ARTISTS AND DIGITAL CULTURE: 
(THE STRAIN OF) SELF-PROMOTION IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT: The topic of digital identity is gaining greater academic attention with the increasing popularity of user created Internet content (referred to as Web 2.0) and social media networks. A seismic technological and cultural shift occurred with the rise of digital culture, where perceived relevance and meaning shifted from something that solely existed in the corporal, or real, world to the increasing importance or perceived relevance of information found on the Internet. These emerging forms of communication and social interaction have placed media theorists in new frontiers of interdisciplinary research to understand and explain the phenomena. In our technologically determinist culture, we increasingly depend on digital media for validating offline information, which places us in a paradigmatic shift where the offline (real) loses importance while the online (virtual) gains meaning. It can be argued that virtual existence via digital identity has become exponentially popular because of a culture that associates technology with progress, while largely ignoring the social ramifications and the effects on the individual, in our new media ecology. This study merges theoretical sources on the discussion of digital identity in such fields as: media ecology, virtual ethnography, narrative identity theory and the philosophy of technology with qualitative research on how artists associated with the Estonian Academy of Arts or the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, utilize social media networks like Facebook to negotiate a professional and social reputation.

KEYWORDS: digital culture, social media, digital identity, media ecology, virtual ethnography, and identity narratives
NOBODY KNOWS YOU’RE A DOG: AUTHENTICITY ONLINE

The most reproduced New Yorker cartoon, that amused and intrigued cultural researchers over the last decade, was first published on July 3, 1993. It was a single panel cartoon by Peter Steiner that portrayed two dogs talking, one sitting behind the computer, the other on the floor. The caption read, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog”. The cartoon has been interpreted in many different ways, some have viewed it as a snapshot in time that managed to capture the moment the Internet became entwined in our lives as well as our sense of self-identity. Others have mused that it portrayed the historical shift that took place in the early 1990s when the Internet went from being confined to the domain of business, governments and universities to being available and accessible to the general public, literally anyone and their dog. Other interpretations of the cartoon, bring us back in communication history to the early Internet and pre-Internet ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network) phenomena of MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons), which were text based, fantasy role playing environments that gave early Internet users the ability to alter their identity by creating new personas and new characters to interact with others online.

In the beginning there was the ‘handle’, an alias that was used in interactive settings like MUDs and Usenet newsgroups, a different form of authenticity and self-representation than what we are used to today in social networks. Facebook’s system of only officially allowing ‘authentic’ accounts has been a topic of criticism – which some have referred to as an identity lock-in (Nicholas Carr) or a form of radical transparency (danah boyd). As Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook’s CEO, stated in 2009: “You have one identity… The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly… Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity” (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Zuckerberg’s definition of user authenticity on Facebook is black and white, you are either authentic or you are not, you have integrity or you do not. However things were not always seen this way.

The concept of user authenticity and misrepresentation, or playing with self-representation, on the Internet has been portrayed as be-
ing problematic by some (Zuckerberg), and therapeutic by others (Turkle). The idea that you are who you say you are online and that a person essentially ‘types themselves into being’ (Sundén, 2003) is facilitated by the nature of the environment, where identity information does not exist in the corporal sense and instead must be communicated through other mediums, such as text, photo, video, audio and so forth. In real life, identity information is multi-sensory – we read others through their physical characteristics (sex, race, age, size, clothing, tools and accessories), their movements, mannerisms and expressions – all this information is communicated before anyone even opens their mouth. Another level of identity information can be communicated on the oral-aural level, such as tone of voice, language spoken, accent and choice of words.

