

# Commentaries

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## Can social network sites enable political action?

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Social network sites (SNS) like MySpace and Facebook have re-organised the web, but to what ends? Fantasies about political action dance in the air while activists dream that this structure will allow people to speak truth to power. Yet, these daydreams are shattered through even a cursory look at what practices are actually taking place. Typical SNS users are more invested in adding glitter to pages and SuperPoking their 'friends' than engaging in any form of civically driven collective action. How did this happen?

Technology's majestic lustre makes it easy to fool people into believing that technology's structure determines practice. It seems like such a simple conclusion – video games will make us violent, the Internet will make us more informed, and social network sites will make us politically activated, right? Wrong. Unfortunately, this techno-determinist doctrine does not actually hold up to interrogation. As science and technology scholars have argued, technology can best be understood through its social construction. Technologies are shaped by society and reflect society's values back at us, albeit a bit refracted.

If we accept that technologies mirror and magnify everyday culture, what do social network sites say about society? While we may wish that they shine a positive light, the most insidious practices on SNS highlight how status-obsessed and narcissistic we as a society are. We may wish to blame the technology for creating self-absorbed people, but it is probably more likely that egoists love social network sites because these services support their desire to exhibit oneself for the purposes of mass validation. By demonising the technology, we fail to fully grok the not-so-subtle message that society values beauty, exhibitionism, and self-aggrandisement and that social network sites provide opportunities for anyone to showcase themselves as pseudo-celebrities. Although these performances may not be 'real' because anyone can self-construct to put their best foot forward, they are certainly less scripted than reality TV. It may not be possible to get as much mindshare as Britney Spears, but social network sites certainly provide a platform for attention-seeking populations to do their thing.

While such a critique surely evokes profiles of women revealing skin in provocative poses, the most active egoists on social network sites are musicians, politicians, marketers, and other populations who desperately want the attention of the masses. By and large, when politicians and activists

talk about using MySpace and Facebook, they aren't talking about using it the way most people do; they are talking about leveraging it as a spamming device. While attention-seekers are actively networking on SNS, the vast majority of participants are simply logging in to hang out with the friends that they already know. Stranger danger warnings have worked – most participants are not looking to meet new people, but to gather with friends when physical co-presence is impossible or impractical.

Social network sites are a type of networked public. As with other publics, people gather for a variety of reasons. Given the scholarly attention to civic publics, it is often hard to remember that people participate in public life for other reasons: identity development, status negotiation, community maintenance, and so on. When it comes to publics, exchanging gossip is far more common than voting. For many of the most active participants on SNS, networked publics substitute for physical publics because physical publics are inaccessible, untenable, heavily regulated, or downright oppressive. Women and people of colour may have equal rights in the public sphere, but youth do not. If you cannot grab a beer at a pub with friends or hang out in a public setting without being shooed for loitering, where else can you gather with friends? Online, of course.

This is not to say that networked publics are identical to unmediated publics. As an entire generation is quickly learning, networked publics have properties that are unlike anything previously experienced by everyday people in unmediated publics. Performances are *persistent*. This is great for asynchronous communications, but not so great when you think about all of the future audiences who may have access to what was intended as ephemeral speech. Digital bodies are *searchable*. Although parents and bosses and others who hold power over you have longed to scream 'find' into the ether to instantly summon you from anywhere you might be, the 'accio' spell only works in the world of Harry Potter. Yet, online, search is nearly universal and social network sites and other online forums provide Google with uncountable terabytes of information, allowing them to construct highly detailed dossiers on all participants, all available with the flick of a cursor. Thanks to the properties of bits, digital acts are also *replicable*. It is quite simple to copy and paste anything that is said and move it from one context to the other in a manner that makes it difficult to distinguish between the copy and the original. Include the ease with which anyone can alter the original and you can imagine the complications that this causes. Finally, participating in networked publics requires that you face *invisible audiences*. Offline, we are accustomed to being able to see anyone who can hear our speech, although recording devices have been complicating this assumption for quite some time. Online, not only are lurkers invisible, but it is nearly impossible to imagine all of the future potential audiences who might stumble upon or actively seek out our online performances. Combined, these four properties make it difficult to ascertain context or to act in a manner that will be socially acceptable to all potential viewers.

The other force at play is *scale*. Mediating technologies change the scale of any act. Activists know that a bullhorn lets them reach many more people, even in the context of a supposed shared space. Telephones allow

people to communicate over long distances. The Internet not only collapses space and time, but beyond bandwidth, there is no additional structural cost between communicating with ten and broadcasting to millions. Infinite scaling may be structurally possible online, but the attention economy regulates is what actually scales. Just because someone wants to reach millions does not mean that they can effectively do so just because their content is public if no one is interested. Likewise, just because a private message is intended for ten people it does not mean that it will not spread if the content is of interest to many more. Public and private are only guidelines online because there are no digital walls that truly keep what is desired in, and what is not out.

The possibility of scaling is what tickles the fancy of most political dreamers who see the Internet as a democratising technology. What they fail to realise is that in an attention economy, people pay attention to what interests them, regardless of what is technically available. As the mass media know all too well, the antics of Paris Hilton or David Beckham sell more papers than details of who voted for what piece of legislation. Gossip is alluring; war is depressing. When newspaper sales are needed to sell advertising to generate revenue to appease stockholders to keep the wheels greased, who will take the moral ground?

