

Networked Confessions:

Normalization and Self-Regulation through Social Media

7 November 2012, 10:01pm. A Fox network affiliate in Sacramento, California reports a single example of how racists and bigots took to the internet to vent their frustration in the hours following the re-election of Barack Obama. Denise Helms of Turlock, California used her Facebook *wall* to broadcast the following announcement: “Another 4 years of the n***** maybe he will get assassinated this term..!! [sic] (Rankin).¹ The statement is described by reporter Kimberly Rankin as “making the rounds on Facebook.” After Helms’ initial statement was widely disseminated across the Twitter platform, she made the following post on her Facebook profile:

So apparently my post last night about Obama got onto Twitter and Fox 40 came and interviewed me cause apparently a lot of people in Sacramento think I'm crazy and racist. WOW is all I got to say!! I'm not racist and I'm not crazy. just simply stating my opinion.!!! [sic] (Cnet)

This was to be her last post under that account. Despite Helms having deleted the initial post, and later her entire Facebook profile, the story continued to spread—in internet parlance, the story went viral. Attention from re-posts/re-tweets, television, and newspapers resulted in threats and harassment for Helms. When this came to the attention of her employer, Cold Stone Creamery (CSC), she was fired. CSC issued a statement, via Twitter, condemning Helms’ views. All but one Twitter post (*tweet*) from CSC on 8 November was in response to the Helms story, each employing similar language—disgraceful, unacceptable, shocked, saddened, no longer with the company—in response to various users² who were spreading the story with declarations to never eat ice cream again. The Denise Helms story more or less collapsed within two or three days, with the original affiliate station attempting one last volley of relevance by linking the Helms story to an aggregate map of racist *tweets* made near Election Day.³

There are two points of interest around the Denise Helms example. First is the replication of a single statement from an individual social network user to the wide, gaping maw of the news cycle. The story itself, as a news product, is then replicated across multiple networks. It is difficult to distinguish between outlets which are creating “original” content around the Helms post and those doing stories about the story of Helms’ post. From this stream of information, we have a picture of Denise Helms. Twenty-two years of age. White, blonde, female. Lives near Turlock, California, a southern suburb of Sacramento. Employed by CSC franchisee, Duane Costa. Fired by the same from her position as manager. Not registered to vote. *Liked* Romney/Ryan page on Facebook. Not crazy (crazy). Not a racist (racist). At the time of her post regarding Obama, Denise Helms had her account set to *private*.⁴ But perhaps this is not *really* Denise Helms. At the very least, we might say these are all true statements regarding “Denise Helms”, a mediated image of the flesh-and-blood person. How does one distinguish between the two? It is not enough to simply say one is real and the other is not, since it is essentially “Denise” who got Denise fired.

The second point of interest in this example is the tenor of the reaction to “Denise”. Consider these sentiments from those reporting on the story: “Yet another person discovers that what seems to be private may not be” (Cnet). “Those who use Facebook are surprised that she messaged her friends her opinions” (Wong). Mashable, a site which aggregates and ranks stories posted elsewhere on the internet asked its readers if Helms should face legal action. Lastly, there are two solicited comments from random people on the street. The first, a male university student, announces that Helms’ situation is the reason for his caution on Facebook, stating he “will be looking for a job soon.” The second, a woman in a strip mall, declares: “I think employers should look at the Facebook and see what kind of employees they’re going to be.”⁵ The judgment is

clear. From a flippant post to a general consensus, there are some things you just shouldn't say—and if you are going to say them you shouldn't say them on the network because everything on the network is fair game. The second “general public” statement specifies that what one posts on *the Facebook* is an accurate measure of the type of person they are. The operating assumption is that what we post on the network is true—even if we post fantastic lies. From this perspective, “Denise” is real and her counterpart in meatspace⁶ is the facsimile.

Social networks compel us to provide an endless stream of information about our lives. When social media is read as a confessional discourse, it can be seen as a normalizing force for a society in which network participation reaches a certain level of saturation. These discreet forms of power begin working on the social network's users, but as has been illustrated, network content is easily transferred to the geospatial realm. Once “released” the reactions that surround this content and inform the construction of popular sentiment, which continues within the network, allow corrective impulses to transfer across multiple bodies—even those with no connection to the network. In addition, the maintenance of a profile constitutes a digital self whose very existence comes to regulate its creator.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (HoS), Michel Foucault illustrates how disciplinary forms of power function, in part, through a model of confession and subsequent incitements to discourse. The main goal of this system is to exercise power over life, on the individual body and the population writ large. He describes a process through which confession took shape. At the heart of each manifestation was the goal of gathering knowledge of the subject for the purposes of applying some manner of control. Rather than distinct eras of confessional practice, Foucault describes subsequent methods as more efficient articulations of the same dynamic, namely a desire to control masses of people under the banner of their

specified betters (who serve as arbiters of acceptable practice, but are nonetheless controlled by the system writ large).

