It's Not All Zeroes and Ones: constructing online identity assembly theory

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Abstract

The construction of online identity, though examined in other disciplines, has not yet been approached theoretically in the communication scholarship. Online identities cannot be understood as linear or static as some identity theory presents. Online identities need to be understood as continually changing representations, never fixed in one position, and perpetually in a state of assembly. Identity research within the communication literature has focused on specific characteristics of the medium (e.g., anonymity) and the effects of those characteristics on the outcomes of the communicative act rather than focusing on the communicative process of identity construction itself. In other words, past research examined the bookends of the online communicative act – this project focuses on the communicative processes in order to explain the dynamics of online identity (re)creation. In this light online identity assembly theory (OIA) serves 1) as a response to the limitation of current online identity research within the communication discipline and 2) as a way for the communication discipline to engage this developing and ever-important area of study. OIA offers a new direction for the investigation and interrogation of online identities, recognizing how the interrelation of race, class, gender, and social position in online social communities overtly and covertly influence how we assemble ourselves within online spaces. *Facebook* profile construction processes are interrogated as a test application of OIA theory, demonstrating how OIA theory can contribute to identity research by looking at the interrelationship of these concepts in relation to one another rather than as separate elements within identity.

Keywords

computer-mediated communication; identity; communication theory

You can never step into the same river;

for new waters are always flowing on to you.

Heraclitus of Ephesus

As online communication (e.g., email; SMS; instant messaging; video chat; MMORPG; online social communities) becomes commonplace, understanding both the process of online communication as well as the product of that communicative phenomenon grows more necessary. Each online communicative act relies on the technology to translate the message from sender to receiver(s); without the technology, online communication cannot take place at all. In essence, the message is wholly constructed and contained online.

One realization regarding online communication is beginning to emerge: the individuals and groups engaging in online communication are constructing simultaneous multiple identities in new ways. An individual user can have as many identities as s/he wishes, resulting in an individual user being a truly polysemic self, able to adjust in small or radical ways at any given time, both visually and textually. Carey (2009) reminds us that, "Communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (p. 19) – the same can be said of online identity. Though online identity has been investigated through various empirical methods and perspectives (e.g, Turkle, 1995; Walther, 1996/2010), the construction of online identity has not yet been approached theoretically in communication scholarship. The goal of this project is to understand online identity construction through a uniquely communicative perspective.

The position of this essay is that online identities cannot be understood as linear or stable. In an online space, the look, feel, perceived appearance, even location of an online identity can be changed, edited, augmented, or deleted at a moment's notice. Online identities need to be understood as continually changing representations, never fixed in one position, perpetually in a state of assembly. *Online Identity Assembly Theory* (OIA) serves as a response to the limitation of current online identity research within the communication discipline. To demonstrate this limitation, a critique of identity research developed by communication scholars is provided. OIA is then applied to the *Facebook* profile construction process as an initial demonstration. Future lines of inquiry and research using assembly theory are provided. This discussion will demonstrate how communication is uniquely positioned to answer the question of "how do we create who we are within an online space?"

A Foundation For Assembly – Extant Theoretical Positions

Online identity construction stems from the broader question of "what is an identity?" Anderson (1996) defines identity as "a sense of the unified self that exists across time and situation, as well as the constellation of characteristics and performances that manifest the self in meaningful action" (p. 225). The both/and characteristics of this statement demonstrate the theoretical dilemma within communication with regards to online identity, recognized as a communicative *heteroglossia* (Bakhtin, 1982), where an existing online identity can be reconstructed in different ways to present a "new" identity. Communication has employed several theories of identity from within and outside its ranks (e.g., SIDE, SIT, CTI); however, none look at identity (particularly online identity) as a complex and uniquely communicative phenomenon. As various definitions and theories are presented, the complexity of what *is* online identity becomes more obvious. The next section will detail these various theoretical positions.

In 1993, Hecht proposed the *Communication Theory of Identity* (CTI), the first communication theory specifically looking at identity. CTI was not attached to specific aspects of communication (organizational, intercultural, interpersonal, mass, etc.). Rather, it could be applied across the many facets of the discipline. Prior to this, two theoretical approaches (both coming from psychology) were widely used within the communication discipline: *Social Identity Theory* (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and *Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects*, (SIDE) (Postmes and Spears, 1998; Postmes, Spears, and Lea, 1998). Each theoretical premise positions identity as a social construction or developed through the interaction of social relational forces; essentially, identity is constructed via the communicative act. Although these theories are helpful, they limit our understanding of online identity. These limitations are identified as each theory is critiqued. The following section will explore each of the three theoretical positions in the order they appeared on the academic landscape, determine where they inform our understanding of online identity, and how OIA can extend from these foundations and offer new insight into online identity as a dynamic communicative process.