The Internet may not have word count limits, but it is still about garnering attention. Although the Internet makes it a lot easier for activated people to seek out information and networks of like minds, what gains traction online is the least common denominator. Embarrassing videos and body fluid jokes fare much better than serious critiques of power.

Social network sites are situated in the broader context of the Internet. Over the last decade, the dominant networked publics have shifted from being typically organised to being structured around personal networks. Most users are no longer seeking out chatrooms or bulletin boards to discuss particular topics with strangers. Instead, they are logging in to hang out with people that they already know. Structurally, a social network site is the quintessential personal network tool. SNS are designed to explicitly be about 'me and my friends'. People are exposed to the things that their friends choose to share. If that content is valued, it is spread further through friend networks. Lack of shared interest results in lack of spreadability.

People's social networks are homophilous. Birds of a feather stick together and friends seek out people who are like them. Politically engaged people typically know other politically engaged people, and social network sites create cavernous echo chambers as people reiterate what their friends posted. Given the typical friend overlap in most networks, many within those networks hear the same thing over and over until they believe it to be true. It was precisely the echo chambers of the blogosphere in 2004 that convinced the mass media that Howard Dean had more traction in the US presidential campaign than he did. Echo chambers are problematic because they give the impression that activists have spread a message further than they have. Just as politically engaged people know others who are activated, alienated and uninterested people know people just like themselves. Bridging the structural holes that divide these groups of people is just as challenging online as offline, if not more so. Offline, you

know if a door has been slammed in your face; online, it is impossible to determine the response that the invisible audience might have to your message.

Rather than fantasising about how social network sites will be a cultural panacea, perhaps we need to focus more directly on the causes of alienation and disillusionment. SNS are not going to make people engage, but they can make visible whether or not political operatives are succeeding in getting their message across. There is something to be said for getting a realistic perspective on the values of society at large. SNS do allow activated people to share a message with their friends. If we can figure out how to activate unmotivated groups, perhaps they can leverage their own networks to convince others. The infrastructure is available for people to spread information, but the motivation is not there to either share or receive it. We need to work on solving that problem and we will know when we do because the messages will be written in Comments and on the Wall.

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# The new risk communities: Social networking sites and risk

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Risk is a pervasive part of our modern and post-modern consciousness. Ulrich Beck's (1992) risk society delineated the new forms of risk that can saturate our landscapes through modernisation, industrialisation and globalisation, where the interlinking of the world creates both greater immediacy and new paradigms of risk. The wired and connected globe in this sense reconfigures the notion of distance and proximity, constructing new risks which can impact on our immediate environment even if these hazards happen in faraway locales. Risk is implicit in our everyday lives and actions. However, the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has created new connections with the wider world, producing new ways of communing with hitherto unknown individuals and groups. These new forms of connectivity are laden with both opportunities and risks.

While initial discourses of the Internet portrayed it as a virtual realm dichotomised from the real, subsequent rhetoric has acknowledged the limitations of divorcing the real from the virtual. The context of our physical environment, culture and social norms shape our engagements with technology and in this sense the Internet is a cultural artefact. Inversely, the Internet is equally capable of facilitating new forms of online cultures and human interactions (cf. Hine 2000). Similarly, in terms of the risk landscape, our actions and the ways in which we communicate through new technologies can have consequences for our security and safety or perhaps even our perceptions of risk. This article analyses the emergence of implicit risk communities where the performative display of information in Social Networking Sites (SNS) is a behaviour which sustains the architecture of such sites, and facilitates new types of deviance, fraud, deception and crime while enabling new types of communities and fraternities. It creates rhizomatic networks where risk is not only pervasive but becomes the very fabric in maintaining new forms of community, identity and gaze, reflecting the ways in which an invisible audience consumes and engages with personal information while contributing to new types of risk profiling.

In recent times, SNS have come to signify new types of deviance and unpredictable behaviour. In one recent incident in Missouri, USA, a 13-year-old girl hanged herself after a failed MySpace romance, which was later discovered to be a hoax invented by a neighbour. The case received further attention when investigators ruled that while what had happened to the young and vulnerable girl was cruel it was not criminal (Leonard 2007). In a further twist, an imposter claiming to be the neighbour had posted a blog detailing the reasons for setting up the hoax, adding yet more layers to this tale of deceit.

The case represents a cruel concoction of love, deception, betrayal and tragedy magnifying the unexpected ways in which SNS and interactive

sites can exploit the vulnerable and transgress the boundaries between the real and the unreal, and the public and the private. In the process it highlights different forms of deviance that can pose new ethical and legal challenges in the real world. Such incidents have renewed calls among regulators, educators and parents to protect the young who are often seen as the target audience of such sites.

### **Privacy versus the social practice of sharing**

Social networking platforms present new ways to construct the self and make connections with others who browse these sites or share the same interests. People join such sites with their friends and use the various messaging tools in order to socialise, share cultural artefacts and ideas, and communicate with one another (Boyd 2007). As such, these sites thrive on a sense of immediacy and community (Barnes 2006). A new generation of SNS started with the launch of Friendster in 2002 and Myspace in 2003, with the latter being bought by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation in 2005 for US\$580m (Roen 2007). Facebook, a social networking site targeting college students, was subsequently launched in 2004 and is currently one of the most popular SNS, among which are also Orkut, Bebo and Yahoo 360.

