

The Collaborative Self:
From Collectivity to Individuality and What Blogs Can Teach Us About Identity

by

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

This paper uses blogs as a starting point for an examination of how identity is constructed collaboratively through a series of linguistically mediated social processes. The goal is to establish a theoretical framework for understanding individual identity as rooted in media, language, and society and the result of collective social processes as opposed to their genesis. It draws together conceptual models from theorists in sociology, media studies, and genre theory to explore how selves are created in the online contexts of blogs and how those concepts relate to wider cultural concerns and anxieties related to the construction of individual identity. By examining issues of privacy, anonymity, and authenticity as they relate to blogs and bloggers, this paper aims to provide a view of individual identity as contextually situated yet continuous across social contexts and which is the result of collaborative, collective social processes.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my family and friends without whose support and encouragement I would not have been able to succeed:

Especially to Jodie, Kaiya, and Ronin for your inspiration, patience, and love

Also to all of the other family members, scholars, skeptics, companions, sellouts, dropouts, sages, artists, poets, rebels, dreamers, schemers, fiends, troublemakers, warriors, naysayers, and well-wishers I've encountered on my journey so far for inspiring me along the way

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Chapter 1

Introduction

we are fundamentally inclined to claim that the falsest judgements (which include judgements *a priori*) are the most indispensable for us; that without accepting fictions of logic, without measuring reality against the purely invented world of the unconditional and self-identical, without a constant falsification of the world by means of numbers, man could not live—that renouncing false judgements would mean renouncing life and a denial of life. (Nietzsche 12)

The concept of the blog was originally sold to me by a close friend who described it as "an easy way to create a website and post your own content." As an aspiring writer, my first impression of the blog was that it was a streamlined authoring and publishing tool. However, not long after I began my first blog back in 2008 it became increasingly apparent that blogs signified not just a mode of autobiographical self-representation or technological innovation but rather the interconnectedness between media and society. More than that, they provided a window into the construction of identity within the context of mediated social practices. What blogs do and what blogs are is not new for "Different media tend to establish different types of social information-systems" (Meyrowitz 73). Blogs are simultaneously media and social context; however, because of their particular technological and sociological affordances and their relatively recent development, they provide a unique insight into how media and social processes function in relation to the creation of identity. In her influential work *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Sherry Turkle writes that "We construct our technologies, and our technologies us and our times. Our times make us, we make our

machines, our machines make our times. We become the objects we look upon but they become what we make of them" (46). Though much of Turkle's conception of identity in online contexts sees digital media contributing to its fluidity and decentering, she does make the important connection between the ongoing relationship between identity, media, and embedded social practices.

More than that, blogs represent a digital proof of concept of what I have termed the collaborative self. According to the famed Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin "I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another" (*Poetics* 287). The collaborative self is a critical framework that sees identity as a mediated social construct. In particular, it represents the viewpoint that individual identity is not inherent and does not originate from an embodied individual but from collective, social processes. The collaborative self challenges conceptions of identity grounded in conventional essentialist notions of the self and "the societal imperative with which we have been raised... that there is one primary persona, or 'true identity,' and that in the off-line world – the 'real world' – this persona is firmly attached to a single physical body, by which our existence as a social being is authorized and in which it is grounded" (Stone 73).

Joshua Meyrowitz argues that "To a large extent, behavior is shaped and modified by the socially defined situations in which people find themselves. While there remains much individual variation within a given situation, there is also a larger consistency in the patterned variations most people exhibit as they move from one type of situation to another" (27). The blog is the perfect example of how technology and society function in concert to enable the emergence of individual identity. Blogs demonstrate how "a social situation is... an 'information system,' that is... a given pattern of access to social information, a given pattern of access to the behaviour of other people" (37). A careful examination of blogs as both media and

social context reveals the ways in which individual identity is formed through collaborative, collective processes.

