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BUILDING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

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Social networking sites have changed the ways that individuals interact with others and represent themselves in both personal and professional contexts. There has been a great deal of research conducted on how young people use social media for social interactions (boyd, 2014; Marwick, 2010; Livingstone, 2010) and to maintain social relationships. There has been little research, however, on how young people represent and develop their professional identities online and through social network sites when they begin looking for professional employment.

Previous research has found that students have little guidance when it comes to managing their privacy settings and representing themselves professionally for the job market (Buck, 2012). This paper investigates the use of social media to present professional work and interests through journalism students' online professional portfolios and an integration of these identity representations through social networking sites such as Twitter and LinkedIn. Through an exploration of these students' professional identity representations, this study considers how educators might assist students in entering distinct "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in online spaces in order to consider themselves as developing professionals.

Professional Identities and Online Spaces

In a transitional space between school and the workplace, upper-level courses in students' majors allow them to not only practice more advanced disciplinary work, but also allow students the opportunity to develop professional identities in these fields. Lave and Wenger (1991), Casanave (2002), and Prior (1998) discuss how students and writers become enculturated into professional fields through education and academic writing. Through the discursal construction of self, writers create new identities as they enter new communities of practice.

Social media provides individuals with new ways to connect with these communities of practice to develop identities for different audiences. Perhaps as a way to avoid situations in which students are judged for social media content they upload, many are given advice to tighten privacy settings and remove photos when they begin to look for jobs as they leave school. Social media use while actively applying for jobs is often seen through the negative: do not post publicly, do not share photos, and be careful

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about what information is available online. In her recent book, danah boyd (2014) notes that this type of paternalism does not give young people the opportunity to engage in thoughtful online interactions. Similarly, this advice may help students consider the wider audiences of their content, but it does not allow students to use social media proactively, to connect with professionals in their fields, or to share their professional work with a wider audience. This paper investigates how students conceive of and represent their identities in online spaces.

Theoretical Framework

This project is informed by Holland, Lachicotte Jr., Skinner, and Cain's (1998) conception of a "practice theory" of the self, which argues for balancing sociocultural influences and individual agency. For these authors, identity is multiple and recreated in each moment, not based in inherent characteristics of an individual or dictated by a society. They do see identity as anchored in embodied categories, yet it is constantly negotiated through social activity and individual agency. These individual elements do not in and of themselves make an individual, but they are "living tools of the self" (28). The self is always embedded in social practice, and Holland et al. see "sites of self" as always plural (p. 30). Interactions between an individual and a group of people create what Holland and her colleagues call "figured worlds," defined as "social frames of meaning in which interpretations of actions are negotiated." Individuals represent themselves in relation to these figured worlds, and these representations are shaped by their conceptions of and interactions with the group.

These figured worlds provide what Holland et al. call a "space for authoring," where an individual authors an identity that fits within that figured world, but is still based in that individual's embodied experience. Holland and her colleagues therefore see identity construction through this negotiation between an individual and a group. Considering the profession in which a student is entering as a figured world allows faculty to assist students in conceiving of audiences and identities for professional spaces.

Methodology

Writing courses, particularly courses that focus on the professional writing students will be engaged in in their professional careers, represent ideal locations through which to guide students in representing professional digital identities, as Paula Boyd (2013) has argued. This study consists of in-depth interviews with students from an online journalism course I taught in Spring 2013 and Spring 2014. Throughout this class, students represented professional work and interests on a WordPress blog and through Twitter. They also developed professional online portfolios to showcase their work in the class.

I collected digital texts (text & image screen capture) of 15 students' professional online identity representations from social network sites determined by the research participants, which included LinkedIn, Twitter, and other sites. I also collected and analyzed participants' final online portfolios from the course. These texts were discussed in a semi-structured interview with each participant. Follow up interviews were conducted six months after the initial interview to assess how students continued

to develop their online professional digital identities after the course. The data was analyzed through open coding, and coding categories were derived through that data based in grounded theory.

Conclusions

While analysis of this data is ongoing, students participating in the study reported that they had spent little attention considering their digital identities as journalists in online spaces. While one participant had a blog he updated regularly before enrolling in this course, many students took their first steps to considering their professional digital identities in this course. For many of these students, Twitter was a work in progress. While they saw the importance of Twitter in networking with other professionals in their field, they currently used the service to connect to peers. The course allowed them the opportunity to share their own professional work through this online platform, and they often maintained two accounts, one for professional purposes. Through the online digital portfolios and LinkedIn profiles, students saw value in maintaining these online spaces in order to share their work more widely and to consider the possibilities for networking, promotion, and participation with other journalists online.

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