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M/C Journal, Vol. 14, No. 5 (2011) - 'zone'[Home](#) > [Vol. 14, No. 5 \(2011\)](#) > [Adam Ruch, Steve Collins](#)**Zoning Laws: Facebook and Google+**[Adam Ruch, Steve Collins](#) | [Volume 14](#) | [Issue 5](#) | [October 2011](#) | ['zone'](#)

As the single most successful social-networking Website to date, Facebook has caused a shift in both practice and perception of online socialisation, and its relationship to the offline world. While not the first online social networking service, Facebook's user base dwarfs its nearest competitors. Mark Zuckerberg's creation boasts more than 750 million users (Facebook). The currently ailing MySpace claimed a ceiling of 100 million users in 2006 (Cashmore). Further, the accuracy of this number has been contested due to a high proportion of fake or inactive accounts.

Facebook by contrast, claims 50% of its user base logs in at least once a day (Facebook). The popular and mainstream uptake of Facebook has shifted social use of the Internet from various and fragmented niche groups towards a common hub or portal around which much everyday Internet use is centred. The implications are many, but this paper will focus on the progress what Mimi Marinucci terms the "Facebook effect" (70) and the evolution of lists as a filtering mechanism representing one's social zones within Facebook. This is in part inspired by the launch of Google's new social networking service Google+ which includes "circles" as a fundamental design feature for sorting contacts. Circles are an acknowledgement of the shortcomings of a single, unified friends list that defines the Facebook experience. These lists and circles are both manifestations of the same essential concept: our social lives are, in fact, divided into various zones not defined by an online/offline dichotomy, by fantasy role-play, deviant sexual practices, or other marginal or minority interests. What the lists and circles demonstrate is that even very common, mainstream people occupy different roles in everyday life, and that to be effective social tools, social networking sites must grant users control over their various identities and over who knows what about them. Even so, the very nature of computer-based social tools lead to problematic definitions of identities and relationships using discreet terms, in contrast to more fluid, performative constructions of an individual and their relations to others.

Building the Monolith

In 1995, Sherry Turkle wrote that "the Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life" (180). Turkle describes the various deliberate acts of personnae creation possible online in contrast to earlier constraints placed upon the

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“cycling through different identities” (179). In the past, Turkle argues, “lifelong involvement with families and communities kept such cycling through under fairly stringent control” (180). In effect, Turkle was documenting the proliferation of identity games early adopters of Internet technologies played through various means. Much of what Turkle focused on were MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) and MOOs (MUD Object Oriented), explicit play-spaces that encouraged identity-play of various kinds. Her contemporary Howard Rheingold focused on what may be described as the more “true to life” communities of the WELL (Whole Earth `Lectronic Link) (1–38). In particular, Rheingold explored a community established around the shared experience of parenting, especially of young children. While that community was not explicitly built on the notion of role-play, the parental identity was an important quality of community members.

Unlike contemporary social media networks, these early communities were built on discreet platforms. MUDs, MOOs, Bulletin Board Systems, UseNet Groups and other early Internet communication platforms were generally hosted independently of one another, and even had to be dialled into via modem separately in some cases (such as the WELL). The Internet was a truly disparate entity in 1995. The discreetness of each community supported the cordoning off of individual roles or identities between them. Thus, an individual could quite easily be “Pete” a member of the parental WELL group and “Gorak the Destroyer,” a role-player on a fantasy MUD without the two roles ever being associated with each other. As Turkle points out, even within each MUD ample opportunity existed to play multiple characters (183–192). With only a screen name and associated description to identify an individual within the MUD environment, nothing technical existed to connect one player’s multiple identities, even within the *same* community.