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Tajfel and Turner's *Social Identity Theory* (SIT), though not a communication theory, has been used to understand identity by communication scholars. As Scott (2007) presents in his analysis within organizational research, SIT "claims the social categories in which one belongs are an important part of one's self-concept. Tajfel and Turner suggest that social identities are those aspects of an individual's self derived from the social categories to which one belongs" (p. 125). In addition, Scott also points out that

there are two distinct disconnects between SIT and communication. SIT specifically examines identity categorization and how the individual works within and among those categories, but not at the communicative acts that lead to category formation or how an individual communicates when part of the categories.

These same limitations exist when SIT is applied to online identity within the online social community (OSC). Though SIT can present the researcher with insights into why certain decisions would be made within an OSC, it assumes that group interactions are motivated by a socially constructed online identity where agency is solely externally located. However, SIT does not consider the user's agency when creating the identity, nor the articulation of the user's identity with other OSC identities when co-constructing a discursive space. As an extension of SIT, SIDE continues the theoretical development of identity

Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE)

Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects, or SIDE, extends SIT and positions identity awareness on a continuum between personal and group in a given situation (Lea, Spears, & deGroot, 2001). Postmes and Spears (1998), in their meta-analysis of existing deindividuation research in psychology, state that deindividuaion is not a normative state but, rather, a subjective and situational phenomenon. SIDE proposes that "deindividuation settings do not lead to a loss of personal identity; rather, they can facilitate a transition from a personal to a more social or collective identity" (Postmes and Spears, 1998, p. 254). They further explain that the process of deindividuation is not as well understood as the extant literature would suggest, creating space for SIDE to aid in further understanding the individual-group dialectic from a social psychological perspective.

Postmes, Spears, and Lea (1998), in their work with computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments, further the application of SIDE within the communication field yet (like in SIT) limit the position of agency for the individual within CMC. For SIDE, the individual identity is not an independent actor within CMC but simply another member of the group. It is this lack of agency on the part of the user's identity that needs to be considered further within communication theory and research. Additionally, SIDE is based on and assumes a stable existence of anonymity within the CMC context and the cognitive awareness of our identity. For users, "we know who we are," even as that knowledge shifts from the individual to the group and the effects of anonymity persist within CMC. While SIDE research has found evidence to support the effects of anonymity, these effects have been found with "zero history

groups" (experimental situations where participants work within a computer-mediated environment [CM] where there is no collective history, either face to face or CM). In these situations, anonymity would have the greatest effect because there is no standard of expected behavior (Sassenberg & Boos, 2003). However, when working to understand the assembling of an identity, time is an important aspect that cannot be fully explored with zero history groups. As Walther (1996) found, "time to exchange information, to build impressions, and to compare values" can lead to communication that is "no less personal than FtF" (p. 33). With time being a factor, it is possible then that the individual identity could assert itself from within the social group. These limitations demonstrate that there are theoretical gaps that need to be filled within the current communication literature, leading us to CTI.

Communication Theory of Identity (CTI)

Hecht (1993), when constructing CTI, saw his essay as a way to project his research into identity over the next 10 years. By investigating identity configuration from a communication perspective, Hecht (1993) recognized identity as "inherently a communicative process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages are exchanged" (p. 78). Such a concept positions identity as a communicative articulation of messages or discourses. He goes on to further that, after reviewing the existing literature at the time, identity in such a position is not only empirical but also discursive in nature as well as existing within an axiomatic position, connecting to Anderson's (1996) definition of identity (presented earlier).

Hecht (1993) proposes four frames to aid in the analysis of identity: personal; enactment; relationship; communal. These four frames not only position identity as a unique presentation of self, but also locate identity within a social or situational context. The personal frame presents the communicator's identity as "stored as self-cognition, feelings about self, and/or a spiritual sense of self-being" (p. 79). This position provides the researcher a way to understand how an individual defines her or himself innately or within specific social contexts. For the purpose of this essay, the personal identity frame demonstrates not only how the user perceives the self within non-mediated environments but also the choices the user makes when her or his mediated identity is initially constructed and published within the OSC.

