

Socially Mediated Publicness: An Introduction

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Social media complicate the very nature of public life. In this article, we consider how technology reconfigures publicness, blurs 'audiences' and publics, and alters what it means to engage in public life. The nature of publicness online is shaped by the architecture and affordances of social media, but also by people's social contexts, identities, and practices. Navigating socially mediated publicness requires new mechanisms of control and new skills. Understanding socially-mediated publicness is an ever-shifting process throughout which people juggle blurred boundaries, multi-layered audiences, individual attributes, the specifics of the systems they use, and the contexts of their use.

It is popular, yet too easy, to claim that everything is different in a world of Facebook and Twitter. Old practices and patterns continue to thrive in new media. However, social media blur boundaries between presence and absence, time and space, control and freedom, personal and mass communication, private and public, and virtual and real, affecting how old patterns should be understood and raising new challenges and opportunities for people engaging others through new technologies (Baym, 2010; boyd, 2010). Social media mirror, magnify, and complicate countless aspects of everyday life, bringing into question practices that are presumed stable and shedding light on contested social phenomena.

"Publicness" is one such issue—and it is the focus of this special issue. Although scholars have long tussled over the very nature of public life (Livingstone, 2005; Sennett, 1992; Warner, 2005), social media complicate what it means to be public, to address audiences, and to build publics and counterpublics. The articles in this special issue unpack the nature and meaning of "publicness" in increasingly mediated societies. Though their topics are diverse, together they demonstrate how the practices of everyday public life are filled with nuance and complexity that call

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for strategic management. Collectively, they shed light on the ways in which social media are reconfiguring the nature of “public.”

Publicness and (Social) Media

In their astute analysis of grassroots movements before and after “Web 2.0,” Harrison and Barthel (2009, p. 161) argue that what is new about social media is the “now-widespread recognition and acknowledgement that users actively apply the affordances of new technologies in the service of their own creative and instrumental objectives, and that the desire to do so seems to be liberally distributed among those who are online.” Media and “public” have always been intertwined. The ancient Romans posted newspapers throughout the city, allowing people to conceptualize themselves as part of a polity (Briggs & Burke, 2009). Newspapers spread across otherwise-insurmountable geographic barriers enabled people to shift from tribalism to imagining themselves as part of nations (B. Anderson, 1983). Grassroots groups and communities have long used newspapers, television channels, radio, and even quilts to make themselves visible and to create new publics (e.g., Dayan, 2001; Harrison & Barthel, 2009). To the extent they could, people have always used media to create public identities for themselves, others, and groups.

It is thus not the ability to use technology toward these objectives that is new with social media, but the scale at which people who never had access to broadcast media are now doing so on an everyday basis and the conscious strategic appropriation of media tools in this process. Home videos were once viewed by only a few unless selected by curators of TV shows like *America’s Funniest Home Videos*. Today, anyone equipped with a smartphone and an internet connection can post their footage on YouTube. What’s posted online is not necessarily visible to everyone, but when people choose to share content in “spreadable” media (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, forthcoming)—home videos like “Charlie Bit Me” appear to “go viral,” quickly garnering millions of hits. While such popular sensations are frequently referenced, what’s more astonishing is how common it is for a typical teenager to achieve hundreds of views for an ad hoc music video. That level of moderate, widespread publicness is unprecedented. There are more layers of publicness available to those using networked media than ever before; as a result, people’s relationship to public life is shifting in ways we have barely begun to understand.

The people whose experiences are conveyed in this issue use the public and quasi-public qualities of social media to carve out safe identities for themselves in the face of legal troubles, create public memorials for the dead, narrate their own stories of queerness, instantiate and challenge gendered practices, discuss civic practices and everyday hobbies, and organize into covert networked publics that provide services in a nation where the government does not. As people use these media to accomplish more than they can do without them, they juggle multiple

layers and kinds of audiences, bringing into being multiple and diverse kinds of publics, counterpublics, and other emergent social arrangements. They struggle with both the visibility and obscurity of their mediated acts. The sometimes quasi-public and other times entirely public nature of social media perpetuates and makes visible processes that have always been at play, while warping them in ways that call for new literacies and strategies.