The phenomena of computer users creating virtual representation of themselves on the Internet led to a myriad of terms used to capture, describe and analyse the activity. Terms such as digiSelf, online identity, digital identity, virtual self, and cyberself were discussed by Internet researchers in the 1990s. The idea of a cybernetic fusion between man and machine led to speculation on everything from cyborgs to ‘computer cross-dressing’ (Trend, 2001). One of the first explorers in the new field of social research, who picked up on the new phenomena of identity play of individual users in MUDs, was Sherry Turkle in her 1995 work, 'Life on Screen'. The Internet researchers of the 1990s explored the idea of using computers to re-negotiate our identity, which was applying earlier identity theories and post-modern philosophy into actual social practice. The post-modern belief of pluralism, or ‘incredulity towards meta-narratives’ (Lyotard, 1984) was applied to identity as not a singular, fixed entity but instead consisting of multiple personas, identity as being fragmented (Giddens, 1991) and identity as liquid (Foucault, 1998). Identity was discussed as something that required tailoring to appropriately pass in different situations and contexts – such as interpersonal interactions or different social environments.

In this sense, self-presentation was metaphorically referred to as performance, adopting terms from dramaturgy such as actor, stage and audience. Erving Goffman used micro-sociology to describe self-presentation in everyday life, using the smallest change in facial expression in the context of human interactions as part of different
stages (audiences), which demanded different performances from the actors. Goffman referred to such stages as; front stage (public), back stage (private) and off stage or side stage (to confidants). Kenneth Burke, a literary theorist and philosopher, referred to his social rhetorics and study of communication as dramatism. Burke’s dramatistic pentad consists of: act, scene, agent, agency and purpose, has been compared to Marshall McLuhan’s sense of figure and ground (a phenomenological approach to medium and context), which McLuhan adapted from Gestalt psychology (McLuhan and Zang, 2013). Ernest Becker, a prominent cultural anthropologist also used dramatistic terms to describe the roles that are socially constructed and culturally enforced that lead to states of anxiety and self-disconnection, that ultimately stem from a denial of death (Becker, 1962).

The theatric or dramatistic approach to language, applied to self-identity and self-representation, are nothing new and have been discussed since the Socratic Dialogues and Plato’s discussion of ‘the great stages of human life’ in The Philebus to Shakespeare’s musing on the different acts in human life, comparing the world to a theatre: “All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players, They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts” (Shakespeare, As You Like It).

The cultural and social theories of the pre-Internet, pre-personal computer, ‘electric age’ (McLuhan, 1964) are often discussed when analysing life online and when examining identity negotiation and authenticity and its relevance in virtual environments (see Goffman, Becker, Burke and McLuhan). In many ways these dramatistic self-representation and identity theories set a methodological language, with terms like “performance” and “audiences” often used in social media contexts. The social media user can be seen as a performer who has easy access to tools of mass communication, to an unlimited worldwide audience of Internet users – or a micro-public of curated ‘friends’ on networks like Facebook. The audience can dictate or shape the behaviour of the social media user. Though there are certain discomforts in mixed audiences – when it is a collection of individuals who do not necessarily know each other, have common interests or interact in real life. A haphazard mix of friends, family, co-workers, school mates, acquaintances, friends of friends, private businesses and strangers are often thrown into a homogenous
I like the pluralism of Facebook, because this is the idea of Facebook. For example if I’m interested in the art scene, or something different – I still like seeing lots of different things that are going on, on my Facebook wall. And I’m not stressed about people putting pictures of ‘her giving birth’ and the babies. Why not? It always gives you something to talk about, how people are crazy and annoying. People are what they are, and you can’t change them – you can just observe them. And if they like to put things like that, they are that kind of person who likes to share that kind of information. But this is information for me, about them (Artist, Male).

The identity narrative, when mediated through social networks, often takes the shape of a ‘status update’ or a ‘post’ which when collected together over time, can represent many fragmented, short stories about the self. These autobiographical narratives blur the line between authenticity and relevance, as self-presentation to a mass au-
Media Transformations

Audience can amplify distortion, with subjective truths, abstract symbolism, group identity, and ‘meaning making’ differing even within a select audience of Facebook friends. Authenticity and integrity become complex when dealing with subjective, abstract notions such as self-identity and identity narratives. It is a generally held belief in narrative studies that every person has their story – and that the absence of this story results in confusion and chaos – for example, those who suffer from memory loss and are unable to remember who they are and what their life story is. A three-pillar approach is acknowledged for one to socially exist and to interact with others - identity, memory and narrative (Eakin, 2008). Creating authenticity in an online environment is merely a mediate, virtual form of identity formation and communication – where identity narratives have become content for social media networks such as Facebook, as well as blogging platforms like Blogger and Wordpress, and micro-blogging at Twitter.

