



Profile propaganda and the changing face of self-presentation on social network sites: A review

Natalie Millhouse, University of Newcastle
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Abstract

Propaganda, a term commonly associated with political or marketing communications, is a selective presentation of information with the intent to manipulate opinions (Jowett & O'Donnell, 1999), and as traditional concepts of communication and behaviours are evolving on social media it is now also associated with individual self-presentation on social network sites. Introduced as 'propaganda narratives' in relation to selfies (Eagar & Dann, 2016), it was established that propaganda techniques are used by everyday individuals as a form of self-promotion. However, selfies form only a small part (if any) of some user's profiles and the question whether propaganda use extends to the rich body of personal information known as a 'profile' needs to be answered. By reviewing extant literature this article identifies shifting behaviours of self-presentation, defined as 'profile propaganda', offers

insights into the context of the behavioural shifts, and provides a foundation for understanding the future implications, particularly in relation to communications and relationship formation.

Background

Since the development of Web 2.0 and the socialisation of the internet (Marwick, 2013) society has rapidly moved into a digitally mediated networked society (boyd, 2010; Castells, 2010; Jan van Dijck, 2012), in which social media has attracted people by the billions (Statista, 2017) to a variety of platforms where rich bodies of user-generated content (UGC) are created, shared and consumed (Fisher, Boland Jr, & Lytinen, 2016; Pera, Viglia, & Furlan, 2016). Defined as, “Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and self-present” (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 50), social media is a communication evolution. It opens up new channels to fulfil long-established needs to communicate and connect (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; José van Dijck, 2013a) and provides new environments to build relationships, source information, seek entertainment, and interact with brands.

Social media includes: social network sites (SNS), such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Snapchat; content communities, notably Wikipedia; messaging apps, for example WhatsApp and Messenger; video sharing sites, such as YouTube; virtual worlds and gaming, as in World of Warcraft; and blogs and forums – and it is an intrinsic part of culture today (boyd, 2014; José van Dijck & Poell, 2013). SNS are one of the most transformative elements of this emerging ecosystem of connective social media (José van Dijck, 2013a). As networked communication platforms, SNS require personalised ‘identifiable’ profiles, encourage public connections and interactions, and are populated with UGC (Ellison & boyd, 2013, p. 158). Due to their widespread uptake in society and their requirement of individuals to make decisions regarding personal presentation and identity

(Papacharissi, 2010), SNS are useful environments to gain insights into identity formation, management, motivation, and outcomes.

Getting to know SNS profiles

On SNS an individual's identity is collectively known as a profile. A profile is a means of 'promoting uniqueness' (Pera et al., 2016) and users benefit by sharing personal content or comments (Weinberg, de Ruyter, Dellarocas, Buck, & Keeling, 2013). Individuals are responsible for creating and maintaining their own profile (Bareket-Bojmel, Moran, & Shahr, 2016), often with multiple self-identities to manage across various platforms (Baym, 2015; Fisher et al., 2016; Marwick, 2012). What constitutes a profile varies greatly between SNS platforms, however at its simplest, a profile presents and potentially informs the identity of the individual participating on the network. Once a by-product of role playing games and avatars (Turkle, 1999), and fact-based entry points for interaction (Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2011), profiles today are an all-encompassing, ideally authentic "repository of self and other-" (Ellison & boyd, 2013, p. 154).

Self-identity, or more commonly self-presentation, is not new or exclusive to SNS profiles, and neither is managing a multiple self (Goffman, 1973; Kendell, 1999; Turkle, 1999). Importantly however, the techniques and tools to self-present publically are more readily accessible through the technical features of SNS, and with widespread expectations for individuals to have an SNS presence using techniques learnt through ongoing activity (Fisher et al., 2016; José van Dijck, 2013b), a new dynamic of self-presentation is taking place online. Individuals are learning to balance the ideal with the authentic, or 'self-triangulation' (Davis, 2014), attract attention and conform to expectations (Parmentier, Fischer, & Reuber, 2013), and seamlessly combine a professional, private and public self (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013) – and when knowledge transparency

(Leonardi, 2015) and social surveillance into personal activities is commonplace (Marwick, 2012; Ranzini & Hoek, 2017), it can be a rewarding, but also an unforgiving environment.

