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“LiveJournal is a Conversation With the World”:

An examination of the effects of
interpersonal communication on personal blogging.

By

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine the situation created by personal blogging on LiveJournal, a popular blogging platform, specifically how the actions of friending (creating a link between two separate LiveJournals) and commenting (leaving a message on a particular LiveJournal post) affect the presentation of self and creation of community. It was found that traditional assumptions of the dangers of the internet to obscure identity affected the respondents little if any, instead they seemed to prioritize the promise of relationships with other users that mimed traditional off-line friendships.

Introduction

Scholars view the internet in two radically different ways. On one hand, the internet is seen as a place where people exist without context, where a forty-year old white man from Des Moines can pretend to be a sixteen year old from Tokyo, a native New Yorker attending NYU, a dog, or nothing at all.¹ A place where no one can be trusted and nothing is what it seems. On the other hand, the internet is viewed as a way to explore one's identity and to socialize with people who have similar interests or identities, unconstrained by the blunt facts of geography, class, race, gender, or nation. So which is it? Amusement park of dangers or community of like-minded individuals?

It is both and neither. The internet, like life, is what one makes of it. Some people use it to shop, some to lie, some to do research, some to get laid, and some to stay in touch with their grandkids. That is what makes the internet interesting, it is not a simplistic binary but another way to observe people.² Some live their lives online, some merely visit, and for some the internet has an interesting effect, being simultaneously part of their lives and yet distanced slightly from the "reality" of their non-digital existences. One can be oneself, but better, or differently, or simply more honestly. Some see that as the true revolutionary nature of the internet: that once can use it to change or modify one's identity. As a *New Yorker* cartoon once said, "Online, nobody can tell that you're a dog."

People do the same things online that that they do off-line, the difference is that we cannot actually see them. It seems safe to assume that the individuals we meet online are at least human, but we lose other visual cues, the aspects that speak to an individual's gender, race/ethnicity, age, attractiveness, able-bodiedness, and location. We take such factors for granted

¹ As seen in media such as Kornblum 2005 "Lying online is easy."; Silverblatt in Billhartz 2005; Cassidy 2005 in the distinction between Facebook and Friendster/MySpace; Dateline's *Predator* series; Noguchi 2005; also Lindlof and Shatzer discuss the particular consequences of this for scholars.

² That is people who have access to computers and internet.

in face-to-face contact yet, they, with the exception of location, are partially inferred by cues off-line. For example, race is based on such cues as skin and hair coloration, facial structure, clothing, diction, and positioning. In modern-day America, we say that a person's race or gender should not matter to us, but when we cannot judge what race or gender another person is, as is the case in online forums, we struggle to accept and define them.

Certain factors, like intelligence or education are factors that are more likely to be visible online, possibly even more so than off-line since such aspects are more obvious in the written word. Particular identities, such as religion or sexual preference, can be hidden in person nearly as easily as online. It may be easier to try on identities online, simply because one has the option of multiple presentations. However, for an established identity, such as a blog,³ we get cues similar to those we get off-line. A blog is a history of statements and artifacts that either do or do not add up to a coherent whole. Such personas come with background, repeated interactions, an easily viewable history, and trusted comrades through links. Internet users learn to read cues just as people learn to read them off-line. And when those cues do not match up, there are ways to try to verify identity, including checking internet location addresses (ips), cached pages through sites such as Google, and observing the blogger's web of connections.

One of the most common presentations of self online is blogs (weblogs, web diaries): digital, and often personal, forums where the only rule is chronological, in reverse order with the most recent entries first. Blogs are a particularly rich environment for studying presentation of identity because they inherently provide a history of the presentation through archives. One can see the history of the blog and what the writer(s) wrote during that time period. In addition, many blogs are personal in which the topic of conversation is the life and feelings of the blogger. This creates a unique opportunity to view how people present their selves for consumption.

³ Also the longer a presentation continues, the more one loses if one changes identities. Thus longer-term presentations such as blogs are more trustworthy than shorter-term presentations such as chat room identities.

Furthermore, blogs have become very common, so many individuals read them.⁴

The content of blogs can vary widely, from cutting-edge political commentary designed to rile readers to a high school student's banal recounting of their Tuesday, and every topic between. There are blogs on nearly every possible topic, from cuteness⁵ to law,⁶ and in most languages, although English still remains primary. Professionals blog, from librarians (Kenney and Stephens 2005) to professors (Johnson and Steven 2005), while some people have even been fired for blogging (Barkham 2005). There are photo blogs (plogs), audio blogs (podcasts), video blogs (vlogs), and blogs posted while mobile (moblogs). The connection between such varied topics might seem mystifying to those that have not seen a blog; however magazines are an informative comparison. Like periodicals, there is a blog for everyone, no matter how esoteric one's favorite topic is. In addition, blogs depend, at least partially, on audience. Bloggers write for others as much as they write for themselves.

Just as email has made us all writers, weblogs have made all of us publishers. And weblogs are publications, designed to be read by someone, whether it be a large global audience or (as is more commonly the case) a micro-audience of hundreds-or only a handful-of people (Blood 2002: x).

A blog is not a blog without an audience or at least the idea of one. That is the key difference between a diary and blog. Yet, most have a fairly small audience of a few hundred at most.

The audience is usually even smaller for personal blogs, that is those based on the details of the blogger's own life. Many of these are started to keep friends and family updated. These friends and family can interact with blogger as well, through through the the option to "comment" or leave a message on a particular post, adding a reflexive edge to blog reading. Readers also have ability to see the earlier entries or archives of the blog; thus those who are not familiar with the blog or blogger can gain a background. These features can add extra depth to the blog, allowing readers to create a more multidimensional understanding of the blogger. Many of these personal

⁴ One in four American workers viewed blogs at work in 2005, spending an average of 9% of the work week reading them (Johnson 2005).

⁵ Cute Overload (<http://cuteoverload.com/>) and Adorablog (<http://www.sushiesque.com/adorablog/>).

⁶ Such as Lawblog (<http://www.lawblog.com>) and the Volokh Conspiracy (<http://volokh.com>).

blogs are created using blogging software, particularly Blogger, Xanga, LiveJournal, and MySpace.⁷ Software adds several advantages to personal blogging including increasing the ease of blogging, directing the blogger into particular types and styles of blogs, and encouraging interpersonal connection. This is a change from the first blogs, which consisted of links to news stories or other websites with minimal commentary and were rarely inwardly focused.

LiveJournal is a particularly interesting example of personal blogging software; it is more of a culture than a technology. Since its start in 1999, over ten million journals have been started on the site, with over a million updated in the last month. LiveJournal is dominated by Americans and other English speakers, but there is also a strong Russian language presence. Of the over four million users who give their ages (who are between thirteen and fifty-five), 1.8 million were teens and another 1.8 million were in their twenties, with the majority of individuals in their late teens or early twenties (LiveJournal.com Statistics).

What makes LiveJournal so interesting, however, is not just its popularity, but its interconnected nature. Once one starts a LiveJournal, one is part of an interconnected community (boyd 2005a). The process is based around "friending": a word that sounds simple, but sums up a very complex and important part of why LiveJournal has as much in common with social networking sites as blogging sites. To "friend" someone is to perform three actions through one. One of these actions is the creation of a web link between the two journals through the user information page. Friending also indicates to the individual that you like their journal and are interested in reading it on a regular basis, since one's friends' entries are organized chronologically on one's friends' page (a web pages that consists of the entries of those one has designated as friends and is the most common way to read LiveJournal). Friending also gives the friended greater access to one's journal since LiveJournalers can "lock" their journal entries to only friends

⁷ Blogger exists solely as a blogging format, where the other three also include social-networking features such as being able to search for individuals with shared interests. MySpace is primarily a social networking site that also allows blogging and is currently the most popular website on the internet.

or subgroups of friends. Linking through friending is one of the key elements of LiveJournal compared to other blogging services available. Friending makes the audience of a journal more evident than it might be to bloggers using other types of software or doing their own coding. In addition, since LiveJournal tends to attract more personal blogs, it is a rich research field, especially for those interested in studying personal blogs or interactions between bloggers.

