

Perception of imagined audience

Digital Culture and Society

18.05.11

Supervisors:

Bjarki Valtysson & Christina Neumayer

Written by:

Martine Ramskov Gjede – mrgj@itu.dk

7.973 words

Contents

Abstract	4
Introduction	4
Problem formulation.....	5
Definition of networks, imagined, immediate and invisible audience	6
Theoretical Framework.....	7
Social online networks	7
The rhetorical traditions transferred onto Facebook	9
Conceptualizing audiences on social online platforms	9
Interaction with a creative audience in a produsage environment.....	10
Actions of self-presentation, when dealing with collapsed contexts.	11
Front- and backstage: Goffman and the self-presentation.....	11
Collapsed contexts.....	12
Lifting the curtain: Dealing with collapsed contexts	12
Technological affordances.....	13
Methology	15
Questions on Facebook	15
The blog.....	16
The interviews	16
Laura	16
Lene.....	16
Nick	17
Analysis.....	18
Acts of maintaining the social network.....	18
The perception of audience as a variable	20
Performances, self-presentation and codes of conduct.....	23
Concise Conclusion	24
Discussion.....	26
Conclusion.....	27
References.....	29

Appendix31

Abstract

This research paper presents a study on how users perceive an imagined audience when creating status updates on Facebook. Through a theoretical framework of self-presentation and performance on the medium, and an understanding of how social networks act on social media in order to maintain the network, the study analyses a data collection made on how users conceptualize the imagined audience when creating updates. The study suggests that the perception is pliable according to the user's offline interactions, geographical location and creative acts of maintaining a social network. Furthermore the user utilizes a collaborative construction with the audience to perceive the audience, however experiencing a crisis of performance with expected consistency when dealing with collapsed contexts on the medium. The study advocates that creating updates in the future will become a middle ground between perceiving an imagined audience and taking advantages of privacy settings on Facebook.

Keywords: Audience, self-presentation, Facebook, social media, digital society

Introduction

On a Tuesday at 2 pm, Nick, a user on Facebook, created a status update he sent out to his 629 friends:

"CBS!!! Warning Warning Warning. Don't even think about it."¹

The status update doesn't explain or elaborate further. Naturally only some of Nick's 629 friends will know what he is implying in his status update. The status update isn't directed to *all* of his friends, but only *some* of his friends. In his short status update, Nick has created an imagined audience, to whom he directs the message, consisting of fellow students from Copenhagen Business School and excluding the rest of his list of friends. Nick might have forgotten that he also has an invisible audience, consisting of *everyone*, who can read the status update. In this sense, he is directing his message to his imagined audience and ignoring his invisible audience. His choice of imagined audience is supported by the audience liking and commenting his update.

¹ Appendix 1, 1).

The American ethnographer, danah boyd describes directing ourselves to audience on social networks sites as a compromise, transferring how we know to act socially offline to how we conduct and present ourselves online. Offline we are “fine-tuning” our social conduct according to the context we are in. However online, we are no longer facing one social context – but several. We are faced with collapsed contexts, when we have become friends with old and new colleagues, ex-partners, new classmates, old high school friends, our mother-in-law and acquaintances from church. Although we have a sense of our audience, in order to present ourselves, we have to construct or imagine an audience:

“The need for variable self-presentation is complicated by increasingly mainstream social media technologies that collapse multiple contexts and bring together commonly distinct audiences².”

The variable self-presentation not only comes into place when we are dealing with collapsed contexts when using Facebook as a medium for creating status updates. Our technological affordances are also a variable, compromising our performance and our perception of our audience on the medium.

Problem formulation

The purpose of this study is to explore the perception of imagined audience and how this concept is revealed through user’s status updates with the problem formulation:

How do certain users conceptualize an imagined audience when creating status updates on Facebook?

This project will explore the perception of imagined audience. Firstly, I will create a theoretical framework by describing social online networks and directing messages through status updates (hereafter updates) by referring to the works of Manuel Castells. I will then reflect on how old rhetorical traditions of the perception of audience can be transferred onto Facebook by reflecting on Castells’ theories of creative audience and Alex Bruhns’ produsage environment. Furthermore in order to gain a clear overview of the digital audience and how users imagine and construct, I will include Erving Goffman’s theories of action of self-presentation and front and backstage, explaining how this becomes conflicted when dealing with collapsed contexts and technological

² Marwich, 2010

affordances on the medium. Secondly, I will describe the data collection methods I have used and third, I will combine methods and the theoretical framework for an analysis and discussion on the perception of imagined audience.

Definition of networks, imagined, immediate and invisible audience

In the project I am using the terms network, perception of imagined audience as well as invisible and immediate audience. I use Castells definition of network: A network is a unit of interconnected nodes. A node is a single component which is contributing to the goal of the network. In a social network, there is a certain social interaction and a production of meaning. The social network works on a binary logic that will include and exclude, changing over time according to the performance and ability of the nodes that contribute and according to social interest³.