The pastoral model of confession, in which religious “shepherds” tended their parishioner “flocks” through routine and repetitive invocations of a duty to reveal sexual indiscretions, focused on the management of desire with a constant eye toward transubstantiation of the spirit through denial of temptation. The beginning of the Enlightenment saw an intensification of the confessional practice which, as Foucault asserts, developed around “a political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex...in the form of analysis, stock taking, classification, and specification of quantitative or causal studies” (HoS 23). Where the pastoral model concerned itself with morality, the subsequent form added rationality. This allowed for discourse around sex to multiply through a variety of disciplines, such as biology, demography, ethics, medicine, pedagogy, political criticism, psychiatry, and psychology (HoS 33). These various incitements to discourse, as Foucault describes them, implicate both speaker and interlocutor in the process of regulation and normalization. These subject positions will be used throughout my discussion to distinguish between those giving and those receiving the confession. Further, when I refer to social media functioning as a confessional discourse, I have the following description of confession from HoS in mind:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile (61).

The speaker is driven to unburden themselves and experiences relief and pleasure through this act. The interlocutor valorizes both the confessional act and normative performance (normative

in the sense of submission to discourse and normative acts outside of the confessional space).

There is also an element of pleasure for the interlocutor, in that hearing confession allows access to knowledge, forbidden or hidden knowledge. A sort of eroticism develops around the position of judgment. Not just erotic for the interlocutor, but folding back onto the speaker, who comes to project esteem for the practice onto their audience. This cycle, in which the speaker is driven to reveal more and more, regardless of any potential deviance, then works back through the interlocutor whose own pleasure in the act requires the solicitation of constant revelation. This network of power functions through both entities in all such discourses. Sexuality is the transfer point through which a productive theory of power works in a given case—not power in and of sex itself, but rather a point at which the mechanisms of power can be seen to operate.

Confession is the key to functions of this sort of discourse.

Transferred from merely sexual activity to all activity, the networked community creates an incitement to discourse following what Foucault describes as the shift of the confessional act from one of religious penance to an Enlightenment-inspired enterprise of self-administered control. Despite confession's role in the creation of power through knowledge, it provides a false sense of liberation from the same. By making known an unlimited stream of information about the details of one's day (to say nothing of automated location updates), social media creates a space within which the manufactured subject undergoes a complete separation from the living body. This external self becomes a perpetually observed and narrated entity. That is, the distance between the self-as-inner-voice and the self-as-projection becomes increasingly narrow. There is no essential form being subsumed into the artificial, but rather the sublimation of that inner voice by the projected, digital avatar.

Surrounded by interlocutors, driven to divulge every bit of our holdings, the act of

confession shapes our subjectivity, further normalizing the digital subject-entity. The sum of content from the user's profile, tracked movements across multiple platforms, and interactions with other digital subjects are what constitute the avatar. Never once and for all, but perpetually, for so long as the avatar is to remain legible. The digital subject-entity is a simulacrum of one's own self; a copy of a copy, in the sense that even the self-as-inner voice is constructed from experience, but just as well a mechanism which is then more efficiently governable, countable, and categorical. At the population level, what Foucault refers to as the species-body, these power relations function through regulation and management of whole societies—data aggregation, market research, mortality rates, et al. The mass of humanity must be accounted for, births marked and capacities for labor measured, as a literal human resource for the production of capital. The question of what can be measured, ordered, and managed becomes a question of what retains intelligibility within the system of classification. Here, the expert opinion weighs in on the limits of what can and cannot be. As the drive toward greater efficiency becomes more important (not to say it was ever unimportant, only that human costs associated with increased efficiencies become less of a problem), the confessional act can be managed by fewer interlocutors over greater numbers of speakers. The self-managed confession takes shape in the form of self-quizzing against dominant social norms endorsed by the expert opinion of a general public. Within a social network, the space we inhabit is thought to be democratic—insofar as each user has an equal voice; however, the existence of a global interlocutor (in the form of the user community) serves to mediate voices toward a certain mean. Failure to update, adjust, or manage our avatar would distance the user from the given community, without which a vital component of the digital subject evaporates. Through continuous posting, users participate in a constitutive process which reinforces broad surveillance and turns all activity into potential

performance.

