LEFT BEHIND, LEFT UNSAID: ABSENCES ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S FACEBOOK TIMELINES

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Since its launch in 2004, Facebook has promoted an ethos of sharing and connecting with friends. From Facebook's motto to "connect and share with people in your life" to its recent "Friendaversary" that invites users to celebrate friendships as mediated on the site, Facebook operates on a logic of sharing (van Dijck 2013; Kennedy 2015). Despite discourses of flight from the site, Facebook is still one of the most popular social networks with over 1.2 billion daily users. There is a considerable and growing literature on Facebook use, including disclosure practices (boyd & Ellison 2008; Sauter 2013; Marwick & boyd 2014; Duguay 2014), privacy strategies (Raynes-Goldie 2010; Vitak 2012), and the role of the site in mediating identity-work (Robards 2014; Lincoln & Robards 2014). What is less well-understood is *dis-use,* or the absence of disclosures. In other words, what is left unsaid on Facebook?

In this paper we draw on data from the Facebook Timelines project to explore the multi-dimensional notion of 'absence' as it plays out on Facebook: obvious gaps, disclosures that were erased, and significant events (deaths, break-ups, failures) deemed inappropriate for Facebook. We interviewed 34 people in their twenties who had been using Facebook for more than five years, in both Tasmania (Australia) and Liverpool (UK). During our interviews, we 'scrolled back' with our participants over their years of disclosures, and invited our participants to explain, reflect, and 'co-analyse' with us this digital trace of their life (see Robards & Lincoln 2017 for full details).

Absence manifests in disclosure practices in a number of ways as part of the ongoing reflexive project of self (Giddens, 1991; Lincoln & Robards 2017). Light's (2014) book *Disconnecting with Social Network Sites* signals a new area of interest on 'disconnective practice' that this paper works to build upon. In addition, we engage with

Goffman's dramaturgical framework (1959) often used in studies of connection on Facebook to further unravel some of the complexities of managing 'absence' across a front- and back-stage.

This paper will be divided into three parts to cover three themes in the data: evolving social media literacies, imagined audiences, and absence on social media as a safety mechanism. First, we begin our discussion by considering notions of social media literacy and how 'absences' are intrinsically linked to the emerging social media competencies of our participants as they've grown up and as Facebook has become more widely adopted. We explore how through the research process, participants were able to reflect upon changes in their use over time, often constructing an 'all or nothing' narrative around disclosure with 'all' defining their early practices (posting daily or weekly) and 'nothing' or very little as their current practices. We consider how 'absence' figured into the refining of disclosures over time while our participants were still very much present on and connected to the site: checking it a number of times each day, commenting, messaging friends, liking posts from others, but not making as many posts themselves as they had in the past. In this sense, 'absence' is not as straightforward as 'not being present' and presence here is multi-faceted.

Evolving social media literacies were also found to be directly informed by changes in imagined audiences. As parents and older relatives came to adopt Facebook as the site became more widely adopted, so too did our participants' strategies around audience segregation become more complex. Our data indicate considerable 'back stage' work around decision-making to determine what will and won't be disclosed on the site, drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical framework (1959) and a range of existing work that makes use of Goffman's dramaturgical framework as applied to digital social spaces (Hogan 2010; Pinch 2010). An event such as the death of a loved one, for example, might be a key critical moment in the life narrative of a young person, but posting about this explicitly on Facebook may be deemed unsuitable. However, the overt absence of a tragic event might be alluded to when a friend makes reference to it in a comment, or in a vague references that only close friends and family will be able to decode. Here 'absence' becomes complicated as conflict between Facebook etiquette – where front and back stage boundaries are negotiated – and family conventions occur. Here, questions emerge about what should be left unsaid.

The theme of family continues to be significant as we consider how 'absence' is used as a safety mechanism on Facebook often instigated by parents or family members. In this context, a number of our participants were guided in their setting up of profiles by parents or older siblings who worked with 'absence' as a starting point for presence on the site. For example, some of our participants were discouraged from using photographs of themselves. Others were encouraged to use alises. As we discuss elsewhere, absences are amplified when applying for a job when Facebook users are encouraged to remove particular types of information about themselves, erasing traces and narratives that may compromise employment opportunities (Lincoln & Robards 2017).

Our discussion concludes when we turn to the role of absences in self-care on social media: removing unsettling content from one's news feed, blocking abusive users, and

even de-friending friends and family to escape drama. One of our participants, Mary, explained how she deleted her father from her Facebook, for instance, because 'he posts emotional stuff about family, friends and stuff'. Mary explained that Facebook was part of her daily rhythm and posts from her father would disrupt and irritate her. 'There's a time and place for that', Mary explained discussing the 'emotional stuff' her father would post, and Facebook was not it. 'If I sit there at work and if I open Facebook and see something that pisses me off it ruins the whole day', she added. Mary's approach here – to delete her father – represents a different kind of absence, but connects to Light's (2014) broader arguments about the productive (and vital) dimensions of disconnection.

In summary, the scroll back method we've employed in this study, and recruiting our participants as co-analysts, has allowed us to move beyond the logic of sharing and visibility and connection that Facebook turns on. Instead, moving attention to disconnection and absence and what is left unsaid can reveal developing literacies around social media use that exist outside a formal school-based curriculum, and that instead develop among friends. Turning to absence can also reveal complex strategies around audience segregation and self-care.

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