ARTICLE

Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: teenagers' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression

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Abstract

The explosion in social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Bebo and Friendster is widely regarded as an exciting opportunity, especially for youth. Yet the public response tends to be one of puzzled dismay regarding a generation that, supposedly, has many friends but little sense of privacy and a narcissistic fascination with self-display. This article explores teenagers' practices of social networking in order to uncover the subtle connections between online opportunity and risk. While younger teenagers relish the opportunities to recreate continuously a highly-decorated, stylistically-elaborate identity, older teenagers favour a plain aesthetic that foregrounds their links to others, thus expressing a notion of identity lived through authentic relationships. The article further contrasts teenagers' graded conception of 'friends' with the binary classification of social networking sites, this being one of several means by which online privacy is shaped and undermined by the affordances of these sites.

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Key words
affordances • identity • online communication • online risk •
privacy • social networking sites • teenagers • youth

INTRODUCTION

Young people have always devoted attention to the presentation of self.
Friendships have always been made, displayed and broken. Strangers –
unknown, weird or frightening – have always hovered on the edge of the
group, and often, adult onlookers have been puzzled by youthful peer
practices. Yet the recent explosion in online social networking sites such as
MySpace, Facebook, Bebo and others has attracted considerable interest from
the academy, policymakers, parents and young people themselves, the repeated
claim being that something new is taking place. What, then, is distinctive
about the youthful construction of self and peer relations, now that this is
mediated increasingly by social networking sites?

In terms of their affordances, social networking sites enable communication
among ever-widening circles of contacts, inviting convergence among the
hitherto separate activities of email, messaging, website creation, diaries, photo
albums and music or video uploading and downloading. From the user's
viewpoint, more than ever before, using media means creating as well as
receiving, with user control extending far beyond selecting ready-made, mass-
produced content. The very language of social relationships is being reframed;
today, people construct their 'profile', make it 'public' or 'private', they
'comment' or 'message' their 'top friends' on their 'wall', they 'block' or 'add'
people to their network and so forth.

It seems that for many, creating and networking online content is
becoming an integral means of managing one's identity, lifestyle and social
relations. In the UK, MySpace is by far the most popular social network, with
6.5 million unique visitors in May 2007, followed by 4 million for Bebo and
3.2 million for Facebook (Nielsen//Netratings, 2007). US figures are far
higher, with 38.4 million unique visitors to MySpace in May 2006
(Nielsen//Netratings, 2006). Young people are in the vanguard of social
networking practices: 31 percent of MySpace users are under 18 years, as are
54 percent of Bebo users in the USA (BBC News, 2006); 6.6 million unique
users aged 12–17 visited MySpace in August 2006 across Europe (Comscore,
2006), and 32 percent of online 16–24-year-olds use social networking sites at
least monthly (EIAA, 2006).

Optimistic accounts stress new opportunities for self-expression, sociability,
community engagement, creativity and new literacies. Critical scholars argue
that youthful content creation will counter the traditional dominance of
consumers by producers and facilitate an innovative peer culture among

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young people, both locally and globally. Public policymakers hope that media literacy skills developed through social networking will transfer to support online learning and participation and protect youth from the online risks associated with transgressive representations of the self and abusive contact with others. Popular and media discourses all too often reflect a puzzled dismay that young people live in such a different world from the (nostalgically remembered) youth of today's adults.

Media panics amplify the public anxieties associated with social networking. The 'MySpace generation', they suggest, has no sense of privacy or shame. One attention-getting headline read: 'Generation shock finds liberty online: the children of the internet age are ready to bare their bodies and souls in a way their parents never could' (*Sunday Times*, 2007). And another claimed: 'Kids today. They have no sense of shame. They have no sense of privacy' (Nussbaum, 2007) Moreover, social networkers are supposedly wholly narcissistic: 'MySpace is about me, me, me, and look at me and look at me' (Fairfax Digital News, 2007). In short, it is commonly held that at best, social networking is time-wasting and socially isolating, and at worst it allows paedophiles to groom children in their bedroom[1] or sees teenagers lured into suicide pacts while parents think they are doing their homework.