I define the imagined audience as: The audience, the user write or reach out to by posting pictures, videos or links through updates on Facebook. The imagined audience is a group of friends within the list of friends the user has collected on the medium, and the user thinks of this collection of friends when the update is being created.

I define the invisible audience as: The invisible audience is, depending on the user's privacy settings, everyone that uses Facebook, Friends the user has accepted, Friend or Friends or groups the user has chosen to include in updates using the lock function, and therefore taking advantage of privacy settings for updates. The invisible audience is called "invisible" because it is the audience we cannot see, and often forget. It does not only operate in real time but operates in the future, gaining access to our information.

I define immediate audience: The audience that announces itself on the medium, by liking and commenting. The audience operates in real-time or near future, and through engaging, the user gains feedback and responds.

³ Castells, 2004; 4-43

Theoretical Framework

Social online networks

In the socialization of society, there is a construction of a shared cultural practice that allows individuals and social groups to live together⁴. In the digital era, we find the cultural social practices in online social platforms such as Facebook. People are joining for the main purpose of socializing, catching up through the creation of a certain self-presentation. On digital platforms people come together and communicate for the sake of communicating. There is a value of creativity and a possibility of self-realization by inventing, and sharing, a constant flow of production and using, copying and re-creating (remixing) turning users into “producers”. The value of sharing becomes a part of networking, creating a synergy of learning from others but also passing knowledge on, becoming a culture in itself⁵.

In the digital era, what defines the social network, is a certain expression and individualism, performed by the user, where a manner to maintain the network is to send targeted messages to the rest of the network⁶. On Facebook this practice can be seen through sharing links, picture, videos and creating updates. The updates created to maintain the network are often of symbolic value, or completely esoteric –excluding nodes that may be connected through the list of accepted friends, but do not belong to a certain social network. However the excluded nodes are often visually aware of this exclusion, when an update is created, and ordinarily whole heartedly accepts the exclusion in accordance to undefined terms of social conduct on the social online platform. In order to maintain the network, creating a flow or a stream of information to the network, the user has to direct his updates by creating an imagined audience.

How the user contributes and acts on Facebook changes over time, depending on the participation of the certain social network. Since networks are pliable, constantly expanding or shrinking, and has no center or a hierarchy, the survival of the network is depending on the performance of the single user. It is therefore up to the user to produce, but also to direct himself to his audience, the social network by self-mass communication.

⁴ Ibid., 2004;30

⁵ Ibid., 2004; 40

⁶ Ibid., 2004;30

Directing messages to a certain social online network is not the only reason users create updates. The users also creates updates and communicate – for the sake of communication, making a self-mass communication. With the growing abilities of media online and horizontal networks of communication, we can choose to broadcast our opinions in a real or chosen time to a global audience that is everybody that wants to listen or read. Castells describe it as:

“Self-generated in content, self-directed in emission and self-selected in reception by many who communicate with many,⁷” meaning that we choose and direct the exact content, and we select the wide audience. On Facebook the users choose the wide audience as friends or friends of friends, and intently create an update as a “shout out”, not excluding or including, but self-generated communication for the sake of spreading a message widely.

⁷ Castells, 2009;70

The rhetorical traditions transferred onto Facebook

Moving from understanding that we create updates in order to maintain and contribute to the life of a social network or to mass-self communicate, I will now describe how we conceptualize the audience according to rhetorical traditions and how the audience engages in a produsage environment.

Conceptualizing audiences on social online platforms

According to old rhetorical perceptions of audience we have guidelines, we approach, when we direct ourselves to our audience. The whole purpose of presenting ourselves in front of an audience is to provoke or reinforce the approval and backing of our audience. In that sense, we want to create a mental contact with our audience.⁸ However the audience can be a variable, and can not only be identified according to visible or auditory conditions. The audience can be defined according to whom, through argumentation, the speaker is directing himself to⁹.

Just as the audience can be a variable offline, the audience is a variable online, containing several audiences, that not only differ in social contexts¹⁰ but also in time and in matter of conduct from both the user and the audience: The invisible audience that operates past, present and future and in different contexts, the audience we imagine and construct, when we write our update, and the immediate audience that becomes visible, by announcing itself through “likes” and “comments”. In this sense the immediate audience will differ from the imagined audience and this is revealed through response.¹¹

Chaïm Perelman outlines the specialized audience versus the universal audience as a rhetorical perception of offline audience. When we direct ourselves in front of a specialized audience, some perceptions, methods or phrases are commonly known and need no further elaboration, whereas the universal audience is everybody who is capable physically and consents to listen. The universal audience in this sense has to consent by listening in order to become an audience.

Consenting to be an audience on Facebook is found through accepting friend requests, and furthermore the News Feed. In this function, sharing of links, videos, pictures and written updates

⁸ Perelman, 43

⁹ Ibid., 47-48

¹⁰ boyd, 2007

¹¹ boyd, 2006

are shown, and if we choose to hide a person, we no longer consent to be a “universal audience”. The specialized audience comes into existence when we direct our updates to our imagined audience. And this audience will announce itself and make consent through “likes” or “comments”.

