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What is This?

Identity and social media

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Given the quantity of data social networks produce – millions of data points and in some cases billions on the scale of big data analysis – how do we frame the quantitative analysis of this data in terms of theoretical models of identity? In 2008, Vincent Miller's article in *Convergence* recognized in our ubiquitous and pervasive media the essential role of phatic communication which forms our connection to the here and now. Social media has become a native habitus for many and is a place to perform our various roles in our multimodal lives, as a professional, a parent, an acquaintance, and a colleague. The current generation has grown up with social media and like the 10-year-old Facebook, Twitter too has become part of some people's everyday here and now.

In this issue, Nicholas Carah, Sven Brodmerkel, and Lorena Hernandez focus on how Facebook works not just as a platform to harvest data but also as a platform to manage the circulation of affect and creation of social connections around brands. Looking specifically at drinking culture and Facebook, they argue that some social media engagement practices allow for circumventing regulatory regimes by prompting connections between mediations of drinking culture and the brand that would not be possible in other media channels.

Yet do we understand the aspects and patterns of identity development in virtual worlds? As Margaretten and Gaber (2014) have proposed the concept of 'authentic talk' identified as 'spontaneous, unrehearsed discourse' on Twitter, in this issue Bernadett Koles and Peter Nagy offer an alternative conceptual model to researchers of a virtual identity developed to capture this complex conglomerate of personal, social, relational, and material aspects. While Tamara Shepherd and Thorsten Busch argue that Twitter has acquired the critical mass of users necessary to successfully establish a robust and financially viable social network. Employing a business ethics perspective, Shepherd and Busch examine Twitter's ethos in relation to debates around democratic communication in relation to corporate social responsibility. 'This issue becomes all the more pressing because online social networks to a certain extent have taken on the role of quasi-governmental bodies today, regulating what their users can and cannot do, thus raising questions of accountability and legitimacy' (2014: 294).

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A case study of online experiences by Dimitra L Milioni, Vaia Doudaki, and Nicolas Demertzis in the politically divided island of Cyprus asks whether the experiences of young adult Cypriots aged 18–24 from both communities are shaped by socioeconomic factors, such as gender, education, and income? Critically the authors ask whether ethnicity is the defining factor. They suggest the existence of a 'reverse digital divide', as the more disadvantaged community engages more often in expression, association, and learning online. Clearly the issue of identity formation online is still highly relevant for this generation.

Virtual communities offer both ways of circumventing regulatory regimes, as Carah et al. demonstrate, and ways of augmenting official channels. Exploring the online forum of blogs, Katherine Harrison examines the narration of personal life stories in (in)fertility blogs written by women trying to conceive, arguing that blogging helps women to renegotiate their experiences of femininity when motherhood is denied or difficult. Such discussion in an open forum she argues offers a new paradigm for fertility information which challenges both the doctor/patient power dynamic and traditional discourses concerning fertility.

Finally, in this issue on identity and self-expression, Susan Ballard raises a question over the uniqueness of our own human creativity. Ballard reexamines the notion of machine aesthetics which were, until recently considered shorthand for a fascination or celebration of the machine, a kind of techno-utopianism. Now, however, the machines that surround humans do appear to be capable of producing works of art. Ballard takes us into the creative world of Douglas Bagnall's machine aesthetics with cloud watching and film-making robots, challenging our assumptions of the uniqueness of our innate creativity.

We end with reviews of three books on media regulation in the United Kingdom and Europe by John Nathan Anderson: Christian Potschka, *Towards a Market in Broadcasting: Communications Policy in the UK and Germany*, Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone, *Media Regulation: Governance and the Interests of Citizens and Consumers*, and Karen Donders, *Public Service Media Policy in Europe.* The three together offer the reader a comparative assessment of work in the field.

References

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