

Culpable Media/Culpable Selves: Digital Disembodiment and the Rise of “Crowdsourced Morality”

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Abstract

Social media encourage collective practices of public expression and individualized practices of privacy and reputation management. Juxtaposing three contemporary extreme scenario case studies, select interviews with first-year college students and human resource staff, and the historic practices of impression management and public expression, I contend that users participate in collective expression and surveillance through social media that ultimately culminate in an extensive and potentially threatening form of disembodiment as it subjects ‘culpable’ individuals to the morality of the crowd. In this process of “crowdsourced morality,” users not only strip expressions of original context and intent, but they also bully ‘culpable’ individuals by grossly mischaracterizing them to incite public censure and punishment. Therefore, while social media theoretically promote expression through shared connections and content, they also operate as culpable media that complicate personal expression by producing power differentials that always potentially disempower the individual against the excruciating power of the crowd.

Keywords

self-presentation; privacy; surveillance; morality; social media

Introduction

Web 2.0 platforms continue to change the ways people connect to one another, how individuals engage in impression management, and how privacy is practiced and understood. Sites like Facebook, twitter, reddit, and tumblr, among others, encourage individual expression by allowing users various opportunities to connect with others and be involved in more intimate affairs of their lives. Yet, as these media offer a world of interconnection through a perpetual stream of content that is personally supplied and collectively created, they also saturate our lives with information to the point that it overlaps, transgresses, and ultimately challenges the nebulous, yet “spatially” demarcated, boundaries we, as a society, have long held between public and private expression (Baym, 2010; boyd, 2008; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Petronio, 2002). In this way, users not only contribute to the accretion of shared personal information that drive Web 2.0, but they also inadvertently collapse private life into public life when they enact hyper-vigilant practices of impression management and participatory surveillance to present a coherent public image across offline and online contexts (see Foucault, 1975; Monahan, 2011; Nissenbaum, 2010; Van Dijck, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). As a result, a user’s profile operates as a site of contested identity management, particularly as her backstage performances—increasingly removed of the context in which they originated—become the potential subject of intense public scrutiny and censure (see boyd, 2008; Goffman, 1959). In instances where a backstage performance of a relatively harmless nature circulates beyond its original audience, the individual depicted in the image, video, or post is not only disembodied as a source, but she also becomes a victim of “crowdsourced morality,” the name I’ve given to the process where countless unknown others mob, bully, and justify their moral values to publically shame and punish the allegedly culpable individual.

Private/Public Impression Management and “Crowdsourced Morality” in Action

To investigate this problem, I explored three notable incidents on the social networking site, Facebook, and the social news and entertainment site, reddit. I also interviewed first-year students and various

human resource staff from academic and business settings to articulate the contemporary discourse of privacy and the various nuances in personal and professional behavior that support, challenge, and redefine the duality of public and private in everyday life. I draw on the dramaturgical metaphors for impression management and public life from Erving Goffman (1959) and Richard Sennett (1977) to consider how public expression has changed and how “crowdsourced morality” is performed as an increasingly common practice of online interactions. Juxtaposing these incidents to the historic practices of public and private expression, I argue that “crowdsourced morality” challenges the authentic and/or intimate image of self that one maintains online by increasingly disembodied the individual to instill a decidedly gendered moral order over backstage performances depicted in public. The three case studies—Lindsey Stone, a former employee of Living Independently Forever who was fired for posting a “funny picture” on Facebook where she flipped off a the “Silence and Respect” placard in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Arlington National Cemetery (see Zimmerman, 2012a, 2012b); Chelsea Welch, a former Applebee’s waitress who was fired for posting a customer’s “self-righteous no-tip” receipt to reddit (see Morran, 2013a, 2013b; Welch, 2013); and Amanda Todd, a 15-year-old Vancouver teenager who committed suicide after being incessantly bullied by former friends who discovered a photo of her breasts she had naively flashed to a “cyberstalker” that shared the image with everyone she knew online because she wouldn’t “put on a show” for him (see Mui, 2012)—demonstrate that visual depictions of backstage performances often complicate the coherent public image one attempts to maintain and manage between online and offline contexts, particularly when they reach others who believe that the depictions violate an arbitrary societal expectation for acceptable *public* behavior (see Goffman, 1959; Sennett, 1977; Van Dijck, 2013a, 2013b). Since these sites afford greater reach and allow others to easily replicate and share an individual’s performances (Baym, 2010; boyd & Ellison, 2007), regardless of her privacy settings, the visual depictions potentially circulate beyond the intended audience (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013b). As this occurs across multiple audiences online, the visual depiction of the backstage performance now not only disembodies the individual, but it also becomes a signified performance that collapses private into public. The end result is an otherwise private performance recast as public, and, therefore, subject to intense public scrutiny, judgment, censure, and punishment.

For these three individuals, their otherwise private visual depictions spiraled out of their personal control because they could not fully manage the complex identity negotiations that occur across the multiple audiences granted access through the subdomains of Web 2.0. While Stone, Welch, and Todd tried to defend themselves online, either issuing statements or avoiding unknown others who began to verbally attacked them online, the sheer force of “crowdsourced morality” ultimately shaped their future outcomes. Thus, the threat that Web 2.0 poses for every individual stems beyond a mere moment taken out of context; it is, instead, a loss of self generated in the overreaching surveillance and vitriolic judgment that are mounted against an individual as she is disembodied in the distance from the expression, which ultimately leads to public censure, self-censorship, and a digital scarlet letter that forever follows the individual wherever she may go. Therefore, although each of these notable incidents differs in scope, magnitude, and geographical location, what all demonstrate is the violation of privacy and an assumption that it will be available in online settings (see Nissenbaum, 2010; see also Warren & Brandeis, 1890/2010).

Conclusion

While the process of disembodiment online is not new, I argue that the rise of “crowdsourced morality” is, particularly as it grossly mischaracterizes individuals to incite public censure that leads to grave consequences for ‘culpable’ individuals. To the extent that crowdsourced morality invites self-righteousness and judgment in public discourse by disembodied the individual as the source, I argue that it devalues open, democratic dialogue that would otherwise contextualize a person or an event in time by instead supplanting it with the moral judgments of nearly anonymous others to potentially punish the individual for her actions. However, when this happens, crowdsourced morality not only disciplines the

individual, but it also threatens public life by allowing the mob to police and regulate other's actions, altering practices of expression while also compelling individuals to conform to highly polarized patterns of interaction. The end result is a society where public discourse becomes hyperpersonal, highly judgmental, and highly abstracted from the individual in question without much consequence for the members of the mob who assess, judge, and ultimately shape the future of the individual in question.

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