The Private and the Public: Identity and Politics in Virtual Space

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The School of Media Studies, The New School

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Biography

Nathanael Bassett is a graduate student in the Media Studies Program at the New School. He is also an artist/instructor at Youth Rights Media in New Haven, Connecticut, and does freelance videography work for non-profit and advocacy media. His interests include participatory culture, identity, the public sphere and virtual community. He is currently doing research into hackathons with Prof. Nitin Sawhney and Christo de Clerk of The New School.

Expanded Abstract

The use of digital networks and and social media have transformed our understanding of both personal and collective identity, but have also created a crisis in our self concept. While older forms of media depended on hierarchical structures of control, "interactive media move the locus of control to the individual." In the remediation of our society to this form, we see recursive affects not only in how older media redefine themselves in the image of a new medium, but more importantly in how we redefine ourselves to a public we represent and by which we are represented. The public sphere becomes more “public” and inclusive by our deliberate participation and its influence on our self-concept. The space becomes one where there are a number of possibilities. Either dominant and hegemonic discourses are remediated due to the issues of ownership, control, and accessibility of the medium, or the medium assists the construction of counter-publics by marginalized groups.
These counter-publics are publics with a different set of qualities and expectations for their members, in that they “fashion their own subjectivities around the requirements of public circulation and stranger-sociability,” as Michael Warner writes. But recursive theme of self and community comes at odds with our past concept of identity. There is a tension between the “online” and the “offline” persona we adopt. The oscillating sense of self is one feature that sets the digital public and identity aside from its predecessor, part of our crisis of “private and public.”

In the digital public, we are co-constructing self and collective identity by collaborative and personal efforts. Christopher Kelty uses the term “recursive public” to describe a particular type of public that is self-aware, cognizant and reconciling “the ability to build, control, modify, and maintain the infrastructure that allows them to come into being in the first place,” specifically, communities of open source developers and free software advocates. These groups reorient their sense of power, knowledge through direct involvement in governance and are adaptable above all else, while staying open and available to others. They represent a type of collective intelligence who are willing to alter the frameworks of their interaction, and they seize the responsibility and agency to define and control their social ontology. In this sense, they are similar to the network society of Manuel Castell, where subjects become engaged in identity building in the form of project identity, specifically from communal resistance to oppressive cultural institutions.

The digital public is an ideal space for this type of identity building, because it has a history with societies of anonymity, with privacy and self-efficacy being key values. It
also welcomes oppositional societies by engendering counter-publics as mentioned above, but also through the “cyber-balkanization” of online communities created by users. Lastly there is a contention within the “virtual commons between community and custodianship.” Agency of the group members in spaces like Facebook define how recursive the groups are, and to what degree people are invested in the community. Greater agency means a type of collectivity which is less homogenous, more flexible, and open to participation, where users go beyond affiliation with the group, and are directly responsible for how it operates and the way it is perceived by others. This is the second part of the “private and the public” identity crisis.

The two sets of identity crisis that happen during the remediation of self-concept to the digital public are private or individualist concerns, and public or collective concerns. Personalist concerns relate to how we see our own identity as augmented and affected through our participation in digital publics. Anonymity and fragmentation, as well as the nature of our behavior and interaction with others, are poorly understood as strong binaries (online/offline, private/public) which should be reconciled with critiques of “digital dualism” as posited by Nathan Jurgenson and others.

Collective or public concerns exist regarding our relationship to others and the groups we identify with. Strong collectives are monoliths which cooperate through individual compliance, and the collective identity is a “mask” adopted by the participants. But this traditional view of collectivity directly contrasts the recursive public of co-construction, operating through “weak ties” as the group articulates its own identity, motivations and agenda. Media democratization and digital publics engender this weak collectivity, where
individuals are represented and not merely participating. While we are contributing to and helping to inform communal characteristics, we are also informed by the features of the group itself. The greater our agency or individual autonomy as participants of a public, the more recursion works as a feature of that collective.