THE UNGOOGLABLE MAN: RELEVANCE ONLINE

If Peter Steiner’s “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” captured the zeitgeist of a culture about to turn digital in 1993, Roz Chast’s 2010 one panel cartoon represents where we find ourselves now, in a new era of digital dependence. The Ungooglable Man was published on April 8, 2010, in the New Yorker. It depicts a man walking down a sidewalk, the man, though attired normally, looks a little disturbed – he has stubble on his chin and his eyes are open a little too wide, his mouth pinched in a grimace. The caption reads ‘The Ungooglable Man’ and captions dart around him, sensationalist style, like headlines in pulp fiction: “Even the most powerful search engines cannot detect him!” another headline reads “No Facebook page... No Myspace page... No Nothing!” the last headline concludes “And yet He Walks Amongst Us!” The man walking down the street is depicted as an anomaly, the fact that no search engine can find any information about his existence and no social network has him as a user – creates an existential crisis: Can he really exist? If there are no traces of his existence on the Internet, how can he exist at all? The fact he can still ‘walk amongst us’ creates an almost ghost-like existence: where he is both seen and unseen, real and unreal – satirically speaking, an abomination of nature.
The cartoon captures an apt observation of our current culture of digitized relevance and how we increasingly depend on digital media for validating offline information. This is not just checking who individuals are, but also, to a much larger extent, about businesses and organizations. Websites that offer a platform for users to write and read reviews, for example Yelp, allow people to review (warn or endorse) businesses like restaurants and other service industries. Other user review websites, like Tripadvisor, allow users to rate their trips and vacations, by giving reviews of hotels, restaurants and travel destinations. In our social media age, businesses who have a high rating (of positive reviews) will proudly display their Tripadvisor ranking in their place of business as it lends their business a sense of prestige, relevance and authenticity.

The irony in this situation is that this particular form of authenticity and relevance is very easily manipulated by any party with a vested interest. This shift of perceived relevance stems from the growing trend of basing our knowledge and trust in the online world of user created content, whether in the form of hotel reviews on Tripadvisor or professional qualifications listed on Linked-In. The need to validate offline, ‘real life’ information, on the Internet is part of a larger cultural transformation in what is perceived as important, prestigious and authentic as opposed to what is perceived as dubious, dangerous or a scam. This places us in a paradigmatic shift where the offline world (the real) loses importance while the online world (the virtual) gains perceived meaning and relevance. It can be argued that virtual existence via digital identity has become exponentially more popular because of a culture that associates technology with progress with a cult-like following of trends in technological tools and social media platforms. The social ramifications of media effects are rarely discussed or understood. Media ecologists and Marxist theory would describe this drive as a ‘push’ on the consumers rather than following the classic ‘supply and demand’. Finding a use for things we never asked for or wanted, and didn’t know we needed, is arguably part of the technological imperative.

The Chinese discovered gunpowder but chose not to develop the gun. We in the West generally accept the notion of the technological imperative which, like natural selection and evolution, inevitably leads where it will and precludes purposeful change, directed progress.
The imperative implies that the invention of a new technique demands its adoption and development, and although there are countless examples of ‘useless’ inventions that no one wants and which are not developed but fade away, the general tendency has been to pursue possible developments for their own sake. The technological imperative concerns that self-motivated pursuit and implies that it is somehow inevitable (Shallis, 1984).