As the self is increasingly commodified on SNS, everyday individuals are turning to promotion and branding techniques to meet personal and societal expectations (Eagar & Dann, 2016; Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011; José van Dijck, 2013b). This evolution in the development of profiles highlights the importance to better understand identity curation, performance and exhibition (Gandini, 2015; Goffman, 1973; Hogan, 2010; Senft, 2012; Warburton & Hatzipanagos, 2013), as it affects all social interactions and people's innate desire to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

The pressures on the profile

While the presentation and viewing of identity is generally seen as a positive experience of SNS use allowing individuals to enrich self-conceptions (Fisher et al., 2016), increase a sense of belonging or self-worth (Dumas, Maxwell-Smith, Davis, & Giuliatti, 2017; La Sala, Skues, Wise, & Theiler, 2015; Sinclair & Grieve, 2017), improve social capital (Florida, 2005; Smith, Smith, & Shaw, 2017), achieve self-realisation (Gandini, 2015), and contribute to self-esteem (Ellison et al., 2011; Nie & Sundar, 2013), it is important to note that it doesn't take much to become a negative experience (Senft & Baym, 2015). As boyd (2010) summarises, SNS are persistent, replicable, scalable, and searchable, and what was previously a fleeting quip or a blip in time could become a long-lasting event potentially affecting relationships (Ellison et al., 2011), reputation (Yang, 2015), result in cyber-bullying or victimisation (Saridakis, Benson, Ezingard, & Tennakoon, 2015), affect employment prospects (Carr & Walther, 2014) and even have legal implications (Browning, 2015).

While an individual can often choose whether shared content is private or public (Marwick & boyd, 2014), understanding who audiences are can be difficult (Litt & Hargittai, 2016), particularly when all

audiences see the same content (Papacharissi, 2010). Additionally, some platforms allow content to be added to profiles by connections or 'friends' (Baym, 2015) diminishing control and sometimes increasing anxiety amongst users (Senft, 2012), further complicating the art of digital self-presentation (Belk, 2013). Recent changes to some SNS platforms address audience control, such as Instagram's introduction of 'Favourites', however, when Mark Zuckerberg famously stated, "You have one identity", as discussed in David Kirkpatrick's *The Facebook Effect* (2010, p. 199), the expectation to disregard social hierarchy within networks is made clear. Kirkpatrick goes on to say Facebook is, "causing a mass resetting of the boundaries of personal intimacy" (2010, p. 200), one that alters established norms of communication (Goffman, 1973).

Audiences, defined as a "mental conceptualisation of the people with whom we are communicating" (Litt, 2012, p. 331), are constantly shifting within and across platforms (Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2010), and can be effected by algorithms, cookies and privacy preferences (Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Moll, Pieschl, & Bromme, 2014). As a result the imagined audience can be vastly different from the actual audience (boyd, 2010; Litt & Hargittai, 2016), meaning what an individual believes to be private can actually be public, or the information simply reaches unintended audiences as it joins the 'digital superpublic' (Senft & Baym, 2015). This uncertainty and loss of control experienced by users may explain the increased use of identity management to avoid context collapse amongst audiences (boyd, 2010; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Meyrowitz, 1985). However, while context collapse may imply negative outcomes it can also provide positive opportunities for broader reach within audiences than would otherwise have been achieved (Vitak, 2012), such as validation or even fame – outcomes which are very appealing to some SNS users.

Contexts of communication can refer to time and place, for example afternoon drinks; circumstances, such as recently single; or personal identifiers, as in age, gender, race, sexuality, and cultural

influences (Drakopoulou Dodd & Patra, 2002; Kral, 2014; Lee-Won, Shim, Joo, & Park, 2014). Socio-economic or political contexts, such as socially bound, information economies also inform the context of communications (Castells, 2010; Florida, 2005; Gandini, 2015; Gill & Pratt, 2008). Context, regardless if maintained or collapsed, or whether audiences are actual or imagined, place continuous pressure on profiles through ongoing collaborative and dynamic interactions (Belk, 2013; Gandini, 2015; Marwick, 2015), where online identities are continuously “made, displayed and reshaped” (Baym, 2015, p. 118).