Nielsen/NetRatings has rated MySpace as the forerunner of Internet social networking sites with 38.4 m visitors in 2006. The research firm has dubbed such sites as the 'reality television of the Internet as content is relatively inexpensive for publishers to produce'. Nielsen proposes that social networking is more than a fad and will become an activity that will be more and more ingrained in mainstream sites. According to a poll by Pew Internet Project Data 2007, conducted among 935 randomly chosen youths, more than half of all online American youths aged 12–17 use online social networking sites. The Pew research, which defines an SNS as an 'online location where a user can create a profile and build a personal network that connects him or her to other users', also concluded that for girls SNS provided spaces to reinforce pre-existing friendships and for boys the networks provide opportunities for flirting and making new friends.

In assessing SNS, Boyd and Ellison (2007) highlight three distinctive features: the user's ability to construct a public profile, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and to view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. According to Ralph Gross and Alessandro Acquisti (2005), such sites, through the emphasis on personal profiles, offer a representation of users for others to peruse, with the intention of contacting or being contacted by others to meet new friends or dates, find new jobs, receive or provide recommendations, and more besides. Dana Boyd (2006), points out that while the meanings of practices and features can differ across sites and individuals the notion of sharing is intrinsic to these sites. Personal information and private comments on a public platform then become a form of social capital which people trade and exchange to build new ties and to invite different types of gaze and spectatorship.

Wellman (cf. Lange 2007: 2) defines social networks as 'relations among people who deem other network members to be important or relevant to

them in some way, with media often used to maintain such networks'. Another essential component of such sites is that user profile information involves some element of 'publicness' (Preibusch et al. 2007) and it is the consumption of private details that sustains the culture of gaze and the curiosity of the invisible audience. Lange (2007) explains that social network sites are websites that allow users to create a public or semi-public profile within the system, and one that explicitly displays their relationship to other users in a way that is visible to anyone who can access their profile. As such, exchange and sharing is an integral and definitive part of the SNS culture where the emphasis is not entirely on the authenticity of the information but the element of connection and connectivity it can create (Nardi 2005). SNS invariably celebrate the visibility of social connections and consequentially Boyd (2007) considers SNS as the latest generation of 'mediated publics' where people can gather publicly through mediated technology. She points out that features such as persistence (i.e. the permanence of a profile and its circulation in cyberspace), searchability, replicability, and invisible audiences constitute the key elements of this environment. Users' behaviour may be mediated by these features without necessarily integrating the underlying immediate and future consequences or risks embedded in these technologies or their actions.

Gross and Acquisti (2005), point out that the most common model of the SNS is the presentation of the participant's profile and the visualisation of his or her network of relations to others. Such sites can encourage the presentation of a member's profile (including their hobbies and interests and the publication of personal and identifiable photos) to the rest of the community through technical specifications, while visibility of information can be highly variable amongst such sites. Most networking sites make it easy for third parties, from hackers to government agencies, to access participants' data without the site's direct collaboration, thereby exposing users to risks ranging from identity theft to online and physical stalking and blackmailing (Gross and Acquisti 2005).

Barnes (2006), in citing Benniger, postulates that electronic forms of communication are gradually replacing traditional modes of interpersonal communication as a socialising force, mediating and at times displacing social norms in different contexts. In the interactive spaces of the Internet there may be a disconnect between how users say they feel about the privacy settings of their blogs and how they react once they have experienced the unanticipated consequences of a breach of privacy (cf. Barnes 2006).

According to Gross and Acquisti (2005), anecdotal evidence suggests that participants are happy to disclose as much information as possible to as many people as possible, thus illuminating the design and architecture of sites which hinge on the ease with which personal information is volunteered and the willingness of users to disclose such information. The perceived benefits of selectively revealing data to strangers, it seems, may appear larger than the perceived costs of possible privacy invasions. Other factors such as peer pressure and herding behaviour; relaxed attitudes towards (or lack of interest in) personal privacy; incomplete information about the possible privacy implications of information revelation; faith in the networking service or trust in its members; and the myopic evaluation

of privacy risks of the service's own user interface, may drive the unchallenged acceptance by users of compromises to their safety (Gross and Acquisti 2005), thus sealing the role of SNS as complicit risk communities.

### **SNS as a risk landscape**

Barnes (2006), in citing Katz and Rice (2000), describes the Internet as a 'Panopticon where surveillance is part of the architecture'. There are myriad risks lurking in the trails of data people leave in SNS sites and in the ways it is mined for commercial, legal and criminal purposes. SNS such as LiveJournal.com, Facebook, Myspace, Friendster and Google's Orkut.com have been a source of concern in the United States, initiating federal laws that require most schools and libraries to render such web spaces inaccessible to minors in order to protect them from harm (McCullagh 2006). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the House of Lords Science and Technology select committee has suggested that both private and public sectors need more effective ways to deal with the rise of online fraud and hacking, and have recommended the formation of a new national police squad charged with reducing online crime (Johnson 2007). The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) in the United Kingdom has also drawn up official guidelines for the millions of people who use such sites, offering warnings such as a 'blog is for life' and 'reputation is everything'. People are also advised that entries can leave an 'electronic footprint' and that the lives of people can be put at risk by the reckless disclosure of information (Hough 2007). The notion of data and profiles having a permanence and circulation in unexpected ways is something the ICO wants to impress on people in terms of potential harm and transgression of privacy.

