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Young people and Facebook: What are the Challenges to Adopting a Critical Engagement?

Luciana Pangrazio

Abstract

This article presents findings from a recent study into the ways young people are engaging with the social networking site Facebook. It draws on a qualitative, small-scale study with six 13 and 14 year old girls who have been using Facebook daily for two years. It aimed to explore the nature of their critical understanding of the medium in ways that have been obscured by research and popular discussion that assume a simple dichotomy between ‘digital natives’ and others. In order to analyse results, Foucault’s theory of discursive formation is used as a framework through which the motivations behind the behaviours presented might be understood. Results suggest that there are a number of factors that make critical engagement difficult in this context. First, coupling the highly visual nature of the medium with an essentially ‘invisible audience’ made participants anxious about ‘fitting in’ to the discourse, which ultimately limited the scope of their use. Second, because social networking is strongly linked with identity presentation critiquing the medium would require an analysis of personal identity. Finally, to critique the site requires the individual to stand ‘outside’ the discourse (Gee, 1991), which essentially counters the reason for using Facebook. The article concludes by making some suggestions for future educational programs that aim to develop critical engagement with social media.

Keywords: critical engagement, digital native, discursive formation, education, identity Facebook, qualitative study, young people.

Many assumptions have been made about young people and their use of technology. Words and phrases like “digital native”, “tech savvy”, and “millennium generation” are often used to describe young people, assuming a categorical classification hierarchy of dependence, mastery, and awareness of technology. The problem with characterising the relationship in such a way is that it may not only be inaccurate, but it may mean that educators, and society more generally, ignore whether young people are approaching social networking sites, like Facebook, with effective critical skills. Building on Jenkins’ (2006, p. 3) idea of the “transparency problem”, this study aimed to discover whether young people can “see clearly the ways that the media shape their perceptions of the world” through analysis of their ability to critically engage with the social networking site Facebook.

This article begins by examining the appropriateness of critical engagement for social media and how this might be applied to young people’s use of Facebook. It then discusses the theories of identity that are relevant to this context in order to understand the crucial nexus of critical engagement, social networking, and identity for young people today. Foucault’s theory of discursive formation is used as a theoretical lens through which to understand the reported behaviours and explain why critical engagement might be difficult in this context. While a study of this size is limited in scope, it is able to offer a snapshot into how young people are using the medium and how their identity is implicated in this process. The key questions guiding this research are: How are these young people using Facebook? Is there any evidence of a critical

engagement with the medium? And, how does this social networking site influence their sense of self and their engagement with others?

Critical engagement and social media in the postmodern context

Critical engagement refers to an active and questioning approach to texts, with its roots firmly planted in critiquing the dominant discourses of society. Critical literacy, pioneered by Paulo Freire (1970), argues the significance of the social context of teaching literacy. It therefore has the potential to examine, analyse, and deconstruct discourses and social structures so that the individual becomes an “agent” capable of change (Barton, 2007). Traditional concepts of critical literacy, therefore, focus on how individuals are ‘positioned’ and act within the dominant discourses of society. Adopting a critical approach to social networking sites is not only valuable in helping young people see the competing discourses that surround their use, but also how it may influence the presentation of their identity and their relationships with others. However, with the advent of the Internet the literal perception of what is understood as ‘text’ has changed. As a result, a traditional model of critical literacy, which is primarily directed at print based texts, is no longer appropriate.

There are two key features of digital texts that are relevant to this discussion. First, the multimodality (Kress, 2003) of digital texts requires the reader to interpret and make meaning from multiple modes of information. When using social media, for example, information can take the form of images, writing, music, gestures, speech, icons and more. Unlike printed text, digital texts require the ‘user’ to interpret information that is “spread across” (2003, p. 35) several modes. Kress writes that the book was “ordered by the logic of writing”, whereas the “screen is ordered by the logic of image” (2003, p. 9). Writing may appear on the screen, but it will be subordinated by the image. For this reason Kress argues that the theoretical framework has therefore changed from linguistics to semiotics. The second major feature is the participatory culture of the internet (Jenkins, 2006) that gives rise to interactivity between participants and, therefore, multiple authorship and collaboration. In this way, social media lacks the “fixity and boundedness of traditional print text” (Burnett & Merchant 2011, p. 46) and therefore gives rise more readily to multiple meanings. Essentially both these features undermine the stable structures that enabled critique to take place.