Social-mediated publicness calls into question understandings of the relation between public and private and between audiences and publics. We see in these articles that public and private—openness and closedness—are dialectic tensions inextricable from and constitutive of one another (Baxter & Montgomery, 2007). When private is made public through social-mediation, the nature of both experience and of privacy itself can be changed. Yet, the realities of visibility and obscurity introduce new complications. There is little doubt that social media heighten the potential for visibility and introduce the possibility of public engagement that far exceeds what's possible in an unmediated environment. Yet, it is also true that most content online is obscure and consumed by few. As a result, social media introduce a conundrum of visibility (boyd & Marwick, 2009), as people's mediated acts are both visible and invisible in networked publics.

Addressing Visible and Imagined Audiences and Collapsed Contexts

If social mediation blurs boundaries and pushes mutual redefinition between public and private, it also calls for rethinking the relationship between "audiences" and "publics." Audiences, writes Livingstone (2005), have generally been aggregates that are linked theoretically to the private domain—watching television in living rooms, for instance, or watching YouTube videos in bedrooms. Audiences have thus been treated as less significant than publics, which are seen as "rational versus emotional, disinterested versus biased, participatory versus withdrawn, shared versus individualized, visible versus hidden." Dayan (2001) is among those who have argued that "audiences" are aggregates produced through measurement and surveillance, while "publics" actively direct attention. The interactivity and bi-directionality of social media demand directed attention in a way that watching television does not. The boundaries between audiences and publics become even harder to disentangle theoretically or empirically when people engage one another online in public and quasi-public ways. "In a thoroughly mediated world," argued Livingstone (2005), "audiences and publics, along with communities, nations, markets, and crowds, are composed of the same people." Coining the phrase the "people formerly known as the audience" to describe the emergent collectives on social media, Rosen (2006) described them as "simply the public made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable."

For some—such as the musicians Baym (forthcoming) has interviewed—audiences may be more visible than ever online. Prior to mass communication, audiences were

visible to performers, as they were physically co-present (Livingstone, 2005). Mass media separated audiences from performers, making audiences into abstractions open to varied definitions and understandings that depended on the purposes for which they were being measured or considered (e.g., J. Anderson, 1996). From this broadcasting perspective, social media make audiences more visible. Yet for the person who once would have constructed a public identity primarily in face-to-face conversations, online audiences are less visible than before.

The first articles in this issue focus on the individuals' management of public identities for themselves and others. We open this issue with Eden Litt's theoretical analysis of the "imagined audience" of social media. In it she identifies many factors that may influence how and who people take their audiences to be when they post (quasi-) public material online. For instance, people may imagine they are addressing the people who most often comment on their messages, their supervisors at work, or they may not be considering recipients at all. Their practices may be shaped by individual characteristics such as motivation (e.g., professional, interpersonal), ability to interpret social cues, self-monitoring, and skill (Hargittai, 2008).

As Litt discusses, scholars such as James (1890), Cooley (1902), and Goffman (1959) laid the groundwork for thinking about how even the most private of selves are formed in relation to diverse others, and how the challenges of differing and sometimes unknown audiences can complicate self-presentation. Having to imagine one's audience is a fundamental human problem rather than one distinctive to social media. But social media make it particularly challenging to understand "who is out there and when" and raises the potential for greater misalignment between imagined and actual audiences.

Online audiences also result in collapsed contexts (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Again this is not distinctive to social media. In his wonderful essay on "footing," Goffman (1981) took apart what he called the "participant structure" of face-to-face conversation, noting how single utterances may be heard by multiple kinds of audiences including those who are addressed, those who are ratified to respond, those who are by-standers allowed to hear but not respond, and eavesdroppers whose overhearing is covert. Mass media raised their own challenges for addressing multiple audiences simultaneously. As recounted by Meyrowitz (1985), the civil rights leader Stokely Carmichael struggled with context collapse as he sought a single rhetorical style that could be used to address both black and white audiences through the radio.