I was originally drawn to studying LiveJournal because of my own involvement in the community. During my continuing participation,⁸ I have seen particular issues, such as the nature of friending or comments, become pertinent over and over again, both in my own blogging experience and others. Specifically I wanted to explore the inherent contradictions that seemed to characterize LiveJournal: an artifact that was one part personal journal, one part community billboard, one part daily conversation, and one part self advertisement. One of those contradictions was one's invulnerability to strangers, that is how it seemed easier or safer to share highly personal parts of one's life with LiveJournal friends because they had little if any impact in one's off-line life, yet were still supportive. Another was the idea of popularity. There seemed to be a lot of interest in being "LiveJournal popular" a phrase that characterized individuals who were friended by a lot of users and whose posts got a large number of comments. Although certainly there are many LiveJournalers who are not interested in this level of popularity, many of the ones I knew are, though they would not have admitted it. My interest was not in why someone would want to be popular since that seemed self-evident. Who would not want to feel interesting? Rather, I was interested in the interaction between popularity and personal-nature, that people were in essence presenting their lives and, often, extremely painful

⁸ Since January 2003. During that time I have posted over 700 entries and received over six thousand comments in my primary LiveJournal. I have also started separate accounts for purposes as varied as discussing my research and giving voice to a stuffed moose. Currently, my primary LiveJournal has been friended by over one hundred and thirty others, fifty of whom I have not friended in return. LiveJournal is my primary "home" on the internet and is the basic way I communicate with people. On average I spend at least an hour a day reading, writing, and responding. This is an average level of involvement for people who are invested in the community in my experience.

and personal details of their lives, in an attempt to amuse others and garner support. This is an action I participate in myself, without a deep understanding as to why. Relatedly, was the issue of readership. What was the appeal of such presentations? Why would someone read the daily musings of someone they did not know?

Such questions are based on certain assumptions. One of those assumptions that was particularly difficult to explain was how we can accept such presentations as valid and truthful. This was specifically problematic for me to elucidate, since it was an assumption that I had accepted at some point during my time LiveJournaling. It was a non-question, in the same way that it is not a question that is asked about everyday real life encounters. In actuality, it seems to be the wrong question to ask. For many internet users such as myself, the internet is just one more thread that weaves through their daily lives, neither exotic nor unusual, but simply another piece of social interaction. Instead of questioning this simple binary, I ask: In the locale of LiveJournal, how do the actions of friending and commenting interact with the actuality of their off-line lives to create the LiveJournal presentations of popular users and what can those presentations tell us about the nature of social interaction and the creation of social relationships both online and off?

Literature Review

In this way, Daily Kos and other blogs resemble a political version of those escapist online games where anyone with a modem can disappear into an alternate society, reinventing himself among neighbors and colleagues who exist only in a virtual realm. It is not so much a blog as a travel destination, a place where what you have to say can be more important -- at least for a few hours each day -- than who you are or what you do (Bai 2006 14).

Where do you want to go today?-- Microsoft

In her article "Where Do You Want to Go Today?" (2000), Lisa Nakamura discusses prevalent advertising imagery of the internet as a global yet raceless tourist location. Although her goal is to show how such imagery colonizes the internet dividing the white user from the exotic decorative other, the assumption of internet as a place when it has no physicality is intriguing. It seems almost a contradiction, travel without leaving one's house or even moving, but cyberspace is often categorized as an exotic yet physical local.

Since its invention, the internet has been a source of fascination for academics. Of particular interest are the possibilities that the internet can hold, that somehow life online is not reality,⁹ but something different, virtual reality. This term itself is fascinating, what makes something virtually real? As Pierre Lévy (2000) states in his book, *Cyberculture*:

But as it is currently employed, the world 'virtual' often signifies unreality, 'reality' here implying some sort of material embodiment, a tangible presence....We assume something is either real or virtual, and that it cannot possess both qualities at once (29).

Thus virtual reality is unreal realness, a contradiction that helps to explain the character of popular opinion of the internet. The internet seems to be both important, in terms of cyber culture and global business, and unimportant, an aspect of teen culture. To those who do not use the internet or, rather, who use the internet merely as a tool, internet socialization seems dangerous and also like a form of play-acting.¹⁰ Markham (1998) suggest one can place the ways people view the internet on a continuum presented by the concepts of tool, place, and way

⁹ This is also characterized by the term "real life" or "rl", a phrase that is used online to refer to one's life outside the context of the internet.

¹⁰ See the first footnote.

of being.¹¹ She states that some users see the internet simply as a communicative tool in the global economy; others view websites, chat rooms, and the like, as a place to visit, often with friends; while many frequent users see their lives online as a way of being, not merely an addition to a life off-line, but an alternative to it and the assumption that life and social relationships must be embodied.¹² For those that view the internet merely as a tool, the idea that individuals would trust complete "strangers" they know only online seems preposterous. For those that view the internet as a new way of life, it seems ridiculous limiting oneself to news and shopping, when the potential of the internet is revolutionary.

James Chesebro and Donald Bonsall (1989) recognized this potential divide as early as 1989, realizing that for many computer use was simply a trade skill, while for others it represented a potential friend or extension of self. They also were willing to accept the possibility for strong non-face-to-face relationships:

As people increasingly use computers, will they develop computer friendships, in which electronic messages transmitted among people become the only basis for the friendships?

Yes. They lack the physical intimacy of face-to-face friendships, but computer friendships, in our view, will function as powerful psychological relationships at least equal in the importance to many face-to-face contacts. We anticipate that relationships developed through computers will eventually be recognized as a significant form of interpersonal communication and also that an increasing number of people will view their computers as intimate social and emotional companions, a "social" development that will probably remain unadmitted until such relationships can no longer be avoided or ignored (italics original, underlining mine, 235-6).

Of particular interest is the foreshadowing that such relationships could potentially replace traditional relationships. Additionally, the simple fact that such relationships would be embarrassing shows the strength that the concept of computer-as-tool in mainstream thought, even now. Chesebro and Bonsall's posed rhetorical question might seem overly simplistic to us seventeen years later, but this is at the dawn of the internet, before most people in the United

¹¹ Turkle (1984) also makes a similar distinction, if one that is much more strongly based in Marxian theory. Her distinction is between machines (objects that force us to bend to their rhythms) and tools (things that work for us), allowing home computers to be a tool for better self-knowledge.

¹² I would argue that the category "way of being" now holds two groups, those that live highly digital lives that are extensions of real life without a distinction between the two, such as teens who spend all evening chatting online with friends they just saw in school (unlike the "place" category which still sees the internet as an exotic local) and the group that lives a highly virtual life (which is what Markham originally intended).

States had their own computer, let alone instantaneous chat on wireless broadband connections.

Now most Americans have at least some access to the internet.¹³ Certainly middle and upper class teens and college students use the internet as a way to socialize, both with strangers and their off-line friends, as exemplified by services such as LiveJournal, MySpace, and Facebook. Interestingly, such socialization is done with little if any differentiation between those known off-line and those only known online. Donath and boyd (2004) explore this factor in their examination at social networking sites such as Facebook and Friendster. Such sites exist for people to interact with real life acquaintances and those they are connected to online. These sites also require mutual linkage: those that are marked as friends by person A also mark person A as their friend. The authors explain that a display of connections implicitly verifies one's claims of any status. They assume that one would not be able or willing to tell bold lies to their friends.

However:

The subject's profile may touch upon various facets of his or her identity, and those who are displayed as links may know only some of these. Other claims in the profile may be untrue, yet unquestioned by friends and colleagues, who may simply assume this is an aspect of their acquaintance about which they do not know (Donath and boyd 2004: 73) .

Thus there is the potential for claims to be made that are untrue or are modified truth. I would add that such claims will be accepted as long as they seem reasonable and do not contradict previous knowledge. Such referencing does not even require that we know the person- multiple claims that do not match each other will be suspicious as well.

Meyrowitz (1985) argues that we often give multiple presentations of self that are not false, giving the example of telling different accounts of his vacation to different individuals, telling wilder stories to his friends, and ones that focused on education to his parents and teachers. He emphasizes that he did not lie or mislead anyone but merely told them different truths, a factor that may be emphasized online, but that also occurs off-line. The potential

¹³ An estimated 73% of American adults have access to the internet, with 42% having broadband (high-speed) internet access (Madden 2006).

problem with multiple presentations is that when different social spheres connect, different social mores are expected at the same time, which he refers to as "situational social geography". The rules determined by such geography exist somewhere between objectivity and subjectivity: the rules may not make sense logically, but are still real to the people inhabiting that space due to shared social understanding. One of these rules is the expectation of people to be situationally consistent, having a consistent presentation of self in a particular social circumstance, but not the same consistency in different locales.¹⁴ Internet communication makes it more likely that one will be in several social locales at the same time.

