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I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience

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Abstract
Social media technologies collapse multiple audiences into single contexts, making it difficult for people to use the same techniques online that they do to handle multiplicity in face-to-face conversation. This article investigates how content producers navigate 'imagined audiences' on Twitter. We talked with participants who have different types of followings to understand their techniques, including targeting different audiences, concealing subjects, and maintaining authenticity. Some techniques of audience management resemble the practices of 'micro-celebrity' and personal branding, both strategic self-commodification. Our model of the networked audience assumes a many-to-many communication through which individuals conceptualize an imagined audience evoked through their tweets.

Key words
audience, context, identity, micro-celebrity, self-presentation, social media, Twitter

Introduction

We present ourselves differently based on who we are talking to and where the conversation takes place – social contexts like a job interview, trivia night at a bar, or dinner with a partner differ in their norms and expectations. The same goes for socializing online.

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Participants have a sense of audience in every mediated conversation, whether on instant messenger or through blog comments. This audience is often imagined and constructed by an individual in order to present themselves appropriately, based on technological affordances and immediate social context. Studies of identity presentation on profile-based sites, such as social network sites and personal ads, have demonstrated that profile owners are attentive to audience (e.g. boyd, 2006b; Ellison et al., 2006). The need for variable self-presentation is complicated by increasingly mainstream social media technologies that collapse multiple contexts and bring together commonly distinct audiences. This paper examines how people using the microblogging site Twitter imagine their audiences and what strategies they use to navigate networked audiences. Our findings shed light on how audience changes in networked environments.

Imagining the audience online

Every participant in a communicative act has an *imagined audience*. Audiences are not discrete; when we talk, we think we are speaking only to the people in front of us or on the other end of the telephone, but this is in many ways a fantasy. (Social norms against eavesdropping show how 'privacy' requires the participation of bystanders.) Technology complicates our metaphors of space and place, including the belief that audiences are separate from each other. We may understand that the Twitter or Facebook audience is potentially limitless, but we often act as if it were bounded. Our understanding of the social media audience is limited. While anyone can potentially read or view a digital artifact, we need a more specific conception of audience than 'anyone' to choose the language, cultural referents, style, and so on that comprise online identity presentation. In the absence of certain knowledge about audience, participants take cues from the social media environment to imagine the community (boyd, 2007: 131). This, the imagined audience, might be entirely different from the actual readers of a profile, blog post, or tweet.

Joshua Meyrowitz's germinal work *No Sense of Place* (1985) applied situationist theory to the changes brought about by electronic media like television and radio. Situationism maintains that people react to situations based on context rather than fixed psychological traits. Situations, and thus social order, are collectively produced by participants (Garfinkel, 1967). Meyrowitz theorized that electronic media eliminated walls between separate social situations, contributing to the rapid social change that characterized the United States in the 1960s. Similarly, self-presentation theory has been used to understand the further combination of audience by digital media. Self-conscious identity performances have been analyzed in internet spaces like social network sites (boyd, 2007; Livingstone, 2005), blogs (Hodkinson and Lincoln, 2008; Reed, 2005), dating sites (Ellison et al., 2006) and personal homepages (Papacharissi, 2002; Schau and Gilly, 2003).

Personal homepages, arguably the first multi-media online identity presentations, are highly managed and limited in collaborative scope; people tend to present themselves in fixed, singular, and self-conscious ways. Papacharissi describes the personal homepage as 'a carefully controlled performance through which self presentation is achieved under optimal conditions' (2002: 644). Schau and Gilly found that personal homepage creators thought of their work as constructed for the public; even if they focused on friends or family, creators 'acknowledge(d) the potential for the audience to be unlimited and undefined'

(2003: 391). Similarly, Robinson argues 'the very construction of the homepage presumes the expectation of the virtual "generalized other"' (2007: 104). She notes that personal homepages are more atomized and isolated than blogs and message boards, which presume ongoing communication with the audience. She writes, 'the "I" is constantly redefined as the "me" in response to this interactional commentary' (2007: 104).

The specifics of the imagined audience are more important in social media that involve greater interaction with readers than personal homepages. Professional writers' sense of 'audience awareness' factors greatly into their writing, in terms of goals, vocabulary, technique, and subject matter (Berkenkotter, 1981). Like many writers, bloggers write for a 'cognitively constructed' audience, an imagined group of readers who may not actually read the blog (boyd, 2006a). Actual readers are present only in digital ephemera like server logs or comments. The imagined audience exists only as it is written into the text, through stylistic and linguistic choices (Scheidt, 2006). Through the process of labeling connections as 'Friends', social network sites require participants to publicly articulate connections, thereby enabling them to write their audience into being (boyd, 2006b).

