Social Network Sites: Public, Private, or What?

danah boyd
University of California-Berkeley, School of Information
University of Southern California, Annenberg Center
http://www.danah.org

Abstract

Social network sites (SNSes) like MySpace, Facebook, and Bebo are ubiquitous and today's youth are spending a great deal of time using these sites to access public life. How is public life shaped by social technology? How are the properties of mediated publics like social network sites different from unmediated publics? This article seeks to explore the social dynamics of mediated public life in order to help educators understand their role in socialising today's youth.

The Challenge

It is difficult to define 'public' or 'private' without referring to the other. Often, especially in tech circles, these terms are seen as two peas in a binary pod. More flexible definitions allow the two terms to sit at opposite ends of an axis, giving us the ability to judge just how public or private a particular event or place is. Unfortunately, even this scale is ill equipped to handle the disruption of mediating technology. What it means to be public or private is quickly changing before our eyes and we lack the language, social norms, and structures to handle it.

Today's teenagers are being socialised into a society complicated by shifts in the public and private. New social technologies have altered the underlying architecture of social interaction and information distribution. They are embracing this change, albeit often with the clumsy candour of an elephant in a china shop. Meanwhile, most adults are panicking. They do not understand the shifts that are taking place and, regardless, they don't like what they're seeing.

This leaves educators in a peculiar bind. More conservative educators view social technologies as a product of the devil, bound to do nothing but corrupt and destroy today's youth. Utterly confused, the vast majority of educators are playing ostrich, burying their heads in the sand and hoping that the moral panics and chaos that surround the social technologies will just disappear. Slowly, a third group of educators are emerging - those who believe that it is essential to understand and embrace the new social technologies so as to guide youth through the murky waters that they present. This path is tricky because it requires educators to let go of their pre-existing assumptions about how the world works. Furthermore, as youth are far more adept at navigating the technologies through which these changes are taking place, educators must learn from their students in order to help them work through the challenges that they face.

In this article, I want to address how the architecture that frames social life is changing and what it means for a generation growing up knowing that this shift is here to stay. Educators have a very powerful role to play in helping smooth the cultural transition that is taking place; I just hope that they live up to this challenge.

Social Network Sites

In communities around the world, teenagers are joining social network sites (SNSes) like MySpace, Facebook, and Bebo. Once logged into one of these systems, participants are asked to create a profile to represent themselves digitally. Using text, images, video, audio, links, quizzes, and surveys, teens generate a profile that expresses how they see themselves. These profiles are sewn together into a large web through 'Friends' lists. Participants can mark other users as 'Friends'. If that other person agrees with the relationship assertion, a photo of each is displayed on the profile of the other. Through careful selection, participants develop a 'Friends' list.

The collection of 'Friends' is not simply a list of close ties (or what we would normally call 'friends'). Instead, this feature allows participants to articulate their imagined audience - or who they see being a part of their world within the site. While SNSes have millions of users, most participants only care about a small handful of them. Who they care about is typically represented by the list of Friends. If an individual imagines her profile to be primarily of concern to a handful of close friends, she is quite likely to have a few Friends and, if the technology allows it, keep her profile private. If she wants to be speaking to her broader peers, her Friends list is likely to have hundreds or thousands of Friends who are roughly the same age, have the same style, listen to the same music, and are otherwise quite similar to her. She is also quite likely to keep her profile visible to anyone so that she can find others in her peer group (boyd 2006).

Profiles and Friends lists are two key features on social network sites. The third is a public commenting feature ('Testimonials', 'Comments', 'The Wall'). This feature allows individuals to comment on their Friends' profiles. These comments are displayed prominently and visible for anyone who has access to that profile.

These three features - profiles, Friends lists, and comments - comprise the primary structure of social network sites, although individual sites provide additional features for further engagement. While SNSes allow visitors to wander from Friend to Friend and communicate with anyone who has a visible profile, the primary use pattern is driven by pre-existing friend groups. People join the sites with their friends and use the different messaging tools to hang out, share cultural artifacts and ideas, and communicate with one another.