Building on the challenges of collapsed contexts and complicating the notion of "facework," Lim, Vadrevu, Chan, and Basnyat write about how juvenile offenders in Singapore strategically manage in their Facebook profiles as they construct identities for themselves and others in an environment equally visible to peers and authorities. How can they simultaneously stay out of trouble, keep from some friends that they are incarcerated, and accord enough face to gang members to stay safe and credible in their peer networks? The gang networks once negotiated through offline interactions are now visible on Facebook, meaning that

interactions and networks that could have been shielded from both fellow gang members and from authorities may now take place where all can see. Simultaneously navigation of different social and cultural worlds brought together in single social media sites presents ongoing challenges for those whose lives are multifaceted.

Navigating collapsed contexts requires a wide variety of strategies. While some people seek to engage in strategic facework and minimize visibility, others seek to publicize themselves in ways that may complicate their relationship to different members of their audience. Vivienne and Burgess show how the process of creating private stories for online public consumption can crystallize self-understandings as people negotiate their positions relative to publics both intimate (e.g. family, friends, and co-workers) and unknown. In constructing these identities they must consider how they will be received by their intimate publics and also how the public telling of their stories might affect their loved ones, as with one person who chose to use photographs of flowers rather than relatives in order to protect family members from possible future stigma. Vivienne and Burgess show that private information is not the same as privacy, nor is public the same as publicity. The experience of making a story public in a persistent, searchable form made people more aware of the public value of the private and the potential of such sharing to create and impact unknown publics, changing how they understood the nature of "private." These processes are not static, but ongoing. Vivienne and Burgess parse apart the different phases of digital storytelling, showing that public and private are continuously reconfigured over time from the earliest stages of contemplating telling one's story to managing that story's visibility long after it has first been shared.

Engaging in Networked Publics

While Litt's, Lim et al.'s, and Vivienne and Burgess's pieces focus on how people actively manage their relationship to publics and audiences, Marwick and Ellison's complicates this by introducing a new dynamic: the public facework of the deceased. The audiences for socially mediated public identities are always extended over time, but contexts such as Facebook memorial pages, in which the processes of managing public-ness are left up to those that surround the deceased individual, draw attention to challenges people rarely consider. Newspaper obituaries and funerals have historically made deaths public, but people who would never have seen or participated in those may respond to Facebook memorial pages. Some who post to memorial pages are intimate loved ones and some are acquaintances, but others are "grief tourists," and some are anti-fans (Gray, 2003) or trolls seeking to disrupt and upset the mourners (Phillips, 2011). When a social medium extends the public ritual of marking a death into persistent and open environments, people can be motivated to seek large ongoing public testimonials for the deceased. New norms must be negotiated around what is appropriate and who has the rights to oversee

those memorial identities. The keepers of memorial pages negotiate hierarchies of legitimacy regarding who can manage the reputation of the deceased person. For the dead, identity management passes on to others in ways unforeseen and possibly unwanted.

The two remaining articles consider issues of identity and public at larger social scales. Salter and Blodgett offer a close examination of a telling example of conflict in popular and public online gaming culture. The incident they examine reveals distinctions between a dominant male public and the female counter-public culture that emerged in the conflict's wake. While "geek masculinity" is pervasive in online gaming cultures (Taylor, 2012), the purportedly "humorous" use of a rapist creature—the Dickwolf—in a popular comic and the doubling-down on support for that character in the face of women's complaints made a misogynistic hypermasculine gaming public visible in ways that problematized women's participation in that ostensibly public sphere. The public architecture of social media thus can be used for exclusion as marginalized voices are threatened and silenced through social mechanisms.

