SOCIALLY DIVIDED: AFFORDANCES, GENDER, AND RACE IN FACEBOOK

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Abstract

This study investigates created, non-neutral affordances granted by social networking sites and their implications for perceptions of marginalized communities. I employ Facebook as a case study and speak with emerging adults to comprehend how socially marginalized groups are represented through Facebook's affordances. In particular, I consider: How familiar are users with Facebook's affordances?; How are issues of gender and race represented through Facebook?; and How do users conceive of gender and race?

Brief Literature Review

With each new technological advancement comes a declaration of some "great social equalizer" (boyd, 2014). When the internet was first entering households, a common belief was that its integration would bring a cultural and social shift. These sentiments were guided by the fact that virtual communities allowed users to leave their bodies behind; users met new people and experimented with their identities (Rheingold, 1996; Turkle, 1995). Prejudices were assumed to soon be a thing of the past—race, gender, and physical appearances would no longer be delineating factors.

Today, these utopian visions are criticized for their optimism. It seems that technologies cannot solve social issues and perhaps even work to emphasize social divisions (boyd, 2014). The prejudices that we learn offline are likely to journey with us into digital spaces. Although Facebook, for example, allows users to connect to people in new ways, it also reinforces existing networks and norms transferred from offline spaces. In other words, Facebook relationships are "anchored" and compel users to value nonymous (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), and perhaps even anti-anonymous (Cirucci, 2014), identifications over anonymous ones.

Integral to understanding these spaces is examining interfaces' affordances (Gibson, 1979); they are human-made and therefore inherently hold political, economic, and social powers (Winner, 1980). It is not that technologies force themselves onto people,

but work to set parameters regarding what acts of identification are possible (Hutchby, 2001). Facebook is not concerned with knowing offline realities but with "how specific, abstract definitions are executed to form a world" (Galloway, 2013, p. 23). Just as with offline structures and expectations, online affordances are reified and naturalized, becoming invisible, but powerful, templates for users as they attempt to create their identities and comprehend others'.

Indeed, investigating digital affordances may lead to some better understanding of the ways in which technology and society are synchronously working to determine one another and to cultivate new cultural identification norms. Technologies may appear to have agency (Srauy, 2013). However, those who create digital structures are constantly making moral choices that directly affect functionalities, representations, and social expectations.

The technologies themselves are certainly important. But, I argue that many do not pay enough attention to the human actors behind them. Users are constantly in discourse with the interfaces, connecting them to the sites' human programmers. Thus, because social networking sites are human-made structures, they are *necessarily* not neutral.

Recently, digital media scholars have started to push for a more rigorous analysis of digital affordances (e.g., Neff, Jordan, McVeigh-Schultz, & Gillespie, 2012). Previous discussions may have warned against technologically deterministic language, but perhaps this position became too strong, leading users and academics alike to pay too little respect to the power that digital media designers, and thus their tools, hold. Tools are programmed to render social change, even if this view is not common, or liked, among the general population.

Affordances online are arguably more "distinct" than offline affordances (boyd, 2011, p. 39), and, as such, more closely influence identifications. While it may be extreme to state that digital affordances dictate behavior, it is appropriate to claim that, through calculated suggestions, they shape engagement with the self and with others (boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2009).

Because social media affordances are so seamlessly integrated into their respective sites, they are easily viewed as "natural" and quickly folded into users' daily lives. Affordances in online spaces can be viewed as within one of two categories: technical and social. However, social affordances rely on technical affordances, and, in many cases, it is difficult to clearly separate the two for analysis. In short, social affordances are created through the afforded acts of their technical counterparts (Postigo, 2014).

Through social media affordances, our identification information is amplified, recorded, and spread in new ways. Digital selves exist in perpetuity, constantly transformed and interpreted in new ways. The self can be replicated an inordinate number of times, and it is impossible to distinguish the original from the copy. In addition, sophisticated algorithms allow our digital bodies to be searched and for others to find the different iterations of self with one click (boyd, 2011).

Method

As Galloway (2013) suggests, I view Facebook's interface not as a medium, but as a mediator. Instead of examining what the structure mediates (identity performances through Facebook), I first explored the ways in which Facebook mediates identifications (the interface itself). I then conducted focus groups with emerging adults (n=45) at a large, urban, east-coast university in the United States. Because Facebook is a social medium, focus groups are particularly relevant because they mimic customary social interaction.

Informants were 18-30 and declared their racial affiliations as: white (71%), Black (13%), Asian (9%), Latina/o (4%), and Other (2%). I applied a narrative approach to analyzing and reporting my findings. Listening to informants' narratives allowed them to recall stories and to find language that adequately expresses the meaning of past experiences (e.g. Bochner, 2011). Employing an "off-the-cuff" interview style (Frey & Fontana, 1993), I invited my participants to tell their own stories about interacting with and through Facebook's interface, while also providing them with new vocabulary and space to be critically reflexive.

Findings

The following sections outline some key findings drawn from a larger study wherein I catalogued and analyzed all of Facebook's affordances (Cirucci, 2014). I then spoke with emerging adults regarding their experiences with the site. This study provides a short list of findings, specifically related to gender and race affordances, representations, and expectations on Facebook. Each subsection that follows notes a select few of the affordances found and then presents participants' experiences.

Digital Gender
In early 2014, beyond binary options, Facebook afforded US users 50+ gender affiliations.[1] Although this change occurred shortly before I spoke with my informants, only half were familiar with the additions and only one had changed her gender. The gender prompt is not perceived as a space for expression by my informants, but as a space to check a box that mirrors their birth certificate or a medical form.

