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Why and How Online Sociability Became Part and Parcel of Teenage Life

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Introduction

During the last few years, personal and social media forms have blossomed online, attracting ever more users. Newsgroups, mailing lists, and MUDS (multi-user dungeons) in the 1980s and early 1990s were populated by a narrow segment of technologically interested Internet users. But email, instant messaging, blogs, photo- and video-sharing, and social network sites (SNSs) have become mainstream phenomena. In this chapter, (inter)personal tools for communication are labeled "personal media" to account for media forms that facilitate mediated interpersonal communication and personalized expressions (as a contrast to mass media)[1] (see also Lüders, 2008). The success of online personal media seems to reflect a human willingness to embrace tools that support social interaction between offline meetings (just as we have previously embraced letters and telephones) (see Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005). Whereas diaries, letters, telephones, and snapshot photography are also examples of personal media, the focus here is on online personal media, as their networked qualities suggest important changes if compared to the historical significance of the analogue antecedents. These changes and the growing importance of online sociability, particularly among young users (as suggested by e.g. Henderson & Gilding, 2004; Lenhart et al., 2007; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Ofcom, 2008; Storsul et al., 2008; Kim & Yun, 2007), will be addressed in this chapter. Two questions will be attended to. First, *how should we understand the personal and social significance of online sociability?* This question reflects the focus of a considerable amount of research and will also suggest reasons for the extraordinary growth in use of personal media. Second, *having an online presence arguably challenges privacy issues, yet how should we appropriately assess the correlative challenges and risks with regard to privacy?*

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The Escalation of Online Sociability

Extensive research has been conducted on the Internet as a social space and suggests why online personal forms of communication have become so popular. In short, personal media are perceived as meaningful by users, because they resonate with fundamental human desires concerning self-expression, socializing, play, and being creative. Common research questions have accordingly focused on the consequences of online practices for identity-related issues, the social relationships of individual users, as well as the interdependence of online and offline spaces.

In this section, research and theory concerning personal media as sites for self-expressions, socializing, and creative play will be discussed. A range of scholarly perspectives will be introduced, including sociology, media and communication research, psychology, and human–computer interaction (HCI). I also include analysis and interview-quotes from a three-year study of personal media usage among young Norwegians to illustrate and emphasize interesting aspects (Lüders, 2007). The informants were promised anonymity, and their names have accordingly been changed.

Self-performance and socializing

As the following pages will show, personal media have undoubtedly become part and parcel of everyday teenage life. Being online is basically one of several ways of being in the world. Online diaries, photosharing services, and SNSs situate the individual in the centre of her or his network (boyd & Ellison, 2007), and users play the role as themselves, maintaining (and strengthening) existing social ties (boyd, 2006; boyd, 2007; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Choi, 2006; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kim & Yun, 2007; Liu, 2007). According to a PEW study, 91 percent of US teens who use SNSs do so to connect with friends (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). However, according to the same study, 49 percent of social network users said that they used the networks also to make new friends. Moreover, some SNSs may be more oriented towards maintaining existing relations than other types of personal media. For example, Lüders (2009) portrays how the young Norwegian bloggers interviewed extended their personal social networks and strengthened social ties thanks to their extensive online presence. New friends were eventually included into their closer social circles, particularly after face-to-face meetings (Lüders, 2009). Dwyer and colleagues (2007) similarly found that MySpace users were significantly more likely to meet new people than Facebook users. MySpace users further reported a more extensive usage of additional personal media to strengthen new online relationships.

Whether friendships have been initiated offline or online, sociability is a keyword for understanding the attraction of personal media. Sociability as a concept characteristic of the significance of social interaction for societies was introduced by Georg Simmel (Simmel & Wolff, 1964). To Simmel, sociability is a particular

play-form of association, in which people take part in interaction free of any disturbing material accent. Sociability characterizes interaction for its own sake and has no objective purpose with regard to the content of the interaction taking place. The main purpose is simply being together and acknowledging the other in one's life. Just as playful interaction is important in people's offline lives, sharing a playful togetherness has emerged as an appealing aspects of online spaces (see e.g. Baym, 1995; boyd, 2007; Lüders, 2009). Judith Donath (2004) applies the concept of "sociable media" to account for both old and new forms of media that enhance communication and the formation of social ties among people.

