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Reading Notes: Danah Boyd

- Danah Boyd's key points:
 - **Trust.** I'm with Danah when she questions the degree to which trust can be extended from one member of a social network to another, and how many degrees out, especially. I'm more of a sceptic, as my position on trust is that it's an attribute of dyadic relations. This might be semantics. Whatever it is that "belongs" to a group, call it trust or perhaps commonality, familiarity, membership, even "confidence" (though Anthony Giddens uses that to describe our "trust" in tech/science), I don't think it's the same as the trust that enables two good friends to share intimacies, expose themselves to risk, etc. Trust is first extended by one partner, and then leveraged and reproduced through follow-up interactions. I don't see how it could simply belong to a network. Yes, I think it must be a matter of semantics...
 - **Self presentation.** I agree with Danah that YASSNs raise a lot of interesting questions w/r/t self presentation. And Erving Goffman is certainly a good source for insights into this. But there's a big difference between The Presentation of Self in Public Places and self presentation online. Note the distinction: presentation of self vs self presentation. Goffman's work always involves facework, facetime, and f2f contexts. He's concerned with how the participants in a social encounter handle one another's interactional and personal needs. Meaning that aside from the content of an exchange (conversation), there are aspects of acknowledgment, turn-taking, etiquette, convention, and so on. It's in this that the self is presented, is present and presented. I think for Danah the self is represented. If that's the case (and we could create some interesting conceptual work around re-presentation) then Goffman's insights on performance, interaction, ought to be bracketed, modified, etc. I've got plenty of that in my social interaction design project.
 - **Performance.** Boyd fits in the tradition of "constructed identity" thinkers. Like Turkle, Haraway, Butler, she values opportunities for online identity play, and sees them more or less as performances. Again, using a term

that describes an act originally situated in f2f co-presence can soon lead us from terra firma into terra squishy. Identity politics (I know the literature from ten years reading post-structuralism) is a conceptual framework. Not an explanatory, not even a descriptive framework. I get really nervous when we deploy critical terms like that, because we risk losing on two fronts: a) we lose the power of insight claimed by the original discourse and b) we risk misleading the audience through a heuristic sleight of hand (descriptions taken as explanations, metaphors and analogies giving the appearance of being the phenomenon themselves). If online presence is “like” gender construction, does this mean that it is gender construction? No... We need terms that not only describe what we observe happening online, but that explain the mechanisms, causal relations, forces, objects, subjects, what have you. We can shoot for prescriptive theory, but I think a pseudo-science like psychology, merged perhaps with some cognitive science stuff is as good as we’ll get for now...

- On a related topic, we really need to update the cognitive foundation on which most HCI has been built. Cognitive science simply isn’t the best tool with which to cover social interactions. Its rational and utilitarian disposition misapprehends the ambiguities of relation and interaction that give interpersonal dynamics their interest and energy. It’s not a meaning-based discipline, at least not a hermeneutic. And where it might help us cover the user-computer interface, it does little to help us with the social interface.
- **Social software’s ability to capture social interaction.** Danah’s one of the best we have when it comes to getting in there and not only observing how people use a social software network, but feeling in her gut what’s really going on. It takes users of these things to tease them apart.
- **Social networks**, friend-based networks in particular. Most of Danah’s work involves social networks built on friendship, real or online. Friendship is of course only one modality of relation. It’s a modality in which persons either like each other, or are attracted to/interested in each other. In other words, it’s one that shapes interactions and “self presentation” in a pretty specific way. We should build out the concept of self-presentation to accommodate other modalities of relation:
 - Filiation-real (real family)
 - Filiation-constructed (constructed family)
 - Strategic (relation serves a strategic motive)
 - Work (relation exists because of work and serves purposes of work, is thus subject to constraints)
 - Affinity (shared interest but no direct relation between members)
 - Association (membership, organizational or not)