A theoretical framework for understanding identity in the context of social media

There are several theories of identity that pertain to the research. First, it is important to note that identity is a social rather than an individual construction (Moje & Luke, 2009). However, even though identities are socially constructed they are still ‘lived’ by the individual. Second, Moje and Luke also describe identity as “fluid” in that “it is no longer conceptualized as a stable entity that one develops throughout adolescence and achieves at some point in (healthy) adulthood” (2009, p. 418). This is a counterpoint to Erikson’s (1959) concept of identity as something that can be “achieved”, and perhaps more appropriate given the postmodern context. Finally, identity can also be thought of as “recognised” (Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 419) by others. James Gee (2000) defines this aspect of identity:

Being recognized as a certain “kind of person,” in a given context, is what I mean here by “identity.” In this sense of the term, all people have multiple identities connected not to their “internal states” but to their performances in society. (2000, p. 99)

Gee goes on to acknowledge the presence of a “core” identity “that holds more uniformly, for ourselves and others, across contexts” (2000, p. 100), however, suggests that the definition of identity as “recognized” is more useful as an analytic tool in theorising and researching education. When an individual uses social media these three aspects of identity are at work. The individual presents an identity that can be easily recognised through photos, affiliations and interests; feedback and interaction from other users helps to socially construct identity and there is no requirement to have a fixed sense of who you are, instead identity is about a series of experimentations.

Social networking and identity

Research has shown that social media is strongly linked with the presentation and formation of identity (Boyd, 2007; Ito et al., 2008; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Dowdall, 2009) Further to this, it can also be a place where role conflict can be worked through. Selwyn (2009), for example, discovered that for the University students in his study, the Facebook wall was a place where they could become familiar with the “identity politics” of being a student. It became a space where the issues that arise from University staff, academic conventions and expectations could be reported and reflected upon. Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) also link Facebook usage with “psychological well being” (2007, p. 1143) because it was able to build social capital (Bourdieu, 1977) in its participants. However, particular aspects of identity are reinforced in this context, perhaps at the expense of others. Kress (2003), for example, writes that the “screen is the site of the image – it is the contemporary canvas” (2003, 9). It is plain to see this on social networking sites, like Facebook, as the photo or visual representations of self are of great import. Boyd (2007) outlines four properties that separate unmediated publics from networked publics:

Persistence: in that “networked communications are recorded for posterity”;

Searchability: in that “identity is established through text [so] search and discovery tools help people find like minds”;

Replicability: in that “networked public expressions can be copied from one place to another verbatim such that there is no way to distinguish the ‘original’ from the copy”;

Invisible audiences: in that “it is virtually impossible to ascertain all those who might run across our expressions in networked publics” (2007, p. 9).

As Boyd acknowledges these “properties affect the potential audience and the context in which the expression is received” (2007, p. 7). While many users may find these qualities liberating, for others such unstable parameters for expression and reception may become an issue, particularly if issues of self-esteem are at play. Furthermore, how do such contexts intersect with unmediated or offline identities? At the very least, it requires the individual to be many things at once; to mediate and perpetuate their identity for the variety of audiences and discourses they experience (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Methodology

This small-scale research project aimed to examine how a small group of experienced

users were interacting with the social networking site Facebook; and the kinds of critical and uncritical understandings they had of it. It examined more closely the kinds of interactions and understandings being developed through the templates it provided, in order to construct a more nuanced and complex picture of how young people use social networking sites, beyond simple dichotomies and assumptions. It offers a discursive understanding of social networking practises that are not afforded in quantitative research. It involved an initial whole class discussion, peer administered interviews, observations of the participant's Facebook page and a follow up interview where points from the peer administered interview were clarified and explained in greater detail. The interviews took place over a period of six weeks.

