

# The internet and the network society media essay



Throughout the past three decades, a plethora of major social, technological, economic, and cultural transformations (Castells, 2010: p. xvii) have combined resulting in the emergence of a new society – the ‘ network society’ (see Castells, 2001a, 2001b, 2008, 2009, 2010; Hardt and Negri, 2000; van Dijk, 2006). Despite some commentators suggesting that the etymology of the term ‘ network society’ is extremely vague (Cavanagh, 2007), it is important, at this point, to provide a definition before proceeding to the subsequent discussion of changes which have occurred within and as a consequence of the network society. Manuel Castells (2001a), arguably the most significant theorist in this field, provides – in my view – the most concrete definition describing the network society as “ a society where the key social structures are organised around electronically processed information networks (p. 4). In this sense, the infrastructure of the network society is determined by the relationship between social, technical and media networks (van Dijk, 2006). It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an all-embracing, comprehensive review of the network society and all of its components, therefore, the fundamental changes which have occurred vis-à-vis communication will form the focus of this section.

In the network society, face-to-face interaction remains the most prevalent and, arguably, the most important form of communication for various reasons. However, a number of technological devices have supplemented and, in part, replaced this form of communication (van Dijk, 2006). It is important to note that the rise in wireless devices, such as the mobile phone, have had a profound effect on the methods by which social beings interact. For example, in 2009, mobile phone use in the United Kingdom was almost

ubiquitous (81%) (Office for National Statistics, 2010). In regards to mobile phone use amongst children, it was reported that more than half (56%) of those aged 8 - 11 had used a mobile device in 2007, primarily for text messaging (61%). Meanwhile, for those aged 12 - 15, mobile phone use was near ubiquitous (90%) with a significant majority (87%) sending at least one text message per week (Office for National Statistics, 2008). Thus, with the rise of wireless networks have enabled people to apply the telephone for communicatory purposes in alternative ways; for example the ' mobile phone' allows and is increasingly used for text messaging, multimedia messaging, and Internet access. According to Castells (2010), we have witnessed an increasing " technological convergence between the Internet and wireless communication and multiple applications that distribute communicative capacity throughout the wireless networks, thus multiplying points of access to the Internet" (p. xxvi). A key example of such expansion is the recent proliferation of the iPhone which is estimated to surpass 100 million sales in 2011 (Chen, [www. wired. com](http://www.wired.com), 2010), and whose users define it as ' divine' (Campbell and La Pastina, 2010), the ' Jesus phone', and the ' holy grail of all gadgets' (Danneskjold, 2007; also see Campbell and La Pastina, 2010); as Apple proclaim when advertising the recently launched iPhone 4, " This changes everything. Again" (Apple, [www. apple. com](http://www.apple.com), 2010). However, the iPhone does not fundamentally change communicatory practices, but rather - much like the Internet - it supplements them offering itself as a tool which one can apply when seeking alternative routes of communication.

Thus, communication is supplemented rather than replaced by the rise in technological devices, in this sense, technological devices do not influence social change (Castells, 2010), but rather, create a pathway through which social change can occur. This ideology rests upon the premise that a reciprocal relationship exists between people and technology, after all, technology would cease to exist without the presence of people.

Let me now turn to the proliferation in Internet use which has occurred over the past decade, its profound influence on communication, and its position within the network society.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Internet use has grown exponentially by almost 444 per cent (Internet World Stats, [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com), 2010). As of this writing, approximately 29 per cent of the global population are currently connected to the Internet; furthermore, in the United Kingdom, a recent survey found that Internet use currently stands at 70 per cent, an increase from 58 per cent in 2003 (Dutton et al., 2009). As a result, the Internet's role in the mediation of everyday practices and activities is expanding, for example, various studies have reported that we are increasingly using the Internet for banking (Wood and Williams, 2007), shopping (Wood and Williams, 2007), listening to and purchasing music (Jooyoung Lee, 2008), dating or 'e-dating' (Couch and Liamputtong, 2008), and communication - particularly through 'blogging' (Stern, 2007; Ekdale et al., 2010) and social networking (Boyd, 2001, 2007, 2008; Boyd and Ellison, 2008; Houghton and Joinson, 2010; Patchin and Hinduja, 2008, 2010).