The application of Simmel's concept of sociability to online forms of communication illustrates that research and theory-building concerning online interactions and presentations of selves have not been developed from scratch. Rather, existing knowledge of self-performances and the significance of socializing have greatly inspired attempts to analyze and discuss their online counterparts. One of the most cited and relevant perspectives has been Erving Goffman's ([1959] 1990) work on context-dependent, face-to-face performances. According to Goffman, we take on specific characters to please our current audience: we adapt to social situations and perform according to common expectations of the roles we embody (Goffman, [1959] 1990). These expectations differ according to interactional contexts; e.g. a social, career-minded, family person embodies different roles in front of her/his children, spouse, friends, and colleagues. In everyday social situations we are consequently deliberately conscious of matching our presentations of self to expectations of the roles we embody.

Goffman's ideas have been revised to fit both electronically mass mediated forms of interaction (Meyrowitz, 1986) and mediated forms of interpersonal interaction (e.g. boyd, 2007; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Kendall, 2002; Markham, 1998; Papacharissi, 2002; Sveningsson Elm, 2007, 2009). In face-to-face performances, expressions given off (e.g. drifting eyes, blushing cheeks, or other presumably unintentional cues) are difficult to control. Studies on mediated forms of communication have found that the physical absence of others makes users feel more in control with their mediated self (e.g. Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Henderson & Gilding, 2004; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Lüders, 2009; Markham, 1998; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002), or, in Goffmanian terms, users have more control of expressions given off (Goffman, [1959] 1990). Possibilities for impression management are hence perceived as better (although far from total) in mediated interactions. In other words, there are unique qualities with mediated forms of communication, and these qualities affect how individual users choose and manage to present themselves. Mediated communication is sometimes characterized by candidness as a consequence of users having more time to create expressions, and greater control over self-representations. However, a multitude of self-presentational strategies are common. Some users create profiles which accurately describe their personality; others present themselves with deliberately false but humorous content (see also Livingstone, 2008). As 15-year-old Kristine says: "My profile just contains a lot of crap. Like claiming that I'm a widow

and that I work with sewage. I don't pretend to be serious." This is far from the identity-experimenting role-playing typically often emphasized in studies conducted on computer-mediated forms of communication in the 1990s (Jones, 1997; Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1997). That is, whereas Sherry Turkle (1997, p. 177) proposed that, "[w]hen we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass," Kristine of course does not reconstruct her self as a widowed sewage-worker. Rather, her profile actions should be regarded as play and superficial fun.

In online social spaces, users are not merely present on the basis of their own expressions. Rather, postings by other people on one's own profile will affect the perceptions that visitors get of the target profile maker. In a study of the role of friends' appearance on Facebook, Joseph B. Walther and colleagues (2008) found that the presence of physically attractive friends on the Facebook wall had a significant effect on perceptions of the physical attractiveness of the profile's owner, and, intriguingly, "things that others say about a target may be more compelling than things an individual says about his- or herself. It has more warrant because it is not as controllable by the target, that is, it is more costly to fake" (Walther et al., 2008, p. 33). Given that users commonly experience online spaces to be intertwined with offline spaces, friends-conveyed person-characteristics such as those uncovered in the aforementioned study may potentially have considerable consequences for how users are perceived by friends and contacts overall. Interestingly, the presence of others in one's own online life is also less ephemeral and more visible than the presence of others in one's own offline life. For example, unless purposely deleted, comments and photos that friends post on each others' walls stay there for all to see, whereas an oral compliment is bound to the place and time of the utterance.