What is a blog? Depending on what field of study one chooses to use as a lens, a blog might be seen as either medium (or sub-medium) or culture (or sub-culture) or genre (or sub-genre). Positioning the blog as a genre is useful in defining the social practice of blogging because "Genres aren't just texts, they include and shape practices, ways of doing things" (Myers 19) and "Users of these texts don't just create a genre, they create a social world" (21). Julie Rak sees the blog not as an extension of extant life writing genres like the diary or the journal but as "an internet genre with a history as long as the history of the internet itself" (170). Media, like genres, encompass embedded though constantly negotiated social practices and cultural markers. Marshall McLuhan writes that "it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale of form and human association and action" (9). A consideration of blogs as genre, then, is to consider the indexical markers of shared meanings and associations embedded in the technological medium of blogs and the shared social practices of blogging.

The inception of the blog or "weblog" was as a collection of links to various webpages. Originally, weblogs served as an indexing tool in an era before search engines such as Google. In a much more intimate community, they also served as cultural guideposts as the interests and biases of the user who posted the links would be known. In this way, weblogs acted as an "ideological backdrop" emphasizing "the early ideology of the web as a non-corporate public space for individual expression" (Rak 171). Eventually, blogging software was released that allowed people without an extensive background in HTML coding to easily publish their own blogs (Myers 17). This provided access to a greater number of people, and the blog evolved from a simple list of links into its current recognizable form. Blogs are now characterized by a series of dated entries appearing in reverse chronological order. These entries can be organized

around a central theme such as travel blogs or parenting blogs, or they can simply be a collection of the author's thoughts and recollections unified only by their having been written by the same author or appearing in the same blog. They can also contain pictures, video, and audio as well as links to other blogs or websites. Blogs typically have some form of feedback such as a comments section or a link to the author's email address.

According to Trish Wilson, one of the key defining characteristics of blogs is their capacity to foster social interaction. She writes that "They are interactive by design. Many blogs include comments sections for each post where readers may state their opinions. Blogs by nature are conversational... They link to each other, and they make contact via email. It is this interaction that makes the blogosphere unique" (51). Though interaction is not "unique" to blogs, it is emphasized through the practice of blogging. Blogs invite—or at least stress—the social interaction between the individual and their audience, even if that interaction is limited to an increased sense of self-reflexivity in relation to a perceived or potential audience. In George Herbert Mead's influential *Mind, Self, and Society*, he writes that "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process" (135). Blogs are not static; they constitute the overall practice of blogging, which is an ongoing collaboration between the individual and other social agents within a given social context be they other individuals or established social expectations and roles.

Blogs also demonstrate that identity is necessarily mediated. In McLuhan's seminal work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, he lays out a framework for interpreting the relationship between humanity, technology, and society that begins with his (in)famous proclamation that "the medium is the message" (7). He expounds on his central thesis by

explaining that "the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology" (7). Media influence society by affecting the conceptual frameworks of perception and interpretation that guide both small- and large-scale social interactions. From McLuhan's point of view, it is less the content or information conveyed by a blog that is significant, but the underlying connotations inherent in the medium of the capital "B" Blog that would lead to a restructuring of social patterns. While he does make an important connection between media and society, McLuhan's argument is problematic primarily because it is rooted in traditions of essentialism. Blogs, like all other media, influence social interaction; however, there are no set decipherable messages that any single medium embodies by virtue of how it affects perception. All meaning is constructed and is the result of a never-ending set of social negotiations as we collectively attribute meaning. Identity is the result of an ongoing dialogue between the self and society.

To say that identity is linguistically mediated is to recognize the centrality of language in the construction of identity and its function as both medium and content. McLuhan writes that "In this electric age we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension of consciousness" (57). Though, again, rooted in tropes of essentialism, the point McLuhan makes is useful in conceptualizing identity as mediated patterns of information. Blogs are useful objects of study in this regard because the particular forms of social interchange that they afford emphasize the linguistically mediated formation of identity. Language is one of many media that influence and allow for social interaction and the development of identity, but it is also the primary medium that facilitates these processes. For clarity sake, I use the term language throughout this paper to mean "The system of spoken or written communication used by a particular country, people, community,

etc., typically consisting of words used within a regular grammatical and syntactic structure" (OED). Drawing on Bakhtin in establishing the role of identity in autobiographical theory, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that "Since social groups have their languages, each member of the group becomes conscious in and through that language. Thus autobiographical narrators come to consciousness of who they are, of what identifications and differences they are assigned, or what identities they might adopt through the discourses that surround them" (39). The selfing process through which individuals come to consciousness of themselves must not only be mediated but mediated specifically through language. Individual identity is the result of this dialogic process between the individual and society.