MEDIATING SOCIAL NETWORKING

For once it seems that the academy has kept pace with market innovation and social practice. Usefully countering the hype, a rapidly expanding body of empirical research is examining how people create personal profiles, network with familiar and new contacts and participate in various forms of online community (boyd, 2006; boyd and Ellison, 2007; Hinduja and Patchin, 2008; Lenhart and Madden, 2007). Certain trends are already apparent, challenging the simple distinctions with which new media research began. Notably, despite the potential for global networking, most people's contacts are local, with stronger ties centred on pre-existing study or work contexts (Haythornthwaite, 2001), especially among teenagers (Gross, 2004); although niche networks are often geographically spread, interest in 'strangers' or distant others is minimal (Boneva et al., 2006; Mesch and Talmud, 2007). However, this does not mean that face-to-face communication is being displaced. Indeed, while social networking is displacing other forms of online communication to some degree (email, chatrooms, website creation), it incorporates others (instant messaging, blogging, music downloading) and remediates yet more (most notably, face-to-face and telephone communication; Bolter and Grusin, 1999; Jenkins, 2006). Consequently, the simple distinction between offline and online no longer captures the complex practices associated with online technologies as they become thoroughly

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embedded in the routines of everyday life (Bakardjieva, 2005; Silverstone, 2006).

These insights centre on emerging social practices with online social networking. Less is known about the specific contribution of social networking sites in shaping these practices, if any. To understand the relation between the two, the notion of mediation – social and technological – permits us to avoid a technologically deterministic account while acknowledging the shaping role of technology and social practices (Bakardjieva, 2005). Hjarvard proposes that

> mediation refers to the communication through one or more media through which the message and the relation between sender and receiver are influenced by the affordances and constraints of the specific media and genres involved. (2006: 5)

Thus, while all communication is necessarily mediated, an empirical account of the specific forms and practices associated with a particular medium is warranted. In a complementary fashion, drawing on Gibson's ecological psychology, Hutchby theorizes the mutuality between technological shaping and social practices thus:

> [A]ffordances are functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object. In this way, technologies can be understood as artefacts which may be both shaped by and shaping of the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them. (2001: 44)

This article combines these perspectives with a child–centred, qualitative methodology (Livingstone, 1998) in order to explore teenagers' practices of social networking. In addition to understanding the affordances of social networking sites, a child–centred approach means that the analysis should acknowledge young people's experiences, and it should situate their social networking practices within an account of the changing conditions of childhood and youth (James et al., 1998). As has been argued elsewhere, the tensions over children's media use often stem from underlying changes in the positioning of childhood and youth vis–à–vis parents, school and community (Livingstone, 2002). Today's teenagers live through an 'extended youth', historically speaking, staying young for longer in terms of education and economic dependence but becoming independent younger in terms of sexuality, leisure and consumption (Gadlin, 1978).

Hence, for teenagers, the online realm may be adopted enthusiastically because it represents 'their' space, visible to the peer group more than to adult surveillance, an exciting yet relatively safe opportunity to conduct the social psychological task of adolescence – to construct, experiment with and present a reflexive project of the self in a social context (Buchner et al., 1995;

Giddens, 1991) as well as (for some) for flouting communicative norms and other risk-taking behaviours (Hope, 2007; Liau et al., 2005; Stattin Kerr, 2000; Wolak et al., 2006). Indeed, it seems that even normatively valued online activities are correlated in practice with risky activities regarding online content, contact and conduct, suggesting that what for an adult observer may seem risky, is for a teenager often precisely the opportunity that they seek (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007); this complicates straightforward policy attempts to maximize the former while minimizing the latter.

The complex relation between opportunity and risk is not distinctive to the internet, rather it is a feature of adolescence. As Erikson (1980[1959]) observed, the adolescent must develop and gain confidence in an ego identity that is simultaneously autonomous and socially valued, and that balances critical judgement and trust, inner unity and acceptance of societal expectations. Thus, they must make judgements that are difficult offline as well as online – whom to trust, what to reveal about yourself, how to establish reciprocity, when to express emotion, and so on. By examining how online identity and peer relations are shaped by both peer culture and the affordances of networking software, the purpose here is to show how online opportunities and risks are interconnected.

METHOD
Sample and interviews
A series of open-ended individual interviews were conducted with 16 teenagers in their homes (see Table 1).