Social behavior continues to be based on projecting certain impressions and concealing others, behaving one way here and other there. What has changed are the dividing lines between here and there; what is different is the number of distinct social settings.... Many people are "revealing" aspects of themselves which were once concealed because it is now more difficult to keep such backstage information secret (Meyrowitz 1985 320).

In electronic media, physical locale no longer constrains us or fences in different social groups, creating a rhetorical space that is defined socially. In such a local, we as a group create the norms, the timing, and nature of how, when, and where we interact.¹⁵ Such interaction is characterized by social information, that is: "all that people are capable of knowing about the behavior and actions of themselves and others". The possibility of the internet is that of a written world, one where the individual has the time to more carefully craft his or her message, in essence, his or herself. The appeal of such messages is the idea that the presenter feels he or she has the control over what is known. For the observer, the appeal is the gain of social information

[We are] fascinated by exposure. Indeed the act of exposure itself now seems to excite us more than the content of the secrets exposed. The steady stripping away of layers of social behavior has made the "scandal" and the revelation of the "deep dark secret" everyday occurrences. Ironically, what is pulled out of the closets that contain seemingly extraordinary secrets is, ultimately, the "ordinariness" of everyone (Meyrowitz 1985: 311).

¹⁴ Odzer (1997) also emphasizes that different cultures have different definitions of truth and reality.

¹⁵ Warschauer (2000) and Bowker (2004) also touch on the idea of multiple identities in multiple locations. Warschauer, unlike Bowker, he finds it less problematic, because individuals regularly experience identity in different ways. Bowker's argument based on his own experiences as an academic, while Warschauer's argument is primarily based on the effects of the internet on a underprivileged language group. As previously mentioned, Donath and boyd also share the idea that people would have multiple identities as a natural occurrence of socialization.

This can help account for the appeal of reading the blog of a stranger while also explaining why individuals would chose to share the intimate details of their lives online.

Ernest Goffman (1959, 1967) describes human interaction as a type of play acting, in which each individual is trying to gain information about the others in the interaction while simultaneously trying to present him or herself in the best light.¹⁶ Meanwhile, others involved will be checking these presentations against what other information they have, such as visual cues or previous history with the individual. Goffman's ideas can help explain the popularity of such services as LiveJournal and Facebook where individuals have greater control over who can see their profiles and writings. Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, explained it as:

I mean, one way to look at the goal of the site is to increase people's understanding of the world around them, to increase their information supply....The way you do that best is by having people share as much information as they are comfortable with. The way you make people comfortable is by giving them control over exactly who can see what (Cassidy 2006 54).

The classic Goffminian encounter exists virtually, although often individuals do not present themselves in the best possible light, which complicates understanding such presentations.

Relatedly, Huffaker and Calvert (2005) expected to find teens taking advantage of the anonymity of the internet to hide their emotional presentations of self, but found that many teens gave identifying details such as first and last names and location. They discovered that in their study, teenagers were using blogs as an extension of their real lives, discussing issues that were important off-line, such as relationships, and thus used their real life identities, rather than falsified ones. This leads them to conclude that there is "a certain sense of empowerment in revealing thoughts and feelings without hiding behind a public mask" (2005). I would suggest it is even more simplistic than that; these teenagers probably do not see a divide between the virtual and the non-virtual.¹⁷ It makes sense that when the internet is used primarily to socialize with people one already knows, that it would not have the same transmutative qualities as it would as

¹⁶ He defines this presentation in the given occasion as an "encounter" and that generally such encounters follow particular patterns or cultural scripts known as a "routine".

¹⁷ Also Katz (2000).

it previously did.

Online communication is not an isolated social phenomenon. Considering how it interacts with people's lives off-line can help explain the formation of community online and highlight the advantage to belonging to such communities. Three major advantages of such online communities are: convenience (I can help you when it is convenient for me), freedom (I can control how close you get to me and what you get to know), and interest (We're friends because we like the same things, as opposed to other social factors¹⁸) (Wellman and Gulia 1999).

One major perceived disadvantage of online communities is a lack of trust. Nissenbaum (2003) examines this question and finds three primary obstacles to achieving trust: missing or obscure identities, with the possibility that a solid online identity has accountability; the disembodiment of physical clues and personal characteristics that we think have certain meaning, which is related to the issue of the difference between strangers on and off-line; and that the internet often has inscrutable contexts, that it can be difficult to tell features such as role definition, background constraints, and social norms (144-146). However, this does not lead Nissenbaum to think that achieving trust online is impossible, instead she concludes that online trust is social capital and vice-versa, and that such trust can come from trusting in one's own self-presentation and others perception of it (138-9). That is that a solid reputation built up through repeated presentations of self is a form of social capital that one can use to increase trust, especially through other's opinions of oneself.

Odzer looks at a similar issue of how one creates a identity with others, specifically the popular criticism that what happens online isn't "real". She argues that to those who see the internet as a way of being, such relationships are very real and become so through repeated interaction. She also sees an advantage in how the computer medium subdues inhibitions in its real/not real dichotomy, allowing individuals to explore their own emotional hardwiring and

¹⁸ Also discussed in Warschauer (2000) and Kumar et al (2004).

allowing them to visualize how they understand themselves from a different perspective. "All social interaction combines our inner and outer worlds, but cyberspace provides an especially versatile medium for externalizing the internal" (Odzer 1997 5-6).¹⁹

Also of interest to academics is the idea that the online self is one composed nearly or entirely of text; a self that is not only completely under the creation of the individual inputting text, as previously discussed, but also that exists solely as text.²⁰ The internet only knows me through what I have typed and what other people have typed about me, but not just today, but what has been written in the past, potentially presented for a very different audience²¹ .

... cyberspace dissolves the pragmatics of communication which, since the invention of writing, has conjoined the universal and totality. It brings us back to a preliterate situation - but on another level and in another orbit.... Regardless of the message, it is connected to other messages, comments, and constantly evolving glosses, to other interested persons, to forums where it can be debated here and now" (Lévy 2000: 98-9).

Ironically, Lévy's post-literate society is one that depends on literacy, not just the base knowledge of how to write text, but also how to effectively communicate through text. Online, one's messages, comments, and glosses become influential through connection and that connection is often interwoven with the skill of the presentation. Agger (2004) discusses how this text based virtual self is constantly recomposed through media and that such repeated small presentations change the nature of how one exists. With discussion of Web 2.0, the concept that the internet is being created by individual consumers instead of being structured by traditional media, Ito (2004) discusses the term hyper-social exchange, a two way discussion between the media and the consumer (or the consumer and another consumer). He argues that individuals do not just accept media as a finished product handed to them, but reconceptualize media to fit their own needs. Thus a presentation of self such as blogging somehow fits the consumer's own

¹⁹ Other theorists also examined the possibility that computer based communication holds for inner study. (Anthony 2004, Turkle 1984). One can use one's presentation of self, an external action, as an introverted action: to learn more about oneself, one's inner nature.

²⁰ The increased use of photos and other forms of multimedia may change this idea, but have not been well examined, probably because the technology is so new.

²¹ Also Finder (2006), Bowker (2004), and Warschauer (2000).

needs, whatever they might be.

While not directly addressing computer mediated communication, two other theories address the nature of social interaction on the internet. One of these is para-social relations, an explanation of the relationship between individuals on T.V. (presenter/persona) and viewers. Spectators view the presenters as someone they are interacting with even though logically all communication is one-sided. There is no obligation to create or contribute to such relationships on the part of the spectator and they are unable to create new interactions, just chose from those offered. Such relationships are characterized by the presenter duplicating the features of an informal real life gathering. "Because the relationship between persona and audience is one-sided and cannot be developed mutually, very nearly the whole burden of creating a plausible imitation of intimacy is thrown on the persona and on the show of which he is the pivot" (Horton and Wohl 1956: 218). This can be applied to any other form of one-sided media and has some potential application to understand the popularity of reading blogs, particularly personal blogs where the writing duplicates many other types of intimate communication.

The other is Warner's concept of the public (2002). A public is a group of strangers connected through their mutual interaction with a central text. Publics create a relationship among a group of strangers who all chose to enter a public via interacting with a text such as a blog entry. The act of reading binds strangers together, while convincing them they are no longer strangers. Such an interaction is characterized by a sense of connection: we're doing the same thing at the same time and are thus alike. Like Horton and Wohl, Warner also emphasizes the importance of the language to seem personal, while remaining impersonal. "Public speech must be taken in two ways: as addressed to us and as addressed to strangers" (58).