The study considered critical engagement to mean several key things. First, it meant knowledge of the conventions of social networking sites and an awareness of how they structure information and interaction in a particular way. In practical terms this might mean knowing how to adjust privacy settings and limiting the amount of personal or private information that is posted. It might also mean knowing the difference between an online friend and an offline friend, and not becoming friends with strangers or unfamiliar people. Using social networking sites critically might also mean demonstrating behaviour that is appropriate for the medium. No doubt what is deemed appropriate would vary across age and cultural groups, however, certain behaviours would be universally considered inappropriate. For example, most groups would consider engaging in offensive or mean behaviour online inappropriate. It might also mean avoiding posting provocative photos or posts and, as a corollary of this, being aware of the digital 'fingerprint' that will stay with them into the future. Finally, given the pre-eminence of photos on the site young people could become overwhelmed by the pressure that such a visual medium places on them. Critical engagement might therefore mean understanding, and then possibly resisting, the pressure that social networking sites like Facebook place on the user in relation to posting photos, posts and having a lot of friends. One aspect of the study investigated whether the site encouraged or directed particular behaviour in users and if they accepted or resist this 'positioning'. The study involved six volunteer female students who ranged from 13-14 years old and came from a Government school for girls in Melbourne's Eastern suburbs. This Government school has one of the highest numbers of parents/guardians educated to a tertiary level (DEECD, 2011), and is located in an affluent suburb. They have ready access to technology and, we could presume, parents who have expectations about their education that may well extend to a critical engagement with social networking sites. The six participants' names have been changed to protect their privacy and are presented here as Phillipa, Nina, Nadia, Cassie, Sally and Felicity. They all use Facebook daily and most signed up two years ago, when they were 11 or 12 years old.

The participants were also involved in the research process and helped to construct the interview questions and carry out the interviews on each other. There were two reasons for this. First, the aim was to deliver an insider's (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) perspective on social networking use, not only through the answers to the interview questions, but also through the questions and ideas that the participants added to the set of interview questions. Given that the research was to take place in a school, the aim in adopting this approach was to overcome the 'deep grammar of school' which 'institutionalizes the privileging of the newcomer/ outsider mindset over the insider mindset' (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 33) In this way, the research could be likened to social and cultural anthropology which "attempts to understand alien belief systems 'from inside'" (Hammersley, 2002, p. 66).

Second, involving the participants in the research process aimed to lessen the power imbalance between researcher/teacher and participant. In this context, such power

imbalance may skew results. Rather than participants “telling it like it is”, they may feel pressure to respond in a particular way if the researcher is an authority figure, like a teacher or university researcher. Collaborating with student researchers was one way to breakdown this hierarchy; the ‘subjects’ were positioned as active ‘participants’ working with the researcher toward a common goal (Herring, 2008, p. 87). The participants in this study were actively involved in designing the interview questions and collecting data with their designated partner, however, given some of the sensitive information that was put forth during interviews, they were not involved in the analysis of results.

Results

When the data from the student interviews, follow-up interviews, online observations and class discussion were analysed, three main themes emerged: (1) For these participants the main purpose behind their Facebook use was to produce and present a social identity or image that could be recognised by others and, in this context, photos were the main way this was achieved; (2) Anxiety resulted from judgments and bullying that was reported, which impacted how they used and engaged with the ‘templates’ and functions of the site; and (3) Participants often contradicted what they reported in interviews with their social networking behaviours, demonstrating that enacting a critical practice in this context is difficult. Because participants often felt restricted by what they could and could not do on the site, Foucault’s notion of a discursive formation was used to help understand how this discourse positioned users of the site. Through this theoretical lens we can see how Facebook encourages and privileges some behaviours over others, making it difficult for young people to find the ‘space’ to critically engage with the site. An analysis of these themes provides some insight into the complexity of the critical engagement required for a social networking site like Facebook.