In scholarly discourse, the value of publics is often connected to its political potential (Calhoun, 1993; Habermas, 1991). Yet, citizens often engage in and with the politicized public sphere for purposes more personal and mundane, to develop a sense of their relationship to the broader society and to engage in identity work. For this reason, scholars like Fraser (1993) have challenged the masculine assumptions embedded in theories of the public sphere. Meanwhile, scholars wedded to the bourgeois public sphere—such as Habermas—have rejected the value of both old and new media in supporting valuable political or cultural work (Habermas, 1991; Habermas, 2006). This issue's final article, by Shklovski and Valtysson, explores the emergence of publics through social mediation in the authoritarian state of Kazakhstan where online speech is censored through state mechanisms, but also through internet service provider rules and the self-censorship that people internalize to avoid trouble. They show how mundane publics emerge as people discuss the hobby of making soap, how issue publics emerge around discussion of topics such as traffic, and how counterpublics emerge as people organize to help the less fortunate. Though all of these play within the nation's rules in order to exist, they constantly negotiate the boundaries and scale of socially-mediated publicness. Through engagement and participation in diverse publics, communities in Kazakhstan construct public spheres that have meaning and value to them.

As people communicate publically through social media, they become more aware of themselves relative to visible and imagined audiences and more aware of the larger publics to which they belong and which they seek to create. They negotiate collapsed contexts, continuously shifting power dynamics, and an open-ended time frame. Through discussing the personal, mundane, and everyday, people negotiate a sense of public place and help new publics—both wanted and unwanted—to coalesce. Socially-mediated publicness may be a source of support and empowerment while simultaneously posing conflict and risk.

Influences on Socially-Mediated Publicness

It would be a mistake to attribute all of the changes to the media themselves. Baym (1995) argued that online community should be understood as emergent, taking shape as people unpredictably appropriate elements of different influences. Two of the influences she highlighted were media infrastructures (including their temporal structure) and external contexts (emphasizing that the online was always permeated by the offline and that the online always flowed offline), each of which emerges in this issue as essential for understanding socially mediated publicness.

Sites' architectures and the affordances they provide do shape identities, audiences, and publics, but not in simple ways. The Internet is too often perceived as some kind of homogenous monolith with uniform effects on its users (Baym, 2010). It is thus essential to break it down and identify the particular elements of design that are appropriated in the service of publicness (and privacy). As Benkler (2006) has described, one principle difference between mass media and networked social media is that the network architecture lowers the cost of becoming a speaker, meaning there can be more speakers, and that it is easier to perceive oneself as a possible speaker. As a result of these social, cultural, and technological developments, Ito (2008) suggests that we must give the resultant networked publics new forms of consideration. Building on Ito's work, boyd (2010) argues that networked publics have affordances that differentiate them from other types of publics—including persistence, replicability, searchability, and scalability—that collectively introduce new social dynamics, requiring people to manage invisible audiences, collapsed contexts, and a blurring between the public and private.

The authors in this issue speak to many specific affordances that people appropriate in negotiating socially-mediated publicness. Litt points to site policies such as demanding real names versus accepting pseudonyms, algorithms that shape the messages users are fed, mechanisms for feedback such as site analytics, and the ability to limit one's audience to varying degrees. Lim et al. speak of the importance of being able to publish status updates and photographs and also of the ability to have multiple accounts for different audiences. Marwick and Ellison consider who can create a page, post and comment, and the ability to report inappropriate content, block people, delete messages, moderate interaction, and engage in metrics such as "likes." The most important affordances for Vivienne and Burgess's storytellers include the modes of distribution sites offer, how enduringly searchable they are, and their available privacy settings, which together affect perceptions of a site's safety. Shklovski and Valtysson show how rules of engagement on a site may disallow certain kinds of conversation and topics, in this case barring explicitly political discussion. Although none of these authors discuss it, questions of who owns a site may also be important in shaping how comfortable and able one feels with being public through it, as well as how people's personal information is liable to be used.

