about identity and perception.

Facebook is a particularly interesting case study in relation to personal identity on the Internet because, unlike other social networking sites such as LiveJournal and to a lesser degree MySpace, people use their real names on Facebook and attempt to represent who they really are. As Lev Grossman writes:

[Facebook users] declare their sex, age, whereabouts, romantic status and institutional affiliations. Identity is not a performance or a toy on Facebook; it is a fixed and orderly fact. Nobody does anything secretly: a news feed constantly updates your friends on your activities. On Facebook, everybody knows you’re a dog.5

When Grossman jokes that on Facebook everybody knows you’re a dog, he is referring to the iconic cartoon printed in The New Yorker in 1993 where, in reference to the anonymity of cyberspace, two dogs sit in front of a computer screen with the caption ‘On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog’. In 2007 Kimberly Christopherson examined this idea in relation to social identity and found that the Internet is a unique social context in which the expression of social behaviours can be analysed.6 A decreasing level of anonymity brought about through social networking has led to the adoption of different strategies depending on the individual’s goal for social interaction. Communication via Facebook is changing the face of social communication on an interpersonal level.

Kim Moldofsky of the Hormone-Colored Days blog writes that she has tried to
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keep her online and offline identities separate yet struggles with this neat division on Facebook because she is representing her 'real' self on Facebook. 7 Moldofsky's 'Facebook philosophy' centres on maintaining control of a fluid online identity. On Facebook we take our own name and seem to be more willing to part with our personal information than were previous net generations. We select our social identity from the series of group memberships available.

Social identity [is the part of] personal identity -- our sense of who we are -- that comes from our group memberships and the social categories to which we belong: our age, sex, race, religion, profession, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, region, social class, ideological persuasion, political affiliation, mental health status, etc. 8

Our answers to these questions, several of which can form a Facebook profile, betray the fact that we know that in order to be recognised as part of these groups we must possess certain common characteristics, and further that we can only be defined in these ways through social interaction. Maybe Sophie was right -- was I a different me when I went by the name Tieka (an anagram of my own name Katie) on IRC and ICQ in the 1990s and all I had to answer was ASL (age, sex, location)? In the absence of clearly demarcated networks this was an entirely different projection of identity.

I have been on Facebook for about three years and I currently have 243 friends. I friend, I unfriend and I've been friended and unfriended. I'll admit I have no idea who many of my friends are -- some I consider strangers, others 'Facebook
friends’ I have come to know through their profiles, status updates, tagged photos and choice of quizzes. Although I really enjoy my Facebook friends and feel a strong connection and sense of community with many of them, most of the time these people are little more than objects of entertainment to me. Many are involved in the performance of gender and social identity, a performance I also participate in as I carve out an online identity based on how, and as whom, I want to be perceived in both the online and offline world.

George Herbert Mead argued that the self is established through communication. He saw the individual as a product of society, of social interaction. For Mead, we are only able to conceive of ourselves in relation to other people. In the first instance we are an object to others, and then when we take the perspective of other people through language we become an object to ourselves. Although Mead was theorising about these issues during the 1920s, his perspectives have taken on new currency in the Facebook era, according to Mark Van Hollebeke.

On Facebook our profiles are objects to our friends, and then through the language of Facebook – profile pictures, status updates, quizzes, relationship statuses and photos – we take the perspective of others to communicate ourselves to the network. Drawing on the work of Mead, Van Hollebeke argues that ‘the individual projects traits based on what others in society think they are’ on their Facebook page. Mead was particularly interested in selfhood as an extension of being an object to others, and, by extension, the self.

‘Me’ and ‘I’ are crucial in Mead’s understanding of social interaction and communicative identity. For Mead ‘me’ referred to the social self while ‘I’ is the response to ‘me’. The self is intertwined with social existence. When Facebook users communicate ‘what’s on [their] mind’, or update their status, they are offering a representation of the self or a ‘me’ based on socialisation they have already experienced. For example, when one friend posts about cricket on Boxing Day or another laments the stares of older mothers when she drops her children off at school wearing short shorts, they have selected an identity that they want to project. On Facebook, identity is a choice, an object we choose to project. When ‘I’ maintain my Facebook page I select a ‘me’ to project to the world, and myself. My personal identity is selected from a choice of social identities.

Social existence and communicative identity for Mead is a three-step process that I wish to outline using the example of profile pictures on Facebook.

Firstly, others become aware of an individual’s intentions through their actions or a gesture. A profile picture is one of the first steps in the selection of an identity on Facebook, particularly as before Facebook people generally adopted avatars or an image that represented a person’s online identity rather than an actual picture of the person. For example, on my LiveJournal I use an animation of a stick figure dancing. As Facebook has crossed over into the educational arena, with many universities using Facebook to communicate with students, tertiary institutions are informing students about how to manage their online identities:

Use your proper name and try to occasionally use a profile picture of your face! (photos of your pet, baby or favourite sunset frustrate people who are trying to track you down)

In the second step, communication takes place because the user selecting their profile picture has knowledge of how others in the network will respond, even if this is only on an unconscious level. When users select a profile picture of themselves on their wedding day or with their partner, or with a group of people at a party or in a nightclub, they are communicating something significant. This act of choosing a profile picture demonstrates the way ‘I’ chooses a ‘me’. The woman choosing a picture of herself on her wedding day takes the perspectives of other people, knowing they will interpret her as a wife or perhaps a ‘beautiful bride’, which then invites all sorts of other social meanings.

Finally, this picture means something to the individual who is negotiating their personal identity among the available social identities. Identity as it emerges in the mind of an individual cannot be separated from social processes and interactions. Discussing Mead’s work, George Cronk concluded:

Mind, then, is a form of participation in an interpersonal (that is, social) process; it is the result of taking the attitudes of others toward one’s own gestures (or conduct in general). Mind, in brief, is the use of significant symbols.

The self emerges through perception, meaning and language. The wedding-day photo is a symbolic act of communication. While as a gesture this choice may appear non-significant, symbolically it might communicate something about the woman’s identity, and her perceived success in life, since women experience ongoing social pressure to be married.

My Facebook friends often seem like caricatures of stereotypes of typical types of
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- Tara Brabazon

The drip-drip-drip of micronews about 'friends' on Facebook is corroding our capacity to determine the important, relevant and significant. I do not need to know that Fiona is going out to get plastered on Friday night. I do not need to know that Peter snogged a woman in Komedia on Saturday. This endless washing in the banal corrodes our capacity to differentiate between the war on terrorism and the selection of hair care products, or the military build up in the Middle East and shoe shopping.15

The idea that Facebook users can no longer differentiate between representation and reality has led to calls for people to go offline. Communication overload has inspired a teen movement of 'switching off':

You're getting a feed of everything everyone is doing and saying. You're literally watching the social landscape on the screen, and if you're obsessed with your position in that landscape, it's very hard to look away.16

While my first reaction to these calls to switch off Facebook to discover who your real friends are is that they are reactionary and display a fear of new technology, they do resonate. Thanks to Facebook I now know how everyone turned out — those ex-boyfriends I never wanted to see again but kind of wondered about in an 'I'm so much better off without you way' and those girls I thought would be my best friends forever. But I don't really know: I only know how they want the world to think they turned out and how that in turn has impacted on their formation of a personal identity. Facebook is an extension of language, and as we participate in it, it...
participates in the ‘dynamic, ongoing social process’ of personal and social identity as a communicative creation.

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Endnotes

9. IRC (Internet Relay Chat) and the ICQ messaging service were popular in the 1990s and early 2000s.
11. Ibid.
17. Cronk, op. cit.