Methodology

I was originally drawn to examining LiveJournal because of my own involvement in the community. During my three and a half years of participation, I observed particular issues, such as the nature of friending or comments, become pertinent over and over again, both in my own experiences and the observation of others. Specifically, I wanted to explore the inherent contradictions that seemed to characterize LiveJournal: an artifact that was one part personal journal, one part community billboard, one part daily conversation, and one part self advertisement. Complicated by the fact that I easily participate in such contradictions in my own LiveJournal, I needed to go beyond my own personal experience and study how other LiveJournalers understood themselves through their blogs to understand this behavior.

Individuals who are highly involved in LiveJournal tend to be very reflexive about their relationship with their blogging, as well as being experts in the mores and social culture of LiveJournal. They are, therefore, the ideal way to examine how interaction with others through LiveJournal affects self-presentation. In the context of this goal, it would be impossible to understand how this process could work each of the several million LiveJournalers. Instead, I chose to try and highlight particularly heavy users as knowledgeable and forthcoming sources,²² as a way to examine the interaction of friending, comments, and community building with presenting oneself on one's blogs.

Seven individuals were recruited by a snowball sample from my own journal under the stipulations that individuals must be over eighteen, American citizens currently living in the United States, who had at been friended by at least one hundred others. Two of the respondents were individuals with whom I had a previously established relationship. The other five were recruited by a second post promoting my project, made by someone with whom I had a

²² Much as how anthropologists chose particular individuals in a society to focus on due to their belief that said individuals are particularly strong sources.

mutually-friended relationship. All of the subjects volunteered before the original post had been up thirty-six hours.

The pool was compelling because all the subjects were female and post-college. Although LiveJournal is female dominated, 67.6% of LiveJournalers who give a gender report as female (LiveJournal.com Statistics), the average LiveJournaler is characterized as a teenager or college student. Of the over four million LiveJournals that give ages, nearly two million are teens and almost all the rest are in their twenties (LiveJournal.com Statistics). Thus this pool is significantly older than the average LiveJournaler and slightly more female-dominated. Many of my subjects were familiar with each other, specifically the group of five recruited outside my pool of confidants. All had been blogging for at least two and a half years.

Another way to examine my research pool is to apply the LJ popularity ranking.²³ This test looks at the probability that a random user might at any point click on a random friends link and reach a given profile. Using this tool, all but one of my participants were rated more popular than 99% of LiveJournal users.²⁴ This puts them in a group of the top hundred thousand LiveJournals. This was not a surprise since all but one of the participants had been friended by at least one hundred LiveJournals, already established as a particularly large amount of connections.

After obtaining consent, the public archives of each individual were read in full, starting from the first post. Although locked or friends-only posts were not studied in this project, since I was previously familiar with two of the individuals, there is a chance that some of my analysis could be influenced by topics or writings that were not part of the targeted study. Reading the archives took much longer than expected, with most of the respondents having written at least

²³ As found here: <http://trustmetrics.relativestate.net/ljpopularity.php>

²⁴ Tin_Lizzy, a participant that did not have the requisite 100 friends-of, was still rated more popular than 98% of LiveJournalers.

five hundred entries²⁵ and four with over a thousand.²⁶ However, such reading was extremely informative and allowed a certain familiarity during the interviews, since it allowed me to “get to know” the respondents.

Each individual was then interviewed in an informal method, using a chat program of her choice. Three were interviewed using GoogleChat, two using AOL instant messenger, one via YahooChat, and one was interviewed in a back and forth email discussion (she said that she was uncomfortable with chat programs and felt much more comfortable not using one). Interviews took between one and two hours. They were based on a list of base questions (Appendix) and my notes on the individual's archives. However, the interviews were organic; individuals were encouraged to talk about what topics they were interested in. In addition, questions were asked when they were topical and not in any particular order, though most interviews started with a question about their original goals and the situation for starting their LiveJournal. The most important groups of questions were: “How do you choose what topics to write on? Is there an overall theme or goal for your posts?” and “How do you define LiveJournal popularity? Are you popular? Does it matter to you? Has it ever mattered to you?” Afterwards, the transcripts of the interviews and notes made from archives were coded for thematic elements, with the goal of examining how the respondents dealt with their popularity vis-à-vis posting habits, friending practices, and responses to comments, along with any other topics that became pertinent.

²⁵ The only exception being PamelaDean who had 368 entries.

²⁶ Jonquil, Rivka, Onelargecat, and Oyceter.

Analysis

I've been thinking for a long time about the importance of online community. We're the weird ones; we're gay, we're intellectuals, we're obsessive about things only we could care about -- beads, food, science fiction. And for the first time in the history of mankind, we can support each other without being physically present. The gay kid growing up alone in Oklahoma has the Internet to tell him that he's not that weird. Same goes for the fanfic writer in Alabama. And, yes, same goes for the neo-Nazi in Northern California. No rose without a thorn. But every day, in large and small ways, we give each other kindness. The rejected manuscript, the tantruming child, the unexpected diagnosis -- all of those can be despaired of, and then comfort can be spoken. Jonquil, 3 November, 2004.

One of the most intriguing aspects of personal blogging is how it creates a relationship between individuals who would otherwise not know each other. This can build a supportive community that fits the needs of a given individual. This may explain the appeal of blogging. In this context, bloggers would be attuned to the nature of their presentation, but are possibly more interested in the process than the base results. To examine such issues, seven LiveJournalers allowed me into their (digital) lives, showing me a different aspect of personal blogging. The results of the archive reading and the interviews echoed many of the aspects emphasized in the literature review. They showed that social relationships did not need to be embodied and that through the potential of the internet to bring together people with similar interests, one could build relationships based on those interests despite geography or physicality. The respondents discussed self-presentation and the oddness of existing in a space created solely by text. Certain topics continued to arise, both on my prompting and that of my subjects, showing the contradictions that categorize LiveJournal, both as a culture and as a practice.

In particular, these were the difficulties surrounding the concept of friending, the nature of comments and how they make LiveJournal into a community, and the interactions between friending, commenting, and popularity. In the interviews, there is a constant undercurrent of how LiveJournal functions as a center of support, one that can add to, be part of, or even supplant

one's off-line social support. This destabilized Markham's (1998) distinctions:²⁷ the respondents often saw LiveJournal on multiple levels at the same time as a simple tool, but also a place to socialize, and a new way to build support networks.

The demographics of the volunteer pool varied widely, outside of gender and nationality. Jonquil describes herself as "a writer, a mother, a baker, an utter git", lives in California, has had a LJ since 2003. Dr. Rivka (she has her Ph.D.), who is also a mother, has another blog where she writes about political and health care events and has been LiveJournaling since 2001. She also occasionally mentions her real name. PamelaDean, who journals under her own name, is a published science fiction and fantasy writer, mainly writes about nature. She has had a LiveJournal since 2002, but updates less frequently than the others and has only posted 368 entries. Oyceter is a little younger than the other participants, being only a few years out of college, though still older than the average LiveJournaler, and has been blogging since 2003. She also spent her adolescence living with her family in Taiwan and likes to write about what she has been reading. Greythistle also likes to write about what she reads and keeps a more traditional link-style blog. Her biography states: "Over time, many pieces of this mini-biography have been added and commented out. In a meta sense that sentence ought to suffice." These five LiveJournalers were all recruited from a posting in a mutual friend's journal. The other two participants, Tin_Lizzy and Onelargecat were recruited from my own friends' list. Tin_Lizzy works in the tech industry in Minneapolis, plays roller-derby and is the only one of the participants to have less than one hundred friends.²⁸ She's been blogging for two and a half years and her goal is to learn more about herself thorough the journaling process. Onelargecat, named for her fat siamese Paulo, is an editor in San Diego and just had her first baby. She had her

²⁷ That internet users viewed the internet in one of three ways: as a tool, a tourist destination, or a new way to exist.

²⁸ Despite not having the requisite number of friends designated in the original plan, she still has quite a few (over seventy) and I thought she would have potentially interesting things to say on the culture of LiveJournal, particularly since she did not belong in the same social circles as the group of five.

husband post when she went into labor, keeping her friends updated. She has also been on LiveJournal for the last two and a half years. Although all are female, nearly all are over thirty, and several have friends in common, this is a fairly disparate group with different goals for LiveJournaling. One thing that they all do have in common is that they have been friended by nearly or over one hundred other LiveJournals, making them particularly popular and well-connected in the world of LiveJournal.