> *Ryan A., 19-year-old white male*:[2] I think as soon as I got a Facebook I put it [gender selection] and my gender hasn't changed; though, I haven't really changed.

Some even noted that using the space to perform more than gender ascribed at birth is identification "overload."

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[1] Currently, at the time of publication, Facebook allows users to type anything into the "gender" box, after they have selected "custom" as their main gender, instead of "female" or "male."

[2] Each informant was asked to choose a pseudonym and was provided a blank space to provide identifying information including, but not limited to: age, racial affiliation, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic class

> *Davina, 19-year-old Black female*: If you are non-binary, then…whoever knows you would know that. Like, does that have to be the first thing that somebody sees on your profile?

Gender Just Matters More

In comparison to the growing affordances of gender, race/ethnicity is an anti-affordance. In other words, on Facebook, there is no specific space that invites users to input their ethnicity/race identifications. This omission led my informants to make general conclusions about race and gender identifications. Three general themes emerged: (1) race is too complex to include as an identification category,

> *Deb, 18-year-old African American female:* I know a lot of people who have a lot of race identity.

(2) our society is post-racial,

> *LJ, 19-year-old white female:* Umm, I like that there isn't one actually; I think that it's good that it's [Facebook's] color blind.

(3) and visible, corporeal identifiers (namely profile pictures) deem ethnic/racial affiliation unnecessary.

> *Stephanie, 27-year-old white female*: I think it's the fact that you can post a picture of your race but you can't post a picture of your gender.

It should not need to be explicated here that race and visual signifiers play a large role in society and in the way what we view and judge others. Media have long been known to play a significant role in creating and maintaining negative stereotypes. People regularly learn how to interact with one another through physical features, and it would be naïve to assume that digital worlds open up new, equal spaces (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012). As Nakamura (2002) argues, the internet supports *cybertyping*—digital realms such as Facebook harbor hegemonic ideals, and race becomes just as important online as it has always been offline (Martin, Trego, & Nakayama, 2010; Tynes, Reynolds, & Greenfield, 2004).

With the above in mind, it is also important to question why Facebook would leave out race/ethnicity seeing that it is a valuable marketing tool. Beyond the notion that Facebook employs powerful algorithms that likely abstract what a user's race/ethnicity is through stereotypical likes and browsing history, Stephanie may be correct. It is not impossible, or even improbable, that Facebook "guesses" race/ethnicity based on profile, uploaded, and tagged photographs of users.

Therefore, Facebook's active decision to leave out race/ethnicity affordances, while constantly updating and posting messages about gender affordances, has led users to view gender as a more important, but less messy, identification aspect. Viewing our society (particularly in the American context) as post-racial and guessing race/ethnicity through skin color and other physical "tells" is socially normalized through Facebook's actions.

None of the Above

Identifications like gender are required for Facebook users. All must choose female, male, or custom. This is in line with other anti-anonymous identification trends on the site such as asking for real names and full birthdates. Attempting to elicit some thoughts about agency, I asked participants to reflect on why Facebook is lacking "none of the above" affordances. My informants were in agreement that Facebook, similar to the census, a medical form, or a job application, is an *official* space that obviously needs to collect identifying information. This interpretation is important, and lucrative, for Facebook, as it ensures that Facebookers are *accurately*,[3] not necessarily authentically, broadcasting themselves.

> *JM, 20-year-old white female:* I think when I filled out Facebook it was, like, so long that it was just kind of like, kind of like checking off a physical form, like, male, female, what are you interested in.

> *Alessia, 20-year-old white female*: When you first start out with Facebook, it's an application process too…

The idea that Facebook is some official, patrolled identification space is in line with comments from its creator, Mark Zuckerberg:

> You have one identity. The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly. Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity. (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 199).

Immersed in the "official" Facebook space, users are compelled to believe that accuracy equals authenticity. Thus, to perform "authentically," users are more likely to input incredibly identifying information that is deemed important through Facebook's interface design. Apparently, to be "authentic" then is (citing only two examples) to accurately include the gender that was assigned at birth and to not explicitly define race/ethnicity.

Conclusion

Facebook strategically decides how identities will be shaped in an effort to construct more efficient data collection, algorithmic, and marketing models. The process of selecting which identification affiliations to request, and which to simply not mention, places value on select identifications. As supported through my brief summary of findings, this leads to Facebookers adopting new expectations and norms regarding the identification process and important cultural issues. Some users believe that gender is more important than race because Facebook explicitly asks users to define it. Others noted that race is a more complex and important fight than gender, and Facebook is right in "staying out." Thus, just as offline expectations follow us into online spaces, prejudices that we learn online journey with us into offline spaces—they are naturalized and reified through our constant performances guided by the interface's affordances.

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[3] In this context, "accurately" is defined generally as performing some legal and corporeal self.

It should be noted that although this paper's findings were meticulously analyzed, there are limitations. Participants were emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 30 and all attended an urban university in the North Eastern United States. Results from different age groups or cultural settings could vary greatly. As such, this study does not claim to be widely generalizable. Instead, it presents a small look into Facebook's affordances and their implications for gender and race identifications and perceptions. Future research should collect and analyze narratives that are relevant to other demographics.

In addition to exploring race and gender, this study acts as a call toward the more rigorous analysis of social networking sites' structures, interfaces, and affordances. Before we analyze how users perform on sites, we should first investigate the spaces through which they are doing so. A fresh approach to understanding media affordances is especially important as we continue to attempt to comprehend how digital spaces alter culture and identities.

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