The term *social media* covers a lot of ground. Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlin broadly define social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on ideological and technological foundations...that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” They separate social media into six general categories, based on the level of “self-presentation/self-disclosure” and “social presence/media richness” (Kaplan).⁷ These categories are, in no particular order, blogs, collaborative projects (Wikipedia), social networks (Facebook), content communities (YouTube), virtual game worlds (Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (Second Life). Social networks are described as having a high element of self-presentation/self-disclosure, and *medium* social presence/media richness. Social presence indicates the level of “influence that the communication partners have on each other’s behavior.” Media richness refers to the “amount of information transmitted in a given time interval [toward] a resolution of ambiguity and reduction of uncertainty.” The description of self-presentation and self-disclosure is worth quoting at length:

[T]he concept of self-presentation states that in any type of social interaction people have the desire to control the impressions other people form of them (Goffman, 1959) [cited in original]. On the one hand, this is done with the objective of influencing others to gain rewards...on the other hand, it is driven by a wish to create an image that is consistent with one’s personal identity. The key reason why people decide to create a personal webpage is the wish to present themselves in cyberspace (Schau & Gilly, 2003) [cited in original]. Usually, such a presentation is done through self-disclosure; that is, the conscious or unconscious revelation of personal information (e.g., thoughts, feelings, likes, dislikes) that is consistent with the image one would like to give.

Presentation and disclosure are at the heart of the confessional act, as much as influence over behavior and resolution of ambiguity are its (superficial) outcomes. First, the incitement to discourse involves the speaker’s desire to correct individual deviance, even if the correction is as

simple as talking the problem away. Ultimately, the interlocutor will provide some directive or palliative—an alternate behavior to gain distance from deviance. Ambiguity, as it relates to confession, is the liminal state between legibility and incoherence as a categorical subject. The act of confession clarifies subject positions, speaker and interlocutor, such that each becomes clearly defined within the system of power. Social networks, as defined above, establish a similar confessional space.

A prime example of this sort of social network would be Facebook, but consider that prior to Facebook both MySpace and Friendster held this role, each in preceding years. That no rivals have appeared to usurp Facebook is a testament to its market strategy over any refined user experience.⁸ This is just to say that the similarities to confessional discourse are not exclusive to Facebook, but a fundamental component of social networking as a platform. Other outlets that closely approximate this are the aforementioned collaborative forms and virtual worlds, but these differ in that users can maintain a level of anonymity or function through multiple alternate identities. Alternate accounts are possible through social network sites, but serve the function of (anecdotally) humor or espionage. For example, if User- κ maintains a social networking profile on Facebook and an account on a content community such as Reddit⁹, they are likely to remain User- κ through all activities on Facebook, whereas one user can create multiple user names within certain content communities, alternating through them at will. Confession can take place within an anonymized space, such as the presumption of anonymity in the pastoral model, but the network in which the user is a known quantity fits the disciplinary model much more closely.

There is a power of persuasion at play across social networks which has increased exponentially. While the whole affair is purely voluntary and by no means available to every part of a society or even in certain societies period—there is arguably a leisure quality to active

participation—as social networks become more and more ubiquitous, they take on a sort of critical mass. At present there is presence enough for participation on Facebook to be expected; indeed not participating is the anomaly. To that end, even if one is outside of the network, they are still implicated in the network via second-degree connections to such an extent that one could find herself in a situation where a conversation with an acquaintance (A) continues with the friend of that acquaintance (B), after the fact and without (B) having been included in the prior conversation at all.

For example, two neighbors, Sam and Sarah, have a disagreement over the neighborhood response to a series of break-ins. The individual positions are immaterial; what matters is that they each have divergent views and Sam feels Sarah's position will result in more break-ins. Sam then relates the conversation on his Facebook page and initiates a conversation with the user community—essentially continuing the debate without the presence of Sarah (assume Sarah has no affiliation with any social network). Days later, Sarah is at work and Donald approaches her. He says that he has seen on Facebook that she was trying to get Sam's car stolen. Thus, without ever participating in the network, Sarah is in a position to have a relative stranger (to the conversation) speak with authority on matters she has never shared, making her a stranger to her own life. Further, Sam's continuation of their debate in her absence has created a situation in which the positions of speaker and interlocutor have shifted several times. First, Sam confesses the incident to his interlocutors, the user community. Even if only half of his network responds favorably to his position, Sam can continue the process with this group alone, making them all interlocutors to Sarah's speaker-in-absentia. When she is approached by Donald, she has already been judged for her confession and must then defend against it or acquiesce to it by engaging in the same discourse—this time with Donald as the representative of the interlocutory body—in an

attempt to defend the “normalcy” of her original response. Even though Sarah has no connection with this network, she is potentially drawn in by virtue of her connection to those networked connections. This alters the incitement to discourse. The speaker proper is no longer needed, nor is a single subject-entity, for management of the self.