Work on identity has gone from the experimenting with self-concepts\textsuperscript{14} to the identification of our online activity as part of a real self.\textsuperscript{15} But this digital activity leaves an exact record unlike anything in the “offline” world, eliciting personal concerns about privacy and whether or not to engage or experiment in identity politics. Likewise, movements like OccupyWallStreet and open data advocates highlight issues of collective identity. Those counterpublics use horizontal, networked power to let participants contribute more actively to define their stakes and motivations. For both, the recursive model of greater agency and involvement with the digital public may provide a way of thinking about identity in the network society.
Notes


15. Stéphane Vial, “There is no difference between the "real" and the "virtual": a brief phenomenology of digital revolution” (paper presented at Theorizing the Web 2013, New York, NY, March 2, 2013)


Cammaerts, B. “Radical Pluralism and Free Speech in Online Public Spaces: the Case of


Dahlberg, Lincoln. “The Internet, Deliberative Democracy, and Power: Radicalizing the


Granovetter, Mark S. “The Strength of Weak Ties.” American Journal of Sociology 78 (1973): 1360–1380.


Gossett, Jennifer Lynn, and Sarah Byrne. “‘Click Here’: a Content Analysis of Internet Rape Sites.” Gender & Society 16, no. 5 (October 1, 2002): 689–709.


Kennedy, H. “Beyond Anonymity, or Future Directions for Internet Identity Research.” *New Media & Society* 8, no. 6 (2006): 859.


Researcher to Do in the Age of the Internet?.” *European Journal of Communication* 19, no. 1 (March 1, 2004): 75–86.


OBJECTIVE

As a student and producer of media, I have a deep fascination on the way technology and communication coalesce. I want to understand, master, and pass on the skills and knowledge how we can use media to change ourselves and our world, by messages and strategies that challenge problems and inspire progress.

EDUCATION

M.A., MEDIA STUDIES, EXPECTED GRADUATION, DECEMBER 2013
The New School, New York, NY
B.A., MASS MEDIA, MINOR IN POLITICAL SCIENCE, CUM LAUDE, MAY 2011
Missouri State University, Springfield, MO

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

TEACHING ASSISTANT, THE NEW SCHOOL: NEW YORK, NY
JANUARY 2013 - MAY 2013
TA for Nitin Sawhney and Melanie Creen on a course in Interventionist Aesthetics, investigating how art, design, and technology can be leveraged to develop creative and tactical responses to critical political issues.

FREELANCE VIDEOGRAPHY
OCTOBER 2012 - PRESENT
Non-profit and advocacy media for web - clients include CT Voices for Children, United Way of Greater New Haven, and the Arts Council of Greater New Haven.

ARTIST/INSTRUCTOR, YOUTH RIGHTS MEDIA: NEW HAVEN, CT
JANUARY 2012 - PRESENT
I teach media literacy skills to high-school aged youth, by developing curriculum and programming during for my class times, as well as helping to develop and consulting on overarching projects for the year-long program.

NEW MEDIA CONSULTANT, PRISCO CONSULTING, LLC: MILFORD, CT
AUGUST 2011 - DECEMBER, 2011
I worked with a small public relations firm to incorporate new media strategies for local and client businesses to implement. I also held a workshop in which I presented how community businesses could engage audiences through social media.

NEW MEDIA SPECIALIST, MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY: SPRINGFIELD, MO
JANUARY 2009 - MAY 2011
I was responsible for engaging students, staff, faculty and alumni in the university community through the web. I created a social media guide for university units to use our online content system, or engage their own audiences via social media. I helped manage content through SQL database management, created 3d models for Google Maps, and produced a series of web videos on behalf of the university, which have had thousands of views.