Interaction with a creative audience in a produsage environment.

Castells describes the digital audience as a creative audience which not only receives the messages, but according to own cultural frame, interprets and modify the meaning.¹² Furthermore Bruhns describes this as part of the produsage environment, when the social interaction becomes the central purpose of the community participation.¹³ Even though this particular research project will not investigate the aspect of the remixing audience, the creative audience in a participating culture, is a vital part of a production, when the speaker directs messages through updates. The speaker seeks approval, trust, a good reputation and merit¹⁴ which can be gained through the participation of the audience, announcing itself through comments and likes. Through this interaction, a mental and social contact between audience and user is created. The social contact between speaker and audience becomes a collective project¹⁵ with the purpose of maintenance. Just as the speaker seeks response from the audience, the audience collaborates creatively in an engagement production, thus bringing creative life, entertainment and maintenance to the network society.

¹² Castells, 2009, 127

¹³ Bruhns, 2008, 316

¹⁴ Ibid., 316

¹⁵ Ibid., 326

Actions of self-presentation, when dealing with collapsed contexts.

From conceptualizing the audience and understanding the creative engagement, I will now describe the actions of selfpresentation and how it becomes conflicted when dealing with collapsed contexts on Facebook.

Front- and backstage: Goffman and the self-presentation

Goffman's theory of self-presentation goes hand in hand with Castells theory of the network society, and how actions are conducted in order to maintain the social network. Goffman describes self-presentation as a performance, we make in front of an audience. In some instances we deliberately perform in a calculation manner in order to evoke a specific response, other times we perform in order to uphold a tradition in a group or because a social status requires a certain expression.¹⁶ On Facebook we experience an upholding of this tradition when a speaker directs himself to a certain group or audience through updates, using a certain language, manner of speech, or sharing links, pictures or videos. Goffman distinguishes the performance as a front and backstage. The front is a "fixed presentation" where a performance takes place in front of an audience, consisting of the equipment needed in order to perform, but also consisting of a balance between appearance and manner, appearance referring to personal items that reflect the performer's social status, and manner, to the way the performer conducts himself. Backstage is where the audience is not allowed, and where the performer steps out of character and does not suppress himself. On Facebook we have set up a front stage with equipment of privacy settings, profile pictures, choices of representation in our profile info describing our education, work and private beliefs, philosophy and interests. However, when it comes to our performance the manners and appearance, and transfer between front and back stage becomes fluid. The reason for this is collapsed contexts.

¹⁶ Goffman, 1959; 17

Collapsed contexts

With collapsed contexts, the user of social online platforms is conflicted. From the offline world the user is accustomed to adjust the conversation according to the relevant social conduct; however the user is presented with a challenge when facing a mixture of several social networks engaging in his online presentation on Facebook. This means that some actions, that might be suitable in one context, may not be suitable in another.¹⁷ When transferring from offline to online, the adjustment often results in the creation of virtual psychical walls. The walls are a symbol of dividers, between the different social conducts in which we operate. Offline we are used to architecture shielding us according to who our audience consists of. We can see the people we are talking to, or hear on the phone.¹⁸ However when we transfer to an online community we can no longer detect our audience, and we create psychical walls in the format of imagining an audience.

Lifting the curtain: Dealing with collapsed contexts

Besides describing the front stage as a furnished setting, Goffman explains that a setting has to be put in place - an act cannot begin before the performer has brought himself into the "appropriate place".¹⁹ Offline, the appropriate place, is how we choose to express ourselves with language, clothes, material things and even people we associate with. On Facebook it is a fluid operation. We can bring ourselves into an appropriate place, however because of collapsed contexts it requires time, constant awareness of new privacy settings, locking of updates etc. and choosing our audience at all times. This way we can stay in check with all our performances. However the performances fall short because of technological affordances, knowledge that Facebook has made new settings, lack of effort, and the immediacy of the medium. We choose to handle the front stage with a complete ignorance of some contexts, to stay silent, or stage a self-presentation where we set up certain basic rules of conduct. However even though we set up a front performance, our audience interrupts by commentaries. Even though we manage to keep our performance in check, comments, tagging, photo uploads from the audience force a lift of the

¹⁷ boyd, 2009

¹⁸ Marwich, 2010

¹⁹ Goffman, 33

curtain, revealing the backstage. Similar to the lifting of the curtain is Joshua Meyrowitz theory of “middle region”, describing how media eliminate walls that separate social contexts²⁰. Through technology there is a region between the front and backstage, that shapes how we interact socially and break barricades between gender and age. However Meyrowitz theories mostly apply to journalism, tv and cultivating life of celebrities²¹.