This is why the study of identity in the context of online media such as blogs is important. All human activity is bound up in questions of identity. As Richard Jenkins puts it, understanding identity is important "because it is the basic cognitive mechanism that humans use to sort out themselves and their fellows, individually and collectively... it is how we know who's who and what's what. We couldn't do whatever we do as humans, without also being able to do this" (13). Identity is ultimately the organizational structure we use to interpret the world around us. Cognition is a means of creating patterns out of raw data, and all of the patterns we form are fundamentally about identity: organization and categorization according to similarities, differences, and contextual relevance. However, identity itself is an ongoing process and so my goal here is not to set a definite meaning for what exactly identity is, but rather to contribute intelligently and productively to an ongoing dialogic process. To take the postmodern or meta approach, the meaning of identity lies in the ongoing process of determining the parameters of what constitutes identity and how it is constituted.

The discourse surrounding identity in online contexts is of particular interest because it "speaks to a core cultural conflict in... popular culture surrounding the nature of identity in a

media-saturated society" (Nunes 359). The study of identity as it is constructed in blogs gives many unique insights into identity in general because we are in the midst of experiencing the cognitive shift that accompanies the integration of a new technology into our lives. Online social contexts such as blogs have not yet been as thoroughly defined and solidified in the collective consciousness as existing offline contexts. So many of the social scripts we follow on a day-to-day basis are implicit (unconscious) and assumed; we know to tip the server at some restaurants and not others; we know to put up our hands in class to answer a question; and we know that generally when somebody asks "How are you?" the desired response is "Fine" or "Good" and not an actual, detailed description of your current emotional, physical, financial, or social state. On the other hand, there are far fewer defined social scripts for online contexts, and those that do exist are still mostly explicit (conscious): for example, what content bloggers choose to include in their blog posts, the amount of personal information they choose to reveal, and what websites and other blogs they choose to link to. Because we are still in the midst of intense social negotiations regarding the collective and shared cultural meanings for online contexts, questions of what identity is – and more specifically how it is constructed – are at the forefront of our collective consciousness and on the tip of our collective tongue.

In examining the controversy surrounding the factual authenticity (or lack thereof) of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* and the resulting discourse in the blogosphere (the colloquial and somewhat problematic term referring to blogs and bloggers in general [Myers 24]), Mark Nunes notes that

During the past decade and a half, two narratives dominated our understanding of online identity. The first suggested that online interaction allowed for a more direct mode of communication between participants, because users could cast off social artifice and speak from the heart (think Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks in *You've Got Mail*). The

second narrative warned to trust no one online, because anyone could be posing as anyone else online, and probably was (as in Peter Steiner's *New Yorker* cartoon, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog"). The James Frey story foregrounds the conflict between these two narratives, and the degree to which this conflict marks a broader social and cultural concern about the stability of the subject-position in a society increasingly dominated by circulations and flows. It is a conflict between a dominant ideology of the modern subject, as carried out on a majority of weblogs, and an ideology of identity predicated upon a fluid understanding of the postmodern self. (359)

The tension between the two ideologies as Nunes describes them represent concerns about anonymity, authenticity, authority, agency, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and continuity as they relate to online constructions of identity although they also have much wider implications.

What is at stake is not just resolving the tension between the congruity (or lack thereof) of selves constructed in online and offline social contexts and the heterogeneous nature of identity, but the definition of identity overall. It's about what it means to be a single individual with a single identity (or not): an empowered self with autonomy (or not) and agency (or not).

Considering identity within the context of blogs is important for several reasons. The first is that new digital media have become so ubiquitous in our day-to-day lives and so incorporated into our social interactions and cultural scripts that it would be both virtually and literally impossible to consider a critical engagement with concepts of identity without also looking at how they have impacted those concepts. Second, new digital media have introduced a very noticeable "new scale" (McLuhan 7) to our affairs. As Lev Manovich points out, unlike previous communication media like the printing press or the photograph "the computer media revolution affects all stages of communication, including acquisition, manipulation, storage, and distribution" and that "it also affects all types of media – texts, still images, moving images,

sound, and spatial constructions" (19). New digital media, including blogs, are altering our perception of the world in unprecedented and fundamentally different ways than most any media that have preceded them.