Presentation of identity – the purpose of Facebook

For these participants Facebook was predominately used for presenting an identity and maintaining and extending friendships. None of the participants, for example, mentioned embedding videos, linking to blogs or other Web 2.0 technologies, or even organising social events through Facebook – they simply re/present themselves through photos and status updates. For example, when Nadia was asked whether she used Facebook to organise events she replied: “Not really then you have email...or phone or whatever”. It seemed that there was quite a specific purpose behind their use, and that this was quite limited. When asked what cues they use to understand a Facebook friend’s identity, all the participants explained that photos and ‘friends’ were most important. While this seems an obvious observation, it is important to note that photos were more important than status updates and wall posts. This fits in with Kress’s (2003) assertion that on screen, image subordinates writing by dominating all “displayed communications” (2003, p. 9). According to the participants, not only do they need to carefully select which photos they upload, but they also need to monitor and review photos of themselves that their Facebook ‘friends’ upload. To Sally, photos are important because, “people can judge you even if they don’t know you”, or in Nadia’s words they “help[s] to know who that person is”.

The participants also expressed concern about what sort of photos to put up, commenting that their ‘friends’ judge photos. For example, Sally said now she knows “what photos to put up and what photos not to put up”. Felicity mentions several times that the photos of her on Facebook “are really, really ugly” and “bad” and that she is often “being weird” in them. She attributes this to her “being caught off guard” and

hopes that we “never see them”. When asked if there were any inappropriate photos of her on Facebook she equates appropriateness with attractiveness: “Define inappropriate ... because I just have really, really ugly bad photos on”. She has 74 photos and images uploaded onto the site. Similarly, Phillipa feels “self-conscious” when people are looking at her photos wondering whether they will like them. She says that it is also important to consider what potential friends might think: “if people are looking to add you as a friend they would look at them to see what kind of things you do”.

In this instance, boyd’s (2007) notion of Searchability is evident, where the capacity to search for and choose friends based on what they do and who *they* are friends with gives a greater sense of control in the presentation of identity. However, there is a negative side to this, as looks often determined whether a potential friendship was made. Felicity explains:

Well I have a few friends and they go around looking up different people and if they find someone who they think is hot or who looks good they add them, so it looks like they are more cool. Because mostly people would assume that pretty people are the cool people.

In this way, a friends’ list becomes a ‘resource’ that is worth displaying to others. Even though Felicity acknowledges that the assumptions made are questionable she accepts it as what happens on Facebook:

You would try to add the more pretty and good-looking people I guess. It’s just what you do. I don’t try to do that, but sometimes it slips up a bit.

Sally, Felicity, Phillipa and Nina all acknowledged that photos can be an inaccurate representation of who a person is and in this way are engaging critically with the site. Phillipa explains:

People will put photos on because they think it will make them look cooler, but then that’s not actually what they’re like they just do it because they think it makes them look good.

Despite expressing doubt over the ‘truthfulness’ of photos, all participants relied on them to represent their own identity and understand others’ identities; in many respects they have little choice given the dominance of the image in this context. Only two of the participants mentioned status updates as relevant to understanding a person’s identity on Facebook. For the participants, the highly visual nature of the medium shaped how they represented their identity and perceived others. In this context, recognition of identity was key, so that identity is continually re/presented in response to feedback from others. Given the highly visual nature of the site, Facebook can be thought of as a room of mirrors, images of an identity are projected on Facebook, but are also bounced back to reflect an identity constructed by others. It is essential that photos are used to represent an identity, but then there is little control over how these will be interpreted. While boyd (2007) argues that in some sense “people have more control online” (2007, p. 12), the participant’s comments reveal the complexity of the context. While they may have more control over what is presented to the world (the photos, comments and conversations that are uploaded into the site), the participants expressed concern over who their audience was, how they would be received and whether their interactions were appropriate or “fit in” to the discourse. In this instance, their anxiety seemed to

arise from a perceived *lack* of control, which was ultimately related to how their identity was “recognised” (Gee, 2000) by others.