For the Facebook-user, a performance is a balance by “the curtain”. Not only is there a performance, where the participant has his own belief on reality, but he makes a performance, a sort of virtual impression on how he wishes to present himself. His performance changes according to his imagined audience, however the invisible audience doesn’t change.

Goffman describes “expected consistency”, which means, we expect coherence between manner and appearance. According to Goffman, there are stereotyped expectations for the front, and that the front is rarely created solely by the performer, but is already staged by established social roles.²² With the existence of collapsed contexts the expected consistency on Facebook becomes strenuous. When creating an account, the user chooses to perform as he wishes. According to this performance the audience has a significant role. If the user only had colleagues as friends, he would perform in one way, if he had family friends he would perform in another. With collapsed contexts the user must choose a coherent performance, which is impossible. So he compromises by imagining an audience to perform for.

Technological affordances

Throughout the theoretical framework I have referred to technological affordances as a hindrance for our self-presentation and choosing our performance when dealing with collapsed contexts. Below, I will quickly elaborate before moving onto description of methods used in the research.

According to boyd the perception of audience is closely related to technological affordances on the medium. Based on how we perceive who our audience consists of, users make room for different relationships through friend requests, and how they will perform accordingly. Their choice on their performances is influenced by how they understand to navigate the privacy

²⁰ Marwich, 2010

²¹ Thyri, 1999

²² Goffman, 37

settings on Facebook and the perception of who might be “looking”.²³ The users understanding of the audience is revealed through their performance and how they can navigate, with tagging, locking the update, grouping and allowing friends to witness complete open profile vs. a narrow profile. Within updates, using the locking function is handy when choosing the audience. However it requires the technological affordance of knowing this option is available, how to create lists, group friends, and also the desire and time to group friends. Also coming into play is the politics of Facebook, wanting to have a remaining and increasingly open medium, with the default setting set to share broadly.²⁴ Constantly making up new ways to have open profiles and receiving knowledge of friends, requiring constant inspections for new technological features available.

²³ boyd, 2006

²⁴ boyd & Hargittai, 2010

Methology

Questions on Facebook

To investigate how Facebook users perceive their audience through updates I asked various questions, about habits of conducting and creating updates and imagining who would be inclined to be “on the receiving end” (the audience). Throughout a time period of two months I posted random questions in my own network on Facebook,²⁵ and also assigned an ambassador with dedicated commentary followers to help gathering answers.²⁶ In order to gain a variety of perspectives, I also assigned an ambassador to reach out to users that are in different social networks than I. The questions I asked included narrow philosophical questions such as:

“Who do you think about, when you write status updates – who you have in mind?”

and open questions such as:

“Do you share videos on Facebook? What kinds, and why?”

and

“Does it sometime surprise you who comments on your status update?”

When I received comments I would occasionally ask for an elaboration, and thus create a dialogue. The postings on Facebook turned out to be an interesting way to collect data material, engaging the creative audience in a collaborative construction. My network became encouraged to talk about the research, and I witnessed several dialogues about the subject in private settings and online instances²⁷.

I received 64 responds on the questions on Facebook. Some chose to answer publicly in the commentaries, and some privately mailed answers. I have chosen to anonymize the informants, not distinguishing between gender, age and geographical location, in order to illustrate the virtual environment of the social online platform.

²⁵ Appendix 2.

²⁶ Appendix 3.

²⁷ Appendix 4.

The blog

The material was collected on a blog.²⁸ Initially the blog was created to have a place to link to when questions were posted, so users could gain more information about the research project and information about me, in order to motivate the participating in the project. Upon receiving the many responds I decided it was a way to easily organize and collect the body of data.

The interviews

I did three semi structured qualitative interviews with three personalities that all have in common that they have: +200 friends, use Facebook daily, frequently create updates and frequently have likes and comments. To gain insight to conceptualizing audience I interviewed about habits of creating updates and participation on commentaries. Before the interviews I gained insight in the targets' Facebook-habits by investigating their updates. Two interviews were conducted face to face and one on Skype. Although conducted on Skype, I didn't experience compromise or a challenge in the intimacy obtained when being together in person.

In order to understand some quotes used in the analysis, I will briefly describe the three targets, referring to them as Laura, Lene and Nick:

Laura

Laura is 34, married and a stay at home mom with six kids. She lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, but is originally from Alabama, where she has a lot of friends. She is very active in church, and her main circle of friends consists of church, family and old high school friends. Laura has been on Facebook since 2009. She has 204 friends on FB, some of them encountered online.

Lene

Lene is a master thesis student at IT University in Copenhagen, studying Digital Design and Communication. She is writing her master thesis on social media with two other women. She is 27 and lives in Copenhagen. Lene has been on Facebook since 2006. She has 200 friends. Lene has encountered all friends offline.

²⁸ www.conceptofaudience.blogspot.com, see also appendix 5 for screenshot of entire body of response to questions on Facebook.