In goal-oriented spaces like dating sites, people are highly conscious of audience. Ellison et al. (2006) found that personal ads were constructed with a hyper-aware self-consciousness, as users knew that misspellings, cultural references, and even time stamps were likely to be scrutinized by potential suitors. Similarly, social network site users select 'markers of cool' based on an imagined audience of friends and peers. Liu's (2007) study of 'taste cultures' on social network site profiles found that participants listed favorite books, music, movies, and TV shows to construct elaborate taste performances, primarily to convey prestige, uniqueness, or aesthetic preference.

The microblogging site Twitter affords dynamic, interactive identity presentation to unknown audiences. Self-presentation on Twitter takes place through ongoing 'tweets' and conversations with others, rather than static profiles. It is primarily textual, not visual. The potential diversity of readership on Twitter ruptures the ability to vary self-presentation based on audience, and thus manage discrete impressions.

Twitter

Twitter is a microblogging site, originally developed for mobile phones, designed to let people post short, 140-character text updates or 'tweets' to a network of others. Twitter prompts users to answer the question 'What are you doing?', creating a constantly-updated timeline, or stream, of short messages that range from humor and musings on life to links and breaking news. Twitter has a directed friendship model: participants choose Twitter accounts to 'follow' in their stream, and they each have their own group of 'followers'. There is no technical requirement of reciprocity, and often, no social expectation of such. Tweets can be posted and read on the web, through SMS, or via third-party clients written for desktop computers, smartphones, and other devices. These different access methods allow for instant postings of photos, on-the-ground reports, and quick replies to other users. The site was launched in 2006, and broke into the mainstream in 2008–09, when accounts and media attention grew exponentially. In May 2009, The Nielsen Company reported that Twitter had approximately 18.2 million users,

a growth rate of 1448 percent from May 2008. Today, the most followed Twitter accounts represent public figures and celebrities, from US President Barack Obama to actor Ashton Kutcher and pop star Britney Spears.

Twitter and audience

As in much computer-mediated communication, a tweet's actual readers differ from its producer's imagined audience. Twitter allows individuals to send private messages to people they follow through direct messages (DMs), but the dominant communication practices are public. A convention known as the '@reply' (consisting of the @ sign and username) lets users target a conversation to or reference a particular user, but these tweets can be viewed by anyone through search.twitter.com, the public timeline, or the sender's Twitter page (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009 provide a detailed discussion of @replies).

On Twitter, there is a disconnect between followers and followed. For instance, musician John Mayer (johncmayer) is followed by 1,226,844 users, but follows only 47. While followers provide an indication of audience, this is imprecise. When an individual's account is public, anyone – with or without a Twitter account – can read their tweets through the site, RSS, or third-party software. The vast majority of Twitter accounts are public. Those who choose to protect their accounts can restrict their audience, but the lists of followers on both public and protected accounts indicate only a potential audience, since not everyone who follows a user reads all their tweets.

Tweets are also spread further when participants repost tweets through their accounts. This practice, commonly referred to as 'retweeting', can introduce content to new audiences (boyd et al., 2010). While the dominant norm is to use @username to cite the original author or attribute the person who spread the message, retweeted messages are often altered and may lose any reference to the original. Additionally, it is not uncommon for people to forward tweets via email or by copying and pasting them into new communication channels. Furthermore, various tools allow users to repost tweets to Facebook, MySpace, and blogs.

Given the various ways people can consume and spread tweets, it is virtually impossible for Twitter users to account for their potential audience, let alone actual readers. Yet, this inability to know the exact audience does not mean that tweets are seen by infinite numbers of people. As with blogs (Shirky, 2005), nearly all tweets are read by relatively few people – but most Twitterers don't know *which* few people. Without knowing the audience, participants imagine it.

How Twitter users imagine audiences

Methodology

To find out how Twitter users imagine their audience, we asked them directly. We posted questions to our own followers (many of whom retweeted our question to their followers) and sent @reply questions to a sample of users whose tweets appear in the public timeline, every person in the 300 most-followed accounts (249 total), and a subset of users with 1000–15,000 followers. While all the Twitter accounts we reference are public,

we anonymized all of our informants except the highly-followed users. Our questions included: 'Who do you imagine reading your tweets?' and 'Who do you tweet to?' Later, we asked: 'What makes an individual seem "authentic" on Twitter? (Or what does it mean to be authentic?)' and 'What won't you tweet about? What subjects are inappropriate for Twitter?' Our goal in approaching different types of users was not to get a representative sample of Twitter users but to elicit potentially diverse perspectives.

Given the issues mentioned above, we are unable to assess how many people saw our tweets. We received 226 responses from 181 Twitter users through direct messages or @ replies to our queries. The responses we received revealed many different perspectives on audience. While we can neither quantify audience management techniques nor account for all potential perspectives, the responses we received provide valuable insight into some core differences in conceptualizing audience. Future empirical work might examine the prevalence of these strategies and their relationship to follower counts, demographics, or genres of content.

To whom am I speaking?

Our informants conceptualized their audience on Twitter in diverse and varied ways. Most responses we received focused on abstract categories of people (e.g. 'friends'), but a few indicated that their audience was articulated through the service itself. For example, an informant defined his audience as 'the overlap between my followers and my following'.