Studies of self-performance and socialization are commonly situated within a context emphasizing the structures and features of network societies, arguing that modern Western societies have experienced the emergence of limited-purpose, loose relationships, more fluid, yet meaningful social networks (Benkler, 2006, p. 357). Instead of depending on locally embedded, thick, and stable relations (such as indicated by Tönnies' (1955) concept of *Gemeinschaft*), individuals in network societies are "more dependent on their own combination of strong and weak ties" (Benkler, 2006, p. 362); people navigate complex networks according to needs (Benkler, 2006, p. 362; Rheingold, 2002) and purposes of socialization, collaboration, and sense of belonging (Wellman, 2002). Interesting questions arise, such as those proposed by Donath (2007): Will this transform society by facilitating trustworthy individualized social networks of a scale and complexity never seen before? This raises further questions, particularly with regard to social competence. Users already employ digital personal media to assist processes of socializing, and as mediated forms of communication interact with offline spaces of socialization, social competence appears to include the ability to juggle between forms of mediated and immediate interaction. Important social situations are found in mediated as well as immediate spaces, and within certain population groups where mediated

participation is especially high, choosing not to, or not being allowed to, participate in mediated spaces could be as unfortunate as not being part of the clique.

Nevertheless, few studies have been conducted on the characteristics of the social competence required from users in online spaces. Social competence is described within psychological research and clinical studies as the ability and capacity to interact rewardingly with others, and the capacity to adapt to social contexts and demands (Cavell, 1990; Spence, 2003). The context in these discussions is limited to face-to-face situations, accentuating the importance of verbal as well as non-verbal responses that influence the impression we make upon others during social interactions: facial expressions, posture, gestures, physical distance, tone of voice, and clarity of speech (Spence, 2003, p. 84). When social life is situated within mediated spaces, communication must be adapted to the obvious fact that the body is not fully present. Yet, as in face-to-face interactions, the content and the form of communicated messages are vital, as well as knowing the rules of conduct and digital play. Such knowledge can probably only be fully acquired through actual experience. With reference to Michael Polanyi's (1958) work on personal knowledge, the tacit element of social competence suggests that we assimilate social knowledge by being part of specific societal groups: social competence is arguably a type of knowledge with limited capability for transfer. Rather social knowledge develops in actual interactions with others (online or offline) to become part of our background knowledge. This would suggest that participation in online social spaces is important for youth to develop a relevant and comprehensive social competence. It also suggests that in order to investigate the character of social competence in online spaces, researchers need to take an active part in those spaces. Examining online social competence is particularly important as online and offline social venues are intertwined, and as interactions in online spaces hence have real-life consequences.

Considering the particular importance of peer feedback and reciprocity for adolescents (boyd, 2007), and the excellent opportunities for supporting and visualizing peer processes online, the popularity of sites such as MySpace, Flickr, and LiveJournal is reasonable. In the next section, creative play is discussed as an important (though under-researched) aspect of personal media. Contemporary network-mediated subjects are made up of more than their textual footpaths. Utilizing creative desires to construct interesting multimodal presences generates a potentially appealing presence towards others (as well as towards oneself). Social competence in online spaces is consequently connected to mundane forms of creativity.

Creative play

In 2005, PEW reported that 57 percent of American online teens create content for the Internet in a variety of ways, such as creating blogs and webpages; sharing original content such as artwork, photos, stories, or videos; or remixing content found online into a new creation (Lenhart & Madden, 2005, p. i). Today, numbers are likely to be significantly higher, both because of the growth in use

of social network sites, and because these sites typically integrate different creative practices into one service. Jean Burgess (2007) suggests the term vernacular creativity to account for the ordinary, everyday, informal (not institutionally learned), and common forms of creativity at play when people create and share expressions and stories (whether online or offline). The opportunity to share vernacular creative acts online appears to strengthen the motivation users have for creating content (Cohen, 2005). In order to fully understand use of personal media and the concomitant pleasures, pains, and gains of digital play, additional research attention to the creative aspects involved should be included.