Nick

Nick is a graduate student at Copenhagen Business School (CBS), studying International Business and Politics. He is also working as a language officer for the Danish military, and has done this for app. nine years. He has been in war several times, and is now teaching Pashtu and Arabic to other officers. Nick is 29 and lives in Copenhagen. He initially said, he had been on Facebook since 2005, however after a little research we found, it was 2007. Nick has 629 friends. Nick has encountered all friends offline.

I decided on interviews and questions on Facebook and against a focus group, because I wanted to honor and explore the individual experience of creating an update. Users create updates and interact on Facebook differently and I didn't want immediate answers to be manipulated by opinions. This resulted in three very different interview sessions and answers.

Analysis

I will now do an analysis of perception of imagined audience based on the data I have collected through the three interviews and the questions on Facebook. Firstly, I will conduct an analysis of the approach taken to maintain a social network. Secondly, I will analysis the perception of audience as a variable, thirdly the perception of audience when performing front and backstage.

Acts of maintaining the social network

In social networks, users are contributing and performing. One reason for this is to remain an included node, but also to justify the networks existence. Upon creating updates we see these acts of maintenance through a flow or a stream of information, directed to a specific social network. In the interview, Nick explained how his updates are often information given to special social networks:

“If I get a sudden impulse that I know someone in the network, would think was funny, because, one, in between the lines, makes a joke about the employer.”²⁹

Nick indicates that his updates are written, so one has to “read between the lines”, therefore excluding nodes and including a specific network. In his updates, Nick is maintaining the network, and the audience reassures him by announcing themselves through comments and likes, collaborating in the social network by produsing and maintaining with him:

“MG: Why do you think they comment?

N: Because it is in that way the status updates are created (..) they know what is meant by what is said in the status updates.”³⁰

When users work on maintaining the social network, they give signals that this is a work of “maintenance”, perceiving an imagined audience consisting of a specific group that will receive and understand the updates because of the signals given. These signals are of a creative variety: Including esoteric terms, language or knowledge sharing:

“If I write something about sign language, it is mostly directed to my fellow students because they know what I am talking about.”³¹

²⁹ App 6, 24-25, App 9.

³⁰ App 6 78-80, App. 9

³¹ App 5, 3. 9), App. 9

The quote above indicated esoteric signals. The user employs phrases that are commonly known within a specific network and need no further elaboration, however other signals may apply that are not in a written format such as sharing links:

“There are many of my friends, that I know share the same interests as I, so I am thinking that they would find it interesting to read this article, so it is a knowledge sharing.”³²

The quote above mentions a broader signal where links are provided as a knowledge sharing within a network of interests; however the signals can also be narrow:

“The only video I ever posted was of Ethan’s first steps. I wanted friends and family back home to see it.”³³

Some users approach a clear direction to an imagined audience by tagging the audience or shout outs:

“Normally I announce Hey Baton Rouge gals! Where’s a good place to buy shoes? So when I do something like that, I generally specify the audience that I am thinking about.”³⁴

When users send out signals of maintenance, they are deliberately including nodes, but excluding others. Although perceiving an imagined audience, the invisible audience still exists. In my data collection I discovered an interesting point of view from an audience outtake. There are times it is inappropriate to comment and therefore announcing themselves as an audience:

“Under normal circumstances I wouldn’t comment on updates that wasn’t meant for me as an audience”³⁵

This indicates that there is an “honor code” on Facebook between the user and the creative audience. The users perceive an imagined audience, and even though there is an invisible audience present, commenting when sending out signals to a certain social network is inappropriate unless you are an included node. However it also extends to who you interact with offline. If offline contact is limited, then commenting is inappropriate when updates are directed for maintaining a network:

“I wouldn’t comment on an old classmate’s update, just because I think it should be held within the circle of people I have contact with daily or the networks I am in”.³⁶

³² App 8 38-40, App. 9

³³ App 5 10, 26)

³⁴ App 7 216-217

³⁵ App 5 13, 32)

³⁶ App 6 219-221

The perception of audience as a variable

Above I have explained how users create updates for presenting a social network with a flow of information. However the imagined audience can consist of more than one variable. When questioning who comments on the updates, several users replied that it was a crossing of several circle of friends:

“Laura: Most of the time it's a group of probably up to ten people, that if there is a comment it's going to be one of those ten (..) A lot of them are my high school friends (..) Then I have my friends here, who are primarily people I go to church with, then I have friends from my family, like my personal family. And then my husband's family. And those are the primary people I communicate with.”³⁷

Above is mentioned that Laura has a dedicated following of ten people who regularly comment on her update. However she also implies that the dedicated following are a group of people she mostly communicates with. Lene shares the same perception of her audience:

“a mix between people from university, high school, orchestra etc. If I have to define them more specifically, it is people that know about my everyday life and who I talk to regularly.”³⁸

However, even though having dedicated followers crossing several social networks, the perception of imagined audience can still change, if the user changes location geographically:

“Laura: I spent time with friends that I haven't interacted with in a while, then do I think the next couple of days or so, when I am posting, that I am thinking about them more? (..) Probably (..) Yeah (..) Just because of nearness of contact.