Respondents with relatively few followers typically spoke about friends, but some focused on themselves. Respondents with large followings commonly described their audience as 'fans'. Of course, some have multiple audiences in mind:

> I think I write to the people I follow and have twittered something recently. And I also tweet to myself. Is that wrong?

> I guess I'm tweeting to my friends, fans... and talking to myself.

Although some respondents emphasized that they speak to friends through Twitter, what they mean varies. Part of the difficulty is that 'friends' is an overloaded term in social media (boyd, 2008). One user described her friends as people she followed, while another talked about writing to her 'IRL friends' to signal people she knew outside of Twitter. Such users imagined their audience as people they already knew, conceptualizing Twitter as a *social* space where they could communicate with pre-existing friends. This follows the argument that Twitter's strength is in its encouragement of 'digital intimacy' (Thompson, 2008). Many tweets are phatic in nature (Miller, 2008) and serve a social function, reinforcing connections and maintaining social bonds (Crawford, 2009). One respondent wrote, 'I guess it's like a live diary to all my friends. I post what they might find interesting or know they will have an opinion on.'

When respondents referred to their audience as 'me', they also meant different things. Some thought of Twitter as a diary or record of their lives. Others saw the service as a space where they expressed opinions for themselves rather than others. Emphasizing 'me' may also be a self-conscious, public rejection of audience:

> Myself. It is MY Twitter account so, it's mostly about me.

> < Who do you tweet *to*?> No one & I love that. Or maybe myself five min. ago: I write the tweets I want to read.

> I don't tweet to anybody; I just do it to do it.

Although these individuals may not direct tweets to others, they are not tweeting into a void; they all have followers and follow others. Their emphasis on 'me' implies that for them, Twitter is personal space where other people's reactions do not matter. Similarly, a few people saw crafting tweets for a particular audience as problematic:

> As an individual (not org or corp) it's worth it 2 me 2 lose followers 2 maintain the wholeness/ integrity of who/ what/how I tweet.

> when I tweet, I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately. Pure expression of my heart.

What emerges here is not that these individuals lack an audience, but that they are uncomfortable labeling interlocutors and witnesses as an 'audience'. In bristling over the notion of audience, they are likely rejecting a popularly discussed act of 'personal branding' as running counter to what they value: *authenticity.* In other words, consciously speaking to an audience is perceived as inauthentic.

The strategic use of Twitter to maintain followers, or to create and market a 'personal brand', is part of a larger social phenomenon of using social media instrumentally for self-conscious commodification. In this process, strategically appealing to followers becomes a carefully calculated way to market oneself as a commodity in response to employment uncertainty (Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005). As Dan Schawbel, author of *Me 2.0: Build a Powerful Brand to Achieve Career Success*, writes on the blog Mashable:

> Today, Twitter has roughly 6 million users and is projected to grow to 18.1 million users by 2010. With all those people, the chances for networking are endless and connecting with new people can lead to career opportunities, so it is essential that your personal brand exists on the service … By leveraging the Twitter platform to build your brand you can showcase yourself to a huge and growing audience. (2009)

Using Twitter to carefully construct a 'meta-narrative and meta-image of self' (Hearn, 2008) is part of what Jodi Dean (2002) calls the 'ideology of publicity', in which we value whatever grabs the public's attention. Publicity culture prizes social skills that encourage performance (Sternberg, 1998); people are rewarded with jobs, dates, and attention for displaying themselves in an easily-consumed public way using tropes of consumer culture. In contrast, tweeting for oneself suggests a true-to-self authenticity, untainted by expectations. Of course, authenticity is a social construct (Grazian, 2003) and it is unlikely that anyone could tweet context-independently with no concern with audience, given our understanding of audience influence on self-presentation (Blumer, 1962; Goffman, 1959). We are interested not in an absolute sense of authenticity, but in what Twitter users consider 'authentic'.

Other respondents suggested that audience conceptions were tweet-dependent. From this perspective, Twitter is a medium, like telephony or email, that can be used for many different purposes:

> isn't tweeting (like all things) situational? Try replacing the word 'tweet' in that Q [with] 'email'.

> Q->A: depends on the topic& intensity of connection: a)RT for public b)@/DM for followers/ friends, c) "thinking aloud for myself";-)

This implies that users write different tweets to target different people (e.g. audiences). This approach acknowledges multiplicity, but rather than creating entirely separate, discrete audiences through the use of multiple identities or accounts, users address multiple audiences through a single account, conscious of potential overlap among their audiences. However, the difference between Twitter and email is that the latter is primarily a directed technology with people pushing content to persons listed in the 'To:' field, while tweets are made available for interested individuals to pull on demand. The typical email has an articulated audience, while the typical tweet does not. Email is also usually private, while Twitter is primarily public. Notably, people avoid broaching many topics on Twitter precisely for this reason.