Identity is not only constructed innately but is also developed through enactment, Hecht's second frame. Identities are enacted through the social construction and interchange that exists within our day-to-day lives. As a communicative act, identity may "be expressed as part of a message or may be the central

feature of the message, and messages may express more than one identity" (1993, p. 79). Hecht's understanding of identities, in particular how they are emergent realities and are socially and symbolically constructed, adds to our development of OIA. This will be further explored in subsequent sections.

Hecht reminds us in his third frame – *identity as a relationship* – that identities, once they are moved from the private to public, are enacted through the relationships an individual has within her or his social reality. Identities, in this case, are simply collections of signifiers until they are engaged by the world around them, when meaning is encoded through the assembly process. Hecht details this when he points out that, "first, people define themselves in terms of others … Second, people define themselves in terms of their relationships … Third, relationships, themselves, take on identities and the dyad becomes an entity" (1993, p. 80). Each of these concepts inform our theorizing of online identity through the lens of assembly and aids in better understanding this particular communicative phenomenon.

Hecht's fourth and final frame, *identity as communal,* reminds communication scholars that identities move from the individual to the collective, continually communicating ideas and constructing realities along the way. Drawing on this frame OIA is ideally situated to help explain how, communicatively, identities are not isolated phenomena. Rather, online identities are interconnected nodes within a wide array of identities and the realities those identities construct.

Hecht's proposed theory, though helpful for understanding identity, is limited with regard to identities within an OSC for two reasons. First, a key proposition offered by the theory is that "identities emerge out of groups and networks" (1993, p. 80), moving the agency of identity away from the individual and handing it back to the group. Given the uniqueness of online identities, being assembled by a single person or organization (in the case of a group, for example), the identity's position within the OSC signifies the practices of one user, regardless whether or not that "user" is representative of one or more than one person. Second, Hecht stresses that identities develop within hierarchies (power regimes). Though this may be the case within non-mediated space, OSCs do provide a space where, though identities are continually re-/assembled, the ultimate agency still lies with the user. Unlike in face-to-face interactions, users can simply delete their profile if it is so desired. OIA utlizes elements of CTI and resolves these limitations as they apply to online identities. The literature from computer-mediated communication (CMC) research relevant to online identity is presented prior to a full discussion of OIA theory.

CMC Research and Online Identity

In his comprehensive CMC literature review, Walther (2010) calls for a move toward new directions in our understanding of what computer-mediated communication is and has the potential to become. For Walther, "as the complex, rapid evolution of existing CMC research indicates, developing new conceptual models and testing them will be quite challenging, given conflicting but strongly help assumptions about how media affect communication" (p. 501). Areas where online identity research is being published include sociology, psychology, new media, and communication and are represented by descriptions of online identity in terms of performance, presentation, and play. A summary of this research demonstrates the assumptions explicated by Walther (2010).

From a sociological perspective, Turkle, with *Life on the Screen* (1995), presented the first major work that distinctly concentrated on online identity formation, play, and performance. Still publishing in the field, Turkle looks at the position of identity from a distinctly sociological and Lacanian psychoanalytic standpoint. Though such a standpoint does offer insight into the position of self, it is limited to the drives that motivate the identity once it is formed and in its distinction only in comparison to the others around it. Other work, including Cerulo (1997), has called for how identity needs to be interrogated and reconsidered. In their extensive review of identity theories (coming from social psychological theory), Monroe, Hankin, and Van Vetchen (2000) call for an adoption of social psychological theories for political science, further establishing the group position over individual agency within identity theories, a position that may not serve researchers in understanding the formation and enactment of online identities within OSCs as a communication phenomenon.

New media, a growing area of research that, similar to cultural studies, draws from many different disciplines, represents extensive work looking at online identities. Work over the past few years (e.g. Vrooman 2002; Lamerichs and Te Molder, 2003; Henderson and Gilding, 2004) has presented various research opportunities where online identity becomes the central focus of inquiry. With each of these cases, the authors are unanimous in their call for further research into online identity. In Kennedy's work researching representations of minority women within online environments illuminates the complexity of identity within the OSC (2006). In particular, Kennedy is quick to point out that "while some academics have identified that terms such as 'anonymity' are too simplistic for understanding internet identities … very few internet identity researchers have engaged with contemporary cultural studies debates about identity" (p. 872). She furthers that contexts, not anonymity, needs to be engaged, and that when researching identity "what is important is to take these conceptual steps without losing

sight of identity as embodied experience, of the real struggles of real people … without losing sight of identity-as-practice" (p. 873). It is this space in current research that OIA can assist with filling.