Different from a simple list of what one reads, friends are an indication of social connection and capital. The more friends one has, the more impressive one's LiveJournal looks, however, friends also connect LiveJournals in a social web, allowing at a glance, the connections between different LiveJournalers. Friending is also a highly awkward, political, and controversial topic. The controversy around the term has been such a widespread issue that as an April Fool's prank in 2004, the LiveJournal staff changed the headings from "friends" and "friends of" to "stalking" and "stalked by". It is also an issue that has impacted the respondents. Onelargecat said:

[H]onestly I wish they wouldn't use that term because it seems kind of laden with some sort of expectations....It makes it seem like reciprocity is expected. It seems like there are a lot of people who don't want you to "friend" them unless they friend you back and likewise, there are some people who seem to expect you to friend them just because they friend you and I don't necessarily WANT to read everyone's blogs and likewise I don't expect everyone I read to want to read mine (Interview, June 22, 2006).

This was echoed by Jonquil:

I think it ought to be named "reading list". HOWEVER, every time a friend of mine has posted a poll, it turns out that there's an enormous variety of emotional connotations associated with it -- some people feel, for instance, that it is an imposition to friend somebody and that you ought to ask permission. My stance is that it's a public Internet, and that somebody friending you is no different than somebody reading the blog every day (Interview, June 23, 2006).

Obviously, it is not just a problem with an awkward and non-precise term, but the cultural norms that have arisen around it. Friending someone, that is in essence syndicating them to one's main feed for ease of reading, seems somehow different from reading the journal every day. This is

perhaps due to the fact that friending is the start of a potential (and reciprocal) relationship. Jonquil herself admits that she tends to "reflexively" friend people in return, despite wanting to remove the emotional connotations of the term friend. The cultural awkwardness surrounding friending is evidenced by posts where the LiveJournaler informs his or her audience that s/he is un-friending others; a practice so common that it has a name: "friends-cut." Many of the subjects made posts on this subject at some point during their history on LiveJournal.

Tin_Lizzy made a fairly typical post of this type in January of 2006:

Just trimmed lots from my friends-list as it was getting a little out of control. Many are folks with whom it's been a long, long time since I swapped comments or chatted, some with whom I don't seem to connect anymore, and a few who don't seem to post much/ever/anymore. *No hard feelings* (emphasis mine).

It seems that such posts are made, in part, to ensure that those who are cut know that there has been a change in status and also to ensure a lack of social effects. While discussing the nature of audience, Greythistle mentioned that one might have friends that one found "uninteresting" but that one could not unfriend because of a

...sense of obligation, sometimes, it appears (not something I've done); or they added the person and decided later that it was sort of a mistake, but felt they they couldn't defriend.... I don't know [why someone would feel that they could not defriend], but I see people talking about it occasionally. (Interview, June 26, 2006).

Thus such linkage seems to be more than simply who wants to read or even be read by, but instead a measure of social connection, with individuals with the most friends being center points of particular communities/subcultures. There also seem to be certain social mores surrounding the practices, probably because it is so key to the culture. These mores seem to include warning of change of friending status and reluctance in changing said status.

Many of the respondents also mentioned keeping track of who had friended them or the dangers of doing so. Jonquil noted that one can start obsessing about one's friends status with different individuals: "This person I really respect and admire doesn't admire me back! Oh, the horror! Woes!!" (Interview, June 23, 2006). Oyceter recollected when some individuals had

defriended her- "And it wasn't personal or anything, and I totally got why, but it still sort of twinged, and I feel bad doing that to other people." (Interview, June 19, 2006). In this comment, there are echoes of what Tin_Lizzy was potentially trying to accomplish in her post- making the defriending seem less personal and more reasonable- but it still seemed to have an emotional impact. Even respondents who seemed to want to avoid the emotional aspects of friending ideology seemed to get involved in them. Part of this issue may be the simple connotations of the term "friend" particularly on a culture that is based around said term. That is why it can not simply be changed, the connotations are built into the culture of LiveJournal as well as the software. In addition, since most LiveJournals are highly personal, the simple of act of reading seems more personal; to defriend seems almost a personal rejection hence why the situation can be so emotional. Thus one would expect LiveJournalers to become attached to their audience and to keep that audience in mind when they posted. This may also explain the focus on mutual friending relationships or "friending back". To not do so indicates that one is not interested in a reciprocal relationship of equals which may seem like a personal rejection. Such a situation would not make much sense if a friends' list was merely a reading list.

This complicates the issue of popularity. As mentioned previously, all of these individuals are generally more connected than 99% of LiveJournals. Nearly all of them have been friended by at least one hundred other LiveJournals- a figure I chose deliberately knowing that it indicated both a high level of being read but also a deeper connection to the community as a general rule.²⁹ During the snowball sample, one individual commented that the bar was set too high; that almost no one had over one hundred friends and such a figure was extremely unrepresentative of LiveJournal as a whole. When asked, nearly all the respondents agreed that

²⁹ Since individuals rarely have more than one hundred friends in real life, this level for friending activity indicates a high level of community involvement, through activities such as posting regularly for a number of months, if not years, high involvement in communities, or cross-friend communication in other's journal posts. It also indicates that one is being read by people that one does not know prior to LiveJournal.

pure number of friends was at least one aspect of popularity, however, most argued that it was not the only aspect. Comments also got a lot of focus as well as reciprocal friending.

Onelargecat defined popular as:

...the people who have been friended by many more people than they have friended back. The people who get read by lots of people even though they aren't reciprocating. I have a lot of LiveJournal friends... but I feel like with most of them if I were to take them off my friends list, they'd take me off too (not that I want to take off a bunch of people). Somehow I feel like with the people on my friends' list, we have more of a "relationship" thing going on. (Interview, June 22, 2006).

She was not alone in denying her objective popularity. Greythistle said she was not popular on a "relative" scale; that compared to her off-line peers with LiveJournals, she was more influential, but not in the scope of LiveJournal itself. Oyceter also emphasized that any popularity she might have was within a very small group of people. PamelaDean responded that she was well-liked in her off-line social group which provided the impetus for starting her journal, but then went on to say "I really don't know why almost five hundred people, many of whom I do not know, read my LJ....I think there are LJers who fit my definition popularity better [than I do], in that they always garner large numbers of comments and provoke lively discussions." (Interview, June 20, 2006).

Many of the respondents also seemed mystified by their readership for similar reasons. Rivka responded that "[Being friended by over 350 people] seems a little crazy, actually....I don't even know who half those people are....[A] lot of these people are total strangers, really, who for some reason want to hear the details about what my kid did today. (Or whatever)." (Interview, June 23, 2006). Jonquil mentioned that she was "Startled. Very, VERY startled. I mean, I just ramble. There is no theme here... I think of my journal as fairly boring and personal." (Interview, June 23, 2006). Greythistle noted in an early post that she was baffled about her readers since she did not "post with any sort of topical consistency." There definitely seems to be a denial of popularity. Although this could be read as simple modesty, there seems to be an

aspect of discomfort due to an idea that one's personal life is not interesting particularly to those one does not know. Onelargecat suggests that part of her popularity might be related to her posting on a variety of things, because different aspects appeal to different readers.³⁰ This unevenness in topic also speaks also to the under emphasis that the world puts on personal-style blogs. Rivka keeps an blog separate from her LiveJournal which she uses to comment on political and scientific news. She explains this choice as wanting to influence a larger audience:

In the world of political blogging, people are reluctant to link to personal journals...partially because personal journals are so heterogeneous....LJ is explicitly personal. It gets back to the distinction between Usenet and LiveJournal. People come to your LiveJournal because they feel like reading whatever the hell you have to say. People come to a blog looking for a specific kind of writing, just as they do to Usenet. (Interview, June 23, 2006).

Here we see a distinction between a "blog" and a "LiveJournal" as well as an explanation on what generates different reading populations for each one. People read LiveJournals for the mishmash of topic positioning. Based on this, readers seem to be interested in learning about the whole person behind the journal and not his or her views on a particular topic. This answers the question of readership raised by Rivka, Jonquil, and Greythistle. In some ways, reading a LiveJournal is almost voyeuristic, a way to dip into someone's life. It can be explained by Meyrowitz (1985) was discussing about exposure, that readers can be fascinated by ordinary secrets about others. However, it seems that the interest on LiveJournal seems to be more than simple prying, since one can read without friending. Instead, individuals want to interact with that persona, in essence setting up a relationship that is similar to an off-line one, though perhaps more intimate in the early stages than a similar off-line relationship.