Another approach some respondents took was to conceptualize their audience as an 'ideal' person:

> I imagine my audience as a fellow nerd, who gets a say in my amusement, confusion, or disappointment at whatever just happened.

> In super-deep novel-writing mode tho I doubt it looks like it, so can't talk, but basically I imagine a few "ideal readers".

> I think of a room filled with friends when I tweet. I assume people like me that are reading my tweets.

The 'ideal' reader is a well-known concept for writers, who often write 'to' an imaginary interested party. In the tweets above, the ideal reader is conceptualized as someone similar to the writer, who will presumably share their perspective and appreciate their work. Ethnographies of television production have similarly found that producers 'imagine others like and unlike themselves, (re)constructing their own identities in the process of constructing the imagined audience' (Peterson, 2003: 161). The *ideal* audience is often the mirror-image of the user.

Strategic audiences

In contrast to general notions of imagined audiences, Twitter users with numerous followers expressed specific, pragmatic understandings of audience. A few mentioned real-life friends, family and co-workers, but others with 100,000+ followers suggested that they imagined their audience as a fan base or community with whom they could connect or manage:

Adventuregirl: when I tweet I thnk of all my Sweet Tweets and sharing my life's advenutes w/them- and luv hearing there's 2!

Padmasree: I mostly think of the community (more than friends)

This approach can be understood through the lens of 'micro-celebrity'. Senft describes micro-celebrity as a communicative technique that 'involves people "amping up" their popularity over the Web using techniques like video, blogs, and social networking sites' (2008: 25). Micro-celebrity implies that all individuals have an audience that they can strategically maintain through ongoing communication and interaction. Twitter is used this way by many people – including marketers, technologists, and individuals seeking wide attention – to establish a presence online. Likewise, by embracing social media to engage directly with their audience, many traditional celebrities and public officials embrace the techniques of micro-celebrity.

Users with large numbers of followers reasonably conceptualized and navigated their audiences tactically. For example, Casey Wright (100,000 followers) answered that he assumed 'a broad audience with disparate tastes.' When asked if he tailored tweets to different parts of the audience, he answered, 'Not really. I don't think any tweet reaches everyone but they all appeal to someone. I try to mix it up.' The specificity of audience understanding was striking among some with large followings:

Nansen: I think of 1. political messaging 2. new friends 3. information 4. news

GuysReplies: My tweets are news broadcasts ala NYTimes or StumbleUpon with Alltop plugs.

Brooksbayne: all of the above, but i have different "silos" for convos here. hashtags help with all that.

[Authors]: What are your different silos?

Brooksbayne: politics, foodie, tech, social media, music biz, brands, and bacon!

Nansen, a conservative activist with 110,000 followers, has definite goals for Twitter: maintain consistent political messaging, create relationships with new friends, provide information, and spread news. Guy Kawasaki (154,000 followers) views his feed primarily as a news broadcast. Brooks Bayne (95,000 followers) recognized the diversity of his audience and used hashtags (keywords preceded by the # sign) to direct tweets to interested followers. These users were personally invested in maintaining high follower numbers and used several techniques to attract attention.

That is not to suggest there is an absolute divide in practice between the heavily followed and those who are not. Instead, knowledge of the audience functions more as a continuum. Several highly followed users did not mention trying to build and maintain audience or feigned unawareness:

TychoBrahe: Honestly, I have no idea who reads them. Hopefully a very small group of very forgiving people!

Others acknowledged their visibility but didn't see their actual audience as their intended audience. Jason Goldman, a Twitter employee, said 'I sometimes think about what my

girlfriend or coworkers or mom would think. I don't think about "audience" really … If I think about audience before tweeting (mostly not true) I think "would my friends dig this."' Movie blogger Harry Knowles said, 'I imagine that my friends are reading mostly, but with the knowledge there's a greater voyeuristic society tuned in.' Of course, just because highly followed users claim that they're not focused on audience does not mean they are not. They may also be aware of the value of being perceived as authentic.

We also talked to users with fewer followers who had strategic plans for their audiences. In choosing what to put forward, they often learn to present what is well received.

> like my stream 1/3 humors, 1/3 informative, 1/3 genial and unfiltered, transparency is so chic. try to tweet the same way.

> Who do I imagine when I tweet? I think, I imagine myself getting my opinion out to hundreds of ppl who might care:-)

> U know I don't know who reads them, but when I tweet sumthin contrvsial or interesting I find a get a cple more followers.

The strategies of micro-celebrity are not only used by people with large numbers of followers. Many users consciously use Twitter as a platform to obtain and maintain attention, by targeting tweets towards their perceived audience's interest and balancing different topic areas.

A variety of imagined audiences stems from the diverse ways Twitter is used: as a broadcast medium, marketing channel, diary, social platform, and news source. It is a heavily-appropriated technology, which participants contextualize differently and use with diverse networks. The networked audience is an abstract concept and varies among Twitter users, in part because it is so difficult to ascertain who is actually there.