As Salter and Blodgett's piece shows, however, affordances are far from all in shaping the dynamics of publicity and publics. Spaces that seem designed for open

engagement and democracy may become sites of hierarchy and exclusion. This is only surprising if one imagines online spaces to be hermetically sealed sites of difference, what Baym (2010) calls “the myth of cyberspace.” In fact, offline contexts permeate online activities, and online activities bleed endlessly back to reshape what happens offline. As Litt discusses, social structures help to define imagined and potential audiences, and social norms influence who should be thought of as part of those audiences.

Power structures out of which the internet emerged and within which it operates influence mediated interaction. In Salter and Blodgett’s example, the external contexts of heteronormativity and sexism endemic to patriarchal cultures play out in social media, reinforcing rape culture. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan’s authoritarian regime shaped the public sphere Shklovski and Valtysson analyzed, engaging in explicit censorship and pushing people toward self-censorship. National and cultural modes of understanding are also critical to understanding the centrality of face in motivating Facebook use in Lim et al.’s analysis, just as the demands of maintaining and giving face in gang networks is critical to understanding why and how their interviewees use social media.

The flows between offline and online go both directions. Members of the Kazakhstani discussion board meet in person after connecting through the site. They mark their cars with bumper stickers that reference the board, making themselves visible to one another offline so they can provide one another with roadside assistance. They created networks of charitable giving that impact the lives of people who likely do not use the internet at all. The Singaporean youth Lim et al. studied continuously bring their external sites and practices into Facebook, adding location to their messages or sharing photographs of offline events such as parties.

The Limits of Control

The picture painted in this issue is one in which people actively construct identities and publics through social media, working their way through challenges over time, influenced by the media, the broader contexts within which they use them, and their personal proclivities. People are strategic, and, especially in guided contexts such as digital storytelling workshops, can be very aware of how they use these media. Yet even the most skilled of social media denizens bump up against limits that counter the seeming freedom to shape public selves and collectives. In the case of the memorial pages Marwick and Ellison examine we see that audiences may include people for whom the messages were not intended yet who can contribute anyhow, leading some to use audience management techniques such as name calling, derision, and threats of violence. Yet without—and sometimes despite—constant vigilance, other people can shape online identities and, as Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, and Tom Tong (2008) have shown, sometimes their words carry more weight than those who feel most entitled to claim the identities.

People also feel compelled to bound the information they share, even if they would personally prefer to make it visible. Vivienne and Burgess's storytellers limited the identifying information they shared, especially when it implicated others. Lim et al.'s Singaporean youth engaged in self-censoring, striving for the lowest common denominator (Hogan, 2010) that could serve all audiences. Shklovski and Valtysson's board members used self-censorship and a cautionary approach to discussion.

The essays in this issue show socially-mediated publicness as an ever-shifting process throughout which people juggle blurred boundaries, multi-layered audiences, individual attributes, the specifics of the systems they use, and the contexts of their use. In closing, we want to flag the importance of skill. Vivienne and Burgess's storytellers had workshops that provided an explicit collaborative framework for working through these issues with others. Most of the people engaging audiences and building identities and publics through social media are not so fortunate. Some develop a sensibility through experience; others find themselves struggling to make sense of and manage their participation in networked publics; some misunderstand the consequences of their actions and make mistakes without realizing it. As Hargittai's work on skill (boyd & Hargittai, 2010; Hargittai, 2008) has consistently shown, people differ in how well equipped they are to take charge of these processes and make wise choices. Given the technological nature of social-mediated publicness, the presence or absence of skills reinforces existing inequalities.

Networked technologies are reconfiguring many aspects of everyday life, complicating social dynamics, and raising significant questions about society writ large. As people engage in and reshape social media, they construct new types of publicness that echo but redefine publicness as it was known in unmediated and broadcast contexts. Though the field remains wide-open for further exploration, the articles in this issue provide a valuable start towards identifying and making sense of the dynamics that are unfolding in a social-mediated public life.

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