

The Visibility of the Self on the Web: A Struggle for Recognition

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ABSTRACT

The present paper develops a theoretical sociological analysis that approaches the Web as an entity situated within the logics of the contemporary societies. Among the traits of the today's Western civilizations, the visibility of the self and the struggle for recognition inherent to the current stage of capitalism are regarded as important analytical tools in order to understand emerging uses of the Web.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4 [Social and Behavioral Sciences]: Sociology, Psychology

General Terms

Human Factors.

Keywords

Sociology, Recognition.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present work constitutes a theoretical sociological analysis that approaches the Web as an entity situated within economical, political and cultural developments of the contemporary capitalist societies. As such, the study goes beyond the understanding of the Web as a purely technological resource, approaching the analysis on how aspects of the contemporary condition become simultaneously reproduced and fostered over the Web.

This analysis focuses on social networking websites and non-anonymous blogs in which processes associated with the visibility of the individuals' selves marked, sometimes, by spectacularization, blossoms in profusion.

In order to develop these reflections, this work examines the historical developments of the capitalist society, leading to a condition in which the self becomes increasingly structured by simulation and performance, and life becomes characterized by a fuzzy distinction between fiction and reality (Honneth, 2004; Hedges, 2009). Drawing upon the works of Baudrillard (1981/1994) and Debord (1961/1983), among other authors, this analysis approaches how, in a society fully pervaded by mass media and publicity, the worth of individuals historically moves from how much money or goods one has to how the individual is seen by others.

Within this logic, labelled by Debord as "the society of spectacle", social recognition is largely acquired through visibility and self-spectacularization. From that formula, personal life becomes a capital to be shared with other people - preferably, with a large audience - feeding the contemporary blurry of the boundaries between the public and the private (Le Goff, 2003).

2. CELEBRITY CULTURE AND SELF-EXPOSURE

The incorporation of the self into the codes of performance and visibility has been played out within contemporary popular culture through what has been called "the celebrity culture" (see Hedges, 2009).

No longer merely admired by their talents, as idols once were, celebrities provide resources for personal identification, promoting a profusion of values and parameters that tends to pervade subjective experiences. Therefore, if until recently celebrities were conceived as idols that, although providing identification models, maintained its unreachable status, today, the word 'celebrity' becomes more nuanced, designating a much more extended and penetrating social meaning. As Hedges (2009) claims, "the celebrity culture" encourages everyone to think of themselves as potential celebrities, as possessing unique and sometimes unacknowledged gifts.

In this sense, although most individuals do not attempt to become a celebrity, many of them often end up organizing life according to the underlying codes of the celebrities' culture. These codes, notably, are intrinsically bonded to individualist illusions that individuals can become whatever they want (Ehrenberg, 2000), as well as with the contemporary urge for making the self visible.

This, writes Gabler (1998 in Hedges, 2009), "is the power and invasiveness of celebrity culture. Celebrity culture has taught us to generate, almost unconsciously, interior personal screenplays in the mold of Hollywood, television, and even commercials. We have learned ways of speaking and thinking that disfigure the way we relate to the world. This is the quality that validates us, this is how we become real to ourselves - by being seen by others".

3. THE WEB AS A RECOGNITION MARKET

When personal exposure becomes a valuable strategy for acquiring social appreciation, we claim, individuals seek to organize their own selves by using the Web's connectivity potential to trade social worth. Thereby, our first argument is that the contemporary demand for the visibility of the self finds, on the Web, a scenario to develop and expand. In tune with some of the findings which contend that the Web affects behavior (Anderson & Tracy 2001, Boase & Wellman 2006), this study sustains that the content creation tools made available by the Web 2.0 brings new resources for this aim. In concrete terms, the set of tools, from which people become able to craft, narrate and expose their selves to a broad audience, potentializes forms of making people's identities visible, often associated with strategies of spectacularization.

Ranging from a simple status message where one can publicize accomplishments or exhibit selected pictures, to thoroughly elaborated profiles on social networking websites and non-anonymous blogs (Zhao, 2008), the visibility of one's privacy becomes no longer a privilege or a burden of a celebrity persecuted by intrusive paparazzi but a socially constructed reality. The exposure of what one is doing, feeling and where one is at each moment, popularized through emerging uses of the Web 2.0 finally puts the power for personal exposure into the individual's hands.

The second main argument of this study is that under a sociological perspective, the Web can function as "a recognition market" in the sense that the above mentioned visibility of the self is directed towards a quest for recognition. The Web – especially after the Web 2.0 - provides the means for individuals to make public "identity statements" (Walker, 2000) that they normally would not do offline. Besides, the scope of self-presentation is enlarged to a variety of interconnected audiences (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

The motivations underlying these often crafted self-presentations are not merely narcissistic (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010) but, as claimed here, it represents a movement towards others, or even towards the individual's broader social existence. When crafting a self-presentation, the individual expects and actively struggles for recognition.

Building upon Axel Honneth's accounts on recognition, this work examines how the Web and its potential for providing visibility may be taken as a fruitful domain for enabling recognition. According to Honneth (1995), the experience of recognition is central for the personal identity's development and self-realization and, on a different level, as a means for social integration. When it is absent or withheld, struggles directed towards the preservation of one's social value and importance may arise (Petersen & Willig, 2004).

Honneth (1995) also remarks that the contemporary evolution of capitalism erodes some of the criteria for achieving social appreciation. Thus, we claim, in a context where recognition lacks, individuals struggle for recognition in every existing source of this complex scenario (Petersen & Willig, 2004). If "being seen by others" is a significant social currency for trading personal worth, visibility channels such as the Web gain social importance.

In addition, according to the individualist perspective inherent to the current historical stage of capitalist societies, individuals must bear, all by themselves, the total responsibility for their personal accomplishments and failures (Bauman, 2001). Thus, recognition becomes an experience that one should conquer by proper efforts. The accessibility provided by Web 2.0 tools matches this perspective since the possibility of achieving recognition through the Web is, to a high degree, put into the individual's ability to organize, through self-instrumentalization, his own attractive and valued self.

4. CONCLUSION

Through a theoretical analysis, the present work concludes that the Web has been presenting traits of a *recognition market* in which contemporary individuals, reproducing fundamental tenets of the broader capitalist culture, trade personal worth through displays and exchanges of – sometimes spectacular - self-presentations.

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