Building from Without and Within: Online Identity Assembly

The user's online identity is continually interacting with the myriad discourse surrounding and within it. Each or any of these options discursively change the user and the online identity, as one is a representation or signifier of the other. Signifiers cannot exist without political and ideological contextualities around it (Grossberg, 1986). It is these conditional realities, existing all around the forming online identity, that allow it to develop and continue the process of becoming, by the user accepting or rejecting each condition based on her or his own axiology or that of the OSC the online identity is part of.

Online identities are a process rather than a product, operating within a continued state of *difference*, of this and not that, therefore entailing "discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of 'frontier effects.' It requires what is left outside, its constitutive outside, to consolidate the process" (Hall, 1996, p. 3). OIA theory also aligns with Hall's theories of articulation as "both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects" (Grossberg, 1986, p. 53). Identities (including online identities) are in a state of political negotiation, with the decisions being made based on both internal and external drives. These decisions are the points of articulation that create particular aspects of the online identity as well as the whole of the online identity as it is perceived and reacted to within the OSC.

Online identity assembly theory, a dynamic approach to online identity, is a uniquely communicative theory extending from Hecht (1993), incorporating Hall (1996), and exploring more distinctly how identity within an online space must be understood through a discursive lens. Online identities demonstrate the complexity of identity. Never static both in physical representation as well as the signified discourses supporting that representation, online identity may be stable (or at least persistent) but also changes with each presentation. Unlike a floating signifier, which retains its physical image though the meaning attached to the image may change, online identities (and the sign that signifies them) can shift at a moment's notice and that shift can be motivated both by the original assembler of that online identity or by one of many outside entities. Online identities are always in a state of assembly, and are defined here as: articulated formations created through the momentary assembly of various and discretely

interconnected nexus controlled by both user and OSC. The interconnections are formed by discourses controlled/managed by various internal and external influences as well as spatially and temporally defined moments.

Communicatively, a user's online identity construction initiates the exchange of information by becoming part of the OSC. The communicative act perpetuates itself through both the discursive development of the online identity by the user as well as the interchanges with other OSC members. This perpetual act does not end. It must be understood that online identities are neither solely local nor finite. Rather online identities, like all other information on the Internet, can be archived. In this case, there can be near-infinite versions of the online identity perpetually reconstituted and reformed through new and different discourses (e.g., archiving, server farms, data mining, other users' identities). For communication scholars, such a position is important in the understanding of identity so that the motivations for a specific communicative act can be fully realized, not as either socially constructed or individualistically driven but, instead, as the product of the discourses of both positions.

Visually, an identity might be represented in the following manner (see Figure 1). *Figure 1* demonstrates how various specific points (nexus) are interlinked by contexts and narratives assembled into a subjective identity. The circles represent the discursive nexus; the lines represent the connections between the various nexus. This figure merely represents the identity's discursive architecture, not its true form. As online identities can be shaped by both internal and external systems, identities are much more organic in their structural representation than Figure 1 allows for. Online identities exist in a state of constrained agency. Each element of an online identity will be discussed in turn.
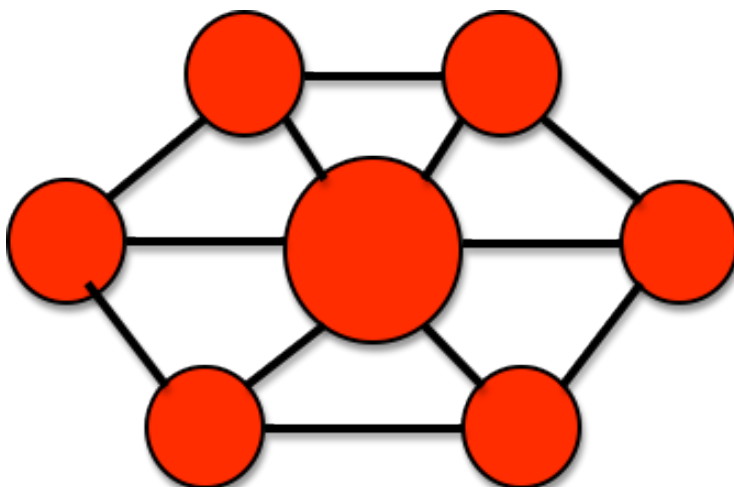

Figure 1. Online Identity Assembly Visual Representation.

Hall (1996) explains how identities are constructed through the differences presented to the individual from within, not outside, the discourse. Furthermore, "they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion" (p. 4). Online identities, in this light, cannot be considered as separate or isolated entities outside the sphere of external influence. Rather, online identities are continually in state of flux within the various modalities, or stages, of assembly – what Hall would refer to as "identification" – "a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption. There is always 'too much' or 'too little' – an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality" (p. 3). For Hall, an identity is never finalized. In the same way, online identity is continually shifting and transforming with the contexts that exist around it.