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CONFERENCE PAPERS

- Recursive Identities in Sociopolitical Movements: A Case Study of Hackathons
  Critical Themes in Media Studies 2013 (cowritten with Daniel Kim)
- The Private and the Public: Identity and Politics in Virtual Space
  MiT8, May 2013

ADDITIONAL EXPERIENCE

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE OUTREACH INTERN, DEMOCRACY NOW!: NEW YORK, NY
AUGUST 2011 - NOVEMBER, 2011

I worked with the Social Media & Online Outreach Coordinator to identify and implement strategies for increasing web traffic and viewership of the daily news program. We located and reached out to communities of interest, possible audiences, as well as responding to engagement from our existing audience across Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT, CAPTURED TIME PRODUCTIONS: LITCHFIELD, CT
MAY, 2010 - AUGUST, 2010

I worked with documentary filmmaker Harvey Hubbell V. in post-production on his film, “Dislecksia: The Movie.” My role was to organize outreach and draft correspondence to advocates, backers and investors, including high-profile individuals who we solicited to appear in the film. I also researched grant opportunities and crowd funding options, such as Kickstarter and Indiegogo. Later funding campaigns run from Kickstarter were successful in funding the final work needed for the project.

SKILLS

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<th>Critical Thinking</th>
<th>Copywriting / Design</th>
<th>Videography</th>
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<td>Teaching</td>
<td>MS Office &amp; iWork</td>
<td>Premiere Pro</td>
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<td>Research</td>
<td>Google Docs</td>
<td>Final Cut Pro</td>
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<td>Content Management</td>
<td>Illustrator</td>
<td>AVID</td>
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<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Photoshop</td>
<td>Motion/After Effects</td>
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OTHER PROJECTS

(Additional projects available on personal blog at [http://mrliterati.com](http://mrliterati.com))

- Thesis in Progress - Recursive Collective Identities: A Case Study of Hackathons
- Remember Me: Municipal Memorials for New Haven: municipalmemorial.org
  Spring 2012
- Helping Youth Find Their Voice: The Role of Media in Youth Organizing
  submitted to Berkman Center for Internet & Society: Kinder & Braver World Project:
  Research Series
- ‘Hood Hub - collaborative concept for immigrant community resources
  February 2012
- “Proslambanomenos” sound art piece
  January 2012
- “Derelict Reality” experimental video
  December 2011

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HONORS & ACTIVITIES

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<tr>
<th>The New School: Associate Editor</th>
<th>Missouri State University: Co-Presenter: Metropolitan Museum of Art's Paper Tiger Television: Designs For a Radical New Media event, February 24, 2012</th>
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<td>Itineration Online Journal</td>
<td>The New School: Departmental Merit Scholarship Fall 2011 - Spring 2013</td>
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<td>August 2012 - Present</td>
<td>Missouri State University: The Underground student newspaper Feature Writer Fall 2008 to Fall 2009</td>
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<td>Missouri State University: The New School: Departmental Merit Scholarship Fall 2011 - Spring 2013</td>
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<td>The New School: Dean's Scholarship Fall 2011 - Spring 2013</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Missouri State University: Dean's List Fall 2009, Spring 2009, Fall 2008, Fall 2007, Spring 2006, Fall 2005</td>
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<td>Missouri State University: University Relations Employee of the Month January 2010</td>
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<td>Missouri State University: The New School: Departmental Merit Scholarship Fall 2011 - Spring 2013</td>
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<td>Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society 2005 – 2007</td>
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<td>Pi Sigma Alpha: Political Science Honor Society September 2009 – January 2010</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gateway Community College The Pride Student Newspaper, Feature Writer/Co-editor September 2004 – December 2005</td>
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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

| AT MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY: Multimedia Journalism |
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| AT MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY: Multimedia Journalism |
| Political Communication Media Analysis and Criticism |
| Media In Politics Mass Media Theory |
| Introduction to Film Issues in Media Ethics |
| Digital Film and Media Production Principles of Cinematography |
| AT THE NEW SCHOOL: Media Studies: Ideas |
| Civic Media and Tactical Design Designing Methodologies for Studying Media |
| Digital Media Theory Participate Research and Inquiry |
| Projects in Advocacy Media Discourse Analysis |
| Public Opinion Amid Social and Antisocial Media Grantseeking |

RESEARCH INTERESTS Political Media, Activist & Advocacy Media, Digital Media and the Public Sphere, Cybernetics, Industrialized Consciousness, Collective Identity

TEACHING INTERESTS Media Literacy, Media Analysis & Criticism, Media Theory

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