Identity Problems in the Facebook Era

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Preface

Social media and mobile devices are platforms for interpersonal communication. Many users routinely share mundane and profound moments through these technologies. After submitting personal information to sites like Facebook, some of these users face a considerable social problem: stigma. Digital media enables users to talk about themselves – and their peers – to vast and imperceptible audiences (Boyd 2007). As a consequence, users broadcast personal details to an extent they may not anticipate. Tracking and removing this information is difficult once it is online, and it can potentially harm users’ reputations. Even if they intend to present themselves in a particular way in a limited context, the contextual convergence that makes social media ‘social’ complicates this process. Personal information that users want to keep in one context can easily leak (Lyon 2001) elsewhere. Such leaks can contribute to stigma, resulting in discrimination, damaged reputations and other social harm.

Stigma is not a new social problem. Erving Goffman, the author of Stigma, published in 1963, defined Stigma as personal attributes that can discredit an individual if discovered. Goffman explored this topic long before Facebook and other digital media. However, the emergence of these platforms forces a reconsideration of stigma and its social consequences. When the Internet first entered the domestic sphere, users were able to construct identities that were “anonymous, multiple and fragmented” (Kennedy 2006: 859). Yet the growing popularity of social and digital media means that users are held accountable to how they appear online. Identity ‘play’ has given way to identity management, as well as crisis management. This book
introduces a range of themes and concepts that address social problems relating to information and communication technologies, with an emphasis on stigma and spoiled identities on digital media. In addition to micro-sociological theories, this book incorporates contemporary work on digital media culture with recent examples of spoiled identities online. This material is organized along the line of argument that user activity on digital media amplifies problems common to face-to-face sociality.