The technological imperative, or inevitability thesis, is an idea in the philosophy of technology that once a tool is introduced into a culture, it cannot be removed or stopped. (Chandler, 1995) During the interviews with artists and academics about how they use Facebook, the dissatisfaction with Facebook as a tool of communication was expressed rather explicitly:

I don’t even use (Facebook) as a networking place, I’m just part of other people’s network (Artist, Male).

However, no matter how ‘useless’ a person found Facebook to be for them, they had no plan to delete their profiles and leave the social networking site, as they saw Facebook as an uncomfortable necessity, something they were a part of, whether they liked it or not.

Another idea in the philosophy of technology and media ecology that could explain the perceived need or relevance to make use of something we do not necessarily want or need is explained by the theory of technological determinism. Technology’s ability to influence how we think, feel, view and interact with others is the foundation for technological led theories of social change. As the guru of the electric age Marshall McLuhan succinctly noted, “We shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us” (McLuhan, 1964). In historical contexts we understand how the technology of past eras re-shaped everything from the daily life of the individual to more sweeping social and cultural shifts. A well-known example being the social and cultural changes that occurred around the time of the Gutenberg press and mechanical (movable) type. The Gutenberg press ushered in a new era, with a shift from an oral-aural, non-literate culture to literacy, mass publishing and a spread of printed materials (such as The Gutenberg Bible) which created new standards, norms and ideas – ‘an agent of change’ (Eisenstein, 1980).
Technological determinism can be further subcategorized into hard determinism, soft determinism, technology as neutral and technology as non-neutral. These four sub-theories are part of a larger analytical approach when attempting to measure or describe the influence or effects of technology on the individual and society (Postman, 1993). The only difference between hard or soft technological determinism and technology as a neutral container being varying degrees of perceived autonomy or free will of man when interacting with technology, which can be problematic as “Tools insist on being used in particular ways” (Mowshowitz, 1976).

The opposing idea is that technology is neutral, which is to say technology is not inherently good or bad – but it is in how we use it that determines its meaning and effects. For example, a knife being able to spread butter on a piece of bread or stab and possibly kill another human being. However, though technically the use of a tool or technology as neutral can be demonstrated, for instance, using a gun to keep peace, as opposed to wreck havoc, the theory of technology as neutral largely ignores cultural symbolism, human cognitive grasps and other contextual and social factors.

For when we deal with meaning and culture, we inevitably move toward another ideal… To insist upon explanation in terms of “causes” simply bars us from trying to understand how human beings interpret their worlds and how we interpret their acts of interpretation (Bruner, 1990).

The way that technology, in this case social media networks such as Facebook, can affect our perception or interpretation of the world around us, and how we view ourselves (our self-identity) is demonstrated satirically in Roz Chast’s ‘Ungoogleable Man’. Where human existence in the real world has taken a backseat to Internet representation – a shift in the interpretation and understanding of who or what is relevant and who or what is real.

**SELF-PROMOTION AND SELF-CENSORSHIP ONLINE**

Both artists and academics acknowledged the construction of a digital identity online to be an essential part of the self-promotion required to add perceived value to their careers, and relevance within their own community.
Although academics may appear to be attached to older traditions, they are more accurately at the vanguard of this reconstruction of the way that information moves through a culture and its correlative reorganization of reputation, value and esteem (Barbour & Marshall, 2011).

Much like artists, academics inhabit an environment where having a good reputation, being held in esteem by their peers and being recognized by their own community will construct their relevance and importance to the larger, general public. Social media platforms have provided creative professionals and academics with a place to freely and instantly share their ideas and work, without being restricted by geographical and institutional limitations, such as exhibitions, conferences and publications.

When discussing the social media environment, and its effects on the users of social media - the private and public aspects are quite often addressed. The paradox of wanting privacy and publicity at the same time, is no longer restricted to the realms of famous celebrities and has now become the plight of every social media user as they struggle to receive the attention they crave while maintaining enough privacy to not feel invaded. Facebook recently (in 2009) made it easier to leave other users positive feedback, in the most passive form possible: by pushing a ‘Like’ button; there is no ‘Unlike’ button.