In regards to communication, the Internet amalgamates both data communication and mass communication (van Dijk, 2006). In particular, such integration has occurred since the emergence of the World Wide Web which has resulted in the mass communicative character of the Internet becoming increasingly visible, for example, one need only examine the explosion of web pages created by organisations (. org), corporations (. com and . co. uk), governing bodies (. gov), institutions, and the increasing field of user-created content (i. e. blogs, forums, bulletin-board systems (BBS), and non-profit sites such as Wikipedia. org or Wiki Leaks). Thus, under the paradigm of the network society one can posit that the Internet presents itself as an 'integrated network' (Castells, 2001a, 2001b, 2004, 2008, 2009, 2010; van Dijk, 2006). EXPLAIN INTEGRATED NETWORK HERE.

The Internet thus fundamentally changes the character of communication through the integration of " text, images, and sounds in the same system, interacting from multiple points, in chosen time (real or delayed) along a global network, in conditions of open and affordable access" (Castells, 2010: p. 356).

Despite its fairly recent proliferation, an expansive body of literature has emerged analysing the effects of increased Internet use - particularly concerning communication and sociability -, the following section will now engage in a critical overview of the salient arguments put forth.

Identity has been subject to widespread theoretical and empirical inquiry for over half a century, dating back to Erikson's (1950) path-breaking work (Schwartz et al., 2010). Erikson's work triggered a wave of academic inquiry

into identity development, most of which attempted to delineate personal identity (Côté, 2006). However, despite an expansive database of literature on the subject, 'identity' is still recognised as "an ambiguous and slippery term" (Buckingham, 2007: p. 1). Its ambiguity arises from its application in many different contexts and for many different purposes (ibid, 2007), as a result, divergent accounts of identity have emerged which lead to confusion over what identity actually constitutes. For the purposes of this essay, the conception of the 'self' will be examined and the ways in which the self is presented and the impression managed in social situations.

Primarily grounded in contemporary Western culture, cultural practices (Boyd, 2001), and Western ideology, a plethora of conceptions of the 'self' have emerged. The concept of identity frequently refers to, at least, two conflicting aspects of the self. First, there exists the internalised self, and second that which is the "projected version of one's internalised self (ibid, p. 21). This distinction has been constructed by researchers in various ways, for example, political economist and moral philosopher Adam Smith (1776/1760) divides identity into the object self and the acting self, Mead (1934), meanwhile, distinguishes between the 'I' and the 'me' whereby the 'me' connotes an individual's social identity of which the 'I' become conscious in the early psychological development of the child, or as Giddens (1991) puts it, "the 'I' is, as it were, the active primitive will of the individual, which seizes on the 'me' as the reflection of social ties" (p. 52). Psychoanalysis has also concerned itself with conceptions of identity, for example, the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud (1914/1923) . . . insert Freud

In spite of the evident differences which persist between these quite divergent accounts of identity, they all recognise that the 'self' is a complex, muddled concept due to its separation between internal notions and external ones. However, an alternative model proposed by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1968) puts forth a suggestion that no internal self actually exists, but rather individuals only possess external selves.

Writing in the 1950s, Erving Goffman (1959/1990, 1963) provided a 'dramaturgical' account of social interaction whereby face-to-face interactions, in an array of social settings, were hypothesised as akin to a theatrical performance. Goffman's model suggests that all social interactions can be hypothesised as a series of interactive performances, where the actors and their presentations are in a flux altering their presentation of selves (Goffman, 1990) based upon their assumptions of what is acceptable in a particular situation and the feedback they receive from their audience (Boyd, 2001).

Moreover, people perform all aspects of themselves, not just their ideas. An example of this can be located in the writings of Judith Butler (1990) who suggests that whilst 'sex' is a biological trait - and thus cannot be altered unless one undergoes a medical operation to remove genitalia - people perform their gender (Butler, 1990). Thus,

Drawing from Goffman's dramaturgical model, two fundamental components exist concerning the passage of social information between individuals (Boyd, 2001). The ability of an individual to convey information explicitly rests upon "the expression that he gives and the expression he gives off"

(Goffman, 1990: p. 14). The first connotes traditional communication practices such as verbal symbols in order for the actor to convey the information in a coherent manner. The second involves a wide range of action that "others can treat as symptomatic of the actor" (ibid, p. 14). This may include body language, facial expressions, gestures, or interaction with the immediate environment. Thus, social messages are not simply a set of factual data (Boyd, 2001), but an ongoing negotiation in communication relying on both "the signals presented by the actor as well as the signs perceived by the observer" (p. 23). A further component of Goffman's theory is the concept of the body. Indeed, in everyday interactions the body is of integral importance when we 'perform' our identity. Primarily occurring in face-to-face interactions, we utilise our bodies as tools whereby, conveying to other people, "we use our bodies to project information about ourselves" (Boyd, 2007: p. 11). In doing so, we wear appropriate clothing, make considered movements, make important use of objects - or 'props' in Goffman's terminology - in our immediate environment, and convey messages through suitable gestures, facial expressions, and body language. Erving Goffman defines these processes as 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959). When one is indulging in impression management, albeit unconsciously at times, they are attempting at best presenting themselves as what the 'audience'