Third, because we are still in the midst of what Manovich refers to as a "new media revolution" (19), we are currently in a state of hyper-consciousness in regards to our relation to the media in question. The bulk of our social contexts and social institutions are very difficult to engage with critically because they are so hard-wired into us. So many of the social scripts we follow have become so implicit and so integrated into our conceptions of identity that we take them for granted. We are still in the midst of trying to decipher what exactly it means to live in a Digital Age and exist and interact in digital, online spaces. This means that we are still consciously trying to work out the "rules," and many of the social scripts that we typically follow to determine "who's who and what's what" (Jenkins 13) are still being negotiated. As Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Sheperd point out in their genre analysis of blogs, "The appearance of a new genre is an event of great rhetorical interest because it means that the stabilized-enough, negotiated balance between innovation and decorum has broken down and a new one is under development" (2004). Though all genres and social contexts are in a constant state of flux, the relative newness and impact of new digital media such as blogs sheds light on the negotiation process by helping to highlight previously implicit facets of this ongoing dialogue.

In *The Discourse of Blogs and Wikis* Greg Myer outlines a rationale for studying blogs. First, if they are increasingly becoming more relevant in political, social, and economic processes then the academic world should consider the potential consequences; second, that examining a medium "as it emerges" sheds light on other media; and finally that blogs thoroughly embody cyber culture by representing the vast array of discursive forms including "the links, the international reach, the search engines, the capacity for including various kinds of

material, visual, verbal and aural" (3). Examining the construction of identity within the specific online context of blogs offers a perspective of a medium which is representative of many of the features of online media and social contexts in general. Blogs also shed light on social processes that lead to the formation of individual identity in other contexts as well, including offline contexts.

My purpose here is twofold: to present a medium-specific method of critical engagement with identity as well as to draw more general principles as to how identity is constructed. The goal is not to provide a set of definitive answers but instead to start asking the appropriate questions. I do not wish to argue for definite values for all of the variables in the equation of identity but rather to explore how the substitution of different values affects the solution and produces different outcomes. I wish to provide a starting point for intelligently discussing the construction of identity in blogs and, by extension, identity in general rather than set a definite end point. It is not about defining boundaries but examining how we determine where boundaries are drawn and how these boundaries are constantly being defined and redefined. The point isn't to try and resolve the various tensions at play when discussing online identities such as anonymity, authenticity, and privacy. There are always tensions that can never be fully resolved in any social context, be it online or offline. The goal, instead, is to compile a set of tools to be able to think critically about the constraints of the social contexts we occupy and how they affect constructions of identity.

The construction of the self is the result of collective, historical, cultural, social, and existential processes. Framing the self with one of these other modifiers – the social self, the historical self, the existential self – would create an exclusionary view of the self. Individual identity is bound up in collective processes; "self-presentation is *collaborative*. Individuals work together to uphold preferred self-images of themselves and their conversation partners, through

strategies like maintaining (or 'saving') face, collectively encouraging social norms, or negotiating power differentials and disagreements" (Marwick and boyd 123 emphasis in original). Arguing that identity is a collaborative process –or really, a network of interrelated collaborative processes—is to indicate an inclusive view of individual identity which also encompasses two aspects which are crucial to its construction: agency and reflexivity. The collaborative self is a self that is the result of contributions from various agents whether those contributions be conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional, supportive or adversarial. But it is a self that is constructed collectively, and though there is individual agency, that agency is not independent from collective contexts.

To analyse how individual identity is constructed in blogs I propose a critical framework that sees identity rooted primarily in social and media processes. The study of blogs is complicated by the fact that "they are both the product of blogging and the medium through which the blogger produces their expressions" (boyd 2006). Blogs allow for the construction of self but are also part of that construction. I intend to explore how the mediated social context of blogs plays a part in constructing the identities of bloggers. Through the adoption and enactment of socially contextual roles, situated linguistic practices, and media-specific affordances and practices, the selves of bloggers are constituted collaboratively through their mediated interaction with other social agents. In 1995, Turkle wrote that "Now, in postmodern times, multiple identities are no longer so much at the margins of things. Many more people experience identity as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands need to be negotiated" (180). Now, almost two decades later, the emergence of blogs as a cultural force of some significance has come to underscore how individual identity is the result of constant negotiation and is situationally contextualized.