Several respondents mentioned that not only were they not popular, but that they had no desire to become popular. This was the biggest surprise of the interviews since previous experience had lead me to believe that popular LiveJournalers were very interested in having an audience and thus being popular.

³⁰ She also mentions how her photography might attract people.

Me: Do you have any desire to become LiveJournal popular?

Oyceter: No, not really. Too scary! Too much attention! Also, I want to blog for fun and if my LiveJournal starts getting all popular or whatnot, then I start getting paranoid and thinking too much about what I write. (Interview, June 19, 2006)

Me: Would you consider yourself to be popular?

Jonquil: Nope. Hmm. I suppose with 300 readers, I probably am. Now I am weirded out. I think, honestly, I don't think I'm popular because I don't **want** to be popular. This is the number-one risk of the Internet: ignoring the lurkers. You think you're writing only for the people you're having a conversation with, but in practice there is ALWAYS a silent audience. Hell, stuff I said in 1984 on USENET can still come back to haunt me, and we all thought that it was ephemeral. I wouldn't like to be popular because I like the illusion of this being among a small circle of friends. Even though there is no definition of "small" that encompasses 300 people. Perhaps "a small town". (emphasis hers, Interview, June 23, 2006).

Similar lines of reasoning were also mentioned by Tin_Lizzy and Greythistle. For those that view the internet as a tool, this sort of statement elicits a common reaction. "Why put it online?" This is a particularly interesting question when considering the environment of LiveJournal, where bloggers can make locked journals, accessible only to a small group of confidants. It can be difficult to explain why one would put one's thoughts online, but the response will usually start in the nature of LiveJournal to create a supportive community mainly created by oneself. Jonquil touches on this factor in her response, when she likens it to being among a small circle of friends. In addition, it does not seem that audience necessarily has to relate to popularity, since the respondents do not seem to be against having strangers as readers, but rather "popularity". Popularity seems self-centered, that one wants attention for selfish reasons and not interaction; Jonquil's discomfort with popularity seems to be particularly centered on lurkers, people who read but do not interact. There definitely seems to be some connection between the two, that people one does not interact with are not friends, but strangers who are overhearing one's life. This may help to explain why the term "friend" is so powerful if contentious in LiveJournal. It describes the desired interaction between poster and reader. In addition, there is the assumption that being popular requires a greater effort on the presentation of self: that those who are popular do not post on everyday events and think "too much" about their presentation. Perhaps, one could go so far as to say that presentations that are popular seem to be coded as

more mediated and less realistic.

Dubiousness is one reaction to the concept of online friends. As seen earlier, Chesebro and Bonsall (1989) predicted this reaction:

We anticipate that relationships developed through computers will eventually be recognized as a significant form of interpersonal communication and also that an increasing number of people will view their computers as intimate social and emotional companions, a "social" development that will probably remain unadmitted until such relationships can no longer be avoided or ignored (235-6).

This dubiousness seems misdirected. It seems clear that such relationships are formed online, created by friending and the interaction between the two journals through reading and commenting. A better question is what are the rules of such interactions and how do they compare and contrast to off-line relationships? All of the respondents³¹ agreed that they had or were in the process of making friends with people through the medium of LiveJournal.

Greythistle explained that shared goals, similar experiences, or even shared interests can help start a friendship: "It's very much like, in my view, how coworkers at an office might become comfortable with each other and make friends, only there's less presumed formality around LiveJournal" (Interview, June 26, 2006). A June 2006 post by Tin_Lizzy emphasizes this point. "Wow - how is it that I can read a LJ-friend's post about her having to put her dog down today, neither human nor person have I met in person, and sit here bursting into tears on her behalf." Tin_Lizzy, a dog owner herself, can empathize with her friend based on their mutual experiences and their connection through LiveJournal. Oyceter wrote in March of 2004 about meeting one of her LiveJournal friends in person and having to explain this relationship to her family:

I also met [LiveJournal name]! Heh, but since I had to get my mom to take me, I had to explain:
Uh, so I have this friend there.
What does she do? asks my mom.
Actually, I'm not sure.
Friend from where?

³¹ This was less of an aspect for PamelaDean, but she also interacts less than the rest of the respondents with LiveJournal and the community of LiveJournal

Uhhhh..
Where?
The internet?
huh?

My aunt was particularly startled. And I guess it does sound kind of nuts especially if one doesn't spend much time online -- I'm meeting someone I've only kind of talked to via text and never seen before! My aunt was all, how will you know who she is if you've never seen her?!

This post sums up a common reaction to the idea of becoming friends with people online; that the text-based nature of the internet somehow makes meeting someone more difficult, perhaps due to a lack of external cues. Thus one must assume that LiveJournalers find a way to negotiate a text based environment, to fulfill relationships' needs through writing.³²

One of those needs is articulation. Rivka touches on the importance of writing well:

They [people online she would consider friends] write well, about their feelings and experiences and they're pretty open in talking about their lives. And they comment. It's very hard to get to know someone online if they're not good at conveying their experiences through writing. For me anyway...If you're trying to form a relationship online, words are all you have. So you need to be skilled with them (Interview June 23, 2006).

As several theorists mentioned,³³ all communication and selves online are text-based. This destabilizes our notions of what makes a self and how we can interact with that self, since there is an extra level of mediation. Individuals have more control over how they present themselves online than they do in person because of the lack of unconscious cues. Goffman's work would predict that this would lead to highly positive self-presentations, however this is not always the case. Individuals are often extremely candid online perhaps because the relative anonymity of the internet allows people to present certain factors about their lives with less social cost. Although such presentations may lose (potential) readers, it can be argued that such honest may also gain new readers, ones that are tailored by reaction to the presentation to be a better "fit" for the blogger, e.g. to have more in common or be more sympathetic. Thus each revealing action is potentially costly but also potentially beneficial. Often the benefit seems to outweigh the risk.

This is not to indicate that reader reaction is not part of the presentation process.

³² There is the potential that new photography and video capacities may change this.

³³ Lévy (2000), Mitra and Watts (2004), Agger (2004), and Ito (2004).

LiveJournals are written with an eye to audience, if not popularity. Onelargecat said:

I always try to think about what I find interesting to read in other people's journals and blogs... and then I try to figure out how I can incorporate those same things in mine. A story complaining about something is more interesting if you can actually convey the sarcasm without writing things like "(eyeroll)" (Interview, June 22, 2006).

Rivka says something similar in her explanation of her posting process:

I often start semi-composing it in my head while I'm doing other things. When I actually write a post, I'm very conscious of writing for an audience. So I think about what would be clear, what would be entertaining, what sounds good. I usually revise posts before I post them. I have a fair amount of ego invested in being seen as someone who writes well. Because it's how you actually affect people, online (Interview, June 23, 2006).

Oyceter mentioned that when she had a lot of Buffy fans on her journal, she realized that Buffy related posts received more attention. LiveJournalers even think about how to present their lives in a way to amuse their friends.

Me: The whole "you know that you're addicted to LiveJournal when something crappy happens, you think 'at least this will make a good entry.'"

Jonquil: Oh, God, so painfully, painfully true. In general...if I find something writing itself in my head --then I write it down. So. Then. Sit down at the terminal and let the characters pour out. Then I reread, revise, and post. And then fiddle and edit and fiddle and reedit, because I'm like that. LiveJournal becomes a conversation with the world. Just as when I see an ad for a good book, I think "My husband would like this, I must tell him about it!", when I see a bad editorial or a great restaurant, I think "My friends' list would like this!" (Interview June 23 2006).

These reactions seem to be about something more in-depth than simply attracting recognition. Although the respondents are interested in attention, their primary interest is community, sparking conversation and creating interaction between their friends' list, instead of attention for attentions' sake. They wish to be entertaining and to seem articulate but also to interact with their friends. One important aspect of LiveJournal seems to be the ability to create an interactive audiences based on shared needs and interests, mediating the affects of attention with a support structure. Although they may not want to have popularity, they still want to be well-respected in their particular corner of LiveJournal. This affects not only how they blog, but also what they blog about. Thus the blogging process is not simply an internal one for their own needs, but also filling the needs of their regular readers, a symbiotic process.