Their ages ranged from 13–16 years, half were girls and half boys, most were white but several were black or of mixed ethnicity, and they spanned the range of socioeconomic status categories as well as urban, suburban and rural locations in the Greater London area. All had home access to the internet (although in a few cases, this was not working at the time of the interview) and all had their own personal profile on MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, Piczo or similar, which they had visited at least once per week in recent months.

The participants were recruited by a market research agency in July 2007 and interviewed by the author. The teenagers and their parents received a written explanation of the research aims, methods and ethics (addressing the answering of sensitive questions, participant anonymity and confidentiality, data storage and publication of findings) before signing a consent form. Each received a modest honorarium. Interviews lasted around one hour, and comprised a free-flowing, open-ended discussion in front of the computer, while simultaneously going online to visit the participant's personal profile and those of others.

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• Table 1   Participants' details

| SCHOOL YEAR | GENDER | |
	GIRLS	BOYS

Year 9	Danielle, 13, C1, Piczo
	Nicki, 14, AB, MySpace
	Daphne, 14, C2, MySpace,
	    Bebo, ex–Piczo
	Jenny, 14, DE, MySpace, Bebo
	Elena, 14, DE, MySpace,
	    Facebook, Bebo
		Paul, 13, C2, Bebo,
		    ex–MySpace
		Joshua, 14, AB, Facebook
		Billy, 14, C2, MySpace

Year 10	Ellie, 15, AB, Facebook,
	    ex–MySpace,
		Ryan, 15, C1, Bebo,
		    MySpace, ex–Piczo

Year 11	Nina, 15, C1, Facebook,
	    ex–MySpace
	
	Sophie, 16, C2, MySpace
		Leo, 16, AB, MySpace
		Danny, 16, C1, MySpace,
		
		    Facebook
		Simon, 16, DE, MySpace
		Jason, 16, DE, MySpace

Note: Each participant's pseudonym is followed by their age, socioeconomic status (SES), and the social networking site they use/used. Household SES is categorized according to standard UK market research categories – AB (professional middle class), C1 (lower middle class), C2 (skilled working class) and DE (semi/unskilled working class). Year 9 is the third year of secondary school in the UK; year 11 is the final year of compulsory education.

Given the overall concern with online identity and peer relations, as shaped by peer culture and social networking site affordances, along with implications for online opportunities and risks, the interview schedule addressed:

- the choices, motivations and literacies shaping the participant's own profile;
- the semiotic and social 'reading' of others' profiles (in terms of conventions regarding form, identity and peer norms regarding transgressive or risky practices); and
- the social and personal meanings of the contacts sustained online and their relation to offline friends in everyday life.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed before being coded, using Nvivo qualitative coding software, according to categories derived from the issues emerging from the participants' responses as well as from the questions asked in the interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Enacting identity

Strategies for representing the self were found to vary considerably. For example, Danielle's Piczo profile has a big welcome in sparkly pink, with music, photos, a 'love tester', guestbook, dedication pages, etc., all customized down to the scroll bars and cursor with pink candy stripes, glitter, angels, flowers, butterflies, hearts and more (because 'you can just change it all the time [and so] you can show different sides of yourself'). By contrast, Danny has not completed the basic Facebook options of noting his politics, religion or even his network ('I haven't bothered to write about myself'). Most profiles are designed in one way or another to provide 'a way of expressing who you are to other people', as Nina put it. Elena, who spends several hours each day updating and altering her MySpace, Facebook and Piczo profiles, says:

> I think layouts really show like who you are. So look at the rainbow in that. I think that would make you sound very, like, bubbly … I like to have different ones … it's different likes, different fashion, different feelings on that day.

In response to this continual activity of representing the self, Elena's friends have peppered her profile with nice comments – 'I'm always here for you', 'You're gorgeous,' etc. – as part of a reciprocal exchange of mutual support which she appreciates:

> It's nice, like, if you've got a nice picture of you and people are, 'Oh, you look nice'. It's like quite nice, I think, when people say you're pretty … I like it when they comment me because, like, it shows that they care.