Creativity has been defined and comprehended in various ways (for discussions, see e.g. Pope, 2005; Weiner, 2000). Whereas creativity used to be conceptualized as a divine ability, it is now commonly understood as part of what constitutes human beings. Moreover, creativity is not necessarily (or even ever) an isolated phenomenon:

> "being creative" is, at least potentially, the natural and normal state of anyone healthy in a sane and stimulating community and . . . realising that potential is as much a matter of collaboration and "co-creation" as of splendid or miserable isolation. (Pope, 2005, p. xvi)

Creativity as natural, normal, and collaborative is more apparent than ever. Technologies which a few years ago would appear at least as semi-professional have now become affordable and manageable for huge user-groups, making it easier to create and share expressions with others. The explosion in content created and shared by amateurs has been so extensive that it is perceived as fundamentally changing the media industry (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Deuze, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Uricchio, 2004). And whereas critical voices are also present, arguing that the growth in amateur content represents the demise of the public sphere (Keen, 2007), Tim Berners-Lee's (1999) idea of intercreativity reflects the reality in a more appealing and perhaps accurate way:

> not just the ability to choose, but also the ability to create. . . . We should be able not only to interact with other people, but to create with other people. *Intercreativity* is the process of making things or solving problems together. (Berners-Lee, 1999, p. 183)

Berners-Lee's optimistic depiction of participation, co-operation, and co-creation forecasts the Web 2.0 discourse exploding around 2005. Originally popularized by Tim O'Reilly (2005), the term "Web 2.0" describes a turning point, with the web emerging as a platform, flexible programming models (XML, RSS, Ajax), and, most famously, web services embracing "collective intelligence," "wisdom of crowds," user-participation, and creation.

Returning to a discussion of personal media, opportunities for participants to create and share expressions should be included in order to comprehensively

explain their growth. It is likely that SNSs have blossomed partly because they support and facilitate creative play. Besides, creative play constitutes a basis for socializing, and creative efforts by friends and contacts are valued highly by users of personal media (Lüders, 2007, p. 164). Social and creative play resonates with the notion of *homo ludens*, introduced by Johan Huizinga ([1938] 1963) and often cited in gaming literature (e.g. Rodriguez, 2006). To Huizinga play is "free," i.e. play has no other motive than the experience it affords. We play because it is fun, and not because we want to fulfill a practical task. A *homo ludens* approach to personal media is an interesting one, although thus far not cited within the literature on online sociability. A focus on play does not imply that we cannot learn from creative play, only that learning is not the explicit aim. Also recall how sociability is comprehended as a particular play-form of association with no objective purpose, emphasizing how play and sociability are (of course) deeply entangled.

The playful character of personal-media actions and the idea of vernacular creativity may also explain why youth do not necessarily regard their online actions as increasing their technical, writing, and creative skills. PEW found that even though teens are embedded in a technology-rich world, they do not regard textual online communication as proper writing (Lenhart et al., 2008). Moreover, young people pose tough criteria for evaluating content as creatively valuable (Lüders, 2007). Yet, whereas youth do not always think of their own writing as "writing" or their photographs as creatively interesting, these informal and out-of-school playful actions may have significance, as users would be expected to develop a sense of technical competence and multimodal literacy. Some of the adolescents I have followed indeed have creative ambitions as such, and in talking to these young content creators, the importance of feedback from online peers for developing multimodal competences is explicitly stated: Camilla (aged 17) emphasizes the importance of receiving comments and learning what visitors to her DeviantArt profile think of her drawings and photos, and 15-year-old Marte comments, "constructive criticism helps me improve my skills" (Lüders, 2007, p. 165).