Anxiety

Representing an identity through such a visual medium seemed to be a source of anxiety for all the participants, to the point where behaviours were limited and only some templates used. Nina attributes this to the judgements people make on Facebook:

I think people are really judgemental on like Facebook and stuff because of the photos and the statuses and, if say your friend tagged you in a photo where you looked really bad and people might judge you and be like “She’s really weird”.

It is interesting to note that several participants equated an “inappropriate” photo as one in which they looked “ugly”. It seems that the visual representation of self on Facebook is of utmost importance, perhaps even more important than how you appear face to face.

Status updates were also a source of anxiety for Sally and Phillipa. Both were “worried” about what to write because they felt they might be judged; as a result they rarely post statuses. Nadia on the other hand thinks that communicating on Facebook can be easier because you can “sound really smart”. Such pressure pushes some people to lie. Phillipa mentioned that she has observed people lie about what school they go to. In one extreme case she said a ‘friend’ had written information that suggested they attended a private school, when in reality they were a student at a government school. Nina also mentioned that some people tell “white lies”:

Some people tell white lies to get attention and to make themselves seem cooler or to get sympathy... I think they are made by people who are insecure...reassurance that’s really what people look for.

On Facebook, positive comments and ‘likes’ from ‘friends’ in response to posts were essential reassurance for their quality and, more generally, the participant’s online identity.

All the participants describe judgement, meanness and often bullying taking place on Facebook. It is clear that the participants know that this is wrong, but according to Nina “it’s easier to be mean to people...online”. Sally explains the phenomenon:

In real life they will be like “oh it’s really bad” but actually online they kind of have a different identity and like “ha ha ha that’s so funny” and go along with it, but not really do something about it.

Nadia also thinks people tend to go along with it: “If someone says something mean or whatever and people are like ‘ha ha so funny’ it’s not because the other person feels like ...I don’t know”. Felicity admits that while she is “not usually mean on Facebook it comes out once or twice” and this, she believes, is because “you have a screen in front of you and no one there”. Cassie admitted that while she does not try to be “deliberately” mean online, “people can get the wrong idea”. Misinterpreting information and people seems to be a common occurrence on Facebook. By extension, when interpretation becomes “slippery”, participants expressed a tendency to read things in a more negative way. While this also takes place in an unmediated exchange,

considering the way identity is constructed in a digital environment does provide a helpful way of making sense of this trend.

In many ways the manner in which an individual and their identity is presented has fundamentally shifted with the advent of social networking sites, and digital technology more generally. Mark Poster (2006) writes that “digital machines” are not an addition, tool or prosthesis but “an intimate mixing of human and machine that constitutes an interface outside the subject-object binary” (2006, p. 48). In this theory, humans are no longer considered separate from their digital tools. Such complex couplings between humans and machines have far reaching implications. Poster writes, “Since the digital self also absorbs the affordances and constraints of the Internet, we can say that the positions of speech that are made in this medium are greatly expanded from what we have known before” (2006, p. 42). While a small-scale study of this nature has limitations in its scope, traces of Poster’s idea are evident. In some instances, the social networking site was thought of as a tool to communicate with others, but at other times it configured interactions and relationships in a new way; enabling the participants to forget that there was a real person or ‘subject’ behind the tool or ‘object’. While the majority of the participants knew that this was wrong, there was a resignation about being able to change behaviours. Sentiments like “that’s just what happens” and “I don’t mean to but...” were often expressed. Add to this the pressure from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. He explains that Facebook “...has always tried to push the envelope. And at times that means stretching people and getting them to be comfortable with things they aren’t comfortable with yet. A lot of this is just social norms catching up with what technology is capable of” (Thomson, 2008). Indeed, if the digital self does imbibe the affordances of the internet, which is evident from this study, then a critical engagement with Facebook or social networking sites more generally, is akin to isolating and analysing how identity has been constructed in and around this context.