An individual identity is not the result of the unilateral construction by an individual, but the collective, collaborative effort of many different agents. Identity, as Bakhtin pointed out, is dialogic and constituted through discourse. He writes that "Dialogue here is not the threshold to action, it is the action itself. It is not a means for revealing, for bringing to the surface the already ready-made character of a person: no, in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time what he is" (Bakhtin, *Poetics* 225). Blogs offer a unique window into how collaborative processes function in this ongoing discourse. The collaborative self represents a view of identity that is constituted through reciprocal processes of social dialogue. It is only through discourse with others within a social context that the self can engage in the process of becoming.

To examine the relationship between individual identity, social context, and media I closely examine several subsections of the blogging community, including personal atheist blogs, Heather B. Armstrong's prolific mommy blog *dooce*, and the now defunct Wal-Mart corporate blog *Life at Wal-Mart* to demonstrate that the self is contingent and adaptable yet coherent and continuous across multiple contexts and various media. I will examine the embedded and emergent social practices of blogs and bloggers, emphasizing the blog as social context reinforced with an analysis of the blog as genre to examine cultural and linguistic signifiers that situate the constructed self within specific social contexts.

Chapter 2

Social Context

I decided it is time to join the blogosphere. I stated many times that I would not conform to this modern form of ego-stroking. Who would possibly care about the thoughts rattling around in my head? Why did I do it? The simplest answer is out of frustration. I am tired of reading the paper and putting it down in disgust. I am tired of watching the news and changing the channel in dismay. I am tired of overhearing so many tidbits of conversation (on a daily basis) that leave me walking away and shaking my head. What could one person do against the tide of ignorance and insanity? My answer was to write. To write with the hope that perhaps others will find what I have to say encouraging, interesting, or better yet thought provoking. (Richards)

The above excerpt from the About page ("Why Reason Being?") on the atheist blog *Reason Being* is notable for several reasons. First, it highlights a specific component of the blog genre – the About page – which typically offers a brief biography of the blogger and/or a synopsis of the focus or goals of that particular blog. Second, it is written with a high degree of self-awareness and self-reflexivity. It offers a succinct (and rather unflattering) analysis of the practice of blogging in general and also the reasons why, despite his earlier misgivings, the blogger began to construct his own blog. Despite first pejoratively characterizing blogging as mere "ego-stroking," the blogger goes on to describe the motivations for expressing his own views and finding an audience of other like-minded individuals. These motivations are consistent with Miller and Sheperd's analysis of blogs: "What typified social action do blogs perform? How do bloggers talk about their own purposes and audiences? When bloggers talk about blogging, two themes relevant to these questions are ubiquitous: self-expression and community development" (2004).

Finally, it emphasizes the collaborative process involved in the construction of identity. Miller and Sheperd point out that disclosure in online media such as blogs should not be understood as the simple unveiling of a pre-existent or perdurable self, but rather as a constitutive effort. The self that is disclosed is a construction, possibly an experimental one, which takes shape as a particular rhetorical subject-position. In a blog, that construction is an ongoing event, the self being disclosed a continual achievement. (2004)

The self is created through an ongoing process, a negotiation between an individual social agent and all of the other agents within a given social context. An analysis of how identity is constructed in and through online media reveals how contingency and social context come into play in that construction.

To say that identity is contingent upon social context is also to acknowledge that identity is not a static, monolithic structure. Identity is contingent rather than multiple. Joshua Meyrowitz addresses this contingency when he writes that "Although we often say we that we want people to be 'consistent,' what we often mean by this is that they should be 'situationally consistent.' That is, we generally demand consistency of treatment from others within a situation, but we are less concerned with consistency of treatment across situations" (45). Contingency points to adaptability and unity whereas multiplicity indicates disparity. Turkle used the example of MUDs (Multi User Domains) to discuss how online contexts affected the construction of identity. She examined the ways in which online contexts seemed to elicit the adoption of roles by participants that were not consistent with the roles that they took on in offline context. She wrote that "MUDs imply difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation. Such an experience of identity contradicts the Latin root of the word, *idem*, meaning 'the same'" (185). Much of how Turkle theorized online identity in *Life on the Screen*