MG: And also maybe a change in geographic location?

Laura: Being in Alabama, I think about Alabama friends more.”³⁹

Above quote indicates that not only is there a perception of imagined audience determined by dedicated followers, but the perception changes according to interactions offline. However this perception may alter, when someone the user didn't include in the imagined audience suddenly announces themselves by commenting or liking. And then the user experiences a collision between imagined and immediate audience:

³⁷ App 7 14-22

³⁸ App 5 4,11)

³⁹ App 7 136-143

“I have gotten surprised a couple of times. For example, if I post something that is of a spiritual/religious nature, and someone who I didn’t know about their walk, would comment. It would also please me to (..) get comments from people I hadn’t seen/talked to in a while”^{40 41}

Even though the user experienced a collision between imagined and immediate audience, they tend to be positive about the intrusion of their perception:

“I get surprised when someone I haven’t spoken to in a while, suddenly comments (..) But then I am also glad because I get to thinking, that there is still a reason why we are friends on Facebook”.⁴²

Because the user has grown accustomed to choosing an imagined audience, when this collision of perception occurs, it can induce an element of surprise, because the user suddenly becomes aware of the neglect of the awareness of the invisible audience:

“MG: Do you get surprised, when these people comment?

Laura: Yeah, because sometimes I forget that.. they're THERE (..) Because when I post status updates I am thinking about my circle of close friends”⁴³

Above I have addressed how the user’s perception of imagine audience come about by offline interaction with several social networks, and how this perception can be altered by the interference of an immediate audience. However like the rhetorical traditions, the speaker wants the audience to announce themselves, by trying to provoke a response. On Facebook a user can provoke a response by fostering an update either with a shocking substance, tagging or direct questions:

“I started thinking well, if people don't know that about me, what do I not know about other people? And so one of my status updates was (..) I like to collect aprons, do you collect something, what do you collect?”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ App 5 12, 29)

⁴¹ In this quote, the user refers to “the walk”, meant as a spiritual journey – “a walk with God”.

⁴² App 5 12,31)

⁴³ App 7 32-34

⁴⁴ App 7 198-199

On Facebook there is also the option of the audience claiming the right to be a part of the imagined audience. Above I have briefly touched upon this subject by mentioning dedicated followers however I would like to elaborate further. An audience can claim the right to be part of the audience by continuously liking or commenting to a variety of updates the user creates:

“Lene: It is the same who comments (..) those I write my master thesis with (..) and the crazy thing is, a lot of the things I write they already know (..) and then we sit in the same room and comment on each other’s updates.

MG: If you were going to a high school reunion, and you created an update about it – would there be other people who commented, you think?

Lene: Some from high school (..) and the two I write my master thesis with.”⁴⁵

Above Lene describes that the two she writes her master thesis with also claim the right to become the imagined audience when Lene directs updates to a network in which they are not included. The result of this announcement is that they ARE included in the perception. However it is important to note, that an audience can claim the right to be perceived as such, however this does not interfere with the previously mentioned “honor code”. An audience must at some point have become a close member of a social network, before crossing over and becoming an imagined audience where it is not natural. Also a user is not always sending signals to maintain a network, but to the imagined audience consisting of dedicated followers, where persistent activity from an immediate audience member can entail an inclusion in the perception of imagined audience.

Just as the audience announce themselves, the audience has the possibility of no longer consenting to be a part of the perceived imagined audience. This is done by no producing and no activity: No comments and no likes. And ultimately the audience can hide the user from the news feed and therefore not be a part of the universal audience.

⁴⁵ App 8, 101-116, App 9

Performances, self-presentation and codes of conduct

I have previously described how a user performs to evoke a response from the audience as well as to maintain the social network. An aspect of Goffman's theory of self-presentation is to uphold the front stage, where there is a "fixed" manner of performance. The performer has a certain conduct of behavior, which can be transferred onto Facebook and also the perception of audience.

According to this perception, the user try to uphold the front stage through a performance of expected consistency but also gives a presentation according to how the user wishes to be perceived. In my study I found various ways of execution, from posting happy pictures and videos of children, as a presentation of a whole-some happy family life, to creating updates with a witty and intelligent context:

"Lene: I would like to post more fun stuff, but it is sometimes hard. You have to be creative once in a while, right? (..) FB is about how you present yourself, and if you can get other people to smile about what you write, then that would be fantastic."⁴⁶

The creation of updates relates to the expected consistency that is a balance of performance and how users wish to be perceived by the imagined audience. However one instance where the consistent performance is threatened is with collapsed contexts. And then the use of technological affordances is beneficial:

"Laura: I hid older people from my husband's family, and then in my church. Because it was inviting my friends to a belly dance class, and I didn't know exactly how they would view that."⁴⁷