Nexus

The nexus points represent the various structures that individuals use to identify aspects of her/himself. Each nexus, a discursive formation representing the elements the user wishes to present within an OSC around a particular concept or idea, is itself an assembly that can also be represented by *Figure 1*. The nexus (and, therefore, the online identity) is never fixed. It is continually being updated, rearticulated by other OSC members (that visit the user profile, post items on the user's profile, etc.), or by the OSC structure itself, when OSC owners (e.g. *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *SecondLife*, or *Google+*) revise the discursive structure of the community.

Connections

Acting as connections between each of the nexus are the various discourses that inform the shape, scope, and perception of an assembled identity. These linkages are assembled through a two-step process. First, the user takes into account the various choices presented to her or him by the OSC with regards to the identity assembly process. Second, once the choices have been weighed, decisions are made as to what will or will not be presented as the user's online identity. These decisions are governed by both internal and external influences. These influences could include rules, norms, intentions, motivations, other users, the OSC structure, etc., acting simultaneously on the user.

Dimensions

Several dimensions inform these discourses: Age, Sex, Gender, Race, Class, Location, and Time. It has to be remembered that, unlike in offline space, any reported identifier is wholly arbitrary, as there is

no way for another OSC member to confirm what is purported as truth by the user. Discursive faith and trust are central to the continued expansion of the OSC. Each of the dimensions reported here will be detailed.

Age refers not only to the age of the user but also the age of the viewer of the online identity, the age of the OSC itself (and the version of that OSC), and for how long the current online identity has been published in that particular OSC. Often, the reported age of an individual user via her/his online identity will invite unsolicited contact from other online identities, thereby expanding the user's network and further assembling the user's presented online identity. *Sex* denotes the biological state of the user as well as the stated (often forced) binary the user chooses to designate her or himself as within the OSC. This binary can shape not only the interactions with other users within the OSC but also unintentionally invite marketing or advertising from third-party commerce identities within the OSC. *Gender* is the performance of self within the OSC. Unlike the stated *age* or *sex*, *gender* comes through the day-to-day decisions the user makes regarding her or his online identity, performed through the assembly of online identity in that moment.

Statements of *Race* provide for online identity customization within the overall assembly and are complicated by the very ontological nature of race. In addition, the performance of race through textual or visual discourse aids in the customizable uniqueness of identity within an OSC. *Class* not only speaks to socio-economic categorization but also the choice of OSC made by the user, often represented by the profile templates. In addition, class plays a large roll in determining access to the OSC to begin with. *Location* declarations refer to the OSC utilized as well as the various networks within the OSC the user has declared her or his self connected to. Location is strictly discourse in nature, as it is strictly declared or assumed within the OSC. *Time* here includes historical, synchronous, and asynchronous moments. Online identities can be assembled outside of time, as it were, initially formed then placed into the OSC. Once within the OSC, the online identity can be acted on by any other online identity, whether or not the user is logged into the OSC. Though it is up to the user to accept the re-assembly offered by the other identities, the process of assembly is never-ending, further demonstrating the perpetual motion within the OSC and the identity, which is part of the ever-expanding network of identities.

Each of these dimensions demonstrates how online identities are discursively constructed, maintained, and re-assembled through both internal and external expressions of power. These articulations (Grossberg, 1986), through they are inherently temporary, can exert their own agency at both

individual and social levels, connecting well with Hecht's own theoretical arguments regarding identity as communication. We now turn to identity creation within an OSC through the process of assembly.

Within an OSC, the user's online identity is continually transforming. Every time the sign is accessed, it has been changed in some way. The signifier is never the same as the time before. Hall discusses how an identity, "like all signifying practices … is subject to the 'play,' or *differance*. It obeys the logic of more-than-one" (Hall, 1996, p. 3). The signifier (the online identity) is never fully realized as a sign. Both the user and other online identities within the OSC, once the profile becomes part of the greater community, have the ability to change and manipulate a particular online identity. Even the act of contacting the user can change the online identity itself. Other users may contact our identity assembler through email or commentary. These responses to the initial communication (the creation of the identity, as there would be not contact made if the identity had not been created in the first place), though they may or may not be returned by the user, still have an effect on the identity and the user behind it.