characterized it as multiple in the sense of being fragmented. Conceptualizing identity in this way is problematic for several reasons. Multiplicity through fragmentation implies damage and demarcation. On the other hand, contingency through adaptability implies continuity and coherence. Identity is not multiple in the sense of the common postmodern metaphor of schizophrenia (Jameson 28), which suggests a series of delineated identities that we cycle between.

However, it cannot be denied that "we all change personae all the time, to suit the social occasion" (Stone 73). An individual's identity is made up of different roles which Bruce Biddle describes as "[patterned human] behaviors that are characteristic of persons within contexts and with various processes that presumably produce, explain, or are affected by those behaviors" (4). Helen Nissenbaum offers a similar view of roles as "typical or paradigmatic capacities in which people act in contexts" (131). The self is made up of various roles which are contingent, contextual, and interdependent. Roles are the defined and mutually understood functions that we adopt based on the constraints – or perceived boundaries – of the specific social context in which we interact with other selves. In any given social context, there can be any number of contextually relevant roles that an individual adopts.

Depending on the social context my identity might be a father, a husband, a brother, a student, a gym rat, a connoisseur of fine cinema, or a friend. All of these roles are differentiated with their own sets of social scripts and expectations, yet none of them is mutually exclusive. There are boundaries, but they are not always clearly defined, and some roles tend to bleed into others so that there are entire spectrums of identity in between. None of these roles is entirely separate from the others, and just as members within a social context collaboratively contribute to each other's identities, so do the roles of an individual identity inform each other. When I am at work I do not stop being a father; however, I will not generally call upon the social scripts

associated with fatherhood while at work because they are not relevant to the social context. It would be erroneous to say that I had cycled through identities. I am still me whether I am at home or at work. The same structural framework through which I organized the constant flow of data I receive every second of every day is still in place. My perceptual framework with which I interpret and categorize this data in relation to myself has not fundamentally changed. I still exist within the stream of consciousness in which I have existed since I was a child and I began to achieve sufficient self-awareness to consciously remember the string of events of my lived experience and pieced together a cohesive life narrative. What has changed is that I am responding to the implicit and explicit social narratives associated with a specific role in a specific social context and adjusting my interaction to the social expectations associated with that role and context.

According to Nissenbaum's theory of contextual integrity, "In the course of people's lives we act and transact not simply as individuals in an undifferentiated social world, but as individuals acting and transacting in certain capacities as we move through, in, and out of a plurality of distinct social contexts" (129). She goes on to explain that "by contexts, I mean structured social settings with characteristics that have evolved over time" (130) and which are "characterized by canonical activities, roles, relationships, power structures, norms (or rules), and internal values (goals, ends, purposes)" (132). Seeing the construction of identity in relation to social context takes into account not just the setting but also social agents such as scripts, expectations, perceptions, and other individuals. The contextuality of identity functions on two levels. First, identity is a form of contextualization as it allows us to interpret and incorporate emergent experiences into our personal and social narratives. Second, identity is a meaning-making process. It not only allows us to interpret meanings but is also part of a process that generates the meanings we interpret.

The relationship between social contexts can perhaps best be illustrated by the ways in which new digital media such as blogs are contributing to the "flatten[ing of] multiple audiences into one," a phenomenon that Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd refer to as "context collapse" (122). According to Meyrowitz, "By bringing many different types of people to the same 'place,' electronic media have fostered a blurring of many formerly distinct social roles. Electronic media affect us, then, not primarily through their content, but by changing the 'situational geography' of social life" (6). Though Meyrowitz was referring primarily to how the medium of television was affecting the construction of and interaction between social contexts, it is easy to see how new digital media like the Internet have accelerated and amplified this phenomenon.

In a post titled "Why am I anonymous?" one blogger writes that

I'm chicken. Really, I am. The religious fanaticism in the US right now means that future employees who google my name could deny me a job because of my lack of faith. If I ever want to do any freelancing, people could deny me their business because of it. It happens. Therefore, I remain closeted. My friends, some of my family, and one or two co-workers know that I'm an atheist, but day to day it's much easier to let people assume I share their beliefs.