Contradictions

One thing that was apparent from the interviews was that what participants said they were doing on Facebook and what they actually practised online were two different things. For example, in the interviews most reported that photos can be an inaccurate representation of people’s identity and that an online friend is different to an offline friend. However, these sentiments were often contradicted later in the interview or by the online behaviour that they recounted. Phillipa, for example, acknowledged that a lot of people find Facebook can become a “competition to see who has more friends”, but she sees herself as able to resist the “pressure”:

For some people I think there would be [pressure], but I don’t really care whether people think I should have friends or not because it’s not really their opinion that should matter.

However, later she elaborates on the complex network of pressures at play that are sometimes difficult to negotiate:

Sometimes there is pressure like if you’ve got a lot of like mutual friends with them ...then you might think maybe I should friend them because then I can be like “Oh yeah I know this person I’ve got them on Facebook”. But then sometimes you just don’t because you think: “Why would I even want to have you? Why would I want you to see all my things? I only add people who I am comfortable with seeing what I have put up.

Most of the participants shared this belief indicating that it was important to say that they 'knew' their Facebook friends even though their actions might suggest otherwise. Cassie, for example, says that she doesn't normally add strangers as 'friends'. However, later in the interview she says that she became friends with an older man who she didn't know:

This guy was like a creepy paedophile. And then he was like being weird and then he's like I want to meet you ... and I'm like de-friend.

As a result of this experience she is "really careful" and doesn't "just add people for the sake of it".

The majority of the participants knew what they should and should not be doing on Facebook: they know photos were not always an accurate representation of identity; they know that they should not judge others online; they know not to 'friend' strangers. In essence, this was the cybersafety message. However, this message was at odds with pressures to adopt other behaviours, like having lots of "pretty, cool" friends and posting glamorous, often provocative photos; essentially what participants admitted gave them "status" on Facebook. For example, in the follow up interview, Sally suggested that some of her classmates would not have told the truth in the peer administered interview: "Some people would say they don't have provocative photos, but they do". Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) define social capital as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships" (1992, p. 14). The reported behaviours and contradictions suggest that for these participants the drive for social capital overshadows the educational and moral lessons these participants had learnt about social networking. This might explain why participants say one thing (the thing they think is 'right'), but do another. It also points to the fact that the critical digital programs offered by the school have not been practically and consistently realised in the participant's out of school engagement with social media.

Formations of a Facebook identity

The participants, and the class more broadly, expressed the point that particular behaviours were encouraged on Facebook, as there was pressure to look attractive, post exciting status updates and also to be extroverted. For example, Cassie says, "I think there is more pressure to be extroverted online because you have to make more like – more for people to like you". Similarly, Nadia thinks "there is really no point in having it [Facebook]" if you are really shy and introverted. Other participants acknowledge this point, but in relation to others, not themselves. Phillipa explains this:

For some people I think there would be [pressure], but I don't really care whether people think I should have friends or not because it's not really their opinion that should matter.

When asked whether they thought Facebook could do things any better, all the participants answered no; in Nadia's words "everything is on there". Two of the participants suggested that they have adapted their behaviour to suit the perceived expectations of Facebook. Nina explains:

I think at the start I was quite introverted and sort of conservative, but as I've become more confident and more comfortable with the networking site and in myself, I've become more extroverted.

While there were moments where the participants were critical of behaviours that took place on Facebook, they all maintained that they were the same person online as they were offline.