Profile propaganda defined

As new norms of communication are being created online, a re-education in basic communication is required as everyday individuals learn and navigate new skills for successful self-presentation to attain a level of media literacy previously associated with public figures, such as politicians, celebrities, and media personalities (Enli & Thumim, 2012; Labrecque et al., 2011; Meyrowitz, 1985), and with consumer brands (Marwick, 2013). While arguably an extension of the self, online personas do not necessarily need to mirror offline realities (Belk, 2013; Ellison et al., 2011), which is a line of thinking that could free people from being overly concerned with presenting the ‘perfect self’, were it not for the fear or shame associated with being caught presenting a falsehood (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). While some SNS users expect profiles to be misleading or inauthentic (Ellison et al., 2011; Gil-Or, Levi-Belz, & Turel, 2015), they moreover accept them as selective, idealised, or harmless ‘strategic manipulations’ to create more positive impressions (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016; Baym, 2015; Toma et al., 2008). This may suggest there is a general understanding that managing the balance between promoting a best-self with being authentic is difficult (Baym, 2015; José van Dijck, 2013b) – and maybe it is a case of ‘we’re all doing it’ or ‘it is expected of us’.

The misleading nature of some self-presentations on SNS should not be overplayed either. As Baym states, honesty levels are similar online and offline, despite the fact that, “reduced social cues make it easier to lie, separation, time lags, and sparse cues also remove social pressures that make lying seem like a good idea.” (2015, p. 127). Conversely, this may simply mean that any increases in manipulative self-presentation online may be equally present in offline lives, and further research into deceptive behaviours taking into account both offline and online personas is required to truly gauge if the online persona is transforming the offline persona or vice versa.

Much research to-date recognises personal and professional identities are increasingly blurred (Carr & Hayes, 2015; Jan van Dijck, 2012), with individuals adopting competitive self-presentation techniques commonly associated with entrepreneurial, media or marketing objectives (Maghrabi, Oakley, & Nemati, 2014; Moulard, Garrity, & Rice, 2015; Pera et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2017; Wernick, 1991). That is, with direct economic, self-realisation, and/or social capital to be gained (Fieseler, Meckel, & Ranzini, 2015). Terms such as self-branding (Baym, 2015; Gandini, 2015), human-branding (Eagar & Dann, 2016; Moulard et al., 2015), branded self (Senft, 2012), persona studies (Marshall, 2014), personal branding (Labrecque et al., 2011) and microcelebrity (Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2012) have all been used to help further an understanding of the migration of private individuals to becoming public actors, or the emergence of ‘public intimacy’ (Hearn, 2010).

Not all research supports the shift away from socialising to promotion, such as Jan van Dijck’s stance that SNS, “have a clear social orientation” (2012, p. 181). Research by Enli and Thumim (2012) strongly argues the term should be self-representation instead of self-presentation because the primary aim of users on SNS is to socialise, not to commoditise. However Enli and Thumim also acknowledge self-presentation is a requirement of SNS participation due to how platforms actively encourage a blurring of promotion and socialising, as well as the broader societal expectations

(Fieseler et al., 2015; Fisher et al., 2016; Marwick, 2013; Norman, 1988; Papacharissi, 2010) – making pure socialising a difficult concept to hold onto.

‘Propaganda narratives’ introduced by Eagar and Dann (2016) determined individuals creating ‘propaganda selfies’ were calculated and manipulative. Eagar and Dann borrow from Jowett and O’Donnell’s (1999) work that defines propaganda as a communicative act based on self-interest, differing to persuasion in its one-way or selfish motivations, with a direct relationship to the management of public opinion – and its unmistakable characteristics of, “deliberate intent and manipulation, along with a systematic plan to achieve a purpose that is advantageous to the propagandist” (1999, p. 11). It is true that some definitions of personal branding could apply here, and branding techniques are most likely being adopted by individuals partaking in ‘profile propaganda’ as a form of ‘strategic self-commodification’ (Marwick & boyd, 2010). However the intent, the imagined audience, and the expected outcomes are most likely different.

Profile propaganda should not be conflated with falsification either. Propaganda, in fact, is not falsification, but strategic misrepresentation, or a skewed presentation of facts, which may include withholding information to give whatever is released more power, sway and impact. With this in mind, it seems successful use of profile propaganda techniques would require a complex understanding of the self in the context of the intended audiences, fine-tuned skills to create compelling content, and promotional know-how to achieve a clear set of personal goals. As such, the term profile propaganda represents more than a set of persona branding techniques; it also incorporates the societal shift taking place for everyday individuals within the evolving communication channels of SNS, and the underlying communication and relationship repercussions.