Undoubtedly, those with creative ambitions find a multitude of self-development opportunities online, but it is not clear what significance, if any, playful social network actions have. This is an interesting area for future research given the societal priority given to discussions about digital competence and digital (access and production) divides. Complicating matters further, creating and sharing (often private) content online is, as already mentioned, potentially connected to privacy hazards, suggesting that users must develop a competence to live in publicly available spaces without unnecessarily compromising personal privacy.

Young, Dim, and Vulnerable?

The previous sections demonstrate why personal media have been embraced by young people worldwide. This development has been met by warnings about the

dangers faced by users exposing their private life online (for an overview of common concerns, see Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). Nevertheless US teenagers seem to take public concern about privacy seriously: among the 55 percent of online teens with social network profiles, 66 percent say that their profile is not visible to all Internet users, and among those whose profiles can be accessed by anyone, 46 percent report posting fake information to protect themselves (or to be playful and silly) (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). The need to protect the private sphere is regarded as important across cultures, yet how to ensure privacy may vary (Newell, 1998; Woo, 2006). There may for example be cultural differences as to whether citizens trust the state to protect them (citizens have a *right* to privacy) or whether they believe that only the individual can protect her/his privacy. An interesting question consequently arises: Do these high statistics in the US reflect the latter belief?

Whether privacy is regarded as a right or an individual responsibility, apprehension arises because network technologies elevate interactions and personal expressions from private lives into sometimes publicly available spaces. This creates complex situations concerning the roles we take on in interactions with others. Recall Goffman's work on context-dependent performances. Whereas online spaces can be private, semi-public, or public, a distinguishable feature appears to be an intermingling of different roles within the same arena, complicating processes of evaluating the appropriateness of self-expressions. The characteristics of digital personal and interactional arenas hence further increase the complexity of modern societies and the intricacy experienced by subjects about their "inner self," the exterior reality, and the connections in-between.

Uploading personal content additionally raises (at least) two fundamental privacy issues. First of all, it is often difficult to assess and interpret the meaning of the terms of services regarding privacy. While problematic, online content and service providers have developed a commercial logic where they offer their material for free in return for users giving away personal information (Shapiro, 1999). This aspect of privacy-related issues with regard to online social spaces is becoming increasingly difficult to assess, as major actors such as Facebook and Google have implemented features for dynamic information exchanges with third-party social application developers. Secondly, users have little control over the content published by their friends and contacts, or over the republication of their own content in other contexts. Consequently, whether or not users trust the service provider, can they trust their online friends (and foes)?

Users face two unfavorable options: protecting their privacy by not being present online, despite potentially undesirable personal and social consequences; or, alternatively, choosing to have an online presence and so jeopardizing their personal privacy. As discussed above, mediated forms of socialization are characterized by other qualities than face-to-face communication, and, especially for young users, not being online means not taking part in an important social arena. These spaces are not always characterized by the most significant forms of communication, but they are nevertheless significant as arenas for phatic communication

(denoting small talk and communication without a purpose beyond acknowledging the presence of others).

Risk-Assessment in Networked Publics

> **Kristian (aged 17):** After all, the Internet is no more public than the world outside, . . . I don't care if a stranger sitting on the next table in a Chinese restaurant eavesdrops on my personal conversation with a friend.

All due respect to Kristian – the Internet *is* more public to the extent that actions are available to an audience independent of time and space, i.e. expressions stretch beyond a here and now, as is the case for public blogs, social profiles, and photo-sharing services (see also boyd, 2007). All the same, Kristian does have a point that often seems to disappear when distinctions between private and public arenas are discussed: private actions take place within public spaces both online and offline. Concurrently, intimate and private expressions and actions can be protected within private spaces offline as well as online. It is, in other words, necessary to differentiate between private and public online spaces.