Mediated Publics

Social network sites are the latest generation of 'mediated publics' - environments where people can gather publicly through mediating technology. In some senses, mediated publics are similar to the unmediated publics with which most people are familiar - parks, malls, parking lots, cafes, etc. Teens show up to connect with their friends. Other people are likely to be present and might be brought into the circle of conversation if they're interesting or ignored if not.

Public spaces have many purposes in social life - they allow people to make sense of the social norms that regulate society, they let people learn to express themselves and learn from the reactions of others, and they let people make certain acts or expressions 'real' by having witnesses acknowledge them (Arendt 1998). Social network sites are yet another form of public space. Yet, while mediated and unmediated publics play similar roles in people's lives, the mediated publics have four properties that are unique to them.

- Persistence. What you say sticks around. This is great for asynchronous communication, but it also means that what you said at 15 is still accessible when you are 30 and have purportedly outgrown your childish ways.

- Searchability. My mother would've loved the ability to scream "Find!" into the ether and determine where I was hanging out with my friends. She couldn't, I'm thankful. Today's teens can be found in their hangouts with the flick of a few keystrokes.

- Replicability. Digital bits are copyable; this means that you can copy a conversation from one place and paste it into another place. It also means that it's difficult to determine if the content was doctored.

- Invisible audiences. While it is common to face strangers in public life, our eyes provide a good sense of who can overhear our expressions. In mediated publics, not only are lurkers invisible, but persistence, searchability, and replicability introduce audiences that were never present at the time when the expression was created.

These properties change all of the rules. At a first pass, it's challenging to interpret context in a mediated space. Physical environments give us critical cues as to what is appropriate and not - through socialisation. We know that the way we can act at the beach is different to how we can act at a public lecture. I welcome anyone to show up to a lecture hall wearing a bathing suit, lay down a towel, and proceed to rub oil all over themselves. The lack of context is precisely why the imagined audience of Friends is key. It is impossible to speak to all people across all space and all time. It's much easier to imagine who you are speaking to and direct your energies towards them, even if your actual audience is quite different.

Just like journalists, participants in social network sites imagine their audience and speak according to the norms that they perceive to be generally accepted. The difference is that journalists are trying to carefully craft a message to energise a targeted audience while teenagers are shooting the breeze, showing off, and just plain hanging out amongst the people they call friends. The ephemeral speech that would be acceptable in any unmediated public with a homogeneous audience is not nearly so well-received in a mediated public with variable audiences.

Of course, two audiences cause participants the greatest headaches: those who hold power over them and those who want to prey on them. The former primarily consists of parents, teachers, bosses, and other authorities. The press have given the impression that the latter is made up of sexual predators, but the most lecherous behavior tends to come from marketers, scammers, and spammers.

Context is only one complication of this architecture. Another complication has to do with scale. When we speak without amplification, our voice only carries so far. Much to the dismay of fame-seekers, just because the Internet has the potential to reach millions, the reality is that most people are heard by very few. At the same time, embarrassing videos may have only been intended for a small audience, but if others are entertained, these things have a way of being duplicated and spreading through the network at record speeds. Another twist concerns teens who were living regular lives until something propelled them into the mainstream media spotlight (typically death, crime, and other negative situations). Suddenly, their rarely visited profile is the object of curiosity for millions, complicating their lives and the lives of their Friends.

Navigating Public Life Today

The Internet lacks walls. Conversations spread and contexts collapse. Technical solutions are unlikely to provide reprieve from this because every digital wall built has been destroyed by new technologies. The inherent replicability of bits and the power of search

make most walls temporary at best. This is why most participants in networked publics live by 'security through obscurity' where they assume that as long as no one cares about them, no one will come knocking. While this works for most, this puts all oppressed and controlled populations (including teenagers) at risk because it just takes one motivated explorer to track down even the most obscure networked public presence.