Navigating multiple audiences

The need to navigate

Like many social network sites, Twitter flattens multiple audiences into one – a phenomenon known as 'context collapse'. The requirement to present a verifiable, singular identity makes it impossible to differ self-presentation strategies, creating tension as diverse groups of people flock to social network sites (boyd, 2008). Privacy settings alone do not address this; even with private accounts that only certain people can read, participants must contend with groups of people they do not normally bring together, such as acquaintances, friends, co-workers, and family. To navigate these tensions, social network site users adopt a variety of tactics, such as using multiple accounts, pseudonyms, and nicknames, and creating 'fakesters' to obscure their real identities (Marwick, 2005). The large audiences for sites like Facebook or MySpace may create a lowest-common denominator effect, as individuals only post things they believe their broadest group of acquaintances will find non-offensive. Similarly, Twitter users negotiate multiple, overlapping audiences by strategically concealing information, targeting tweets to different audiences and attempting to portray both an authentic self and an interesting personality.

But why do users need to navigate multiplicity? In his seminal text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Erving Goffman conceptualized identity as a continual performance. Goffman analyzed people's practices using a dramaturgical metaphor, suggesting that we can understand individuals as actors who tailor self-presentation based on context and audience. He proposed that in any given situation, people, like actors, navigate 'frontstage' and 'backstage' areas; a workplace's office space and meeting rooms might be frontstage, while more candid talk takes place backstage at after-work happy hour. Goffman's work is often grouped with symbolic interactionism, a sociological perspective which holds that meaning is constructed through language, interaction, and interpretation (Blumer, 1962; Strauss, 1993). Symbolic interactionism claims that identity and self are constituted through constant interactions with others – primarily, talk. In other words, self-presentation is *collaborative*. Individuals work together to uphold preferred self-images of themselves and their conversation partners, through strategies like maintaining (or 'saving') face, collectively encouraging social norms, or negotiating power differentials and disagreements.

Goffman maintained that this becomes a process of 'impression management', where individuals habitually monitor how people respond to them when presenting themselves. This process is self-conscious in situations of intense scrutiny, like first dates and job interviews, but is habitual even in relaxed social situations. Self-monitoring leads people to emphasize or de-emphasize certain things, responding to further feedback in a dynamic, recursive process (Leary and Kowalski, 1990: 43). Thus, self-presentation changes based on audience factors, such as friendship ties (Tice et al., 1995), status differentials (Leary and Kowalski, 1990: 38), and racial differences (Fleming and Rudman, 1993). Even in difficult circumstances, people are skilled at using gesture, language, and tone to manage impressions face-to-face (Banaji and Prentice, 1994).

Most of these studies draw from data and observations that involve people interacting face-to-face, where it is fairly easy to gauge the gender, race, status, etc. of the audience. Removing this ability creates tensions. Meyrowitz (1985) gives the example of Black Power advocate Stokely Carmichael, who typically used different styles when presenting to black and white audiences. Speaking on broadcast television, Carmichael could not appear 'authentic' to both audiences and had to choose between a black or white rhetorical style. He chose the former, engaging his black audience but alienating white viewers. In today's media-saturated landscape, politicians and celebrities use 'polysemy' or coded communication to simultaneously appeal to different, even oppositional audiences (Albertson, 2006; Fiske, 1989). Madonna's early image exemplifies polysemy. She was interpreted differently by young women, who responded to her feminist message, and young men, who responded to her sexy persona (Fiske, 1989). Similarly, George W. Bush sprinkled coded references to hymns, Bible verses, and Evangelical culture throughout his speeches to appeal to his base without alienating others (Albertson, 2006).

Social media thus combines elements of broadcast media and face-to-face communication. Like broadcast television, social media collapse diverse social contexts into one, making it difficult for people to engage in the complex negotiations needed to vary identity presentation, manage impressions, and save face. But unlike broadcast television, social media users are not professional image-makers, and rather than giving a speech on

television, they are often corresponding with friends and family. By necessity, Twitter users maintain impressions by balancing personal/public information, avoiding certain topics, and maintaining authenticity.

Balancing expectations of authenticity

The imagined audience affects how people tweet. People with few followers, who use the site for reasons other than self-promotion, generally see Twitter as a *personal* space where spam, advertising, and marketing are unwelcome. Following the paradigm of symbolic interactionism, identity on Twitter is constructed through conversations with others. Tweets are formulated based partially on a social context constructed from the tweets of people one follows. Participants must maintain equilibrium between a contextual social norm of personal authenticity that encourages information-sharing and phatic communication (the oft-cited 'what I had for breakfast' example) with the need to keep information private, or at least concealed from certain audiences. The tension between revealing and concealing usually errs on the side of concealing on Twitter, but even users who do not post anything scandalous must formulate tweets and choose discussion topics based on imagined audience judgment. This consciousness implies an ongoing front-stage identity performance that balances the desire to maintain positive impressions with the need to seem true or authentic to others.