As the Internet has matured, however, the tendency has been shifting towards monolithic hubs, a notion of collecting all of “the Internet” together. From a purely technical and operational perspective, this has led to the emergence of the ISP (Internet service provider). Users can make a connection to one point, and then be connected to everything “on the Net” instead of individually dialling into servers and services one at a time as was the case in the early 1980s with companies such as Prodigy, the Source, CompuServe, and America On-Line (AOL). The early information service providers were largely walled gardens. A CompuServe user could only access information on the CompuServe network. Eventually the Internet became the network of choice and services migrated to it. Standards such as HTTP for Web page delivery and SMTP for email became established and dominate the Internet today. Technically, this has made the Internet much easier to use. The services that have developed on this more rationalised and unified platform have also tended toward monolithic, centralised architectures, despite the Internet’s apparent fundamental lack of a hierarchy.

As the Internet replaced the closed networks, the wider Web of HTTP pages, forums, mailing lists and other forms of Internet communication and community thrived. Perhaps they required slightly more technological savvy than the carefully designed experience of walled-garden ISPs such as AOL, but these fora and IRC (Internet Relay Chat) rooms still provided the discreet

environments within which to role-play. An individual could hold dozens of login names to as many different communities. These various niches could be simply hobby sites and forums where a user would deploy their identity as model train enthusiast, musician, or pet owner. They could also be explicitly about role-play, continuing the tradition of MUDs and MOOs into the new millennium. Pseudo- and polynymity were still very much part of the Internet experience. Even into the early parts of the so-called Web 2.0 explosion of more interactive Websites which allowed for easier dialog between site owner and viewer, a given identity would be very much tied to a single site, blog or even individual comments. There was no "single sign on" to link my thread from a music forum to the comments I made on a videogame blog to my aquarium photos at an image gallery site. Today, Facebook and Google, among others, seek to change all that.

The Facebook Effect

Working from a psychological background Turkle explored the multiplicity of online identities as a valuable learning, even therapeutic, experience. She assessed the experiences of individuals who were coming to terms with aspects of their own personalities, from simple shyness to exploring their sexuality. In "You Can't Front on Facebook," Mimi Marinucci summarizes an analysis of online behaviour by another psychologist, John Suler (67-70). Suler observed an "online disinhibition effect" characterised by users' tendency to express themselves more openly online than offline (321). Awareness of this effect was drawn (no pun intended) into popular culture by cartoonist Mike Krauhlik's protagonist [John Gabriel](#).

Although Krauhlik's summation is straight to the point, Suler offers a more considered explanation. There are six general reasons for the online disinhibition effect: being anonymous, being invisible, the communications being out of sync, the strange sensation that a virtual interlocutor is all in the mind of the user, the general sense that the online world simply is not real and the minimisation of status and authority (321-325). Of the six, the notion of anonymity is most problematic, as briefly explored above in the case of AOL. The role of pseudonymity has been explored in more detail in Ruch, and will be considered with regard to Facebook and Google+ below.

The Facebook effect, Marinucci argues, mitigates all six of these issues. Though Marinucci explains the mitigation of each factor individually, her final conclusion is the most compelling reason: "Facebook often facilitates what is best described as an integration of identities, and this integration of identities in turn functions as something of an inhibiting factor" (73). Ruch identifies this phenomenon as the "aggregation of identities" (219). Similarly, Brady Robards observes that "social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook collapse the entire array of social relationships into just one category, that of 'Friend'" (20).

Unlike earlier community sites, Ruch notes "Facebook rejects both the mythical anonymity of the Internet, but also the actual pseudo- or polynonymous potential of the technologies" (219). Essentially, Facebook works to bring the offline social world online, along with all the conventional baggage that accompanies the individual's real-world social life. Facebook, and now Google+, present a hard,

dichotomous approach to online identity: anonymous and authentic. Their socially networked individual is the “real” one, using a person’s given name, and bringing all (or as many as the sites can capture) their contacts from the offline world into the online one, regardless of context.