All the participants mentioned that there was a particular way to do things on Facebook, an unwritten set of rules, what Nina called "cybersense". While it may have helped participants "type oneself into being" (Sunden, 2003, p. 3), it seemed that Facebook and its set of values underwrote the "being" that was constructed. At one point during the class discussion, Nadia announced "MySpace is so grade 6", as if there was only one possible choice for social networking now – Facebook. Despite moments of critical engagement, each participant appeared committed to accruing friends, posting photos where they looked 'good' and writing interesting status updates; essentially things that improved social status on Facebook. Applying Foucault's discursive formation as a theoretical lens is appropriate here in that it emphasises how the workings of texts, institutions and social practices can align in certain ways and set limits to how people and things can be recognised (Gee, 2000).

A discursive formation can be approximated to a discipline (like political science, literature or medicine) or "divisions or groupings with which we have become so familiar" (Foucault, 2002, p. 24). Using medical science as an example, Foucault explains that from the 19th century practitioners began to "presuppose the same way of looking at things" and that medicine was organised by a "certain style" and "series of descriptive statements" (2002, p. 37). O'Farrell (2005) explains discursive formations are "a bit like the grammar of a language [and] allow certain statements to be made" (2005, p. 79). In this way discursive formations provide a "space in which various objects emerge and are continuously transformed" (Foucault, 2002, p. 36). A key point is that discursive formations create systems of knowledge and lead to a particular way of engaging with the world, which Foucault terms discursive practice. When social networking sites are viewed as a discursive formation, attention is drawn to the fact that they have the potential to 'position' the user. Once positioned, however, individuals have the ability to assume or resist the position and it is here that critical engagement comes into play. In light of the results, while it may have been possible for the participants to see the behaviours that were encouraged by Facebook, it was very difficult for the participants to see how Facebook positioned them, let alone resist it.

In *Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002) one of Foucault's concerns was our reluctance to question the way a discursive formation like Facebook shapes our perception of the world. He believed that we should interrogate why discursive formations result in some statements and practices emerging into our everyday lives and not others. Through both subtle and overt means, Facebook encourages an identity that is extroverted, outgoing and even sometimes narcissistic; most importantly, one that would be approved by their peer group. The pursuit of such an identity made it difficult for the participants to critically engage with the site, as they become immersed in the social reality of Facebook. While the participants may have had some degree of critical awareness of the site, they were unable to maintain this critical approach as they set out to achieve the 'ideal' self, set out in their personal profile. Often this meant pursuing what was considered valuable in this context—lots of friends and a rich and exciting social life. However, bringing a critical practice to Facebook, or any other social networking site for that matter, equates to critiquing selfhood, and this is no easy task, particularly for a young person who has had little time to form their identity. Further to this, to critique

this discursive formation would essentially mean seeing yourself as ‘outside’ it, and for many of the participants this ‘space’ for reflection or language for critique had not been discovered.

Toward a critical engagement with social networking sites

This paper has explored the complexity of social networking sites as a text for analysis, and the social and personal discourses that take place in and around Facebook. It has shown that critical engagement is important in this context because it is so closely linked to identity formation and presentation for young people today. It has explicated the factors that make it difficult for young people to critically engage with sites like Facebook so they may broach the “transparency problem” (Jenkins, 2006) of social media. While critical literacy approaches to use of social media have been put forth (Dowdall, 2009; Hartley, 2010), the role of identity does not figure as a central point for analysis. However, Burnett and Merchant’s (2011) ‘Tri-partite Model’ is of particular significance for this study.