Laura is explaining how her self-presentation was compromised, and her imagined audience would perceive an inconsistent behavior, so she chose to use privacy settings to determine a narrow audience, excluding a group of people. The expected consistency is related to the social network, the user navigates within, however with the collapsed contexts our self-presentation is compromised, because we have to be careful to not be thrown back stage. Another way to go about this is creating rules of conduct, the user try to uphold:

"Lene: To trumpet my feelings on FB is not something I practice (..) I mean all emotions, both being angry, sad, really happy and go: "Oh I'm in love!", the whole spectrum (..) FB is still a public place, and I don't exclude anybody from seeing my status, so it is a lot of people, that see what I write."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ App 8, 339-343

⁴⁷ App 7, 88-90

Lene describes how she has made a rule of conduct not to have any emotional outbursts. However, even though a user set up a certain code of conduct, with interference of private life or back stage, the perception of audience alters, and the rules are broken, resulting in lifting the curtain and revealing the back stage: Emotional outbursts, alcoholic intake, resulting in sometimes deleting updates:

“Nick: I have tried logging in and deleting status updates or comments after I have written them, because they were perhaps written under the influence of alcohol and the day after I was like “oh!”⁴⁹

Sometimes it is not only the user who lifts the curtain – the audience will forcefully do it for us, through private comments, tagging of updates, pictures and videos compromising our performance and self-presentation, making the back stage visible to the collapsed contexts. However sometimes all the audience has to do is make the user aware that the imagined audience and the immediate audience is not the same:

“I had a shock when I saw somebody I remotely know, that said to me: “Oh, you were in IKEA the other day.” Then it occurred to me that people actually sit out there and witness my life, and after that I deleted a lot of “friends”. But I haven’t locked my status updates from specific people.”⁵⁰

The user suddenly becomes aware of the collision between immediate and imagined audience, resulting in a sharpening of privacy of the medium.

Concise Conclusion

In the acts of maintaining a social network users send out signals, including esoteric terms, language, knowledge sharing and videos, and hereby revealing the perception of imagined audience. Updates can be narrowly directed through shout outs or tagging. The audience is aware when they are included as an imagined audience, even though the updates are posted visually for the invisible audience to see. If they are not included, it is generally thought of as inappropriate to comment or like. The perception of imagined audience is determined by nodes from several social networks, however the perception can change according to offline interaction and geographical location. The user gets surprised when the immediate audience announces themselves, experiencing a collision between immediate and imagined audience. The audience can claim the right to become a part of the imagined audience by becoming a dedicated follower, but can also

⁴⁸ App 8, 288-297

⁴⁹ App 6, 129-131

⁵⁰ App 5 14, 36)

no longer consent to be perceived as an audience. The user acts out a performance that is consistent with his self-presentation. In order to prevent the audience from coming back stage the user will set up rules of conduct on updates. However, because of the collapsed contexts the user's curtain is lifted, either self-inflicted by inconsistent performance or by an intrusive audience, causing the user to delete updates or insert tighter privacy settings.

Discussion

According to boyd, privacy is not about owning or being in control of the data released on the internet. Privacy is about the ability to understand the dividing lines in a social situation and understanding how to navigate within this situation.⁵¹ As previously mentioned, users operating on a social medium, such as Facebook, experience a crisis in the performance, because they usually understand privacy as architecture, incorporating it online by perceiving an imagined audience. However when experiencing a collision between immediate and imagined audience, the user's consistent performance alters. As an outcome of this collision, one would expect the user to gain an understanding of technological affordances. According to an study conducted by boyd et.al. a correlation exists between activity and privacy. The users who frequently engage in the produsage environment, such as creating updates, commenting and liking, are more aware of their privacy settings:

“Those who are regularly engaged in content-contributing activities on Facebook are more likely to modify their settings than those who share on the site less frequently. This makes sense given that those who regularly post content may be more conscious about their audience”.⁵²

However, in the presenting study, I have found that this is not the case: While Facebook has made it available to lock one's update to a certain group of friends and therefore choose an audience; the users I have come across in this study are not using this opportunity – mostly because they are not aware that the opportunity is available. To prove my point, I conducted a quick little poll on Facebook. Out of 21 respondents 86% answered they don't lock status updates, and furthermore 43% spontaneously commented that they weren't aware of the privacy setting.⁵³ This raises a question of the subject of privacy, and whether Facebook isn't spreading this knowledge simply because of the wish for a medium that is to remain as public as possible. However, it also raises the question, if in fact being aware of this privacy option: Would users lock their status updates or would they still perceive an imagined audience? I believe that it would be both. Using the lock function is way to perform consistently for a set audience. Excluding an audience that isn't a part of the imagined, being exposed to sensible updates. The performer will ensure that all updates are

⁵¹ boyd, 2010

⁵² boyd & Hargittai, 2010, 13

⁵³ App 5, 17-18

according to the expected consistency of said audience. However locking status updates are also too much effort and takes away the immediacy of the medium, and the collaborative producing with the audience: With the signals directed out to the network and the codes of conduct present on Facebook, the audience will give an impression to the user that the invisible audience is not there, creating an illusion on the medium.