It should not be assumed that profiles are simply read as information about an individual. Jenny, like others, is well aware that people's profiles can be 'just a front'. For several of the participants, it seemed that position in the peer network was more significant than the personal information provided, rendering the profile a place-marker more than a self portrait. Initially, this author misunderstood this – for example, on Leo's site there was a comment from his friend 'Blondie' saying that she's pregnant: when I ask, he observes that, of course, 'she's joking' – the point being to share (and display) their humorous relationship, not a personal self-disclosure. A more sustained and fairly common instance is provided by Paul. A confident and sociable boy who 'got pulled into the world of Bebo' because 'everybody was talking about it', he has constructed his profile as a joke. With a funny photo of himself, it announces him to be 36, married, living in Africa, a person who likes to humiliate people and to get unconscious (there were other examples of teenagers' playful, occasionally resistant style, for example, posting an image of their dog instead of themselves). Yet in the interview, Paul takes little notice of this, since his brothers and friends (with whom he, like some others, has

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shared his password) have often changed his profile for fun. Thus his profile is meaningful to him not as a means of displaying personal information about him to the world, as often supposed, but precisely because the joky content is evidence of his lively and trusting relations with his brothers and friends.

Pointing to the lack of a one-to-one match between users and profiles, a point also evident in the way that some users maintain several profiles on different sites, Paul explains how the profile may display the peer group more than the individual:

> When we go out together, like they take photos on their phones and stuff and then they upload them on there … So everybody else can see what we've done and, like, see all of our friends and when we're together and it's just like remembering the time when we did it.

Thus although it indeed appears that, for many young people, social networking is 'all about me, me, me', this need not imply narcissistic self-absorption. Rather, following Mead's (1934) fundamental distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' as twin aspects of the self, social networking is about 'me' in the sense that it reveals the self embedded in the peer group, as known to and represented by others, rather than the private 'I' known best by oneself.

Although teenagers tend to describe their social networking activities in terms of freely taken choices, when questioned more closely it appears that they are constrained in two ways: first, by the norms and practices of their peer group and, second, by the affordances of the technological interface. Various representations of 'adult society' (parents, media panics, etc.) also play a lesser role in alerting them to the risks of strangers, viruses, threats to privacy, etc. These will be explored in turn, first showing how young people creatively use the different affordances of different sites to meet their changing identity needs; then second, showing how young people also struggle to fit their interests and concerns within the structures offered by the sites.

Transitions in identity development

Although the intention of this study was to recruit a narrow range of teenagers in terms of age (i.e. 13–16-year-olds, a cohort commonly combined by survey research), it emerged that collectively, the participants had a story to tell about their changing identity. Teenagers are acutely aware of the subtle differences between those a school year younger or older than themselves, indicating perceived differences in identity, social position or maturity, and often media choices are used as markers of relative maturity ('have you got your own television set yet, or seen a film classified for those older than you?'; Livingstone, 2002). Intriguingly, in relation to social networking, such identity development seemed to be expressed in terms of decisions regarding the style or choice of site. Nina, for example, moved from MySpace to

Facebook, describing this somewhat tentatively as the transition from elaborate layouts for younger teenagers to the clean profile favoured by older teenagers:

> With profiles, everything [on MySpace] was all about having coloured backgrounds … whereas I just suppose, like Facebook, I prefer to have, like older people, and it was more sophisticated, can I use that word? … I found when I was 14 I always wanted to be like someone that was older than me … When I first got MySpace, I thought it was a really cool thing because all older people had it, and they were all having their templates and things like that … but I'm sort of past that stage now, and I'm more into the plain things.

Ellie, 15, points to a similar distinction when comparing her Facebook profile with her 12-year-old sister's use of MySpace:

> The reason they [younger girls] like MySpace seems to be because you can decorate your page with flowers and hearts and have glitter on it, whereas on this [Facebook] it's sort of a white background with not so much, it's just a photo and a name, which is pretty much the same for everyone. [Talking of herself] I can't really see the point. This isn't to show off about my personality. I'm not trying to say, oh, I love purple or I love hearts … It's more just like talking to three friends and, seeing as my friends know me, there's no real need for me to advertise my personality … On MySpace, everyone's got these things like, I love this, I hate this, and trying to show off who they are, and I just don't think that's necessary if these actually are your friends.