Assembly

Assembly signifies the process of creating and performing an identity within an OSC. The user, when he or she decides to become part of an OSC, is the originator of the communicative act and the starting position of the online identity. Without the user, the perpetual construction of the online identity could not take place; it always in a state of "updating." Whether by the user, those who come across the user's online presence, or the OSC artifacts are being consciously added to the terrain of the profile. The online identity is in the process of becoming but never fully becomes. Five steps exist within the assembly: Identity Genesis, Identity Articulation, Identity Culmination, Identity Appropriation, and Identity Transformation. Each of these steps will be theorized in turn.

Genesis: coming into being—germinal thought

The initialization of an online identity is the first in a long series of discourses engaged by the user. The user is informed by the desire to exist within an OSC, to belong to a community or society, or even persuaded by the messages or solidarity or homogenization received through a myriad channels. These and/or other influences construct the topos from which the user decides to construct her or his digital self within the OSC.

Similar to the author's initial pen mark or keystroke, the user begins to construct the identity by making the decision that to exist in the OSC is not only natural but, perhaps, is preferred. This decision

then begins a discourse cascade, where various choices – including which and how many online communities to belong to – connect to build an articulated discourse. The next step in the assembly process, *Articulation*, further demonstrates this.

Articulation: individual choices and decisions about identity

The first decision, once *genesis* has occurred, is where to begin. Each identity decision comes from this first one, as each OSC has its own rules that, in order to exist and thrive as an OSC member, must be adhered to. It is here where the *dimensions of identity* come into play. Often, the OSC, as the administrator and hegemon, will require that these dimensions begin to be addressed and put forward within the OSC. Most OSCs will allow you to opt out of publishing some or all of these dimensions, but they must be reported nonetheless. In this way, even within a space that has been declared as truly democratic-via-choice, control and order is maintained.

Each decision represents a particular discourse within the online identity, whether it signifies the user's position on race, gender, sexuality, or social signifiers (e.g. sports teams or musical groups); these discourses then articulate the user's online identity within the OSC. Following Hall's ideas on both articulation and identity, we begin to understand an online identity as a continually evolving and becoming signifier, rather than a stable discursive formation. The online identity moves through a process where the signifier is perpetually deconstructed, rearticulated, presented, and deconstructed again. Once the user is satisfied with her or his initial online identity, the *culmination* of the process is then introduced into the OSC.

Culmination: product—the identity you are communicating with in the OSC

At this step, the various discourses the user has assembled and the decisions that have been made are moved from the private to the public through the act of "publishing." It is at this point that the OSC has access to the online identity, can accept or reject it outright, and even begin customizing it per the social norms that govern the OSC. Unlike the publishing act that exists with other types of media, however, the online identity is never complete. It is always in the process of becoming. The culminating identity is considered as complete as it is at a particular moment in time, yet is not a finished product. Due to the next step, *appropriation,* when the user moves the profile out into the OSC, the profile can be re-articulated.

Appropriation: social aspect – The OSC appropriates the identity

Once the user has culminated the online identity via the articulation of countless discourses and decisions, the online identity is then placed within the OSC. At the moment of entry, the user's online identity is no longer strictly her or his own; rather, as the online identity moves further and further into the collective discourse that is the OSC, it is appropriated into that particular multi-dimensional discursive architecture. Consider figure 1, which represents the individual user's assembled online identity. If an OSC is a self-sustaining and systemically actualizing collection of those online identities, the overall result is a networked architecture of the various matrices (designated by figure 1), maintained by various and simultaneous communicative acts that form, as it were, an assembled OSC collective online identity. Users allow the appropriation of online identity consciously or unconsciously.

Online texts are inherently unstable. Even as an individual moves to publish a document, a photograph, even a profile, that text is never fixed. In this sense, not only is a sign not fully tethered to a particular signified discourse, the sign itself can be re-articulated. A digital space allows for this cycle to exist effortlessly, fueled by the expressed agency of the user, the other OSC members, and the OSC's structure itself. Each of these agents focus on co-constructing the user's online identity within the OSC. Transformation becomes the articulation of the online identity's initial assembly.

Transformation: the OSC reassembles the online identity according to its own terms of service (TOS)

It is at this point where the collective power of the OSC is recognized. After the initial appropriation of the online identity within the OSC, the user then begins a continual negotiation with not only the other users but also the OSC itself. There are a series of possible reactions resulting from the transformation state. If the original assembler agrees with the resultant transformed online identity, he/she may accept the transformation of the online identity and use the transformed online identity as he/she remains in the OSC. This would make the transformed online identity the new culmination and the process of appropriation and transformation is perpetuated. If the original assembler disagrees with the resultant transformed online identity, he/she may choose one of three possible decisions. First, to reconstitute the online identity at the point of articulation, reengaging the remainder of assembly process. Second, remove the transformed online identity from the OSC with the intent to revisit the germinal thought and begin assembly again. Final option, disengage from the OSC.