Social networking sites have also become prime targets for identity theft, and in July 2007 credit information group Equifax similarly warned people against putting too much personal information on social networking websites (Johnson 2007). Figures from the United Kingdom's fraud prevention service, the CIFAS, reveal that a record number of frauds were committed in the first six months of 2007 with identity thefts estimated at 40,000 and online banking fraud increasing by 44 per cent in 2006 (Johnson 2007).

In 2006 a survey of 2,163 adults undertaken by the US National Cyber Security Alliance (NCSA), to examine the possibilities of cybercrime threats such as fraud, identity theft and the viruses associated with the use of social networking sites, revealed that many adult users expose themselves to risk from identity fraud and hackers (cf. Leyden 2006). According to the study, although 57 per cent of the users of such sites expressed concerns about becoming victims of online crime, they are still divulging information that may put them at risk. This meant that 74 per cent had publicised information such as their email address, name and birthday, while 83 per cent had acknowledged that they had downloaded unknown files from other people's profiles potentially exposing themselves to malware, and 31 per cent had responded to 'phishy' or potentially fraudulent unsolicited email or instant messages. The study also showed that, contrary to popular belief, 48 per cent of those who used these sites were 18 or over and 53 per cent were over the age of 35 (cf. Leyden 2006). The data affirms the fact



that awareness of the potential risks in itself does not mediate the user's willingness to put personal details online.

Early discourses of the Internet celebrated not only the ability to re-invent identity online, but also the concept of 'avatarism' where a user can have multiple identities. But although this can certainly be empowering it can also enable new forms of deception. New forms of narcissism enabled by SNS, however, celebrate the notion of constructing one's offline profile online and inviting others to start friendships through such representations of self. Christine Rosen (2007) equates SNS self-profiles to modern day self-portraits where new media enable public displays of self, and as such the exhibition of personal data is a distinctive feature of self-construction and communion. Users may not then think beyond the cultural ethos of these spaces. Additionally, in tandem with the declaration of real identities online, deception and faking are also part of the terrain. Dana Boyd (in press), in observing the Fakesters in Friendsters website, notes that users' appropriation of well-known celebrity and media profiles, or the invention of their own, 'exercises a certain creativity and introduces playful expression' which draws an audience that wishes to engage with these users. She asserts that 'fakesters' were a means of 'hacking the system to introduce missing social texture'.

In the United Kingdom the government-backed campaign group Get Safe Online is warning people against posting personal details online, reasoning that even though some of these details may seem harmless they can provide a rich database for criminals (BBC 12/11/2007). Get Safe Online found that one in four people using SNS have posted confidential or personal information such as phone numbers, addresses or emails on their online profile, making them vulnerable to identity fraud (Williams 2007; Dixon 2007). A study conducted by the group also reveals that more than 8 million users leave their home networks unprotected against intruders while more than half of over 65s use a single password for every website they visit. The convergence of technologies has enabled people to connect to networks even while they are on the move, however not all users are aware of the risks involved in using wifi on an unsecured network where criminals can steal or delete files from – or add files to – a personal computer or laptop (cf. Williams 2007; Claburn 2007).

The Get Safe Online poll also reveals that such sites enable new forms of gaze in mediating offline relationships. According to the study, 30 per cent admitted to searching for former girlfriends and boyfriends and a third admitted to using these sites to find out about their boss, colleagues or a job candidate. The ability to tag photos to profiles and the presence of photo recognition software means that there is a loss of visual anonymity which can be complemented by new forms of gaze (Montgomery 2007). Rules about privacy, personal information, and copyright can also be distorted on SNS. About 13 per cent of users in the Get safe Online study had posted information about, or photos of, other people without their consent, while in early 2007 the campaign found that 12 per cent of the UK's net users had experienced online fraud during 2006 with an average loss of £875 (BBC, 12/11/2007). This study also found that some 3.5m people were victims of online fraud in 2006 (Young 2007; Claburn 2007).

The casualness with which people reveal personal details online is related to the different norms which people apply to online and offline situations. According to the study, the 10.8m people across the United Kingdom registered to social networking sites are much more open about their lives online. Although they may not divulge this information to a stranger in real life they have fewer reservations about posting it online. The IOC survey also affirms that one third of those polled never read privacy policies and it warns that the cost to a person's future can be very high if something undesirable is found by the increasing number of education institutions and employers using the Internet as a tool to vet potential students or employees (Hough 2007).

Beyond the personal information posted by social networkers, there are also worries about privacy after Facebook published its secret operational code on the Internet. The Facebook site in the United Kingdom has 3.5 million users and about 30 million users worldwide. The company blamed the leaked code on a 'bug' which meant that it was published accidentally (Johnson 2007). Although such glitches may not necessarily allow hackers to access private information directly they could nevertheless help criminals close in on personal data. While some personal information listed on the site is semi-private, government and quasi-government agencies such as Get Safe Online are worried that criminals who become friends with other users have the potential to find out much more information about them (Johnson 2007). Research by Websense supports the idea that criminals 'work as an underground community, sharing information on what tools and methods work when it comes to tricking consumers on SNS and hackers have realised that they need to become discreet when it comes to social networking as they need to blend in with the crowd where links can be added to sites such as Wikipedia to lure users onto corrupt sites' (Vassou 2006). There have also been numerous incidents of spyware and spamming being employed by such sites (Rosen 2007).