Once sensitized to this stylistic shift, it became apparent to me that some teenagers preferred elaborately customized profiles while others favoured a plain aesthetic. Daphne, Danielle and Ryan enjoy changing the backgrounds and layouts of their profile every day, typically adopting a highly gender-stereotyped style of, for example, pink hearts and sparkly lettering for girls and black backgrounds with shiny expensive cars for boys. Yet Ryan, the oldest of the three, has a previous profile on Piczo that is more elaborate and busy than his current one on Bebo. The shift need not be affected by changing site: Nicki has remained on MySpace, since the critical mass of her friends use this site. As she observes:

> It's funny how on MySpace you kind of go through phases where everyone might have a really busy … background, and then everyone will have a kind of plain background.

The flexibility of social networking sites in affording revisions of one's identity is welcome. Leo says, of his MySpace profile:

> The one I made before I thought I didn't really like it, so I thought I'd start again, I'd start a new one … [the previous profile] it was just … people I didn't like had the address, so I thought I should start fresh.

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Note that, unlike Ryan, he changed his profile less not because the personal information it displayed no longer represented his identity, but because it was embedded in a network of peer connections away from which he felt he had moved.

What might this shift, whether managed by changing one's social networking site or just one's profile, signify for younger and older teenagers? Ziehe argues of lifestyles that these should be recognized as 'collective ways of life … [which] point to common orientations of taste and interpretations; they demonstrate a certain group-specific succinctness of usage of signs' (1994: 2). In terms evocative of the social practices of online networking, he argues that lifestyles are characterized by, first, self-attention, a subjective disposition which 'raises the question … of a successful life as an everyday expectation'; second, stylization, in which 'objects, situations and actions are placed into a coherent sign arrangement and "presented"'; and third, reflexivity, whereby

> life styles are an expression of an orientation pressure which has turned inwards. The new questions are 'what do I actually want?' and 'what matters to me?' [resulting in] an everyday semantic of self-observation and self-assessment. (1994: 11–12)

Thus Ziehe suggests a way in which the project of the self is represented according to highly coded cultural conventions (here including technological interfaces) and social preferences (here embedded in the norms of consumer culture).

With this in mind, Ellie, Nina and others seem to suggest that for younger teenagers, self-attention is enacted through constructing an elaborate, highly stylized statement of identity as display. Thus a visually ambitious, 'pick and mix' profile, which frequently remixes borrowed images and other content to express continually shifting tastes, offers for some a satisfactorily 'successful' self, liked and admired by peers. However, this notion of identity as display – which characterizes Daphne and Danielle's profiles and, to a lesser degree, those of several of the others – is replaced gradually by the mutual construction among peers of a notion of identity through connection. On this alternative approach, elements of display are excised from the profile, replaced by the visual privileging of one's contacts, primarily through links to others' profiles and by posting photos of the peer group socializing offline.

Equally stylized, albeit employing a different aesthetic, and still focused on the reflexive tasks of self-observation and self-assessment, this later phase brings to mind Giddens' (1991: 91) argument that the 'pure relationship' is replacing the traditional relationship long embedded in structures of family, work or community. As he puts it, 'the pure relationship is reflexively organised, in an open fashion, and on a continuous basis', prioritizing the

values of authenticity, reciprocity, recognition and intimacy. Reminiscent of the concerns reflected by teenagers when talking about social networking, continuous revision of the self is hinted at when Leo says, 'I'll always be adding new friends'. The implications for judging others are brought out not only by Ellie's emphasis (above) on people who are 'actually' friends and so know one already, but also by Ryan's observation about others that 'you look at their pictures, see if they are authentic or not, so if they ain't got any comments and they're just adding people, then I can't believe them'. Now, we may see that Danny's omission of personal information on his profile is less a curious neglect of self than the prioritization of a self embedded in social connections – for it is not that Danny cannot be bothered to network: he sustains links with 299 friends and checks every day to see 'if I've got any, like, messages, new friend requests or anything like that, like, new comments'.