Regular readers of a blog become attached to the persona they read, much as one might with a favorite television or book character, except online, especially in LiveJournal, the character actually responds to the reader. This is a recreation of the para-social interaction with a twist on the theory, since the relationship is actually reciprocal. Response happens through comments, the importance of which came up time and time again in discussion, with six of the respondents³⁴ mentioning that comments either impacted how they posted or how they felt about it. Oyceter described comments as the "lifeblood of LiveJournal" twice, once in her archives, and then unprompted during our discussion. She followed that thought up with:

[Comments are so key] because there are a group of people I "talk" a lot with on LiveJournal, and I like interacting with people. I felt like before, I was getting breadth, but no depth. I feel bad reading people on my flist (friends' list) and not really knowing anything about them. Also, I remember when no one was reading my LiveJournal and how sad I'd be sometimes if I commented on someone's and they didn't answer back. (Interview, June 19, 2006).

This emphasizes how LiveJournal functions as an interaction while highlighting certain mores about the friending relationship (that one should "know about" one's friends and be responsive to comments). Onelargecat explained that what makes LiveJournal different is comments. "I think it is the feeling of having relationships and communities and being able to have conversations within posts easily. Other blogs let you comment, but it's not really easy to have a conversation in them. It feels more one sided." (Interview, June 22, 2006). Rivka seconds the idea of comments as a discussion: "So posts that get a lot of comments are always fun. Sometimes a very good discussion gets started, and that's fascinating -like my April 06 post about not breast feeding. I've gone back to read those comments again and again, and I met a bunch of new people through that post." (Interview, June 23, 2006). In these statements, there is an emphasis on comments as more than simple messages, but as a deeper level of conversation. Comments are a way to have a reciprocal discussion, show appreciation or interest in a topic, and

³⁴ Greythistle mentioned that individuals were welcome to comment and that sometimes it was gratifying to have questions answered and to see that she wasn't just "posting into a void" but otherwise seemed less interested in comments than the other respondents (Interview, June 26, 2006).

to build relationships and thus community. The reciprocity seems to be just as important in commenting practices as in friending ones. Commenting is another way to examine how online friendships are created through repeated discussion and interaction through both posts and comments, as Rivka mentioned. Comments can also be a low-cost way to build relationships, since they can take little time and it an easy way to show support at the reader's connivence. Some LiveJournalers even say that such comment interaction is LiveJournal. Jonquil mentioned "Oh, I love them [comments]. That's why I'm on LiveJournal. LiveJournal is a 'conversation.' Interesting people show up, say interesting things, and then you wander over to see what they say in their own homes.³⁵ I've met some astonishingly interesting people that way." (Interview, June 23, 2006). Comments can be a way to meet people with similar interests or to build one's audience.

Comments are evidence of one's audience and thus can impact how one posts.

PamelaDean wrote:

If I write about the fiction I'm working on, or the reprint status of one of my novels, I get such a kindly outpouring of sympathy and praise that it's a little daunting, but it's very encouraging when I'm having a bad day, so I'm more inclined to do those kinds of posts. When I do something about gardening or phenology, I almost always get people relating their own experiences, some in lovely prose, and that creates a very nice sense of community, even, or perhaps especially, when people weigh in from very different climates (Interview, June 20, 2006).

Again, there is the emphasis on the interaction between posting, audience participation, and community. This is also an example of how a less-positive self presentation can give greater benefits. This interaction is beyond Warner's concept of the public, since they are not merely connected through reactions of the same blog post, but through repeated written conversation miming, in some ways, normal off-line interaction. A conversation about what one did today- a staple of off-line social interaction- archived and linked to tens, hundreds, thousands, or even

³⁵ Also interesting is how she describes the person's own LiveJournal as their "home", emphasizing how a LiveJournal is more than simple writing and the idea that LiveJournal is a community made up of individuals who "live" in it (or set up homes in it).

millions of similar snippets of everyday life.³⁶ For example, many of the respondents wrote about what they had recently read, recommending books to others, but also posted on topics such as what their children had done today,³⁷ or their recent travel, telling everyday stories similar to those one would share in an off-line interaction.

One concern that peppered much of the scholarship on internet communication was that such interactions would be characterized by deception. This seems to be an odd assumption to make: why would people lie about plain, everyday factors? Certainly the potential exists for deception on both a small and large scale, yet most of the respondents and, for that matter most LiveJournalers, seem fairly unconcerned about such events despite knowing that they could happen. In fact, during the same time period as the interviews, a story was spreading through the LiveJournal meta-community about a young woman who created "sock puppets" (fake accounts) for the purpose of making herself more popular in the Harry Potter fandom (corner of the internet). This was an account most of the respondents were familiar with despite not being involved in that fandom, yet they still remained unconcerned. Some respondents even recognized their own potential to mislead, in her May 1, 2006 post, Onelargecat asked "What if I was making up being pregnant?" While asking her about it, she said that it seemed like the sort of thing that would be easy to create (and that would get one extra attention), however that she did not get the impression that people were making up things of that magnitude. She wrote:

I'll take their word in their LJ as truth. I mean, I don't assume that everything on the internet is true just because someone put it out there, but in personal blogs, when people are just talking about their lives and themselves, that I tend to believe, because it seems like it would be too much effort to "fake" things. I figure most people just want to put down their thoughts/feelings and have someone understand them. So to make up whole events just to get attention would be a lot of work (Interview, June 22, 2006).

Deception is viewed to be not worth the reward: although one can get greater attention, one can also get attention from telling interesting stories with an engaging writing style. To be deceptive

³⁶ This is very much like Lévy's immense living hypertext, except on a very basic and daily level.

³⁷ As mentioned by Rivka earlier.

is to gain popularity, not community. Lying wastes effort without getting the support that blogging in LiveJournal can provide. It does not create solid relationships and to acknowledge the possibility that such deception is happening would just negate the potential that LiveJournal has.

Tin_Lizzy said something similar, although she emphasizes the effects that losing face-to-face cues can have:

I'm the sort that instinctually takes people at face value, so unless s/thing smells fishy, I generally assume folks are who they represent as... although there is the notion that online, where the modus of socializing is drastically different than face-to-face talking-to-strangers, that different facets of people can come out that wouldn't normally emerge in face-to-face contact. LJ'ing can be an enabler for shy, quiet, introverted, polite, etc. types to bust out and communicate brilliance, beauty, or bullshit that you'd never get from a face-to-face interaction or friendship (Interview June 23, 2006).

This is one of the obstacles to online trust predicted by Nissenbaum (2003): the loss of physical cues. However, Tin_Lizzy sees a potential for people to present a different persona online and yet not be deceptive, nullifying or changing this point. The internet can allow individuals to highlight particular interests or parts of their personality,³⁸ but that such omissions may not be necessarily a hurtful lie but merely another way to manage projection of self. This is similar to what Mark Zuckerberg elucidated about Facebook, people are more likely to feel comfortable sharing personal information if they feel that they have control over what they share and to whom (Cassidy 2006).

Both Jonquil and Oyceter made similar distinctions when questioned how they would feel if they realized deception on the part of one of their friends. Jonquil said "So if 'Martha' is really 'Mark', I think I'd be okay. But if 'Martha' and I had discussed childbirth and she was really 'Mark' ---anger. Just as it is important to me to be myself (if, obviously a conscious presentation of self), it is important to me that the people I talk to be themselves." (Interview, June 23, 2006). Oyceter makes the distinction of closeness; that it was acceptable if someone mislead random LiveJournalers, but there is a greater responsibility to those that one shares closer ties with.

³⁸ Both Oyceter and Jonquil mentioned hiding or emphasizing particular aspects of their lives.

Meanwhile, Greythistle said it was not an issue for her "if someone's consistent and doesn't hurt anyone or their feelings, it doesn't matter on some level whether they're who they say they are." (Interview, June 26, 2006). There seems to definitely be a distinction between certain misleading changes on base characteristics and changing the nature of the interaction itself. This demonstrates a more flexible understanding of both identity and deception. The idea that LiveJournal is a mediated presentation of self is accepted as a matter of course. Readers understand that writing serves the needs of both writer and reader. Two other challenges to trust online are missing or obscured identity and inscrutable contexts (Nissenbaum 2003). Missing identity can be answered by the physical, that is actual digital presence, of the LiveJournal; a combination of posts, comments, archives, friends, comments in friends' posts, community membership, and information page. This presences may also begin to answer the issue of inscrutable contexts, since the individual LiveJournal is given context based on its place in the culture of LiveJournal. The community also provides social norms to replace those lost when people from multiple backgrounds interact. The awkwardness of friending and the idea that one should respond to comments are examples of the mores that help create a cohesive community.

Rivka provided one of the most intriguing anecdotes on edited self presentation. She conveyed a story about someone she knew who managed multiple presentations of self through multiple LiveJournals.