Teenagers are facing these complications head-on and their approaches vary. Some try to resumé-ify their profiles, putting on a public face intended for those who hold power over them. While this is typically the adult-approved approach, this is unrealistic for most teens who prioritise socialisation over adult acceptance. Some teens work to hide their profiles by providing false names, age, and location. This too is encouraged by adults, typically without any reflection on what it means to suggest lying to solve social woes. Yet, because of the network structure, it's not that hard for motivated searchers to find an individual through their friends.

Another common approach is to demand adults understand that these sites are '*my* space'. In other words, why expect teens to act like they're in school when they're not?

This dilemma introduces another complication of how public life has changed. Just because it's possible to get access to information, is it always OK to do so? The jury is out on this one. Many parents claim that if it's public, they have the right to see it. Of course, these same parents would not demand that their children record every conversation on the school bus for review later… yet. Because mediated publics are easier to access, they afford less privacy than unmediated publics. So, what does it mean that we're creating a surveillance society based on our norms?

While I can argue that 'just because we can, doesn't mean we should', it is foolish to assume that society will quietly take up conscientious restraint. College admissions officers and employers will continue to try to get a portrait of the 'real candidate'. Smitten admirers will continue to try to uncover any juice on their crush. And the press will continue to treat any digital data as fair game when publicly destroying someone's character.

When asked, all youth know that anyone could access their profiles online. Yet, the most common response I receive is "…but why would they?" Of course, the same teens who believe that no one is interested in them are pseudo-stalking the 'hottie' they have an eye on. Educators are not the only ones playing ostrich for mental sanity.

In response to this surveillance, some youth are starting to play tricks on their invisible audiences. At George Washington University in the United States (US), college students played a prank on the watchful campus police. They advertised a massive beer blast, but when campus police arrived to bust them, all they found was cake and cookies decorated with the word 'beer' (Hass 2006). Activist youth are taking advantage of distributed messaging features on mainstream social network sites (bulletins, news feeds) to rally their fellow students to protest, vote (usually campus elections and American Idol), and voice their opinion. An example of this occurred when thousands of American teens used MySpace to organise protests against US immigration policies (Melber 2006).

Youth are also working through the implications of the comments system. For example, teens often break up with their significant other through MySpace comments (typically boys breaking up with girls). The reason for this is simple: a vocalised breakup is visible to all Friends, making it difficult to play the 'he said/she said' game or to control the breakup narrative by modifying the Instant Messaging (IM) conversation.

While most of this is taking place through text right now, video is increasing daily. Video is not currently searchable, but technology will advance, making it possible to determine who was in what footage. These systems will also go mobile the moment someone figures out how to break through the mobile carrier roadblock. When things go mobile, location based information will add a new dimension to the hyperpublic infrastructure.

Supporting Youth Engagement

By providing just a taste of how social technologies have altered the architecture of public life, my goal is to whet the reader's appetite. It is critical for educators to understand how mediated publics are shifting the lives of youth. There are very good reasons why youth use them and encouraging them to return to traditional socialisation structures is simply not feasible (boyd, in press). Rather than diving deeper into these shifts, I want to offer some concrete advice to educators about how to think about the new media and how to engage with youth directly.

1. Recognise that youth want to hang out with their friends in youth space.

Although most adults wish that formal education was the number one priority of youth, this is rarely the case. Most youth are far more concerned with connecting with friends. Their activities are very much driven by their friend group and there is immense informal learning taking place outside of school. Learning social norms, status structures, and how to negotiate relationships of all types is crucial to teens. While most adults take these skills for granted, they are heavily developed during the teen years. In contemporary society, this process primarily takes place amongst peer groups.

Right now, the primary public space that allows teens to gather is online. Not surprisingly, teens are gathering online to hang out with their friends. Much of what they're doing resembles what you did when you hung out with your friends.

2. The Internet mirrors and magnifies all aspects of social life.

When a teen is engaged in risky behaviour online, that is typically a sign that they're engaged in risky behaviour offline. Troubled teens reveal their troubles online both explicitly and implicitly. It is not the online world that is making them troubled, but it is a fantastic opportunity for intervention. What would it mean to have digital street outreach where people started reaching out to troubled teens, not to punish them, but to be able to help. We already do street outreach in cities - why not treat the networked world as one large city? Imagine having college students troll the profiles of teens in their area in order to help troubled kids, just as they wander the physical streets. Too often we blame technology for what it reveals, but destroying or regulating the technology will not solve the underlying problems that are made visible through mediated publics like social network sites.