Figure 2 visually represents the decision and choice process the user moves through while assembling her or his OSC identity. Each section represents one of the decision points within OIA. Decisions throughout the assembly process occur at each step as well as in between steps. The directions represent the flow of decisions from one point to the next (orange indicates internal; green indicates external).
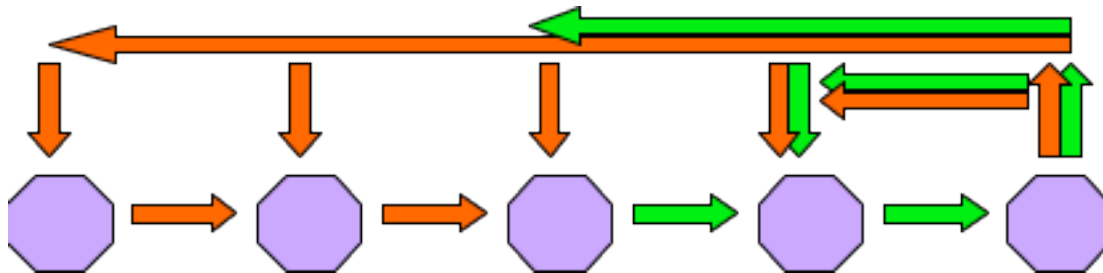

Figure 2. Visual Representation of the Identity Assembly Process.

Putting on The New Lens – Applying the Concept to Facebook

Though, by their very nature, discursive analytic models are tenuous at best, the following example demonstrates how an online identity can be better understood as a uniquely communicative phenomenon and act. In this case, a user identity for the *Facebook* online social community will be explained via OIA. The following case study offers an example of what can be uncovered by way of applying OIA to the many iterations of *Facebook*.

Genesis

The user makes the choice to join an OSC (in this case, *Facebook*). This choice comes from several internal and external motivations (e.g., family has decided to join; employer is creating a web marketing strategy; partner is a member; curiosity). This initial choice creates the discursive groundwork for the online identity to be built upon. After this initial choice, more choices follow in the articulation of the online identity.

Articulation

Once the user has passed the genesis phase, the other aspects of the online identity assembly are repeatable, always culminating in a new discursive formation. The user determines how to represent her-/himself within *Facebook*. The first time the user enters *Facebook* as a new member, the program asks for

15

first and last name, email address, sex (male or female), and date of birth. *Facebook* (2010) states that it, "…requires all users to provide their real date of birth to encourage authenticity and provide only age-appropriate access to content. You will be able to hide this information from your profile if you wish, and its use is governed by the *Facebook* Privacy Policy" (Why do I need to provide my age). *Facebook* then finds the user's "friends" by logging into and mining the user's email address (with permission of the user) in order to suggest friends listed in the email account that also have *Facebook* accounts. The final two steps are the profile creation and uploading of a profile picture. Through each of these steps, the user has the option to ignore, skip, or complete the categories provided by *Facebook*.

The user considers the various dimensions (presented above) as s/he initially constructs the online identity. Here we see the first agency negotiation between the user and outside forces. In this case, the outside forces are 1) the OSC itself (e.g., what is required and what is optional per *Facebook*'s TOS), 2) the rationale for joining (e.g., what is expected by the family, what is required by the company), and 3) the internal struggle with what the user wants this new community to know about her/him. Each of these negotiations shapes the nexus and connections that form the online identity.

Culmination

The choices made since the initial *genesis* involving the myriad discourses representing ideas, interests, likes, or past experiences come together here. The lists of schools and jobs, marital status, why the user is on *Facebook*, interests (i.e. books, tv shows, movies, music, etc), and other content posted (i.e. pictures, websites, notes, etc.) negotiated through become part of the new user's online identity. Additionally, the people that the user decides to "friend," as well as those other *Facebook* users requesting to "friend" the new user, become part of the online identity. Depending on the level of privacy chosen (the user can opt for a measure of control allowing full public viewing or restricting content to an ever decreasing circle of "friends"), others online identity choices can have a strong presence on the user's page. The choices of the new user and the other users who have access to the page represent the discursive connections within the online identity assembly.