The constant demand to make these sites attractive to advertisers means that privacy of users can be compromised in other ways. Wendlandt (2007) notes that online advertising is the fastest growing segment of the advertising industry, currently accounting for more than 25 per cent of advertising growth per year, translating to more than five times the recent average annual growth of other types of media, with about 6–7 per cent spent on Internet advertising globally. Recently, 13,000 Facebook users signed a petition protesting against the networking site's new advertising system which alerts members to friends' purchases online. Some Facebook members have even threatened to leave due to the fact that the new system allowed their friends to find out what they were planning to give them for Christmas (Wendlandt 2007). Preibusch et al. (2007) point out that popular SNS sites such as MySpace.com collect data for e-commerce purposes and user profiles are important for data mining in such websites. Data that accrues on the web is not only used for communicating but also for secondary purposes that may be covered in the SNS's terms of use. Such data can be acquired by marketing agencies for targeted marketing or by law enforcement agencies, secret services and others (Preibusch et al. 2007).

Other types of behaviour on such sites have included the formation of hate communities. For example, the *Times of India* (2007) reports that there has been an increase in the number of online hate communities on Orkut. These communities convene around their fervent dislikes, including those which express their hatred for certain celebrities. Others have included anti-nationalists groups such as 'I Hate India what about u' or 'I love India, Hate Pakistan'.

## Conclusion

The popularity of social networking sites heralds the emergence of complicit risk communities where personal information becomes social capital which is traded and exchanged, and where there are also therapeutic and narcissistic elements, particularly with regard to the construction of self-image and identities. The culture of social networking sites thrives on the performative, on the one hand, and reciprocity and exchange, on the other. Hence the potential dangers and risks of willingly disclosing and displaying personal details become part of the architecture or code of these sites. Social networking sites then leverage on the resulting cultural conventions and communions in order to sustain themselves. The appropriation of new technologies by individuals in order to communicate, form new communities and to maintain existing relationships signifies new ways in which risk becomes embedded and encoded into our social practices, posing new ethical and legal challenges which inadvertently expand the landscape of risk.

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# The female vampire community and online social networks: Virtual celebrity and mini communities: Initial thoughts

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The recent online phenomenon of social networking sites (SNS) such as MySpace and Facebook has drawn much media attention to the role that social networks have to play within our culture. Whether SNS are being restricted for use by the US troops in Iraq; being accused of facilitating paedophiles in their online grooming of minors; or playing an integral role in the process of 'disintermediation', which is consequently transforming the climate of media distribution and consumption, their impact is undeniable. Amongst the moral panic headlines, SNS offer social researchers a unique context to map links between online and offline identity connections and community-building practices.

This article will explore how the proliferation of social networking sites has facilitated the development of the active female vampire fan community in London (including the three main communities – the *Vampyre Connexion*, the *London Vampyre Group* and the *London Vampire Meetup*). Areas of discussion include: the selective nature of subcultural Internet use that is divided into a network of mini web communities and 'infrastructures'; how online social networks aid and facilitate offline/face-to-face social networking and how the participatory culture (Jenkins et al. 2006; Beer and Burrows 2007) of Web 2.0 has played an intrinsic role in the creation of virtual celebrities.

## Mini web communities

There has been some discussion between scholars about the nature of sub-cultural Internet use. For example, Paul Hodkinson's findings suggest that rather than being a mass medium with a potential scope to reach millions, the Internet actually functions as 'a facilitating network which connects together a diverse plurality of different media forms' (Hodkinson 2002: 176). This is particularly evident in my own research of the female vampire community, as Internet appears to reaffirm both individual and group identity and eradicate true difference.

Offline, many members of the vampire community demonstrate their alternative culture via various lifestyle choices. These include gothic-inspired dress practices, music and events. Although they share common interests in a gothic sensibility, the community have an extremely eclectic mix of style, and draw from a variety of trends from Victorian/Edwardian inspired culture to cyber/S & M influences. This alternative identity is continued online via the assortment of gothic/vampiric backgrounds, graphics, theme songs, video sharing and photography, available on their SNS profiles.

Because of their shared goth/vampire interests, the vampire community's use of SNS sites does appear to reveal a basic level of conformity,

with the majority of members essentially adopting variations (albeit elaborate) of the same gothic/vampire style. This actually works to reaffirm a group identity and to gain acceptance into the subculture, rather than being an attempt to express true individuality and difference. Therefore, this irony not only exposes the age-old paradox regarding the conformist nature of alternative culture, it also reveals how SNS bring together those who share the same cultural capital. These sites allow social space for mini communities or 'infrastructures' (Hodkinson 2002) to form online, which can often legitimise the subculture and reinforce its values.

The very nature of SNS creates this sense of 'infrastructure', as each profile hosts 'friends' and 'communities' applications that function as an internal channelling system. Many of the vampire community members have furthered this sense of infrastructure by linking each of their SNS. For example, when a user arrives on their Facebook page, they are then routed off to their MySpace or their Livejournal account. Traffic is filtered through this community from profile-to-profile (i.e. MySpace profile to Livejournal accounts), to other community members' profiles (via the 'friends' function), to groups' pages (such as the *Vampyre Connexion* website), and to commercial advertising sites (bands, alternative dress shops, nightclubs).

Through specific applications such as MySpace's bulletin board, Facebook's events application, and particularly Livejournal's journal, SNS also provide the opportunity to organise and publicise face-to-face vampire community events in an online system that channels information to a vast number of interested parties, thus increasing members' cultural participation. In this sense, the vampire fan community is comparable to a virtual members club, where 'real life' news and events can spread much faster than they could ever hope to face-to-face, and users can feel part of a virtual community.