In terms of affordances, then, social networking sites frame but do not determine. It remains open to young people to select a more or less complex representation of themselves linked to a more or less wide network of others. These choices pose advantages and disadvantages. Elaborating the presentation of self at the node supports the biographization of the self by prioritizing a managed and stylized display of identity as lifestyle. However, this risks invasion of privacy, since the backstage self is on view (Goffman, 1959), potentially occasioning critical or abusive responses from others. Something of the associated anxiety is evident in Ryan's comment about his profile that 'hopefully people will like it – if they don't, then screw them'. The interlinking of opportunities and risks is also apparent when Danielle discusses how her friend used Piczo to express her unhappiness when her parents separated, 'because other people can advise you what to do or say, "Don't worry, you can go through it"'; yet Danielle is one of the few participants who talked about the risk of hostile comments, noting that 'sometimes the comments are cruel and they're [her friends] all crying and upset'.

Alternatively, identity may be elaborated in terms of the network, the node being relatively unembellished but resonant with meaning through its connections with selected others. As Marwick notes, social networking sites enable people 'to codify, map and view the relational ties between themselves and others' (2005: 3). Here, instead, the project of the self is more at risk in terms of one's standing in the network: do people visit your profile and leave comments, are you listed as anyone's top friend, etc. This concern may explain the routine yet highly absorbing activity of checking people's profiles and, in response, revising one's own, often occupying one or more hours each day. Thus Jenny says of MySpace:

> You look through other people's profiles and look through their pictures, different pictures of their mates and that … if someone gives me a comment I'll comment them back … you get, like, addicted to it.

Similarly, Billy leaves about 20 comments per day: 'I go from one [profile] to another, like with my friends, I say hi, how are you?' Nicki adds that, by sending a quick comment, 'it feels like I've kind of kept in touch'. This time-consuming process of sustaining 'constant connection' with peers (Clark, 2005) can seem banal to the observing adult (parent or researcher), frequently often bland in character, and far from the claimed drama of revealing disclosures and risky encounters. However, as with the acts of recognition constitutive of offline social relations, it seems that these are necessary to reaffirm one's place within the peer network.

Creating private spaces for intimacy among 'friends'

Creating identity and social relations online is not only time-intensive, and on occasion risky, but also it can be difficult to manage. In the interviews, the topic of privacy tended to point up ways in which the affordances of social networking sites limit teenagers' self-expression. Although there is much they express only offline, and although they generally set their profile to private (Lenhart and Madden, 2007), it is the case that teenagers may disclose personal information with up to several hundred people known only casually. This is in part because social networking sites typically display as standard precisely the personal information that previous generations often have regarded as private (notably age, politics, income, religion, sexual preference). Thus to the parent generation, it may seem curious for Ellie to observe:

> I don't have any too personal things on it, like, I'm very happy to say I'm Jewish or [have] conservative political views and I'm happy to say my birthday or I'm from London. There's nothing too detailed that will give anyone too big a picture of me.

Nonetheless, it would be mistaken to conclude that teenagers are unconcerned about their privacy. As Sophie says to those accusing her generation: 'I don't give stuff away that I'm not willing to share'. The question of what you show to others and what you keep private was often the liveliest part of the interviews, suggesting an intense interest in privacy. Teenagers described thoughtful decisions about what, how and to whom they reveal personal information, drawing their own boundaries about what information to post and what to keep off the site, making deliberate choices that match their mode of communication (and its particular affordances) to particular communicative content. This suggests a definition of privacy not tied to the disclosure of certain types of information, rather a definition centred on having control over who knows what about you (Livingstone, 2006). Stein and Sinha put this formally when they define privacy as 'the rights of individuals to enjoy autonomy, to be left alone, and to determine whether and how information about one's self is revealed to others' (2002: 414).

The advantage of this definition is that it resolves the apparent paradox that the 'MySpace Generation' is concerned about privacy yet readily discloses personal information (Barnes, 2006; Dwyer, 2007). The point is that teenagers must and do disclose personal information in order to sustain intimacy, but they wish to be in control of how they manage this disclosure. As Giddens (1991: 94) says, 'intimacy is the other face of privacy'. However, two problems undermine teenagers' control over such disclosure. The first is that their notion of 'friends' is subtle while that of the social networking sites is typically binary, affording only a simple classification of contacts (e.g. for MySpace, your friends versus all users; for Facebook, your network versus all networks). Being required to decide whether personal information should be disclosed to 'friends' or to 'anyone' fails to capture the varieties of privacy that teenagers wish to sustain. Indeed, being visible to strangers (managed through setting one's profile to 'public') is not so much a concern, notwithstanding media panics about 'stranger danger' as that of being visible to known but inappropriate others – especially parents. As Jason explains:

> You don't mind [other] people reading it, but it's your parents, you don't really want your parents seeing it, because I don't really like my parents sort of looking through my room and stuff, because that's, like, my private space.