Within the network roles of speaker and interlocutor are exchanged to a point at which the single user performs variations of each within the same moment. As a participant in the network, one is a constituent of that particular species-body; a general public which acts as interlocutor for any single user’s presence. Each single user is a site of confession with every comment or status update (post)—yet their interlocutor/s are absent at the very moment of confession (conception). The social networks at hand do not function in real-time, but rather a time interval which has the potential to approximate real time. In the act of confession, that is, composition and submission of a post, the community is absent save for a single representative in the form of the present user. At this moment, the speaker is the only available representative of the interlocutory body, since this user is also a member of the larger, digital species body. This position requires judgment of the confession within the same moment that the confession is made. This is not the same process as quizzing or measurement taken up as a personal project and balanced against an established norm, but rather a dual state of mind, wherein the user is one as speaker and many as the representative of the interlocutory body.

The result of this schizoid dilemma, where the single user performs both confessional roles, results in the perpetual judgment of one’s own network participation, but also a magnified urge to submit to the continual discourse. Joyce Kazman Valenza is a high school librarian who actively participates in a variety of social media, including email, blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. As a single representative of an average (productive) user, she elucidates her love/hate

relationship with her network in what she describes as a “network confession.”

I get scared when I am off the grid, and I feel my Twitter friends have been learning more than I have; I worry that people will discover my stuff on one of the many networks I joined and abandoned. They will be disappointed that I left no great treasures there and they will think I am a network slacker; I worry many days that I will have nothing to contribute to those who count on me for an occasional gem; I worry that from many of my networks, I take far more than I give; I thought I'd take a closer look at my own network habits and peek into the networks of a few colleagues who keep me up to date and make me continually wonder, "How'd they discover that?" (Valenza 2011)

Robin Marantz Henig wrote a book with her daughter detailing the “torture of modern friendship” which asks the question “Is Facebook making us happy?” In an excerpt, they describe the “new layer of angst to [an] already-heightened awareness of social ranking...” and the pressure (incitement) to maintain a “cyber-public image.” Henig’s daughter, Samantha, finds that social networks consistently focus one’s attention on “the image [they are] projecting.” She also points out that her actions outside of her social network are either predicated on or linked to her network avatar. What we say and do offline becomes a sort of proving ground for the “reality” of our networked self. She goes on to refer to this tendency as “an unwelcome filter through which I view just about everything...” Finally, she asserts a definitive rationale for continued participation, “the more you talk about yourself on sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr, the more successful you are” (Henig). Participation is thus assumed, but only if we engage in a process of interrogation of both our own and other digital bodies. The ubiquity of the network, alongside the expectation of happiness and success through continued performance serve as the impulse for voluntary regulation of the constitutive, digital subject.

In an interview reprinted in *Power/Knowledge*, Michel Foucault describes how power is continually searching for more efficient and comprehensive means of expression. Forms of power which remain too “cumbersome” have a diminishing efficacy, perhaps because they

become too overt in an era where we are meant to have control over ourselves. Indeed, a lack of self-control is anathema to the proper, liberal subject. The relation of power never deviates from its purpose, but continually evolves and takes on new forms to greater success and opacity. To identify, or merely trace out the presumed margins of a current power relation, Foucault suggests “one needs to study what kind of body the current society needs.” I offer the digital body as a possible site for power relation, and the confessional process of networking these bodies as the regulatory mechanism through which this power is monitored and maintained.

¹ This message is variously censored, in some cases as I have replicated, in others the word has been redacted, blurred, or even replaced with the parenthetical (n-word). How Helms articulated herself in the original post is not relevant to this paper, but probably obvious.

² Twits?

³ Interestingly, the Denise Helms’ post does not appear in this analysis.

⁴ All gathered with great ease by skimming stories from Cnet, Mashable, Fox40, and The Modesto Bee.

⁵ Both “general public” statements quoted in Wong.

⁶ c.1995; The physical world, as opposed to cyberspace or a virtual environment, *OED*.

⁷ This taxonomy is certainly problematic, since each manifestation of social media is likely to have overlapping characteristics with manifestations in different categories, as well as the constant influx of new permutations of older platforms. Kaplan and Haenlin admit as much, but as they are approaching social media from the standpoint of marketing, some classification is necessary. Since so much of social media, and certainly all of social networking, functions as a marketing database, the use of a classification system designed around such strategies seems appropriate.

⁸ e.g. A lack of concern for end user as demonstrated through various Terms of Service dust-ups, murky opt-ins/opt-outs for privacy matters, and unilateral rights to all uploaded content.

⁹ Users post links to external sites or to text-based posts of their own making. The community then votes on posts, with the highest ranking making the site’s “front page.” Reminiscent of a classic bulletin board or forum in which users can remain completely anonymous and conversation flows via comments in a hierarchy. The twist is that in addition to the post itself, individual comments can be “up-voted.”

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