Therefore, social networking sites facilitate communication between existing communities and actually aid offline or so-called 'real life' interaction. Such networks also have a uniquely interesting negotiation of on/offline relationships. Community members can take existing relationships from face-to-face settings and move them into cyberspace (Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield 2007; Boyd and Ellison 2007). For example, previous research into Facebook found that more users utilised the 'search' function to find existing friends, rather than the 'browse' function to seek new ones (Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield 2007). As Lori Kendall (1999) suggests, in the past some research has ignored the 'real life' or offline contexts of Internet users and approached the Internet as a 'utopian world', forgetting the real person typing or the 'body at the keyboard' (Kendall 1998: 60). In light of the fact that the majority of users have some degree of relationship offline, SNS provide a rich context to explore the relationship between a person's online and offline life and how the two environments impact and encroach upon the other.

However, due to the relatively small, tightly knit nature of the vampire community, users may also meet friends *online* and then find themselves socialising *face-to-face*. For example, one respondent discussed how she had recognised one of her alternative friends from the MySpace social network offline in an alternative bar:

LVMG1: (female) The goth scene is such a small world and you bump into people all over the place, there were two or three people in a bar and I thought, I know them, and they were my friends on MySpace, and it's from their picture on MySpace that I recognised them.

Similarly the *Vampyre Connexion's* social secretary highlighted this further:

VC2: (female) People assume because it's online it's wrong, as people aren't real. But that's not true it's the opposite. I have never met so many people online, as you are always going to meet in real life and you end up friends.

Therefore, although 'friendseeking' (Carter 2005) on social networks is less common behaviour than conversing with existing friends from the community variations of relationship do exist.

### Virtual celebrities and the 'Egocentric' Shift

In the Web 2.0 climate of 'cultural speed up' (Gane 2006 cited in Beer and Burrows 2007) and the breakdown between the so-called online creator and user, social networking sites are particularly significant. The participatory nature and cultural exchange that seems to be occurring on SNS is a key feature that attracts the subcultural community and serves to consolidate their group involvement. Paul Hodkinson documents the pleasures that goths receive in not only reading but also participating online and how participatory aspects can also directly influence values and trends within the goth scene as a whole. Hodkinson uses the example of one poster and how his posting reinforced the increasing acceptance of men wearing skirts in the goth scene (2002: 183). In this sense, active/high profile online members of the community do not act only as gatekeepers of fandom (see Hodkinson 2002; Williamson 2005), but actually raise their individual status to 'veritable celebrity' (2002: 193) or virtual celebrities.

One only has to look as far as music artists such as the Arctic Monkeys and Kate Nash, to see how SNS such as MySpace can be used to increase fan bases and create celebrity status. Such celebrity is also occurring on a much smaller scale, as highly adept Internet users are becoming increasingly recognisable to the rest of their community. The *Vampyre Connexion's* (VC) social secretary MorbidFrog embodies key elements of the virtual celebrity. Via the information she posts on the VC's Yahoo group, events postings on the MySpace bulletin board and entries on the 'Friends Page' of Livejournal, MorbidFrog has gained a prestigious position within the community. Her own comments regarding her online alias 'MorbidFrog', seem to suggest that this has become somewhat of a stage name:

MorbidFrog: I love it when people come up to me and say 'are you MorbidFrog?' A few weeks ago I went to Salvation books launch party and I met Eileen Daly, the actress from *Razorblade Smile*, who I've known for years as she goes to the same club as me, but she always knew me as Cecile and then she said 'oh you are actually MorbidFrog' I got all excited.



Other users do invest a level of trust and belief in MorbidFrog that has been earned by her commitment to the position of social coordinator and the truth in the information she imparts. Her well-known position is revalidated by her face-to-face presence, as she helps to organise and attend most of the meetings and events, always providing hard copies of events lists to ensure the offline VC community are reached. Other performative aspects of MorbidFrog's face-to-face identity, such as her elaborate dress, also make her extremely identifiable and reveal her commitment to the culture.

Moreover, as Boyd and Ellison (2007) discuss, social networking sites have created a shift in the organisation of such online communities, from a focus on interests and topical community discussions, as demonstrated by earlier forums and email/usenet groups, to a more individual or 'ego-centric' perspective that has consequently made virtual space for these new celebrities. A recent posting on the *London Vampyre Group's* (LVG) Yahoo email group VEIN (Vampire Exchange Information Network), illustrates this shift and reveals that many community members view email groups as obsolete. An initial posting from a committee member of the LVG posted the below, requesting the communities feedback over their decision to close the email group:

Just a little note to raise a simple question 'What is the point of the VEIN' Yahoo group?

(LVGm1, male: 2007)

This immediately sparked a series of responses. Many discuss the notion that VEIN has served its purpose and social networking sites are actually more successful in maintaining the community.

I think VEIN has run its course . . . everything VEIN was set up to do is now done (probably better) by Networking groups.

(LVGm2, male: 2007)

Interestingly, one response from an individual who exists on the outskirts of the vampire community demonstrated her ignorance of other online community sites such as SNS. Although rather anecdotal seen in isolation, her comments do seem to follow the previously discussed trend of mini communities and infrastructures within the vampire community. Whilst a focus on more egocentric social networks helps to facilitate the creation of these new celebrities, those who do not have a high level of interaction online and do not participate offline, may find themselves a little lost in cyberspace.