The differing private or public character of online spaces is here depicted as one of two axes for comprehending online privacy risks. (See Figure 22.1.) The second axis is constituted by whether users are present online as anonymous beings, disclosing no traits which can identify them; or whether they have a disclosed presence online, revealing personal information such as full name, photos, and

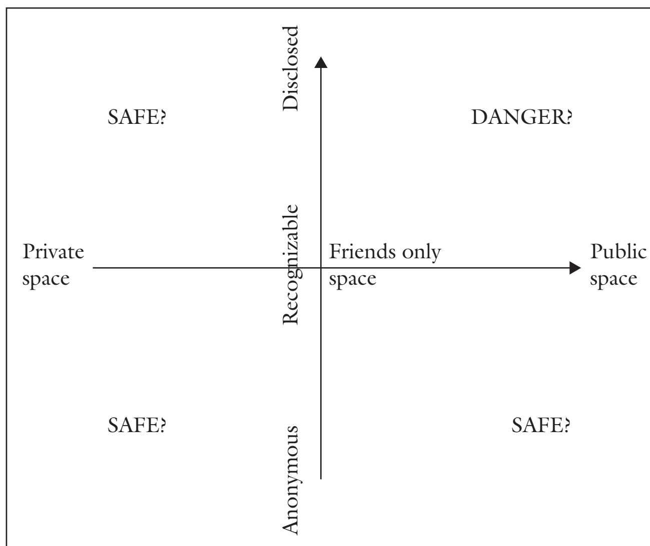

Figure 22.1 Potential Precarious Zones for Personal Information.

friends. Both axes have a middle region. Some blogs (such as LiveJournal) and SNSs allow users to restrict their content as accessible for "friends only," and users may choose to have a restricted or recognizable presence online, revealing first name and information which cannot easily be used to track them offline. A disclosed presence in public online spaces is typically regarded as precarious, whereas an anonymous presence in private online spaces is regarded as safe.

The lower right and upper right corners of the proposed model describe situations where the private sphere enters (or alternatively invades) public spheres. The development of media technologies has been connected to the increasing presence of the private sphere in the public long before the Internet (for discussions see e.g. Barthes, [1980] 1982; Bauman, 2000; Jerslev, 2004; Meyrowitz, 1986; Thompson, 2005). Network cultures strongly reinforce this tendency, and questions concerning privacy issues have consequently been regarded as very important (see for example Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Livingstone, 2008; Sveningsson Elm, 2007).

In public contexts people are normally anticipated to act in accordance with the expectations of several other groups (Goffman, [1959] 1990; Meyrowitz, 1986). Problems arise as young users regard online publics to be different. Online diaries, homepages, and SNSs can for example be perceived as private, even when they are publicly available:

> KRISTOFFER (18): For a long time I had a title on my weblog saying that if you know me, don't say that you have read this.
>
> MARIKA: Why?
>
> KRISTOFFER: Because then it would affect what I write. Then I would begin to think in relation to that person. I try to write my thoughts, but if I know that a person reads it I begin to think of that person as a recipient. And I just want my message to get across; this is my message to myself.

Similarly Walther and colleagues (2008) argue that Facebook users tend to think of their profiles as private, if not technologically then by convention. Recall Kristian's comment about eavesdropping on other people's conversations at restaurants. Although Kristian claims not to care, most people regard eavesdropping as rude (even if sometimes unavoidable). Just because you are able to look into somebody else's life, does not mean you should do it.

Yet, with the complex privacy preferences present in personal media applications, is there still a need to be worried? The answer is a definite yes, precisely *because* of the complex privacy preferences available. With Facebook currently being the example par excellence, privacy settings are way too complex, as described also by Livingstone (2008, p. 406), who found that the teenagers she interviewed experienced great difficulties in assessing the present privacy settings of their profiles. Managing the privacy settings was so complex that the teenagers interviewed did not know how to change settings according to their own liking. Similar observations concerning the asymmetry between desires to protect privacy and actual

behaviors are made by Acquisti and Gross (2006), Stutzman (2006), and Barnes (2006). There is additionally a difference between being and feeling anonymous as users may include personal information, yet still feel that their online presence is relatively anonymous (Kennedy, 2006). Users may regard their privacy to be safe, basically because the magnitude of online expressions to a large extent serves as a safety barrier (boyd, 2007; Lange, 2007).