But then what about the interrupting audience, that creates a collision between imagined and immediate audience? Most users in my data collection described the collision positively; they enjoyed it because it meant a confirmation on why the user and the audience were friends on Facebook. There is also the fact of the “claiming to become a dedicated follower”. When the user gets such claims, the user will extend the perception of imagined audience to include the claiming audience – but it will naturally also mean that the updates will be altered – because when you create an update for an imagined audience, you consider your audience. However, the user will from time to time experience an intrusive audience. Goffman describes it as an audience providing destructive information⁵⁴, and that the impression of the performance will be discredited or disrupted because the back stage is revealed. In this case, there is room for technological affordance. Leading back to finding a middle ground between inserting some privacy settings in the updates while still perceiving an imagined audience.

Conclusion

To answer the research question of how some users conceptualize the perception of imagined audience I have conducted an analysis of the data I have collected and used theories of self-presentation and social networks. The conclusive results are that the user perceives an audience that is a part of a social network but also is a crossing between several circles of friends, with dedicated followers. The user executes updates by directing messages containing signals for the network. The perception of audience is a variable, and alters with the users’ offline interactions and geographical location. The perception of audience is pliable and can be increased with the announcing and claiming of immediate audience and can be decreased when the user experience a collision between the immediate and imagined audience. When the user experiences an intrusive audience, the performance becomes altercated, forcing the user to perform backstage.

⁵⁴ Goffman, 141

This can affect how the user makes use of technological affordances on the medium. The performance of expectant consistency can also be self-inflicted due to sudden updates of emotional outburst or alcoholic intake, resulting in the user creating a code of conduct when creating updates on Facebook or to damage control by deleting updates and thereby correcting the performance.

Within the digital society we are experiencing how the user and his audience join forces in a produsage environment. This also transfers to the perception of imagined audience. The perception of audience is a collaborative construction – not only is it the user, alone, that creates and updates and perceives an audience, but the audience's engagement and participation on the medium becomes a part of the perception of imagined audience. Ultimately this means that the user utilizes the produsing audience in order to construct and perceive an audience when creating updates on Facebook.

References

boyd, danah (2006): *Friends, Friendsters, and MySpace Top 8: Writing Community Into Being on Social Network Sites.* First Monday. <http://www.danah.org/papers/FriendsFriendsterTop8.pdf>, 11.05.11

boyd, danah (2007): *Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life.* MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning – Youth, Identity, and Digital Media Volume, ed. Buckingham, David. Cambridge, MIT Press, MA.
<http://www.danah.org/papers/WhyYouthHeart.pdf>, 11.05.11

boyd, danah (2009): *Social Media is Here to Stay... Now What?*, Microsoft Research TechFest, Redmond, WA. <http://www.danah.org/papers/talks/MSRTechFest2009.html>, 11.05.11

boyd, danah (2010): *Privacy and Publicity in the Context of Big Data.* IN: WWW. Raleigh, North Carolina, April 29, <http://www.danah.org/papers/talks/2010/WWW2010.html>, 16.05.11

boyd, d. & Hargittai, E. (2010): *Facebook Privacy Settings: Who Cares?* IN: *First Monday* vol. 15 number 8. <http://www.danah.org/papers/2010/FM-FacebookPrivacySettings.pdf>, 13.05.11

Bruhns, Alex (2008): *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second life, and beyond, from production to produsage.* Peter Lang, New York.

Castells, Manuel (2004): *Informationalism, networks, and the networks society: a theoretical blueprint.* IN: *The Network Society: A Cross Cultural Perspective*, ed. Castells, M.; Elgar, E. Cheltenham/North Hampton, MA.

Castells, Manuel (2009): *Communication in the Digital Age* IN: *Communication Power.* Oxford University Press.

Goffman, Erving (1959): *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* Penguin Books, London.

Marwick, A. & boyd, d. (2010): *I tweet honesty, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience.* New Media & Society, http://www.tiara.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/marwick_boyd_twitter_nms.pdf, 11.05.11

Perelman, Chaïm (2005): *Retorikkens rige.* Hans Reitzels Forlag, Gylling.

Thyrri, Irene (1999): *Medierne og den øget personfokusering*

[http://www.update.dk/cfje/vidbase.nsf/\(VBFriTekstMultiDB\)/1695A975FE7EB582C125672D005D45CC?OpenDocument](http://www.update.dk/cfje/vidbase.nsf/(VBFriTekstMultiDB)/1695A975FE7EB582C125672D005D45CC?OpenDocument), 13.05.11

Appendix

Due to privacy, Appendices are not included in the report uploaded online. If you would like to view the appendix please contact me or go to www.conceptofaudience.blogspot.com for the anonymous answers from Facebook collected on the blog.