He wishes his private space online, his profile, to be public to his friends but private to his parents. Thus Simon says, 'People that know us, it is probably going to be on, like, public for them'. In short, the language of the privacy settings is confusing in itself. However, when Nina complains about Facebook that 'they should do something about making it more like private, because you can't really set your profile to private', something more subtle is being said. Nina is not confused about the settings, for in the language of social networking sites her profile is 'set to private'. Rather, she is frustrated that her site does not allow her to discriminate between who knows what about her within her 300 or so 'friends'. Indeed, unsurprisingly, teenagers classify their friends in a range of ways. When asked about her 554 friends on Facebook, Ellie describes friends from school, friends from a holiday in Manchester, friends from the London network and so on. Although some reject this trend towards an ever-expanding social circle (Jason, for example, has only 39 friends because those are, he says, his real friends, and having hundreds of friends is 'pointless'), this does not mean that those with many friends make no distinction among them. Nina's classification is graded in terms of intimacy:

> Well, I have my best friends, and then I have friends that I'm good friends with, and then I have friends that I see every so often, and they're normally out of school friends … And then I have just people that I don't really talk to, but I know who they are, and maybe it's 'Hi' and 'Bye' in the corridor at school sort of friends.

It is unclear to these teenagers how they can reflect such gradations of intimacy in managing who knows what about them, the privacy settings provided seeming inadequate to the task. Fahey argues that:

> Instead of speaking of a single public/private boundary, it may be more accurate to speak of a more complex re-structuring in a series of zones of privacy, not all of which fit easily with our standard images of what the public/private boundary is. (1995: 688)

Since these 'zones of privacy' are now managed partly online, at issue is the (mis)match between technological affordances and teenage conceptions of friendship. Of course, teenagers are not seeking primarily to maintain their privacy from strangers (or else they could simply turn off the computer). Rather, they are seeking to share their private experiences, to create spaces of intimacy, to be themselves in and through their connection with their friends.

Teenagers face another problem in managing their privacy online, which concerns the relation between their internet literacy and the interface design of social networking sites and settings. When asked, a fair proportion of those interviewed hesitated to show how to change their privacy settings, often clicking on the wrong options before managing this task, and showing some nervousness about the unintended consequences of changing settings (both the risk of 'stranger danger' and parental approbation were referred to here, although they also told stories of viruses, crashed computers, unwanted advertising and unpleasant chain messages). For example, having set his profile to private, Billy tells me it that cannot be changed to public. Leo wanted his profile to be public, since it advertises his band, yet still says uncertainly: 'I might have ticked the box, but I'm not 100 percent sure if I did'. Or again, Ellie signed up for the London network instead of that for her school when she first joined Facebook and now cannot change this, saying: 'I probably can, but I'm not quite, I'm not so great that, I haven't learned all the tricks to it yet'. The result is that she sees the private information for thousands of Londoners but not that of her schoolmates. Unsurprisingly, then, when asked whether they would like to change anything about social networking, the operation of privacy settings and provision of private messaging on the sites are teenagers' top priorities, along with elimination of spam and chain messages – both intrusions of their privacy.

These difficulties in managing privacy via privacy settings reflect broader internet literacy issues. For example, the top bar of a MySpace profile lists 'blog', 'groups', 'forum', 'events', 'music', 'film', and more. While it was observed that most of the teenagers include music on their profile, when asked about blogs, groups or forums, often the question was met with blank looks. Even 16-year-old Danny, whose father works in computers and who says confidently, 'I know a lot about computers', was confused when asked

about the group facility, saying: 'I don't know if I've got a group … I didn't even know there was [sic] groups'. Ellie has joined 163 groups – including the appreciation society for her local bus, one for a favourite programme, another for a charity that she supports, etc. However, she had hardly noticed and certainly does not use the blog, noting that 'I don't think any of my friends have either'. The limits of teenagers' supposedly exploratory and creative approach to social networking are, it seems, easily reached. Pragmatically, such difficulties are 'resolved' often by simply ignoring sites' affordances (irrespective of whether these are well or poorly designed), including not using the detailed privacy options provided by some sites.