Building on Greenhow and Robelia’s (2009) idea of “advantageous online community practices” (2009, p. 136), Burnett and Merchant offer a conceptual model that highlights the inter-relationship between identity, practice and networks, but argue that these three concepts take place around, through and outside social media. In this way, the model is able to shift the focus from the objects to be critiqued to how the ‘user’ engages with these, integrating identity with critical practice. They write:

Critical practice in this context may be less about digital technology as an abstract force (one that considers how it might structure our thoughts and actions) and more about an interrogation and evaluation of what we and others are actually doing on and off-line. (2009, p. 51)

With this model there is a shift in the locus of practice that is more suitable for networked, collaborative texts like social media. Finally, it should be noted that social networking is a popular pursuit, so any critical practice needs to balance learner interest with more serious pedagogical aims (Burnett & Merchant, 2011). As Buckingham (2003) writes, undermining or ‘spoiling’ enjoyable literacy practices with a ‘correct’ reading of texts is likely to have negative results. Consequently, any sort of critical practice associated with social networking sites needs to be mindful of the connection to, and possible objectification of identity.

To engage critically with Facebook might also mean giving young people the ‘space’ to reflect upon their use. This might be further developed through a ‘meta-discourse’ to identify and evaluate the behaviours and interactions that take place in and around the context in order to encourage what Gee (1991, p. 9) calls “Powerful Literacy”. As Gee explains we cannot expect young people to acquire these skills, they need to be learnt. In this instance, the myth of the digital native as transformed by new technology and, therefore, not needing any education or resources to negotiate social media is inaccurate and potentially damaging. Further to this, the results from this study demonstrate that even a basic literacy was lacking for some of the participants interviewed. For example, several participants did not have adequate privacy settings and would often ‘friend’ strangers.

Final comments

What the research here shows is something of how young people who *are* very much at home with Facebook are not simply skilled users (“digital natives”) but a group being formed in a context which impacts on their identity formation, and not always positively. While many participants could clearly articulate the cybersafety messages, understood a number of things about how Facebook worked, what kinds of representations were prioritised, and also knew what was moral and ethical behaviour, it was difficult for them to maintain this approach when using such an immersive and pervasive medium. The impact a medium such as Facebook has on the self-esteem and personal development in people so young also needs to be considered. For many participants the anxiety associated with presenting an identity that was Facebook ‘appropriate’ and that would be accepted by their peers was palpable. Many of the participants spoke of bullying and judgemental behaviour that seemed elevated on Facebook.

Poster’s notion of a “digital self” who absorbs the affordances of the Internet is a useful way to understand how the behaviours online might be shaped more by the technology than the individual and their moral code. In this way, while it may have been possible for participants to reflect on how Facebook was shaping their view of others, it was more difficult for them to see how it shaped their view of themselves. Abandoning use of the site did not seem to be an option for the participants. This research has uncovered some of the challenges young people face when asked to critically engage with Facebook. These challenges are due to a range of factors: the structure of the site and the privileging of images (photos) over writing in this context; the fact that when viewed as a discursive formation (Foucault, 2002) certain behaviours and language are encouraged over others and left the participants feeling anxious; and that to critique the site is to stand ‘outside’ the discourse, which essentially counters the very purpose of being on there in the first place.

While this research does point to schools playing a more significant role in educating for critical use of social networking sites, the fact that Facebook is banned in many Australian schools, makes this an unlikely prospect in the near future. Lankshear and Knobel (2003) argue that education should not be focused on learning or schools, but instead “human lives seen as trajectories through multiple social practices in various social institutions” (2003, p. 48). For meaningful learning to take place then, the skills taught in schools need to have traction beyond the school setting and this may well involve education around social networking sites. What is needed is a robust program that couples pertinent information with opportunities for young people to reflect on their use of social networking sites, so they have the time, space and confidence to see how the site is shaping their interactions with others. Here Burnett and Merchant’s (2011) ‘Tri-partite’ model may be of use in developing a critical literacy that incorporates a reflection on how identity fits into the picture without alienating or objectifying young people in the process. The purpose of this research has not been to undermine young people’s use of social networking sites, but to demystify some of the ambiguity around common understandings of their use. To encourage confident, enquiring agents in the world, then not only does more discussion and education around critical engagement with social networking sites need to take place, but we also need to continue to investigate and attempt to understand the complex and dynamic nature of the digital worlds young people inhabit.

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