Each of the related discourses are grouped together (*nexus*) and tethered by the structural elements of the OSC (*connections*). The *culmination* of the identity comes from the decision to present the identity as the signifying practice representing the user to the OSC (publishing the profile). This assemblage of discourses is what is considered the representation of the user (the "true" identity, as it

were) to the other OSC members. The moment the online identity is interacted with (via friend requests, postings on the profile wall, etc.), the assembled online identity moves to the fourth phase: *Appropriation*.

Appropriation

Once the user publishes her/his profile, it is no longer the user's property alone. As stated above, online texts are inherently unstable. Nowhere is this more apparent than within *Facebook*. As the user begins exploring the *Facebook*, the members of *Facebook* begin exploring her/him. Adding groups, linking to other user profiles, others posting information on the user's profile or the inclusion of more information in the form of profile updates and notes demonstrates how the online identity is continually being re-constituted by internal and external forces. The user's profile moves through *appropriation* and into the final phase, *transformation*.

Transformation

The user most easily recognizes this phase when s/he receives notice that *Facebook* will be changing its layout for profiles. This scenario most easily demonstrates the permeability of the profile – that any decision made by the user her-/himself or those that have sway over the user's profile will change the way the profile is laid out; in essence, how the user's online identity is assembled and reassembled. This perpetual agency negotiation between internal (the user) and external forces (other users and the OSC) results in the online identity never being fixed but always in a state of fluidity. Once the user receives notice, s/he must negotiate the new settings, determine how to best use them to her/his advantage, and adjust the *Facebook* profile accordingly.

The final element of the process is not one of the phases above but the perpetual renegotiations that the user must go through ensuring that the *Facebook* profile offered to the OSC is an "accurate" representation of the user. As *Figure 2* illustrates, each of these phases is re-engaged whenever the profile is no longer "current." Given the frequency at which users will post on each other's walls, new friends and old will find and add each other, or the news of the day changes over, this process is continually engaged. Online Identity Assembly, as a theory, does not predict the decisions, only the path(s) the decisions could take.

Conclusions

Theoretical positions are never absolute. The confluence of events in our daily lives pre-empts the ability to accurately predict how an essentialized position will hold up under the weight of discursive reality. In this light, OIA theory is offered as an embrace of that very idea. Online identities are tenuous articulations that are easily re-assembled. After accepting this premise, the following advantages are presented.

Online Identity Assembly provides several advantages in communication research that other theories or approaches may have not allowed for. First, OIA recognizes the choices and rhetorically sensitive decisions a user makes within an OSC when constructing her or his online identity, allowing for the possibility of knowing ourselves along a continuum of individual to social identities and choosing the aspects of the identity that best suit the situation. This then focuses on the communicative aspects of online identity – how we are assembled within online social communities. Second, OIA allows online identity to be explored and researched as lived in the OSC, allowing exploration of established groups as well as newly entered/established OSCs. Of particular note is the inclusion of race, sex, and gender as dimensions of the online identity in OIA. In current communication research on online identity, these dimensions are often assumed away or negated. Finally, OIA accounts for how time must be considered when addressing online identities within OSCs. It is for these reasons that we present OIA as an appropriate theoretical frame through which to understand online identity from a communicative perspective.

OIA allows for several directions of further research to be established and explored. First, issues of power and agency inherent in the process of identity assembly should be explored through posts, structural changes (like the recent and frequent TOS changes profile for *Facebook* and their affect on user profiles), or third-party advertisements that are continually updating. Users may react to these changes, revisiting old decisions, making new ones, and then reassembling their online identities through a collection of new discourses and subsequent articulations. This reality reveals the system-inherent struggles between the user, other users, and the OSC. Second, a longitudinal study of user decisions and the rationales for those decisions would allow the researcher to explain the changes to online identities over time. In addition, such an agenda is accessible across various aspects of communication (e.g., interpersonal, small group, organizational). Third, research into race, gender, age, and class identifiers within online spaces is necessary when investigating online identity. Identity does not exist within a

vacuum, and OIA allows for such an assembly of various discourses to be understood and researched as intertwined as well as continually renegotiated.

Online identity assembly theory is not meant to replace or negate previous online identity research within or outside the communication discipline. Rather, our goal was to fill a void that we saw in the current literature as we are trying to understand presentations of online identity in the OSC. OIA provides scholars with a lens through which to see online identities not as static constructs but as dynamic entities. Previous research aided our exploration but limitations in this research constrained our attempts to understand online identity. OIA presents online identities both as a product and a process as we move to theorize about those spaces that are still unexplored.

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