Nonetheless, as Ellie implies, this partial neglect of social networking site affordances reflects the shaping role of social expectations in the peer group. Designing a profile is not solely a matter of individual choice. It is geared towards others through the choice of site (one must select that already used by one's friends), mode of address (most say that they put on their profile the content that they consider their friends would enjoy) and, practically, by the moment of setting up a profile (commonly achieved with the help of a friend who already uses the site). Literacy matters here also, for several of those observed felt limited by the particular way that the profile was set up initially by their friend, not always feeling able to alter this. A case in point is the misleading information about age often posted on their profiles, following the peer group belief (not necessarily accurate) that they were too young to be allowed on the site: Billy is typical in describing himself as 16 rather than 14 because the friend who set up his profile thought 16 to be the minimum age permitted; several have an official age (misleading) but also put their real age elsewhere on their profile; and some use joke ages (Ryan, for example, says he is 98). Correcting misleading information later is not something they can do, as several teenagers stated.

CONCLUSION

In late modernity, 'self-actualisation is understood in terms of a balance between opportunity and risk' (Giddens, 1991: 78). Both the opportunities and risks arise because self-actualization is a social process. Selves are constituted through interaction with others and, for today's teenagers, self-actualization increasingly includes a careful negotiation between the opportunities (for identity, intimacy, sociability) and risks (regarding privacy, misunderstanding, abuse) afforded by internet-mediated communication. Among this admittedly small sample of teenagers, younger teenagers were found to relish the opportunities to play and display, continuously recreating a highly-decorated, stylistically-elaborate identity. Having experienced this 'phase', older teenagers tended to favour a plain aesthetic that foregrounds their links to others, expressing a notion of identity lived through authentic

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relationships with others. As has been previously suggested, this apparent shift in phases of identity development may have implications for teenagers' experience of online opportunities and risks.

Also influencing the balance between opportunities and risks online are the specific affordances of social networking sites, especially their conception of 'friends' and the provision of privacy settings, as has been examined here. Teenagers were found to work with a subtle classification of 'friends', graded in terms of intimacy, which is poorly matched by the notion of 'public' and 'private' designed into social networking sites. While it is teenagers' desire for subtle gradation in levels of intimacy (rather than a desire for publicity or exhibitionism) that guides teenagers' approach to privacy online, it is suggested that in this regard they struggle in terms of internet literacy, impeded in turn by the affordances of the social networking sites.

For those focused on identity as display, online risks may arise from their willing, sometimes naïve, self-display of personal information to a wide circle of contacts, not all of whom are close friends or sometimes even remembered. For those focused on identity as connection, online risks may arise from their very confidence that they can know, judge and trust the people with whom they are intimate, as well as from the possibility of being neglected or excluded from the peer group. Also, risks may arise from the teenagers' limited internet literacy combined with confusing or poorly designed site settings, leaving them unclear regarding their control over who can see what about them. Each of these risks may affect adversely only a minority, but they render public policy measures (improved site design, internet literacy, parental guidance, etc.) appropriate.

Finally, it is worth noting that, rather than compromise their privacy too far, many of those interviewed chose to express their more personal experiences (as defined by them, not by adult society) using other modes of communication, online or offline. Danielle's unhappy friend, noted earlier, seems more the exception than the rule, and most of the teenagers interviewed were clear that they use social networking sites for only part, not all, of their social relations. For example, Ellie uses MSN for private conversations with her best friends and, like many others, for flirting. Nina, Daphne and most others talk to their best friends face-to-face or via MSN. If upset, Joshua turns to neither phone, internet nor even a friend, but rather listens to loud rock music in his room. As Sophie explains:

> When you're moody, MySpace isn't really the best thing to go on … you can't really get across emotions on there because you're writing. It's good for making arrangements and stuff, but it's not good if you want a proper chat.

In other words, although to exist online one must write oneself, and one's friendships and community, into being (boyd, 2006; Sundén, 2003), this does

not mean one must include every aspect of oneself. Deciding what not to say about oneself online is, for many teenagers, an agentic act to protect their identity and their spaces of intimacy.

Acknowledgements

Note
1 I do not mean, here, to deny that such cases occur.

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