I have to admit to not attending any specific vampyre group for about 3 years now. Yet still follow Vein on the offchance of making any of the more general events that are advertised. If Vein is going to close then can someone point me to the alternative/individual sites that are more commonly used now.

(LVG4, female: 2007)

## Final thoughts

Social networking sites have facilitated female vampire fans' participation in the subculture as a whole. The majority of vampire community members use SNS to keep up to date with events and friends old and new. Although this article has only just begun to scratch the surface, there does appear to be a common desire amongst the subcultural community to socialise with 'real friends' online, whether these are pre-existing friends from real life situations, or new friends whom users have met online, but have a realistic possibility of meeting in future face-to-face environments.

Although SNS have also allowed proficient users to gain prestigious positions within the community which verge on mini celebrity, there is still a lot to discuss with regards to online identity construction. Similarly, the high volume of personal information held on SNS, together with the level of online/offline transparency, offer a unique contribution to Internet privacy and ethical debates.

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# The role of intermediaries in the consecration of arts on myspace.com

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With the advent of participatory culture in the digital era, the social networking sites, such as myspace.com, musicfreedom.com, sonicbid.com and youtube.com, have blurred the boundaries between the producers and the consumers of culture, between the creator and the audience. As a result, participatory media have become the central basis for promoting, voicing, and marketing various products involving creative writing, artworks and music. This phenomenon has not only propelled the rise of non-professional artistic goods, but it has also increased the visibility of ubiquitous artistic commodities (Jenkins 2003; Gauntlett 2004). This essay addresses the issue of intermediary involvement in the social networking sites. Specifically, how are the works posted on the websites transformed (or consecrated) into 'art' by the massive network bodies? How can the dichotomous split between mass production and individuality be reconciled in the context of myspace.com? What are the inherent problems related to the consecration of arts in the social networking sites? By pursuing these lines of inquiry, this article will examine the various functions and features of myspace.com's music site. The goal of this article is to analyse and critique the processes behind myspace.com's artistic fields of production.

1. Bourdieu's full question: 'who is the true producer of the value of the work – the painter or the dealer, the writer or the publisher, the playwright or the theatre or the manager?' (:76).

## The internet as a contested terrain

According to Kellner and Kahn (2004), the Internet is a 'contested terrain', a statement that echoes the assessments of various other theorists (Poster 1995; Warf and Grimes 1997; Papacharissi 2002; Hurwitz 2003). Kellner explains that the use of the Internet 'constitutes a dramatic transformation of everyday life', whether its use is to express oppositional, dissenting perspectives, or to promote new journalistic communities where opinions are shared and freely expressed (93). This notion of 'contested terrain' applies not only to blogging, but also to the domain of creative production, such as music, and its dissemination on music networking sites, such as myspace.com and musicfreedom.com. The difference between the mainstream media and the participatory media is that the latter require no intermediaries in order for artists to exhibit their works. Everyone – artists, authors and composers – is self-proclaimed. In this sense, Bourdieu's question of 'who creates the creator' becomes moot (1993: 76).<sup>1</sup>

In mainstream media, cultural production is mediated by a variety of agencies. The majority of music is visible in mainstream media due to the effects of marketing from major record labels. Although not linked to the major record labels, participatory media also represent music marketed by mainstream media. For example, on myspace.com, in the section titled 'Top Artists', users can view three different categories of artists, demarcated on the basis of record label affiliation: Major Label, Indie and Unsigned. The artists are ranked side by side within their own categories on the

music page. This illustrates an even level of exposure granted to unknown as well as well-known artists. It is, however, unclear whether or not the artists listed in the top ranks have been ranked solely based on the popularity gained on *myspace.com*. Nevertheless, viewers have equal access to music produced by amateurs as well as by 'professionals', that is the ones signed under major or indie labels.

In this context, *myspace.com* not only functions as 'contested terrain', but it also intersects with Bourdieu's notion of the artistic field as a 'site of struggle' (30). Bourdieu further asserts that what "makes reputations" is . . . the field of production, understood as the system of objective relations between these agents or institutions and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated' (78). At this juncture, the following critical questions emerge: are independent artists using participatory media simply to have their work viewed, or are they seeking mainstream media exposure? Is *myspace.com* a means to a particular end? Does the mere act of gaining access to mainstream media result in the consecration of an artwork?

### **Myspace.com as a field of cultural production**

As Bourdieu contends, 'the work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art' (1993: 35). On *myspace.com*, the ranking systems are created by the users of the website. On one hand, while granting more freedom for all users to get involved, a new kind of politics may possibly be embedded in the undercurrents of ranking systems and popularity. Cote and Pybus explain that popularity in *myspace.com* is generated not only by the number of friends in one's profile, but also by the number of comments being displayed on the site (2007: 96). To this extent, *myspace.com* functions as a platform wherein artists can gain legitimacy through extensive networking channels. Collective beliefs in relation to the artistic productions are formed via the networks on *myspace.com*. As a result, Levy's (1997) assessment is justified: 'with the disappearance of a traditional public . . . a new form of art will experiment with different modalities of communication and creation' (122). In addition, I contend that examining the overlooked tensions inherent in the field of artistic production is vital.

