Exploring digital remediation in support of personal reflection

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly our digital traces are providing new opportunities for self-reflection. In particular, social media (SM) data can be used to support self-reflection, but to what extent is this affected by the form in which SM data is presented? Here, we present three studies where we work with individuals to transform or *remediate* their SM data into a physical book, a photographic triptych and a film. We describe the editorial decisions that take place as part of the remediation process and show how the transformations allow users to reflect on their digital identity in new ways. We discuss our findings in terms of the application of Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theories to the SM context, showing that a fluid rather than bounded interpretation of our social media spaces may be appropriate. We argue that remediation can contribute to the understanding of digital self and consider the design implications for new SM systems designed to support self-reflection.

1. Introduction

New forms of social media (SM), provide the means to generate and share multiple digital identities, but the resulting identity landscape is complex and the data underpinning digital personhood are fragmented, offering little in the sense of a coherent individual life story or presence. New SM can embrace both individual expressions of self as well as other reflections of self that can be difficult to control, often leading to a form of 'context collapse' where private aspects of the digital self may leak out to an inappropriate audience (e.g. Marwick and boyd, 2011a). Increasingly, researchers are recognising that the management of digital identity can present a burden and new solutions are being explored that support people in understanding and shaping their digital selves (e.g. Bae et al., 2014; Gulotta et al., 2017).

Many of us have a digital identity but fail to fully understand how it is represented and interpreted in the digital realm (Belk, 2013). This paper reports on three converging studies that *repurpose* data drawn down from SM platforms, asking whether such transformations can be used to enhance understanding of the digital self. Following Couldry (2008) and De Ridder (2015), we ask what different digital storytelling media offer individuals, SM researchers and designers in terms of the construction, evolution and consumption of the digital self and the processes involved in digital self-management. We discuss the context and process of digital self-formation before considering the spaces where the digital self resides and describing what happens when SM is transformed into new, often tangible and primarily visual forms. We then present the find-

ings from three studies where we work with individuals to transform or remediate their SM into different types of visual storytelling media (a physical book, three photographs presented as a triptych, and a film). We find that this remediation of personal digital data allows users to reflect on their digital identity in new ways. We note that current assumptions about the bounded nature of SM sites are overly simplistic and that there is a need to develop more sophisticated SM use and management practices. We offer a curation framework which can be used guide the design of systems that promote self-reflection and self-presentation and that would support improved digital literacy.

2. Related work

2.1. The digital self

For the individual user, a prime purpose of SM is "*to consume and distribute personal content about the self*" (Ellison et al., 2011:19). Digital selfhood is performed by posting episodic narratives and curating data (i.e. liking, sharing and re-posting) within an infrastructure that reproduces a world 'out there' (Pridmore and Lyon, 2011). Digital selfhood emerges as a response to such online exchanges and is sustained within partitioned digital environments (Vicdan and Ulusoy, 2012). Many SM researchers apply Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach (e.g. Kim and Ahn, 2013), arguing that digital self-presentation is analogous to a theatrical performance, directed at a particular audience.

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Goffman (1959) argued that people have a 'front stage' whereby they can present an idealised self to others but he supposed that such interactions took place between known individuals and were bounded within a specific context. A challenge in the digital age is that the digital self is dispersed across a range of contexts (platforms) and aspects of our digital selves (in the form of posts or other shared digital content) will reach both intended and unintended audiences. Depictions of the digital self as '*compartmentalised*' (Cupchik, 2011: 325) may not appropriately recognise this digital dispersal. Further, the desire to compartmentalise oneself in SM, by presenting different selves on different platforms, may often fail when 'context collapse' occurs across platforms (Marwick and boyd, 2011a) or over time, when users new to a platform are allowed inadvertent access to posts that leak from another's past (Kerrigan and Hart, 2016).

Whilst theory is rich in this space there is limited empirical insight into how people can better understand and 'manage' their multiple selves. Researchers have examined self-presentation through personal websites (Papacharissi, 2002; Schau and Gilly, 2003) with a more recent focus on SM (Livingstone, 2008; Marwick and boyd, 2011b, 2014; Sauter, 2014) but few capture the different ways that self-reflection is supported by the specific forms of SM. Yet it is clear that people use a range of digital narrative devices to tell their own 'story' (Couldry, 2008) and it is also clear that different SM systems favour particular storytelling approaches. Here, we wish to understand more about how these digital forms can shape users' personal stories (De Ridder, 2015) and what new self-learning is gained from new presentation formats.

2.2. Spaces for the digital self

Schau and Gilly (2003) demonstrate that people actively use signs, symbols, objects, and places in their personal Web spaces, to differentiate between selves (e.g. family oriented, intellectual, career driven, attractive, out going, etc.) whilst attempting to convey an idealised self. Personal photographs take an important role here, becoming a vehicle for the performance of self both in the home (Taylor et al., 2007) and when shared in SM (Van House, 2009). Digital storytelling as a methodology allows researchers to capture these multiple selves within a single story, allowing new insight into issues such as longitudinal adjustment to social norms; self censorship; the construction of the self as content; and the unexpectedness and uncontrollability of SM interaction. This unexpectedness distinguishes the digital self from Goffman's (1959) more controlled notions of self management.