But of course the desired effect, of sharing a photo or a profile picture, is the number of likes you can get (Artist and Academic, Male).

The ‘Like’ button motivates people to share more with each other in hopes of entertaining their audience and receiving positive reinforcement or reception of the content they posted, and in doing so, creating a sense of camaraderie or community.

The sharing of personal information in an online environment helps the Internet user to create an identity to enable social interaction or recognition. Perhaps it is the nature of the social web itself that offers a free (that is to say a no-charge) platform which provides a blank slate for Internet users to share their information about themselves on websites such as Facebook, Wordpress, Twitter, Blogspot and Youtube. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, provide their
users with many different blanks to fill with their personal, real life information. These range from basic identity information like names and birth dates, to more detailed information about place of work, family relationships and friendships, as well as favourite consumer products, businesses, organizations and groups.

Self-promotion in social media can lead to relationship strains for the artists and academics who use Facebook as a platform to share information and invite others to their public events and exhibitions. Facebook allows users to make their profile and event invitation pages either private or public. An invitation to a select group of ‘Friends’ (a Facebook term for those allowed to view information) can cause certain tensions to arise when an individual does not receive the support they would like from their peer group. As one artist and academic explained, the new digital environment de-humanized and devalued an artist’s invitation to their event.

But really there is nothing useful (about Facebook) unless, maybe when I’m organizing something, then I can inform people. If I have an event, I can send invitations through Facebook. But still, for me, Facebook is not very useful in a sense, you send invitations to everybody, but it’s not like face to face communication and people know that. So you’re not sure if these people actually saw the invitation or if they saw it but just ignored it, they didn’t want to come. I feel in this sense Facebook is useless because it just gives people an excuse to avoid something if they don’t want to say “no” to your face. So, I feel that it makes things more complicated than they should be (Artist, Female).

Another example of the strain of self-promotion in social media are the feelings of rejection or frustration when an invitation to an event, such as an exhibition, is ignored. The Facebook interface, such as the chat program, intensifies the problem, as it allows users to see who (of their friends) is online at any given point in time. This can lead to the situation where the artist sending the invitation becomes convinced that the invitation is being ignored not by mistake, but purposefully.

So sometimes I invite people (hesitating), for example, if I post some event that I have and then I can see who is online...
at the same time. So if I see these people don’t come to my event…. Then I think you must have saw my invitation, why didn’t you come, you know? (Artist, Female).

The disappointment expressed by this particular artist at invitations to an exhibition not being accepted or even acknowledged – was a common theme in the questioning of the perceived bond or relationships between a Facebook user and their ‘Friends’. ‘Friends’ is a slippery term, as it takes on different connotations in the social media or SNS (social networking site) context. Friends on SNSs are not the same as “friends” in the everyday sense; instead, Friends provide context by offering users an imagined audience to guide behavioural norms (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

The different types of relationships between users on social networking sites can be subcategorized into different groups such as close friends and family (that you actually have a personal relationship with) versus people with whom you have a real life connection (but not a personal relationship) to complete strangers. Friendship on social networking sites can be subcategorized into different reasons of why a particular person can be added or accepted as a Friend or contact. David Fono and Kate Raynes Goldie defined these friendships on LiveJournal (a social network that provides a platform for blogging and journaling) in the following terms: friendship as trust, friendship as courtesy, friendship as declaration and friendship as nothing. A trust friendship means trusting someone enough to view your personal information or profile, whereas friendship as declaration is more of a public demonstration of a relationship, that may have more significant meaning in offline contexts, e.g. a real life friendship (Fono and Raynes-Goldie, 2006).

