In the Age of Social Networking, Users are Innovators

before diving into big data, look at individual intent

SOPHIE CHOU MARCH 13, 2014

Like most twenty-two-year-old college students, Christian Moscardi is on Facebook every day. Yet by looking at his wall, you'd never know it-- Christian hardly ever posts content; neither statuses nor photos interest him. "Maybe on the very rare occasion, where I'd think: wow I want all of my friends to see this right now", he pondered.

For Christian, Facebook is not at all about consuming and sharing social media. Instead, it's a convenient way to reach all of his friends and colleagues. Communication-- via messages and chat-- is the feature he most values. Ideally, he'd "block everything", save for a "nice profile pic", and use his account exclusively for the messaging and networking aspects.

Twenty-eight-year-old Ph. D. candidate Sasha Rush also owns a Facebook profile that he rarely posts on. Unlike Christian, although he uses messaging sometimes, he has no special affinity towards it. Before he began to pursue his doctorate, Sasha was in fact an employee of Facebook as an engineer. Yet even during that time, when he had a "critical mass" of colleagues and friends, he contributed very little activity himself.

When pressed to explain why, he grins sheepishly: "I'm a lurker", he admits. "I've always been". Uninterested in both photos and statuses, Sasha uses Facebook primarily as a way to keep track of his friends' intellectual and cultural interests through their posted articles and shares. Lately, he's been migrating towards Twitter, where reading is encouraged and easier to do.

Facebook states that its mission is "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected". But in reality, not every person is a sharer, and those who do share are encouraged by different motives and means. Given the same set of tools, users are surprising innovators, picking and choosing the features that suit them best. Because of network externalities, migrating to another platform is often unappealing-- instead, people tend to creatively limit existing structures.

Social media scholar danah boyd reported on a similar phenomenon in the way that Facebook users, specifically teens, retained sense of privacy. Instead of simply adjusting the settings to block certain friends, users tended to develop unique, innovative strategies in posting and sharing-- everything from self-censorship to account deactivation. Social networks create a sort of surveillance state, and under surveillance, people begin to develop methods to manage realities in which they are observed, leading to this innovation. The same theory can be extrapolated to people's differing usages of Facebook at large, not just in their methods of privacy. Because one's Facebook network is essentially a public space, users adapt to participate and share in selected parts of this space.

It's also important to note that this is a chosen surveillance, and one in which the user is both a willing and conscious participant. The effect of a social network is pan-optic in the sense that one can never establish what one's true audience is-- but the individual is no Foucauldian prisoner. Many adults and businesses use Facebook as part of their professional online presence, and tailor their activity for marketing and self-promotion, fully aware of manipulating onlookers to their advantage.

Caroline Sonett, an aspiring musician, makes sure to emphasize her profession on her personal Facebook profile, despite the fact that her network includes both family and friends along with business

relations. She doesn't have a separate Facebook page for her work; choosing instead to promote upcoming concerts with status updates. "Usually my cover photo or profile picture is music related", she says. But because she finds that "people constantly promoting" their work to be "annoying", she is careful to post at most "once or twice" before a show. "I definitely see it as a partially personal and partially networking thing", she states. Even though she also posts photos and statuses about her personal life, because Caroline is friends with a diverse group of people, she carefully self-censors her statuses to avoid offending potentially useful relations.

Scientist Theresa Senft, who studies digital media cultures, calls this the phenomenon of "micro-celebrity", a communicative technique that 'involves people "amping up" their popularity over the Web using techniques like video, blogs, and social networking sites'. The micro-celebrity is at a constant struggle to appeal to her audience while retaining "authenticity", a highly desirable trait. Yet, as boyd explains, authenticity itself is based on the inauthentic: "The authentic is always manufactured, and always constructed in 'contradistinction to something else'. In other words, for something to be deemed authentic, something else must be inauthentic."

If even authenticity cannot be trusted to be authentic, what manifestations do these insights on the psychological ramifications of social media hold? For one, uprooting the easy assumption of an unbiased, non-manipulative user has many implications on so-called "Big Data". As statisticians, computer and social scientists flock to sources like Twitter and Facebook datastores for predictive analysis, it is essential to keep in mind that the absence of data-- whether it be posts, shares, or retweets-- can be just as telling and complex as its presence. Analyzing signals as a uniform, aggregated whole silences what really drives social networks: carefully crafted, self-aware,individual intent.