

Privacy and Presence: Getting Personal with 'New Media'

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Patti McClocklin graduated from the University of Alberta in 1972 and taught for six years before starting her family. While organizing the activities of four lively boys she volunteered in both school and community. In 2006 she was the project lead for the 1st World Conference of Women's Shelters, a groundbreaking gathering of over 800 delegates from 52 countries. Currently, as a founding member of ENDabuseCanada, she pursues opportunities to partner with experts in diverse fields to discover innovative solutions to end relational violence. Her goal is to pursue a Master of Arts with a focus on community and equity studies.

Abstract

This essay was written in response to the question: "How is 'New Media' changing work, life and relationships?" It briefly describes the observed impact of "new media" on, and the resulting relationship changes in the workplace, the marketplace and social settings. The author argues that both a lack of concern and a growing disregard for access to private information are at odds with our historical understanding of the term privacy. Further, the author opines that the response to infiltration by "new media" across what were once considered personal boundaries has been to distance ourselves from the scenes of those interactions. As a consequence, we must question the meaning of presence and its changing function in human relationships.

Keywords: privacy; presence; new media; relationships; workplace; marketplace

I recently engaged in an email discussion with a friend from Australia about the best way to send his money for a reunion being planned. Within the day, my inbox page was inundated with ads for on-line banking options, international money transfers and regular updates on Australian to Canadian currency exchange rates.

"So much for private conversations!"

With companies mining data at every opportunity in order to market, sell, direct and influence our consumption, how much of what we once assumed to be private is, in fact, so? Past purchases, attendance at events, even declared preferences in conversations, are out there "saved" in cyberspace vaults — to be used at will by online companies willing to pay the price. How much of what we have ever posted online is now part of the public domain?

"New media" marketing invades our smart phones and other personal devices. It even finds us through technological relics such as the telephone. "Demon dialers," accessing numbers at an astounding rate, attempt to connect with us in order to make their pitch. On social-media sites we become unwitting marketing assistants by forwarding subtle or not-so-subtle pitches that we "like" to our friends who then do the same. The personal boundaries that once existed between producer and consumer are now blurred.

On social media sites—often without our knowledge or consent—personal comments are shared with hundreds or thousands of people, spreading far beyond those we consider our friends. Our

control over rapid information transfer is becoming more and more impossible. As recently reported by the University of Milan and Facebook scientists, (Agence France-Presse, 2011) the links separating any two people in the world have shrunk from 6 degrees of separation to a measly 4.74. When friends of friends share our messages with each other, our remarks are no longer private in the way once understood - that is, knowledge restricted to a privileged few. Our business dealings are uploaded to 'the cloud' as we work simultaneously with colleagues hundreds of miles away on documents and contracts. "Out there" privacy regulations for servers are unquestionably weak and insufficient in their protection of our personal information. At worst these regulations may be unenforceable. The information may be accessible not only by governments but might also be targeted by those with enough interest and hope for financial return.

"New media" has found creative ways to engage and connect with us. We may react eagerly or we may respond reluctantly as "new media" gathers data about our interests and tastes, ideas and beliefs, locations and activities. In either case, discovering information about us is easy for researchers who take the time to look. Our privacy, it seems, is less and less a matter under our own control.

As compromises to our privacy make us feel as if "they" are a little too close for comfort, we seem to have simultaneously become more distanced from one another. Profound changes have developed in the relationships of buyers and sellers in the marketplace, individuals and groups and even between workplace colleagues. Presence once confirmed the condition of physically being in a place. With the influence of "new media" the idea of presence has altered. Indeed, physical presence matters less and less with many transactions. Whereas a personal connection and individualized service were once touted as good marketing techniques, immediacy and mass awareness are now the driving forces. Campaigns are designed to elicit instant responses from large crowds — our group purchases urgently encouraged so we don't miss out. To vendors of products or ideas it no longer matters who we are — as long as we buy and buy in.

Trendsetters with the greatest clout are no longer only defined by their levels of accomplishment or notoriety. Influence, as determined by web sites measuring social media reach, now factors into the attainment of VIP status. Order clerks, administrators, knowledge sources, educators, fellow gamers, or those who read our blogs, tweets, and chats respond to our typed talk and digital dexterity but no longer see or even care who we really are. Businesses constantly update their web pages to maintain their market presence. In fact, some forms of commerce are non-existent outside of a computer. They only exist once we type the web address into our browser. Only our on-line presence gives their offerings meaning. If we don't log-on, they don't survive.

Social networks validate our presence in an on-line, relational world. If we fail to update, or delete our profiles, we cease to exist for many hundreds of our "friends." Proof of ourselves may be captured and saved online but our immediate presence is not necessary. Virtual interface ignores distance and time. Our dealings with others can occur through time and space making our presence, at any given moment, less significant. If we need validation or fifteen minutes of fame, we can upload files and flicks for everyone to see. Our presence may be acknowledged for just an instant or into perpetuity as hundreds of thousands of others continue transferring data in our wake.

We create Avatars for imaginary quests, join duelling teams in a cyber world and even socialize and connect in virtual spaces where our virtual presence takes on more significance than our actual physical presence in front of the computer. Even in the workplace, attendance is not

necessarily noted by colleagues. Rather, we are discerned on the basis of deliverables, deadlines and outputs. Clocking in for a workday no longer requires one to be present at the job site.

We can engage in on-line chatter limited to twelve words per post or publish thousands of sentences. We may or may not care if anyone else does. In either case, we can follow our followers and tally up our hits and misses without being there when the votes are cast or when the feedback comes in. Our physical presence isn't necessary nor is it missed. When a webcam-enabled robot in one country is controlled by a human being in another, where is the human actually present? (Meisner, 2011) Is it where he or she is physically situated, or virtually active? Or is it both?

Perhaps as "new media" pushes into our personal and private boundaries to "learn" more about us, we respond by distancing ourselves from the collected data and by removing ourselves — at least our physical selves — from the scene. In the wake of "new media" and its infiltration into our once personal domains, the ideas of privacy and presence are very possibly being redefined.

References

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