Further investigation into personal motivations such as social capital and status, identifying connections with personality types, and an examination of SNS affordances designed to encourage personal gain may clarify the environmental and societal influences potentially encouraging this shift in self-presentation behaviour.

Motivations – social capital and status

Deliberate acquisition of social capital online is frequently associated with entrepreneurs, creative workers, and owners of personal brands, including celebrities, politicians or influencers. Due to the proliferation of SNS, its wider audience reach and how certain behaviours are rewarded, social capital is now a motivator for everyday individuals – setting the scene for profile propaganda to emerge.

Social capital is different to economic capital in that it is not a finite, quantifiable figure and it is context and audience specific (Drakopoulou Dodd & Patra, 2002; Ellison & Vitak, 2015; Smith et al., 2017). But similar to economic capital, social capital can yield financial rewards (José van Dijck, 2013b), as well as positive relationship outcomes (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013), notably through the attention economy of SNS (Gandini, 2015; Hearn, 2011; Marwick, 2015). Social capital on SNS is accumulated by maximising all available network connections (Ellison, Lampe, Steinfeld, & Vitak, 2010), and it is increasingly associated with notions of self-worth, status, reputation and self-esteem (Ellison et al., 2010; Hearn, 2010; Sinclair & Grieve, 2017). Social capital is also, “bi-directional in nature” (Grieve & Kemp, 2015, p. 241), meaning that as profiles are collaboratively created during attempts to attain social capital, the rewards of social capital can be shared with the collaborators, creating a self-fulfilling cycle where all actors stand to benefit.

Personalities and online behaviours

The ability to exhibit to a broader audience has also increased through SNS (Fisher et al., 2016), attracting all types of personalities (Eşkisü, Hoşođlu, & Rasmussen, 2016), in particular those comfortable with 'like-seeking behaviour' (Dumas et al., 2017). If there are direct correlations between personality types and profile propaganda techniques they are not yet known, however it will be interesting to see if any patterns emerge with the Big Five personality types – extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness – and the more recently recognised personality type of narcissism (Davenport, Bergman, Bergman, & Fearington, 2014; Eşkisü et al., 2016; Lee, Ahn, & Kim, 2014). Narcissism seems to be the zeitgeist of the digital native generation (boyd, 2014), however some criticisms of 'narcissistic acts' are often "thinly veiled means of undermining the subject" (Burns, 2015, p. 1718) which fail to recognise the act as an expression of creativity. For example, self-portraits have long featured in the arts, yet are increasingly conflated with narcissism due to the proliferation of the selfie (Burns, 2015; Caldeira, 2016; Senft & Baym, 2015). As 'propaganda' has the potential to be an inflammatory term, greater understanding of its precise nature and relationship to SNS profile formation is required to avoid it being seen as the new narcissism.

Affordances for personal gain

The term 'affordances' originated in ecological psychology (Gibson, 1979), later appeared in design studies (Norman, 1988) and now is an integral element to social media research (Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Smith et al., 2017). SNS platforms are purpose built for identity construction and self-presentation (Baym, 2015; Papacharissi, 2010), and are identified by Smith et al. (2017) as shareable, editable, viewable, replicable, and be capable of signalling. boyd (2010) highlights how affordances are instrumental in shaping engagement, as they provide the framework for individuals to reach beyond their existing network to broader social, cultural, and civic publics, defined as networked

publics. While each platform has a set of affordances unique to their objectives and target user, all support and reward an individual to get more likes, have more friends, be endorsed by more colleagues, be re-tweeted more frequently, and be viewed the most (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). Across the board it is a more, more, more, everyone for themselves culture (José van Dijck, 2013a).