SM platforms allow multifunctional communication at scale, through text, photographs, instant messenger, direct messages and videos (boyd and Ellison, 2008). Facebook, as the largest SM platform, offers three different functions for its users: (1) a performance region for managing and sharing recent data; (2) an exhibition region for longer term presentation of self image; and (3) a personal region to archive meaningful facets of life (Zhao et al., 2013). Those authors argue that individuals are likely to be more adept at the first function, managing their content as a performance focused on presenting themselves 'as they are now' on SM, implying that they would 'edit out' content that might conflict with the current, curated version of the digital self.

Hogan (2010) also perceives SM spaces as a mix of situational and curatorial self-presentation perspectives. Hogan distinguishes between *performance* spaces, where actors engage each other online, and *exhibition* spaces, where individuals submit and share artefacts. In describing SM as a form of personal museum, Hogan steers away from the notion of SM as predominantly an interaction space towards recognition of the increasing role of SM as life repositories or curated information stores that can take on a personal narrative of their own (Van House, 2009; Lindley et al., 2013; Odom et al., 2012a; Peesapati and Schwanda, 2010). Zhao and Lindley (2014), explored SM's *curated* elements, asking participants to create digital keepsakes by 'clipping' valued SM content to an online note taking tool. Despite being asked to save content from multiple SM accounts to construct their digital story, Zhao and Lind-

ley's (2014) participants drew heavily on Facebook, partly as it offered many more valued photographs than rival SM sites.

2.3. Social media and self-reflection

Self-reflection is a core human activity that occurs naturally and is often associated with the processes of life review and reminiscence (Butler, 1963). It is also expressly encouraged in some forms of professional practice (Korthagen and Vasalos, 2005). Increasingly, researchers are recognising that self-reflection is important for personal growth and that the processes of self-reflection can be supported by digital data (Kalnikaité and Whittaker, 2011). Within HCI, we see studies on self-reflection associated with two different domains of enquiry. Firstly, people now have the ability to quantify aspects of self (heart rate, sleep patterns, mobility data etc) via a raft of mobile applications that allow people to reflect upon their own lifestyle choices and consequences. A number of studies in 'personal informatics' or 'quantified self' have explored the ways in which such data can be used (Li et al., 2011). Secondly, the digital data associated with everyday SM can also be used for personal reflection. Sometimes this occurs naturally and is associated with the curation of personal SM data (Lindley et al., 2013) but more recently, we have seen the development of new services and applications that re-present personal data in order to encourage reflection. For example, Facebook's A Look Back[1] service was launched in 2014 to compile highlights of a user's profile in filmic form. Individual's Facebook content; photographs, events, liked posts, shared photographs and statuses are collated and transformed into a two minute video for the account holder to watch. Similarly, services like TimeHop[2] and On This Day[3] encourage reflection on past SM posts.

These services which involve remediation and allow for reflection, reveal the value in time-delayed electronic communication. Online application FutureMe[4] encourages content to be posted after a specified time, which has demonstrated instances of 'profound reminiscence' for users, as well as unsettling encounters with past content and personal challenges (Odom, 2015). One FutureMe user sent his parents a future message telling them that he was gay, creating a self-imposed deadline for the same conversation face-to-face. Another time-delayed media sharing system, 'Postulater', allows e-mail exchanges between friends and family for six weeks, requiring a specified time for the release of photos and videos (Hawkins et al., 2015). Postulater users felt vulnerable, as reactions to their future messages were unknown. Finally, systems like the 'Ripening Room' (Bae et al., 2014) that encourage a delay between writing and sharing posts can prove fruitful in countering experiences of regret (Wang et al., 2011) and bullying (Marwick and boyd, 2011c).

Also relevant in this space is the work on designing for remembering. In recognising the fallibility of memory, we can begin to see how systems designed to encourage a revisitation of personal data can be flawed. Information may not always be presented in the way it was captured, and is deemed less manageable than organising a physical collection of keepsakes (van den Hoven and Whittaker, 2012). An overreliance on digital material has been highlighted elsewhere (Van House and Churchill, 2008), resulting in shifts in how we conceptualise our memories and experience recollection.

Bolter and Grusin (1999: 5) point out "older electronic and print media seek to reaffirm their status within our culture as digital media challenge that status." As new forms of content gain popularity, there is still value in older methods. Work on 'material speculation' has explored how the digital sits alongside more traditional forms – e.g. creating an experience of viewing digital media using a traditional wooden chest to store photographs (Wakkary et al., 2015) thereby *repurposing* digital

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[1] https://www.facebook.com/lookback.
[2] http://timehop.com/.
[3] https://www.facebook.com/onthisday/.
[4] www.futureme.org.