This concept of 'authenticity' is a popular one. We refer to the 'real me' and authentic experiences, artifacts, and people. However, there is no such thing as universal authenticity; rather, the authentic is a localized, temporally situated social construct that varies widely based on community. Grazian's study of blues bars in Chicago defines authenticity as conforming to an idealized representation of reality. The authentic is always manufactured, and always constructed in 'contradistinction to something else' (2003: 13). In other words, for something to be deemed authentic, something else must be inauthentic. However, this dichotomy is false when we note that both the performance of authenticity and inauthenticity are equally constructed by discourse and context (Cheng, 2004). What we consider authentic constantly changes, and what symbols or signifiers mark a thing as authentic or inauthentic differ contextually.

The fact that we constantly vary self-presentation based on audience reveals authenticity as a construct: are we more or less authentic with our book club or gym partner? Whether we are viewed as authentic depends on the definition imposed by the person doing the judging. As in much social media, participants' understanding of authenticity on Twitter varies. For fashion bloggers, the ability to assemble an outfit that reflects a personal aesthetic and knowledge of larger trends marks one as authentically stylish and fashionable. For open-source geeks, on the other hand, ignorance of current trends marks authenticity, emphasizing instead mental acuity and knowledge of software and information law. Since authenticity is constituted by the audience, context collapse problematizes the individual's ability to shift between these selves and come off as authentic or fake. We observed Twitter users using two techniques to navigate these tensions: self-censorship and balance. People refrain altogether from discussing certain topics on Twitter, while others balance strategically targeted tweets with personal information.

Self-censorship

Some people we spoke with suggested that they simply would not broach certain topics on Twitter. Self-censorship can be a useful technique in the face of an imagined audience that includes parents, employers, and significant others. Some respondents assumed anyone could potentially read their tweets, making it impossible to discuss controversial or personal topics:

> anything i'd consider TMI (to spare my followers): family problems, relationship rants, etc. This ain't FB.

> bathroom activity, romantic relationships, complaining about an employer

> Won't Tweet anything too personal, TMI about self/others, dead horse areas from subjects like religion/politics/sports

Subjects mentioned included dating, sex, relationships, marital problems; Too Much Information (TMI) about bodily functions and the like; criticism of one's job; and controversial or negative topics that might alienate followers. Without the ability to vary information flow based on audience, participants could not risk a sensitive topic being viewed by the wrong person.

> Twitter can be viewed as a public space that should be carefully policed:

> i'm very conscious that twitter is public. i wouldn't tweet anything i didn't want my mother/ employer/professor to see

> I tweet about anything I would say in a lobby. Beyond that, each tweet is influenced by the tweets around that unique moment.

Interestingly, one user views Facebook as an appropriate place for 'family problems or relationship rants'. While many respondents self-censored sex and dating information, these topics are often discussed on blogs, Facebook, and LiveJournal. The information was not too sensitive to ever be revealed, but it could not be revealed *on Twitter,* which was seen by some as a 'professional' environment with potential professional costs:

> I think it all depends on what the intended purpose for your twitter account. Professionals should beware how they rep their cos i got threatened w/ lawsuit and loss of work bc of one of my tweets. quite careful now in what i tweet. or try to be!

Work concerns influenced what people tweeted about as well as what they self-censored. For instance, a freelancer said 'I always keep my clients in mind. I want to convey intelligence and professionalism, and diversity – I want to be seen as interested in a lot of things.' She could present herself appropriately against the social context of an imagined audience of other professionals.

Participants maintain a public-facing persona to manage impressions with potential readers. Context collapse creates an audience that is often imagined as its most sensitive members: parents, partners, and bosses. This 'nightmare reader' is the opposite of the ideal reader, and may limit personal discourse on Twitter, since the

lowest-common-denominator philosophy of sharing limits users to topics that are safe for all possible readers. While people do talk about controversial subjects on Twitter, our respondents show that some are more likely to avoid personal topics that imply true intimacy and connection between followers. Instead, they may frame Twitter as a place where the strictest standards apply.

Balance

For Twitter users trying to build audience, personal authenticity and audience expectations must be balanced. To appeal to broad audiences, some popular Twitter users maintained that they had to continually monitor and meet the expectations of their followers. However, given context collapse, their followers had different preferences for revealing personal information versus focusing on informative topics. Our respondents described an ongoing loop of impression management as they altered this mix based on audience feedback.

Soraya Darabi, the social media strategist for the *New York Times*, said, 'I'm constantly aware of my followers.' She uses tools like Twittersheep (http://www.twittersheep.com), developed by her company's research and development staff, to track what her 472,000 followers are interested in. Soraya knows her audience is interested in 'media and marketing', so she focuses on those topics. At the same time, she tries to interject her own personality and passions – like music – to retain an authentic voice. Soraya said:

> Say you're an author, a book aficionado. Most [of your followers] have tagged music as a passion. You might want to throw them a bone about your favorite song. There are a lot of Venn diagram overlaps in this community. It's to your advantage to be as much as part of a community as possible which means engaging with people's interests.