The Facebook experience is one of “friending” everyone one has any social contact with into one homogeneous group. Not only is Facebook avoiding the multiple online identities that interested Turkle, but it is disregarding any multiplicity of identity anywhere, including any online/offline split. David Kirkpatrick reports Mark Zuckerberg’s rejection of this construction of identity is explained by his belief that “You have one identity ... having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity” (199).

Arguably, Zuckerberg’s calls for accountability through identity continue a perennial concern for anonymity online fuelled by [“on the Internet no one knows you’re a dog”](#) style moral panics. Over two decades ago Lindsay Van Gelder recounted the now infamous case of “Joan and Alex” (533) and Julian Dibbell recounted “a rape in cyberspace” (11). More recent anxieties concern the hacking escapades of Anonymous and LulzSec. Zuckerberg’s approach has been criticised by Christopher Poole, the founder of 4Chan—a bastion of Internet anonymity. During his keynote presentation at South by SouthWest 2011 Poole argued that Zuckerberg “equates anonymity with a lack of authenticity, almost a cowardice.” Yet in spite of these objections, Facebook has mainstream appeal. From a social constructivist perspective, this approach to identity would be satisfying the (perceived?) need for a mainstream, context-free, general social space online to cater for the hundreds of millions of people who now use the Internet. There is no specific, pre-defined reason to join Facebook in the way there is a particular reason to join a heavy metal music message board. Facebook is catering to the need to bring “real” social life online generally, with “real” in this case meaning “offline and pre-existing.” Very real risks of missing “real life” social events (engagements, new babies, party invitations etc) that were shared primarily via Facebook became salient to large groups of individuals not consciously concerned with some particular facet of identity performance.

The commercial imperatives towards monolithic Internet and identity are obvious. Given that both Facebook and Google+ are in the business of facilitating the sale of advertising, their core business value is the demographic information they can sell to various companies for target advertising. Knowing a user’s individual identity and tastes is extremely important to those in the business of selling consumers what they currently want as well as predicting their future desires. The problem with this is the dawning realisation that even for the average person, role-playing is part of everyday life. We simply aren’t the same person in all contexts. None of the roles we play need to be particularly scandalous for this to be true, but we have different comfort zones with people that are fuelled by context. Suler proposes and Marinucci confirms that inhibition may be just as much part of our authentic self as the uninhibited expression experienced in more anonymous circumstances. Further, different contexts will inform what we inhibit and what we express. It is not as though there is a simple binary between two different groups and two different personal characteristics to oscillate between. The inhibited personae one occupies at one’s grandmother’s home is a

different inhibited self one plays at a job interview or in a heated discussion with faculty members at a university. One is politeness, the second professionalism, the third scholarly—yet they all restrain the individual in different ways.

The Importance of Control over Circles

Google+ is Google's latest foray into the social networking arena. Its previous ventures Orkut and Google Buzz did not fare well, both were variously marred by legal issues concerning privacy, security, SPAM and hate groups. Buzz in particular fell afoul of associating Google accounts with users' real life identities, and (as noted earlier), all the baggage that comes with it. "One user blogged about how Buzz automatically added her abusive ex-boyfriend as a follower and exposed her communications with a current partner to him. Other bloggers commented that repressive governments in countries such as China or Iran could use Buzz to expose dissidents" (Novak). Google+ takes a different approach to its predecessors and its main rival, Facebook.

Facebook allows for the organisation of "friends" into lists. Individuals can span more than one list. This is an exercise analogous to what Erving Goffman refers to as "audience segregation" (139). According to the site's own statistics the average Facebook user has 130 friends, we anticipate it would be time-consuming to organise one's friends according to real life social contexts. Yet without such organisation, Facebook overlooks the social structures and concomitant behaviours inherent in everyday life. Even broad groups offer little assistance. For example, an academic's "Work People" list may include the Head of Department as well as numerous other lecturers with whom a workspace is shared. There are things one might share with immediate colleagues that should not be shared with the Head of Department. As Goffman states, "when audience segregation fails and an outsider happens upon a performance that was not meant for him, difficult problems in impression management arise" (139). By homogenising "friends" and social contexts users are either inhibited or run the risk of some future awkward encounters.