It's also important to realise that the technology makes it easier to find those who are seeking attention than those who are not. The vast majority of teens using these sites are engaged in relatively mundane activities, but the 'at risk' ones are made visible through mainstream media. In this way, both the technology and the press coverage magnify the most troublesome aspects of everyday life because they are inherently more interesting.

3. Questions abound. There are no truths, only conversations.

Over the last year, dozens of parenting guides have emerged to provide black and white rules about how youth should interact with social network sites. Over and over, I watch as these rules fail to protect youth. Rules motivate submissive youth, but they do little to get

youth to think through the major issues. Conversation (not lecturing) is key and it needs to be clear that there is no correct answer; it's all a matter of choices and pros and cons.

An Educator's Role

So, what's an educator to do? More than most, educators are well positioned to directly engage youth about their networked practices. They can posit moral conundrums, show how mediated publics differ from unmediated ones, invite youth to consider the potential consequences of their actions, and otherwise educate through conversation instead of the assertion of power.

I have found that group settings are ideal for engaging youth to consider their relationship with social technologies and mediated publics. Some of the questions that I have used in the past are:

- Technically, I (your teacher) have access to your profile. Should I look at it? (Why or why not?)

- Who do you think looks at your profile? How would you feel if your mother, grandmother, coach, future boss, etc. looked at your profile? Why? What do you think they'd think of you based on your profile alone?

- You were at a party last week and a girl you barely know took pictures of you that you know will get you into trouble, even though you did nothing wrong. She posted them to her profile. How does this make you feel? (When you asked her to take them down, she told you to lighten up. What next?)

- What do you think are the dos and don'ts for having a profile?

Internet safety is on the tip of most educators' tongues, but much of what needs to be discussed goes beyond safety. It is about setting norms and considering how different actions will be interpreted. It's important to approach this conversation with an open mind and without condescension because, often, there are no right or wrong answers.

There are different ways to approach conversing with students. The most obvious is through curriculum, under the broader umbrella of media literacy. At the same time, there are ways to open up this conversation in other settings as well. Social studies teachers can bring in news clippings of case studies. Literature teachers can introduce the meaning of public life through many of the books that teens read. Throughout the world, curriculum regulations differ, but introducing the dilemmas of everyday life is essential.

Finally, there are some practical steps that educators can take to prepare themselves for interacting with all students.

1) Create a profile on whatever sites are popular in your school. Learn the system and make a profile that represents you. Use your own profile and your own experiences to introduce conversations in the classroom – this way they will know that you are online and that you too find it weird figuring out what's appropriate.

2) Keep your profile public and responsible, but not lame. Add your favourite song; add photos of your cat playing; write about your hobbies. Put blog entries up about these issues and your own experiences in handling them. Write them as personal reflections rather than lectures. Not all students are going to read your manifestos, but you will be setting a standard.

3) Do not go surfing for your students, but if they invite you to be Friends, say yes. This is a sign that they respect you. Write a kind comment back to them if appropriate and make certain to respond to comments that you receive. If something concerns you, privately ask why they chose to put a particular item up on their page, rather than criticise their profiles. Ask about their lives; don't demand that they behave as you'd wish. Show that you care, not that you dictate.

4) The more present you are, the more opportunity you have to influence the norms. Social network sites are not classrooms and they shouldn't be treated as such. The goal in being present on these sites is not to enforce rules, but to provide responsible models and simply be 'eyes on the street' (Jacobs 1961).

Mediated publics are here to stay; yet they are complicating many aspects of daily life. The role of an educator is not to condemn or dismiss youth practices, but to help youth understand how their practices fit into a broader societal context. These are exciting times; embracing societal changes and influencing the norms can only help everyone involved.

Useful Links

www.bebo.com

www.facebook.com

www.myspace.com

www.reachout.com.au

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