Brandon Mendelson, an activist with more than 700,000 users, defined his audience as 'my "tribe," people who are interested in leading change in their organizations or day-to-day life by using emerging technology and people interested in helping others through social networks'. Brandon primarily focuses on subjects that appeal to this tribe, but he agreed with Soraya that a mix of personal and professional is necessary for active engagement on Twitter:

> Occasionally I'll get a person not happy about how often I tweet, which is quite a bit, and if I tweet about something personal about my college plans. I always tell them I tweet about what I want to tweet and that social networks are a personal platform. By not sharing personal information I'm not building a strong relationship with my audience.

Other respondents' comments echoed this view:

> Authenticity Rule 1: Include personal w/ promotional. "Bags under my eyes from from staying up 'til 4 accepting friend requests. "

> to me, authenticity means being human; tweets include mix of ups, down, personal, professional. v.little robot or corporate speak

mix of work and social is interesting; agree it creates authenticity, but some find it annoying/ distracting

'Corporate-speak' or 'work' topics were seen as less authentic than personal, 'human' revelations. However, the intimacy of these revelations is limited. Note that both Soraya and Brandon's examples of personal topics are relatively innocuous. Their decisions to reveal personal information are strategic, and often framed as a way to reinforce relationships with followers. Soraya noted:

> I don't put romantic or deeply personal information on Twitter. I do say when I'm spending time with X who they are, but typically that person is in new media and it may look good for professional purposes to say I'm having lunch or dinner with X. It also serves as a call to action to the newsroom that person X is in town.

These exemplify highly self-conscious identity presentations that assume a primarily professional context. Revealing personal information is seen as a marker of authenticity, but is strategically managed and limited. Similarly, several respondents mentioned that concealing personal information was a way to avoid alienating followers, deliberately avoiding topics that their followers might not agree with:

> I try very hard not to Tweet hate speech, anything divisive, try to send messages that will bring people together

> politics and religion can be a little dangerous, 'cus you never know which of your followers you might offend.

Keeping balance is tricky; both Soraya and Brandon mentioned criticism from real-life friends. Soraya has a few close friends whom she asks to critique her Twitter stream to ensure she is striking a good balance: 'I run blind checks – do I look too much like a marketer? Am I tweeting too personally?' The mix of personal and informative tweets from users like Soraya and Brandon allowed them to maintain multiple audiences that included both personal friends and professional contacts. Rather than appealing simultaneously to multiple audiences, each mixed tweets with different target audiences to maintain their broad appeal. This technique resembles the polysemic and coded communicative strategies of image-management experts.

Micro-celebrity, conceptualized as a learned practice supported by the infrastructure of social media, can create tension. Twitter's directed friendship model replaces 'friends' with 'followers' and prominently displays the number of followers on each person's Twitter page, creating a quantifiable metric for social status. The ability to strategically appeal to broad audiences and retain the attention of others is publicly valued through third-party services that rank people according to their number of followers. Micro-celebrity practices like interacting directly with followers, appealing to multiple audiences, creating an affable brand and sharing personal information are rewarded, and consequently encouraged, in Twitter culture. The ability to attract and command attention becomes a status symbol.

At the same time, micro-celebrity practice can be seen as *inauthentic*. When asked to describe 'authenticity' on Twitter, respondents placed it in direct opposition to strategic self-promotion:

> When I present the concept of authenticity I usually mean no marketing speak, don't pretend you know everything. Be yourself.

> High honesty about what you're here for. Don't pretend to be my friend if you're here for promotion. (Promo is fine. Lying isn't.)

> Once I feel they've crossed the threshold of caring more about status/followcount or trendy topics than their followers.

This view of micro-celebrity practice assumes an intrinsic conflict between self-promotion and the ability to connect with others on a deeply personal or intimate level. Some view strategic audience management as dishonest 'corporate-speak' or even 'phony, shameless promotion'. The encroachment of presumably profit- or status-driven 'public' techniques into 'private' social spaces is met with stiff resistance from people used to interactional norms that do not involve the commodification of social ties. We might ask if 'public' space is becoming synonymous with 'commercial', and if alternative models of publicity and attention can thrive within the networked audience environment.

From the broadcast to the network

Twitter is an example of a technology with a *networked audience*. Media audiences are always imaginary, whether they exist in the writer's mind or as the target demographics for a sitcom. But while Fiske (1989) argues that the broadcast audience is a fiction meant to serve the needs of media institutions, the writer's audience services the *writer*. These two models of audience help contextualize the networked audience and its impact on online social behavior.

The writer's audience

Writers have long grappled with conceptions of audience because writers, unlike speakers, are separated from their audiences. In his essay 'The writer's audience is always a fiction', Walter Ong (1975) argued that writers imagine an audience appropriate to their topic and form, and use textual cues to write that audience into being. Writers write for and to this fictionalized audience, adapting to their imagined expectations. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford (1984) distinguished further between the *audience addressed* – the actual readers of a piece of writing – and *audience invoked*, the audience constructed by the writer. Published writers are often told to tailor books to particular demographics; these 'future readers' are a fiction about the audience addressed.