Among the most notable developments which have occurred on the Internet over the past decade, and particularly the past few years, is the exponential increase in social network sites (SNSs) (Choi et al., 2010). Sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Netlog, and Bebo have attracted millions of users across



the globe, many of whom integrate this form of social networking into their everyday practices (Boyd and Ellison, 2008; Kreps, 2008). In the recent Oxford Internet Survey, for example, social networking emerged as the most popular 'new application' amongst Internet users (aged 14+) in the United Kingdom with almost half (49%) of users reporting the creation or update of a social networking profile, up from only 17 per cent in 2007 (Dutton et al., 2009). In regards to children and teenagers, Lenhart et al., (2010a) discovered that the use of social network sites had increased significantly since 2006 where just over half of 'teens' (aged 12 to 17) (55%) indulged in on-line social networking compared to almost three-quarters (73%) as of 2010 (Lenhart et al., 2010). On the basis of such widespread diffusion, commentators have suggested that the explosion in the popularity of SNSs is due to the freedom with which an individual can construct a personal profile page to represent themselves and interact with others (Patchin and Hinduja, 2008, 2010).

At a basic level, social network sites allow individuals to "create digital representations of themselves" (Patchin and Hinduja, 2010: p. 199) through posting biographical information, compiling personal journals and blogs, indicating 'likes' and 'dislikes', demonstrating their interests, and embedding multimedia (i. e., video, pictures, and music or audio). Thus, SNSs centre on the profile (Tufekci, 2008), within this profile the most significant point where identity is managed and performed is an individual's 'About Me' section. The 'about me' section is a reserved space on a profile where a user can .... CONTINUE

As has already been noted, in an effort to make a good impression, individuals survey the immediate area, examine how other people are acting, and make a rational choice on the appropriate performance for that particular social situation – this ‘rational choice’ may indeed be drawn from an established repertoire of performances which have been applied in the past (Goffman, 1959, 1967; Boyd, 2007, 2008). During the performance, people mould their behaviour depending on the feedback and reactions they receive, thus attempting to increase the likelihood of being perceived by their audience as they intend. These processes are what Erving Goffman (1959/1990, 1967) defines as “impression management” and the “presentation of self”.

Mediated environments, such as those that the Internet produces, like social network sites formalise and fundamentally “alter the identity processes of self-presentation and impression management” (Boyd, 2008: p. 119). As a result, children and teenagers – in particular – face a complex challenge whereby they must formally “write themselves into being” (Sunden, 2003: p. 5) through the elaborate task of creating profiles which complicates impression management processes due to the limited nature of feedback in on-line environments such as MySpace and Facebook. In his groundbreaking text, *The Presentation of Self* (1959), Goffman exquisitely formulates a theory of social interaction in which he details the methods individuals apply to take into account the social environment and the role which they are functioning in it to use body language, gestures, speech, facial expressions, and other people in order to convey an impression. However, primarily due to the time period, what Goffman does not account for or, indeed, foresee is

the impact technology would have and the way in which mediated situations will fundamentally impact upon the traditional art of impression management and presentation of the self.

A key point here, is, the embodiment aspect of Goffman's theory. In the 'borderless world' (Oùqvist, 2009) of the Internet, bodies, in the corporal sense, do not exist thus obscuring the immediate, physical identity of the individual in question, moreover, CONTINUE!. Thus, in order to exist in mediated environments, for the first time in history, humans have to write themselves into being (Sunden, 2003). For social network sites, this entails the formation of a profile page and adding and fleshing out the fields as an act of self presentation.

The sexual grooming of children is not a new phenomenon, neither is the conceptual application of the term 'grooming'. In fact, the term has been in circulation for a considerable period of time, for the most part applied by psychologists in efforts to analyse patterns of deviant sexual behaviour (McAlinden, 2006). The

The findings support the view that the Internet is establishing itself as a powerful tool for the formation of new social relationships by enabling some individuals to meet new people and make new friends, whom otherwise they would not have met. (Dutton and Di Gennaro, 2007: p. 593)

For the purpose of this paper I will concentrate on only one component of the network society which is experiencing radical change, that is, communication.