Accepting ‘Friend Requests’ on Facebook, out of courtesy and not wanting to offend the person who extended the request can lead to situation where a Facebook user feels estranged from their own network. As their list of friends or contacts grow, the group can become more anonymous, which may result in an unease with the idea of sharing personal or trivial information with people whom you do not know, trust or feel comfortable around.
I used to share personal photos, but I don’t anymore – as the circle has become bigger – I have over 500 friends, when I first started I had 100 close friends and so I shared more pictures, as you would among friends – but now I’m not so interested in sharing with everybody. I feel that for a lot of people, Facebook is for professional use, and they are maybe mixing their professional and personal life. The biggest private gallery (names gallery) has their own circle of artists who they work with: there are other private galleries but this one represents artists best. The two people who are the head of this gallery are extremely socially active, and I met one of them just once. Of course he knows me, because I’m an artist and he knows the Estonian art life, but suddenly he put me as one of his friends. Of course he wants to widen his professional and social scene, so of course I accepted. It’s tactical – but maybe more for him. This is just one example but there is a lot of this happening, but it doesn’t disturb me. It’s just this kind of place, if I want I can share my photos and my private life in a different place (Artist, Male).

The urge to share the private self, as an individual as opposed to a public or professional persona – is an experience that can place strain on artists who use Facebook as a professional networking platform. When the social network audience, which some referred to as ‘the circle’ became too big and anonymous it dampened the urge to share more personal information. Some respondents noted that there are different parts of their personality that are mediated through Facebook, that if they are a shy and reserved person in real life – they act the same way on Facebook. And though being an artist involves public interaction in exhibitions, interviews and press coverage – it is never about their personal life, it is only about their professional life. The tabloid factor only appears when the artist’s artwork is overshadowed by their own persona – when they become a celebrity in their own right.

RELEVANCE BY ASSOCIATION AND NETWORKED PUBLICS

Another reoccurring theme that comes up with artists-academics when discussing how they read or interpret another individual’s social networking profile, is the idea of relevance by association. That is
to say, the belief that you can denote an individual’s relevance within their own community (for example the Estonian art community) by seeing who is listed as a friend or contact on social networking sites.

The first thing I look at when looking at someone’s profile on Facebook, is who our common friends are. This gives me a good idea because Estonia is so small. Maybe it’s like this everywhere. I see who he knows and this gives me a good idea of what kind of person he is (Artist, Male).

This interpretation of being able to ‘read’ or interpret the identity of others in relation to their friends and associations, is commonly referred to as a ‘social identity’ or ‘group identity’ by media and cultural researchers (Zeng, Huang and Dou, 2009). Group affiliation or cohesiveness and interpersonal ties can influence the perceived relevance, authenticity or importance of a user by other social network users. These friendships or connections may only exist online, as declarations of belonging to certain social circles of artists, galleries, curators, critics and academies.

Facebook users in this study, mostly articulated an understanding that the main use of social networking sites are decidedly professionally oriented, and not a network for private individuals to keep in touch with friends and family and other offline ‘real life’ contacts., though there were many instances where professional and private personas would overlap. When a social network user connects and presents themself to an audience or network of ‘relevant associates’ that does not necessarily match the users offline, ‘real life’ social group, we can see how a communication tool has restructured human interaction. Or at the very least social networks can be seen as platforms to demonstrate social and professional allegiances. This phenomenon, has been referred to by cultural researchers as ‘networked publics’, which can be defined as “publics that have been restructured by network technology” (Boyd, 2010).

‘Artists, Identity and Facebook’ (2012) utilized an ethnographical approach to find out how artists associated with Estonian Academies interpret and construct identity information on Facebook. The problems, or strains, associated with self-promotion in social media were felt mostly in relation to establishing relevance within a community of peers and having to censor themselves in order to construct a pub-
lic persona that would engage, or not offend, their networked public. Which is of course only one example of how social media networks have brought about cultural transformations that have restructured our social and professional relationships and our sense of self.

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Interviews conducted with artists and academics, who are associated with the ‘Estonian Academy of Arts’ or the ‘Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre’ in Tallinn, Estonia between May and August of 2012. The study is entitled ‘Artists, Identity and Facebook’ (2012) and is in the possession of the author.