Marwick (2013) introduced the concept of status affordances, referring to the identifiable summary of a user's popularity, 'likes', 'shares', 'followers', 'views', and 'connections'. Marwick explains these popularity markers afford status by reducing complex relationships to a number that implies influence and acts as a 'measure of self-worth'. Powerful algorithms are affordances that feed into status, revealing popularity is not as simple as how many likes a post receives (Krasmann, 2017; José van Dijck & Poell, 2013). On Facebook, for example, algorithms detect highly-liked posts, an affordance that then pushes that post to the top of a News Feed, to then increase the likelihood of receiving more 'likes'; on Twitter, algorithms inform recommendations based on data created from patterns of use and profiles being followed (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Hidden affordances such as algorithms, just as with the overarching platform affordances, continuously evolve, adapt and respond to and for the users (Nagy & Neff, 2015; Papacharissi, 2010; José van Dijck, 2013a), as well as for platform owners and advertisers (Bucher & Helmond, 2017).

Marwick strongly argues affordances have been designed to, "idealise and reward a particular persona; highly visible, entrepreneurial, and self-configured to be watched and consumed by others" (2013, p. 22). So when individuals employ profile propaganda techniques to self-brand, promote and market themselves as an identity, are they just doing what is afforded them? After all, Facebook has been identified as requiring strong self-presentation skills to maintain or enhance reputation (José van Dijck, 2013b); like-seeking behaviour and self-promotion has been widely associated with Instagram use (Dumas et al., 2017; Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014); Twitter has been outed

as a 'gift economy', with expected returns for retweets and sharing (Paßmann, Boeschoten, & Schäfer, 2014). Collectively SNS affordances have been said to actively promote like-seeking over authenticity (Dumas et al., 2017; Marwick, 2013), drive the development of social capital and deeper relationships (Lee, Kim, & Ahn, 2014), and encourage the monitoring of others (Senft, 2012), as well as to exploit the valuable personal data SNS provides (José van Dijck, 2013b).

While platform affordances do not in themselves determine actions or behaviours, they do control what is or is not possible (Kane, Alavi, Labianca, & Borgatti, 2014) and offer action based mechanisms that a user must operate within. This can potentially shape an individual's behaviour, particularly as perceptions of self-identity can change in response to the platform's affordances (Turkle, 1999; José van Dijck, 2013b). While some research has indicated that the amount of information shared positively contributes to self-identity (Nie & Sundar, 2013), the motivations for individuals to master managing SNS affordances, as would be required for successful profile propaganda techniques, may lie within deeper understandings of the affordances themselves (Davenport et al., 2014).

The evolution to propaganda

While many SNS increasingly favour content such as news, images, and videos and are less reliant on profiles as a traditional construct (Ellison & boyd, 2013), profiles are still the focal point of interaction (boyd, 2010). Whether the profile actively incorporates misleading or selective information, as in profile propaganda, or if it is simply a 'casual manipulation' of presented content (La Sala et al., 2015), there are still many potential effects of the presentation choices being made. In *No Sense of Place*, Meyrowitz discusses the impacts of electronic media on social behaviour, stating: "The selves we project are not simply masks we slip on, therefore, but personalities we become attached to. The longer we play a given role, the more the role comes to seem real, not only to our audiences, but

also to ourselves” (1985, p. 31). It may follow then that SNS profiles are potentially a catalyst for fundamental shifts in identity formation and communication norms.

Young professionals on SNS are already said to, “adopt self-consciously constructed personas and market themselves like brands or celebrities, to an audience or fan base. These personas are highly edited, controlled, and monitored, conforming to commercial ideals that dictate ‘safe-for-work’ self-presentation” (Marwick, 2013, p. 14). While Marwick references ‘professionals’ using SNS, the point associates professionals ‘socialising’ with a level of awareness to gain professional and social advantages. This leads to the question: does a purely personal profile really exist anymore? That is, if users are evolving behaviours to adopt entrepreneurial persona-branding techniques, such as propaganda-based profiles for personal relationships, does this change the nature of content shared across all SNS to be self-censored, non-controversial and low risk (boyd, 2014), purposefully created with context and audience in mind (Marwick & boyd, 2010; Ranzini & Hoek, 2017) – and what does all of this mean for the offline persona?

Benefits of future research

Profiles contribute a large resource of personal data on social media, which holds great value to the individual’s identity formation, to platform owner’s profits, advertiser’s success and employers seeking potential candidates. Profiles also have the ability to alter the formation and perceived value of personal relationships, as well as the fundamental patterns of communication in society. As such, there are many cultural and economic outcomes at stake and society could widely benefit from a better understanding of the emergence of propaganda in relation to SNS profiles.

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