- etc
- **Enrichment of social software through enhanced profiling.** Danah was a big fan of faceting at one time. I'm not sure that she is. The problem w/ faceting, as I see it, is, well, complicated. Faceting pretends to offer control (over presentation of self) where in fact it's not a matter of control. The user has no more control over his "self presentation" than an author has over Oprah's book club interpretations... We can present what we intend ourselves to be, or how we see ourselves, or who we want to be, or what we want to be to others in order to get what we need from them..... But none of that erases the fact that others see us as they see us. Over that we have influence, at best. The term faceting kind of says it all: a facet is a side/surface. Identities don't have sides. Images have sides. Semantics aside for a moment now, faceting and other means of profile augmentation (!) could be useful. If we look at it as presence negotiation, and we consider the ways in which users might seek to invite certain member types (think dating, career networking) to find them, contact them, etc., in other words if we view faceting as self-promotion, then we can see the control features and functions that might help social networking sites...
- **Visualization of social networks** as a navigational aid. Vizster looks cool and I'd love to try it out for real. When it comes to navigation methods, there's simply nothing like a test drive. I don't know how Danah feels about it, nor do I know what it really adds to the user experience. If the point of visualizing a social network is to facilitate network-centric activities, then the visualization aid ought to render the attributes of relations between the network's nodes that contain the most salient information. If the network connects friends, then salient information would be who likes whom; how do they like them; how old is the friendship; what does the friendship facilitate? And so on. The seduction of a visualization is in its appearance: it simply looks cool. But if the rendering doesn't tell us anything by placing nodes (people) closer together, or farther apart; if it doesn't allow us to distinguish types of relations, to change modes (say from "liking" to "working with"), etc., then does it really help us navigate? I'm suspicious about what we can pull from a simple spring and mass system. We need to be able to visualize different layers of a network and its relations. But more on that elsewhere.

General Notes

- Transferability of trust; or notion that trust accrues to a network. Boyd notes that context must be considered in addition to the strength of ties within a network. For example, that the reason two people connected by a mutual friend (the strength of weak ties) aren't necessarily dating material is that context is

required to improve the quality of connections. I don't think it's that context is missing; I think it's simply that Network Relations isn't the best way to solve the dating problem.

- A lot of the work on this subject involves trust, and its utility in social networks. My personal take on trust derives mostly from the linguistic/psychological fields, wherein trust belongs to a dyadic relation, or relation between two people. There's nothing in the theory that describes how trust is transferred *by association* to a third. The suggestion that the trust between two good friends can be transferred to others, through a networking site or otherwise, simply doesn't hold. This may be a matter of semantics, but in my view, trust involves the relationship between individuals, and describes personal experiences, vulnerability, intimacy, and so on. What I have extended to one person isn't extensible/transferable to a third person just by affiliation or shared friendship.
- When Danah discusses strength of ties (weak, strong, e.g. Granovetter's work) she often describes the tie in terms of actors' behaviors. That a person does something for the power he gains as a bridge between individuals, for example. ("People gain by being bridges.") That's not what network relations teaches us – it can't. In Network Relations, actors are black boxes; the network explains behaviors, not the actors' motives. I'm such a hair splitter I'm going to make that my blog tagline: hair-splitting theory... but really, we can't derive motivation or intent from network relations. Personally, I'm still unsure of the value of network relations theory. Or rather, I'm unsure of the value of social networks to the social software space overall. I think they serve the purpose of creating a thematic activity that is focused precisely on connecting up. And getting connected is the first thing a social software service has to achieve. The value of displaying a user's social network, as a contextualization of the user's personality, position, value, etc..... Jury's out.
- From [Revenge of the User](#)
 - "How do we create a nuanced way for people to negotiate different social contexts without creating unbearable collisions?"
 - I don't know that we can; privacy is going to be a huge issue, as millions of one-time community members discover their comments logged in search engines for ever and ever. The collision we need to worry about is less that of dating-profile meets boss-profile at Friendster and more likely potential bossman reads blog comments of potential employee...
 - "How do we let people show face? In other words, how do we let them be socially appropriate?"
 - I'm not sure that these are real problems. Since my position tends more to be linguistic, people navigate the social acceptability of any linguistic interaction **with** language. So there's no problem as long as they have linguistic competency, and practical competence w/ the software.
- Anthony Giddens separates self presentation and presence negotiation. What Danah describes as context, what Giddens, Goffman and others might call

“frame,” is a problem for us online for several reasons:

- The communication medium, often text but increasingly audio and video, and hyperlinkable, searchable and cacheable, is persistent. That is, contributions by any participant persist. Because information finds its way into new “contexts” easily, “collisions” are difficult to avoid. As of yet there is no privacy key, encryption, or persistent personal security protocol that might allow a participant to lock down his/her statements.
- The medium is built for connections and access. Spam is only the tip of the iceberg, really. Spam is dumb. Access attempts are going to get much smarter....
- Interaction tools do not provide the type of context that Danah wants very easily. Tools of interaction tend to flatten out that kind of context. They’re placeless, faceless, and spaceless (I’m reminded of “colorless, odorless, and tasteless,” which was just one way of describing LSD).
- Architecture may be politics, and code may be architecture, and information architecture may be social architecture, and so on ad infinitum. Metaphors reach only so far. Social software needs to become more internally differentiated (complex), while becoming easier to use. We need better ways of handling the interactions between people and better ways of combining the needs of information users and people users. The two are not the same. Currently, our social software sites present us with flattened networks and undifferentiated ties/relations.
- Most importantly, I think, we need to augment our spatial/physical schemes with temporal schemes. Social software handles time, rhythm, speed, continuity and discontinuity, interruptions, and other temporal phenomena very poorly.
- Boss and mother, the two people you don’t want to encounter among your friendsters and tribes. Funny. Danah’s right about the absence of clear boundaries, or “real” boundaries, online. Anonymity provides a screen; the medium encourages play; and privacy is quickly lost to the proliferating practices of push-button publishing....
- We need to distinguish between physical context and context as a linguistic attribute. Boyd refers to interpretive contexts, by which I think she means situations and places. Goffman teaches us that from Austin, interlocutors need to agree first *on* what is said—not *with* what is said. That would be a first condition of communication, one that we can’t take for granted in the case of mediating technologies and mediated interactions. (Goffman’s and others’ work on paralinguistic markers, metalinguistic communication, etc. In the case of communication that involves relations between persons (as opposed to the weather), we need to be able to read the person, not just the utterance... What Habermas calls sincerity). Goffman believed that in order for a person to proceed in a social “doing”, s/he had to understand what it was, or what

was going on, first. I agree of course that context is compressed, if not gutted, when we go online. But in any linguistically-based transaction, competent use of language and speech provides a way forward. The trappings/context of the interaction are nonessential. (There's an additional point of interest here, and that has to do w/ what we call "error handling:" Goffman writes that context becomes especially useful when a transaction goes wrong: "Observe that unlike grammatical constraints, system and ritual ones open up the possibility of corrective action as part of these very constraints. Grammars do not have rules for managing what happens when rules are broken." Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk*, 21

- Context is not transferred to digital environments. What happens online is a talk, it's conducted via linguistic interaction, which is a special type of talk. The matter really is what "doings" occur online, and how do participants understand what to do, what the doing is, and how to proceed. The transactions are linguistic (assuming of course that they involve words addressed to people, whether those people are known or unknown audiences). I like Luhmann's term "theme" in place of doing. As theme allows us to describe communication/information content as well as idiom of interaction, style.
- I want to make distinctions first, then put them back together. Danah combines insights we obtain from sociology, robbing some of them of their power. Is the death of a Friendster user a frozen performance? I think Boyd means it's "like" a frozen performance. Unless I'm reading her wrong. But we want to say more, and be more precise, than "it's like this or that." In the language of representational system, there is: identity, similarity, analogy, and contradiction. As thinkers and designers it's our job to know the phenomenon, not the comparison. Use of comparison should contribute to the power of our thinking, or the power of our explanation or description. Good for heuristics, bad for deep architectural knowledge...
- The terms identity and performance are normally at odds with one another. In Boyd's work we find both, and without clarity. In particular because performance is best used to describe face to face situations. I have to get in my idea of "compression."

[Blogging as liminal practice](#)

- "In exposing how writing changed oral culture, Walter Ong categorizes oral speech and textual writing based on their properties to discuss psychological and cultural effects. He focuses on oral cultures untouched by writing, while simultaneously introducing a concept of 'secondary orality' whereby modern mediated culture creates a new

orality that is simultaneously remarkably like and unlike orality (Ong, 1982: 134). Although he only addresses the properties of 'secondary orality' very briefly, it is the suggestion of something beyond the dichotomy of writing/speech that has made Ong the poster-boy for communications researchers trying to locate computer-mediated communication."

- I need a refresher on Ong. That said, I don't think an ontological grasp of the medium is where it's at. We need a practice-based view of blogging if we're going to understand how it stands at an intersection of substantial shifts in:
 - Authorship
 - Audience
 - Speech and writing
 - Conversation
 - Information distribution
 - Authority, citation, expertise, peer review, etc
 - Branding and truth
 - Social networks

"Autistic Social Software ."

- Autism and ADD as metaphors...
- What's seductive is the modeling
- Socially inept computers
- We don't put the social into computers, or computing. What we need to look at are practices in which we use computers, in which we use communication technologies, in which we network, date, etc, etc. Then, we examine the way in which interactions unfold in practices.

"Profiles as Conversation: Networked Identity Performance on Friendster."

- "performance of social identity" "communicative body," "represented bodies"
- I think the distinction should be: presentation and interaction. I think the term "performance" is possibly misleading in a non face to face context
- I'm the same with "body," which seems pretty out of play. Image or picture of body, style perhaps, or body image/type as it's captured perhaps in a dating profile..
- "how are unknown audiences negotiated?"