A complex relation between opportunity and risk is a characteristic feature of adolescence and thus not particularly distinctive to the Internet (Livingstone, 2008). Referring to psychologist Erik H. Erikson's classic work on teenage identity exploration processes, Livingstone argues that developing and gaining confidence in one's own self is part of being a teenager. This self-exploratory process includes figuring out whom to trust, what personal information to reveal, and how to express emotion. Risky use of online social spaces consequently fits neatly into a psychological framework of adolescence. Donath (2007) similarly argues that while excessive risk-taking online may seem irrational to outsiders, it may, when viewed as a signal, be seen as a way of expressing fitness or aptness to social contexts: "From lion-hunting Masai warriors to cigarette-smoking, drag-racing American teenagers, people (often young) perform risky acts to prove that they are so fit or skilled that they can afford to be daring" (unpaginated). Risk-taking in the form of online presences can also be explained with reference to the continuous risk assessments required of individuals in modern societies (Giddens, 1991). We take more or less calculated risks, believing that the outcome is worth the risk taken (comparable to bicycling, driving a car, investing in stock markets) (Lüders, 2007). Besides, even users who adopt a recognizable/disclosed presence in public online spaces, often regard themselves as having a specific control over their own online self-performance:

> **Linnea (18):** And you're more anonymous even if your name is there, or even if they know somebody who knows me and they might have read my diary. You can be a little bit different from who you are. And you start with a clean sheet. *Presenting yourself as you see yourself* [emphasis added], . . . You can choose what you want to tell.
>
> . . . it's all me, but it's small parts of me. Maybe it's the parts I'm more satisfied with that I write more about.

Linnea only publishes her first name online, but she is far from anonymous, and the content of what she shares with others in publicly available online spaces is honest and personal. As such, her online presence would by many be regarded as perilous.

One of the most interesting conflict dimensions between researchers and commentators of online sociability concern whether or not participants really should be encouraged to withhold information. As I have discussed elsewhere (Lüders, 2008), deceptive strategies may be somewhat at odds with conceptions of what

normally constitutes virtuous conduct. Yet online, concealing one's identity (or even lying) is regarded as appropriate and, ironically, the morally right thing to do (see also J. E. Cohen, 2000; Woo, 2006). Bjørn K. Myskja (2008) discusses a related problem with regard to online trust, and applies Kant's moral philosophy and political theory to account for how Kant's pragmatic approach can be distinguished from his uncompromising ideal morality. Hence whereas according to Kant's moral philosophy we have a moral duty to refrain from lying, according to his pragmatic approach, there is such a thing as well-intended deception. We pretend to be better because as human beings we have so many objectionable characteristics. As such, deceiving others about our true nature makes us act as better humans. Myskja argues that online spaces provide ideal conditions for well-intended deceptions and further that online trust depends on the fact that we exercise self-censorship or deception. There exists a reciprocal acknowledgement that we are not completely honest, and this may promote reciprocal trust (Myskja, 2008). Concomitantly it can be argued that lying about one's identity online is not immoral. Common online practice suggests that participants are being themselves, although presenting a somewhat refined self-version. This is as expected from a Kantian pragmatist position, but perhaps users are nevertheless more inclined to comply with his moral philosophy?