The imagined audience of social media strongly resembles Ong's fictionalized audience. While Facebook or Twitter users don't know exactly who comprises their *audience addressed*, they have a mental picture of who they're writing or speaking to – the *audience invoked*. Much like writers, social media participants imagine an audience and tailor their online writing to match.

The broadcast audience

Today, when we think about 'audience', we imagine people watching movies in a theater, or at home watching television. This model of the audience has historically been viewed

pejoratively in media studies – as an unidentifiable mass who passively consume (Livingstone, 2005: 24). It is also intrinsically *institutional*; broadcasters assume an audience that is anonymous, static, and geographically bounded (Drotner, 2005). One-to-many communication implies a single broadcaster distributing content through a complex entertainment structure that reaches audiences who cannot respond back.

The broadcast model has been complicated through studies of active audiences and through the fragmentation and dispersal of mass audience. Active audience theory maintains that the meaning of a media text is negotiated by the audience; rather than consuming blindly, audiences use interpretive lenses and bring individual experiences to bear when making meaning from media (e.g. Fiske, 1989; Radway, 1984). With the advent of cable television in the 1970s, the VCR in the 1980s, the DVD player in the 1990s and the ubiquity of home broadband and video games, audiences have splintered. The top-rated shows on television are viewed by a fraction of the audience that watched 1960s network television; niche networks and targeted media have proliferated (Turner, 2009).

As a result, the idea of the 'audience' as a stable entity that congregates around a media object has been displaced with the 'interpretive community', 'fandom', and 'participatory culture', concepts that assume small, active, and highly engaged groups of people who don't just consume content but produce their own as well (Baym, 1999; Jenkins, 2005). In decentralized communication networks like mobile phones and email, 'audience' describes how a communicative medium mediates a relationship between content producers and receivers (Drotner, 2005: 196), requiring a more interpersonal and flexible model. New media has changed the broadcast model of the audience, decentralizing media production and distribution (Benkler, 2006). The network changes it further.

The networked audience

The networked audience combines elements of the writer's audience and the broadcast audience. It consists of real and potential viewers for digital content that exist within a larger social graph. These viewers are connected not only to the user, but to each other, creating an active, communicative network; connections between individuals differ in strength and meaning (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Boase et al., 2006). Just as the broadcast audience flattened separated demographic groups into a mass audience, the networked audience combines a person's social connections, revealing the fiction of discrete face-to-face audiences. While the broadcast audience is a faceless mass, the networked audience is unidentified but contains familiar faces; it is both potentially public and personal. Like the broadcast audience, the networked audience includes random, unknown individuals, but, unlike the broadcast audience, it has a presumption of personal authenticity and connection. Social media participants are far more concerned with parents or employers viewing their Twitter stream than a complete stranger.

In contrast to the imagined broadcast audience, which consumes institutionally-created content with limited possibilities for feedback, the networked audience has a clear way to communicate with the speaker through the network. This opportunity for communication influences how speakers respond and what content they create in the future. Audience members take turns creating and producing content, and in this 'many-to-many' model the network constantly centers on who is talking, responding, or replying. Social

media environments become a place where person-to-person conversations take place around user-generated content amidst potentially large audiences.

The networked audience contains many different social relationships to be navigated, so users acknowledge concurrent multiple audiences. Just as writers fictionalize the audience within the text in their *audience addressed*, Twitter users speak directly to their imagined audience. For instance, some ask their followers questions that assume a particular collective knowledge. They target tweets to specific audience members, and conceal or reveal information based on who they imagine to be listening. Some construct a sophisticated model of who may be reading their tweets based on linguistic, cultural, and identity markers in their Twitter stream. Managing the networked audience requires monitoring and responding to feedback, watching what others are doing on the network, and interpreting followers' interests. The network is therefore a collaborator in the identity and content presented by the speaker, and the imagined audience becomes visible when it influences the information Twitter users choose to broadcast.

Networked media brings the changes Meyrowitz described to interpersonal interactions. In sites like Twitter and Facebook, social contexts we used to imagine as separate co-exist as parts of the network. Individuals learn how to manage tensions between public and private, insider and outsider, and frontstage and backstage performances. They learn how practices of micro-celebrity can be used to maintain audience interest. But Twitter makes some intrinsic conflicts visible. On the one hand, Twitter is seen as an authentic space for personal interaction. On the other, social norms against 'oversharing' and privacy concerns mean that information deemed too personal may be removed from potential interactions. Similarly, the desire to have 'fans' or a 'personal brand' conflicts with the desire for pure self-expression and intimate connections with others. In combining public-facing and interpersonal interaction, the networked audience creates new opportunities for connection, as well as new tensions and conflicts.

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