Rivka: Someone friended me and a bunch of other people I know. It was very clear from context that she must know us all from the newsgroup (a), but her actual identity wasn't clear. And when people asked her directly, she didn't reveal it. She was smart and a good writer and wrote interestingly about her life, and I got very interested in her. She said she wanted to be able to vent and ask for support pseudonymously. And she said that if people weren't comfortable not knowing who she was, they should just not read her. So I read her for a while, and then suddenly her journal stopped being updated. And then a year later I found out that she was someone I knew quite well, and had been reading her other journal all along, and had even hung out with her in real life without ever knowing that in addition to being Journalname A she was also Journalname B. That felt very strange. Well, I had to collapse what I thought of as two separate people into one person. The pseudonymous account is where she wrote about relationship problems, and it gave a completely different view of her relationship than I had from other contexts. And she'd written about a whole crisis experience that I couldn't imagine her having. But I wonder if it will affect the next time we meet in real life.

Me: did it seem reasonable that she did that?

Rivka: I didn't really think about whether it was reasonable or not reasonable. I can totally understand the urge to get advice about your life from people who don't know the people involved. But it was still disorienting, having to assimilate these two different pictures of her life. (Interview, June 23, 2006).

Even though she was misled by someone she personally knew, Rivka still mentions that she understands what was driving the individual despite the obscured identity. She also notes that she became interested in this persona, even though she did not know who it was. This story highlights the idea of multiple presentations of self mentioned Meyrowitz (1985) and Donath and Boyd (2004), although Rivka's friend separated the two presentations, instead of negotiating different presentations of self in one identity. This may be due to the needs of the two presentations being so contradictory. She was able to take advantage of the mediation the internet presented while actually being more honest about herself. This complicates the notion that individuals can not be trusted online since she is being simultaneously more and less deceptive in this presentation. This also demonstrates the power of LiveJournal as a community matrix. When the individual wanted support, she went to LiveJournal and expected to get it despite her purposefully unknown identity. She realized that she could accomplish such a task in LiveJournal and have it be successful, perhaps recognizing the innate flexibility that LiveJournal allows for identity. Since she had a reason for obscuring her identity and was honest about her concealment, this presentation, confusing as it might be, is still allowable by the norms mentioned by the other respondents.

These quotes on deception show that LiveJournalers have a flexible understanding of identity. Even though there is a greater malleability to identity online, individuals online compensate for that malleability- for example Tin_Lizzy allowing for a potential change of presentation thanks to the nature of the media, or Rivka understanding that her friend's need for an anonymous identity. This fluidity of truthful presentation negates the binary of internet as deceptive and internet as recreation off-line life. LiveJournal mimics many of the factors of off-

line life perhaps because people need that recreation or because it is directed that way by the software. However, in the creation of the culture of LiveJournal such features are changed to fit the media and the needs of the users. Such changes are the possibility of the internet: it allows individuals to handcraft support groups that will accept their presentation of self as long as they are not deliberately manipulative. This can also explain why people would feel so betrayed when someone turns out to be something completely different than they present; since people are given greater flexibility in presentation, allowing for any corrections that do not outwardly completely change the nature of the relationship/interaction, it can seem particularly troublesome when people go beyond those new loosened freedoms.

LiveJournal is a complex ecosystem. People interact through a written call and reply and these interactions create a contextual community. This shows a level of complexity in online interaction that is under predicted by the literature, particularly in how such interaction moves fluidly on and off-line. People made friends through LiveJournal and used LiveJournal as a major source of emotional support. The respondents communicate with people that they know off-line, people they know solely through LiveJournal, and people they knew other ways through the same message. As Meyrowitz (1985) predicts, such interaction can condense presentations, giving a more rounded and open presentation of self. Although there are some ways to control that presentation and conceal certain facts, through friending, locking, choice of language or topics in posting, and the keeping of multiple blogs, most respondents choose to cover multiple aspects of their lives in one LiveJournal, leaving the readers to sort through the information presented. They also take advantage of the anonymity of the internet to admit aspects of their lives they might otherwise be unable to discuss or to hide particular aspects of their lives. Readers accept this, willingly perhaps due to the implied relationship between the blogger and the readers, partially in the traditional style of mass communication where information flows from the media

to the watcher, but also in the mode of an interpersonal relationship.

LiveJournal allows individuals to present particular bits of their lives to fulfill their needs, such as getting support on a bad day or sharing esoteric interests. Such presentations cohabit with their audiences- both creating the audience, but also tailored for the enjoyment of the audience. The LiveJournal processes of commenting and friending are key in this cohabitation, allowing for the fine tuning of the relationship between presenter and reader. This explains the reluctance of the respondents to embrace popularity since their goal for LiveJournal is a hyper-social exchanged between two friends and not mere popularity.

Conclusion

Seven LiveJournal users invited me into their lives, letting me investigate their digital selves questioning not just the implied rules of their social systems, but how they felt about their own lives, going as far as to ask them if they thought their friends were lying to them. Although I asked from a position similar to theirs, a person or presented person with a long and personal history written publicly online, this was still a gift and I thank them for their honesty, time, and, most importantly, access to treat their lives as my dig site.

This project can help to explore both the popularity of blogging and how the Internet modifies current cultural rules. As blogging becomes increasingly more mainstream, such understanding will become both more important and also more applicable, particularly as the current youth generation gets older. This new digital generation, who grew up with such presentations, will not only change our understanding of how online communication works, but also how social interaction can work. It seems likely that the idea of multiple presentations of self will become more accepted, although there is also the possibility that some of the potential anonymity will be lost, requiring a change to a more traditional presentation of the best aspects of the self. Even now many employers are using services like LiveJournal or Facebook to learn about future employees. Individuals may also start to rely on increased hiding of such presentations.

The research question for this project was originally grounded in the interest of how popular LiveJournalers commodified themselves for readers and popularity, but the research found that for some, popularity was not even an issue. Individuals were simply not interested in popularity, despite being defined as popular. Instead, the respondents built relationships, both with their individual readers and with the character of their audience as a whole. This audience is created by their reaction to the text. Those that regularly read become involved in the

LiveJournal and are a supportive audience. In reaction, that support leads the LiveJournaler to want to amuse and interest the audience. This is a symbiotic relationship that fulfills the needs of both, often with both parties playing both roles.

Blogging by nature is a reflexive activity, but on LiveJournal such activity marks a space that is both public and private, allowing LiveJournalers to focus on the best aspects of each. A LiveJournal functions as a more intimate setting in one post, a political call to action in the next. LiveJournal also exists as a support structure through interpersonal relationships between journals characterized by friending. Such interaction requires a more flexible understand of existence and truth which is easily accepted by LiveJournalers as part of the culture.

LiveJournal is a complex culture and this paper only begins to explore it. Certainly the omission of examining the effects of locking on LiveJournal is a specific weakness. Although it did not fit in the scope of this project, there is certainly research to be done on the ability to control information flow and the perception of security of information on LiveJournal. In addition, it would also be intriguing to see if the experience of being involved with LiveJournal affects users' off-line socialization, not just in the simple addition of LiveJournal friends to their off-line lives, but also in their understandings of the nature of social interaction, such as a more flexible perception of identity.

Appendix

1. What was your goal for your LiveJournal when you started? What is your goal for it now?
How has it changed over time?
2. How do you feel about friending and your friend's list? Who is on your friend's list?
3. What do you think about the process of commenting? Do you appreciate/want comments? In x post, how do you feel about the comments/what was your reaction? What do you like about commenting, not like?
4. How do you define LiveJournal-popularity? Are you popular? Does it matter to you? Has it ever mattered to you? How has this changed?
5. Do you notice who is reading your journal? Does who is reading it bother you? interest you? please you?
6. Do you ever feel vulnerable in posting? Which posts have made you feel that way? Do you ever avoid posting for those reasons? In x posts, how did you feel writing it? having people respond to it?
7. How do you write your posts? Is drafting or editing ever involved? Do you rewrite or edit after original posting? If so, could you explain your process with a given post?
8. How do you chose which topics to write on? Is there an overall goal or theme for your posts?
9. How would you define or differentiate between different kinds of journals? How would you define your journal (e.g. more autobiographical or fiction based on reality).
10. Do you think your style of journaling has changed over time? Why so?
11. What is LiveJournal to you? Why LiveJournal, why not another blogging service? What are other sorts of internet communication/socialization that you participate in?

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