Taking as a premise the belief that users of SNSs should refrain from posting revealing personal information, Hinduja and Patchin (2008) found that a number of users indeed post personal and identifying information, though not to the extent that many believe. Hinduja and Patchin strongly emphasize the risks associated with publishing information such as one's first or full name, portrait photos, or what school one attends. Although they are unaware of "any incident where the revelation of personal information by adolescents on MySpace pages has led to personal victimization" (p. 140), they do not delve much deeper into a discussion of whether publishing personal information necessarily represents risky behavior. Whereas it may initially appear as if the upper right corner of the proposed model – characterized by a disclosed public presence – is the most hazardous position to take, this might not be correct, because of the interplay in use of different personal media. That is, youth who are anonymous in MySpace might accept initiatives for further communication in instant messaging, phone conversations, and eventually face-to-face meetings. It is more important to focus on the context of young users: Youth who engage in a pattern of different kinds of online risky behavior, such as frequently chatting with unknown others, visiting sex sites, and talking about sex online with unknown others, experience greater risks for victimization, yet these kids are typically also experiencing problems in offline contexts (sexual abuse, parental conflict, and offline interpersonal victimization) (Ybarra et al., 2007).

Future research should attempt to examine self-performances and sociability from an unbiased point of view where a priori expectations do not steer gathering and analysis of data.

Concluding Discussion

It is no longer possible to research the social life of teenagers in the Western world without including online sociability as a crucial aspect. Assumptions about implications are common (e.g. claiming that online sociability replaces offline sociability), and research is therefore important in order to counter speculations with empirically based knowledge. As the use of personal media potentially reaches a stage of saturation (implying "everyone" within a social community has integrated sociable tools into their everyday lives), the implications of use become unpredictable. Will the dynamics of societal social networks change during the next few years? Are social networks becoming more ephemeral with weak and strong ties constantly changing? Or are implications too easily exaggerated? And how does trust develop between individuals in complex and individualized networks? This is also related to how individuals may be able to control their own self-performance, but not how their friends and foes represent them, suggesting relevant studies of the intermingling of interpersonal expressions.

This chapter further directs the attention towards social competence in online spaces. Whereas knowledge about social competence in offline contexts is extensive, more research is needed to disclose important social skills in online spaces. Given the interdependence between socialization online and offline, young people who for some reason do not have access to these spheres could potentially feel socially isolated. What are the social consequences of non-use for youth whose friends and acquaintances spend a considerable amount of time socializing online? Discussions about digital divides are consequently crucial as non-access may have serious social disadvantages. Similarly, approaching personal media actions as playful and creative is worth exploring further, for example from a textual and/or cultural studies perspective. Research on personal media should also examine how users acquire the technical competence, literacy, and skills to participate in mediated spaces without having to compromise individual privacy. The complex structures characterizing networked publics represent a fundamentally novel aspect of modern life, as network technologies elevate interactions and personal expressions from private life into sometimes publicly available spaces. This raises a wealth of intriguing and important questions, and as discussed it is not apparent what "risky online behavior" is. Future research should hence examine online behavior and privacy from sociological, legal, and psychological perspectives (e.g. cultural differences with regard to privacy), from an HCI-perspective (how to create safe and user-friendly personal media where users can actually comprehend terms of services and privacy preferences), and from a philosophical point of view (e.g. whether participation in personal media challenges truths and conducts we take for granted, and, if so, how this occurs). These questions are all the more important as personal information is treated as a commodity within an emerging personal-media industry.

The development of communication media has profound impact on the process of self-formation by uncoupling experience from encounters in the physical

world, and we would have a very limited sense of the world without mediated forms of communication (Thompson, 1995). As such, mediated practices are not only about the significance of our own memory traces for our own sense of self, but also augment the complex abundance of personal life traces of others. These traces influence our perceptions of the world. This is true for mass mediated as well as interpersonal forms of communication and explains the common fascination with tools that help us participate in the creation of a collective world. Hence, although extensive research has already been conducted on the usage and significance of online personal media, the potential outcomes for society indicate that these services will continue to serve as an interesting area for research.

Note

1 "Personal media" is chosen instead of the more commonly used term "social media" in order to emphasize the contrast to mass media. Mass media are arguably highly social. Moreover personal media are concerned with intrinsic personal motivations as well as sociability. This is particularly evident with analogue personal media forms such as the diary, scrapbooking, and the photo-camera, but also the case when personal expressions traverse to online environments.

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