In addressing the issue of Internet-based art, Levy states that 'the accent has now shifted from work to progress. Its embodiment is manifested in moments, places, collective dynamics, but no longer in individuals. It is an art without a signature' (123). In this statement, Levy implies that artworks in cyberspace are no longer individualistic. Similar to this line of assessment, Andrejevic (2004) also asserts that 'unlike more traditional forms of art, which relegate audiences to the role of spectator or listener, online art exploits the interactivity of new media to encourage viewers, readers and listeners to do more than just observe . . . If audiences participate in the creative process, how does this alter their relationship to the artist?' (129). In regards to the 'interactivity' and collaborative nature of participatory media in *myspace.com*, the interaction between the users (members of *myspace.com*) and the artists does not necessarily impact the

artists' music. The purpose of this site is not to use the feedback of audience members to fix or create artworks in a collaborative sense. Rather, myspace.com invites the users to validate, embrace, and consecrate the works of art by acknowledging their quality through feedback and expanding individual networks (i.e. the number of friends). The other purpose of utilising this site is the pleasure that can be taken from displaying and sharing one's music.

Besides the number of friends that can be acquired, the commentary section provides a valuable means of estimating the manner in which the music of independent artists is received. In the commentary sections, any user can leave negative feedback on the artist's music site, but the artist has the sole right to delete or repudiate a comment. Thus, the collaborative aspect of creating works of art does not occur because audiences are limited to only three types of responses: (1) indication of a preference for the music; (2) indication of indifference towards the music through not leaving comments; and (3) rejection of the music. In other words, the opinions of the users do not influence the artists' creative processes; rather the audience members' penchants for certain artist's music function as barometers of personal taste and preferences.

### **How do artists gain legitimacy?**

If the audience's (or intermediary's) role in the social networking sites is the one that is most similar to that of the art dealer, broker, agent, or scout (specifically for music), how do artists get discovered or gain favouritism? On myspace.com, once a member requests to be an artist's 'friend', the artist can accept the member's request and can become instantly part of the other's network. In addition to being part of an artist's so-called 'friend's network', audience members can also advertise an artist's music by either displaying his or her profile in the 'Top Friends' list, thereby increasing the artist's visibility among other members, or by adding a particular musical selection to the background of a member profile. In this case, anyone who visits this link can listen to the music – in other words, although the artist is not directly involved with the marketing and promotion of his or her music, other members can expose and endorse the artist's music on their own, motivated solely by an affinity for the music.

Returning to the topic of the process of consecration, it is important to point out that, from the artist's perspective, a maximising of networks helps to further the course of consecration. Bourdieu (1993) claims that for an artist to succeed or to be recognised, 'being different' and branding oneself is important (106). By reading Bourdieu's study of cultural production and Levy's critique of 'collective intelligence' side by side, the issue of cyberspace arts becomes paradoxical and problematic. How can artists function collectively when their end goal is to be noticed as individuals? Artists may need the collective networks merely to display their artworks or to have them consecrated via the networks.

Although participatory media may grant 'collective intelligence' (Levy 1997), it is imperative to consider the notion of the field of artistic production as a 'site of struggle', where artists' survival and success are inextricably linked to individuality.

As Jenkins notes, 'convergence, represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content' (2006: 3). Jenkins' comment leads to a dilemma unexplored thus far. One of the underlying assumptions in addressing the participatory media is that the greatest works of art will make their own marks because the public will take notice of them. This notion, however, embraces an optimistic view of the social networking sites. The theory is as follows: if an artist's music is 'good', it will automatically be discovered, and will result in career advancement. However, this view is somewhat misleading in that there are other factors which must be considered.

### Conclusion

With the emergence of myspace.com, many musicians' efforts to air their music became easier and certainly more efficient. However, the myspace.com phenomenon and the general features of all social networking sites should not necessarily be seen as effective and efficient, nor is audience taste always justly represented. In other words, there are also several shortcomings and problems linked to the popularity of this phenomenon. Firstly, because of the ubiquity of independent artists seeking recognition and the ease of making contacts (users of myspace receive numerous requests on a frequent basis), many users may not actually check out an artist's music and take the time to understand or listen to it. The more people who use this medium for promoting their arts, the fiercer and tougher the competition will become. The issues of scale (i.e. the large number of requests) can have a numbing effect, thus causing the inquisitive factor to diminish. Secondly, music as an art form may not be the most effective means to market or gain popularity, since it can be argued that visual images have a more immediate effect than music. In other words, people see the profile picture first, before ultimately deciding to listen to an artist's music. Consequently, artists must grab the attention of viewers in a split-second through an appealing profile picture – if the profile picture captures the attention of the viewer, then there is a chance that the user will go to the actual site to listen to music and learn about the artist. Lastly, it is important to consider whether the popularity of mainstream music is the driving force behind the success of certain artists' careers on myspace.com or, if unknown artists in non-commercial, non-mainstream genres of music can also generate a popular following within the myspace.com generation.

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This social networking site enables you to post short text messages (called tweets), containing a limited number of characters (up to 280), to convey your message to the world. With the growing craze for online shopping, Twitter also makes it possible to promote your businesses and even shop directly through tweets.Â LINE is a globally available messaging social network that enables you to share photos, videos, text messages and even audio messages or files. In addition, it allows you to make voice and video calls at any time of the day.Â My news page was flooded with porn, extreme religious and political rants, pages that advocate violence against politicians, news media, and worse. Free speech is not always responsible speech.