Google+ utilises "circles" as its method for organising contacts. The graphical user interface is intuitive, facilitated by an easy drag and drop function. Use of "circles" already exists in the vocabulary used to describe our social structures. "List" by contrast reduces the subject matter to simple data. The utility of Facebook's friends lists is hindered by usability issues—an unintuitive and convoluted process that was added to Facebook well after its launch, perhaps a reaction to privacy concerns rather than a genuine attempt to emulate social organisation. For a cogent breakdown of these technical and design problems see Augusto Sellhorn. Organising friends into lists is a *function* offered by Facebook, but Google+ takes a different approach: organising friends in circles is a central feature; the whole experience is centred around attempting to mirror the social relations of real life. Google's promotional video explains the centrality of emulating "real life relationships" (Google). Effectively, Facebook and Google+ have adopted two different systemic approaches to dealing with the same issue. Facebook places the burden of organising a homogeneous mass of "friends" into lists on the user as an afterthought of connecting with another user. In contrast, Google+ builds organisation into the act of connecting.

Whilst Google+'s approach is more intuitive and designed to facilitate social networking that more accurately reflects how real life social relationships are structured, it suffers from forcing direct correlation between an account and the account holder. That is, use of Google+ mandates bringing online the offline. Google+ operates a real names policy and on the weekend of 23 July 2011 suspended a number of accounts for violation of Google's Community Standards. A suspension notice posted by Violet Blue reads: "After reviewing your profile, we determined the name you provided violates our Community Standards." Open Source technologist Kिरिली Robert polled 119 Google+ users about their experiences with the real names policy. The results posted to her on blog reveal that users desire pseudonymity, many for reasons of privacy and/or safety rather than the lack of integrity thought by Zuckerberg. boyd argues that Google's real names policy is an abuse of power and poses danger to those users employing "nicks" for reasons including being a government employment or the victim of stalking, rape or domestic abuse. A comprehensive list of those at risk has been posted to the Geek Feminism Wiki (ironically, the Wiki utilises "Connect", Facebook's attempt at a single sign on solution for the Web that connects users' movements with their Facebook profile). Facebook has a culture of real names stemming from its early adopters drawn from trusted communities, and this culture became a norm for that service (boyd). But as boyd also points out, "[r]eal names are by no means universal on Facebook." Google+ demands real names, a demand justified by rhetoric of designing a social networking system that is more like real life. "Real", in this case, is represented by one's given name—irrespective of the authenticity of one's pseudonym or the complications and dangers of using one's given name.

Conclusion

There is a multiplicity of issues concerning social networks and identities, privacy and safety. This paper has outlined the challenges involved in moving real life to the online environment and the contests in trying to designate zones of social context. Where some earlier research into the social Internet has had a positive (even utopian) feel, the contemporary Internet is increasingly influenced by powerful and competing corporations. As a result, the experience of the Internet is not necessarily as flexible as Turkle or Rheingold might have envisioned. Rather than conducting identity experimentation or exercising multiple personae, we are increasingly obligated to perform identity as it is defined by the monolithic service providers such as Facebook and Google+. This is not purely an indictment of Facebook or Google's corporate drive, though they are obviously implicated, but has as much to do with the new social practice of "being online." So, while there are myriad benefits to participating in this new social context, as Poole noted, the "cost of failure is really high when you're contributing as yourself." Areas for further exploration include the implications of Facebook positioning itself as a general-purpose user authentication tool whereby users can log into a wide array of Websites using their Facebook credentials. If Google were to take a similar action the implications would be even more convoluted, given the range of other services Google offers, from GMail to the Google Checkout payment service. While the monolithic centralisation of these services

will have obvious benefits, there will be many more subtle problems which must be addressed.

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