I live in the so-called "Bible Belt." You know what that means. Liberty University is just a couple hours away. Drive less than an hour and you hit Salem, where Borat found that people would like to hang homosexuals. Yes, this isn't a very enlightened area, but it's beautiful, and as long as you don't talk politics or religion the people are some of the friendliest you'll meet for the most part.

So that's my MO. What should you expect? Who knows? We'll play it by ear. (The Anonymous Atheist, June 14 2007)

In this case the blogger is worried about context collapse among roles in the online and offline contexts of which he is a part. He expresses concern that his role as a blogger might impact his roles in professional and personal offline contexts. This blogger's apparent anxiety around the collapsing of social contexts demonstrates a very significant aspect in how the self is constructed collaboratively. Through the management of the perceived expectations of the audience in a given social context, an individual determines – whether explicitly or implicitly – which social roles are contextually appropriate. The self that is constructed is therefore the result of the influence of the collective expectations of social agents in that particular context.

Marwick and boyd use the term "networked audience" to describe the relationship between the self and the audience in social networking sites. They argue that "the networked audience is unidentified but contains familiar faces; it is both potentially public and personal" and that it "includes random, unknown individuals, but, unlike the broadcast audience, it has a presumption of personal authenticity and connection" (129). The difficulty with collapsing contexts comes from irreconcilable differences among roles in differentiated social contexts. Social expectations are contingent and context-specific and so too are the roles that address these expectations. Because of this roles often do not translate effectively across social contexts. Conflating roles without clear guidelines may lead to violations of decorum and, as John Richards pointed out in his blog, unintended consequences in one social context due to the adoption of roles in another. However, even though the lines among context-specific audiences have been blurred by new digital media, new roles have not yet fully developed to deal with these shifting boundaries. Meyrowitz points out that "When two situations merge, we rarely get a simple combination of situations. Instead, a single new situation with a single new set of rules and roles often evolves" (44). The social roles adopted by a blogger are not just

combinations of traditional expectations of public and private roles; they are entirely new roles that address an entirely new social context.

Context collapse serves not only to highlight the fact that individual identity is the result of collective social processes but also that there is social and personal value in the compartmentalization of roles and social contexts. Different situations result in different exigences and audiences that need to be addressed differently. We attribute different meanings to different situations; however, meanings are not inherent to subjects or objects but are "social products" that "as creations are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact" (Blumer 5). Identity – the construction and perception of the self by ourselves and others – is contingent upon the shared cultural expectations of a given situation or environment. Identity is relational; it cannot exist entirely independent of social interaction with other identities.

The self is constructed based on perceived similarities and differences to other subjects within a social context conceived of as audience expectations. Jenkins expounds upon the relationship between identity and society when he says that

If identification is a necessary prerequisite for human life as we understand it, the reverse is also true. Individual identity – embodied in selfhood – is not a meaningful proposition in isolation from the human world of other people. Individuals are unique and variable, but selfhood is thoroughly socially constructed: in the process of primary and subsequent socialization, and in the ongoing interaction during which individuals define and redefine themselves and others, throughout their lives. (40)

The production of individual identity – the self – is dependent upon social context in terms of both relation and process. We draw upon shared cultural scripts and determine audience expectations to form normative ranges of expectations as to what is and isn't contextually

appropriate given the social circumstances. At the same time, there is an ongoing process of social interaction as social scripts evolve and adapt that affects how we relate to each other and consequently how we construct our identities. Jenkins purposely and purposefully uses the term "identification" instead of "identity" to emphasize the processual nature of identity (5).

Blogs emphasize this ongoing process of validation and reciprocity between the self and the collective through engaging with the expectations of the audience. Marwick and boyd's networked audience "has a clear way to communicate with the speaker through the network" which in turn "influences how speakers respond and what content they create in the future" (129). This is not radically different from face-to-face communication in offline contexts in which we respond to each other through dialogue and conversation. The difference in online social contexts such as blogs results largely from the new scope and scale of context collapse where previously discrete audiences have now been given greater access to social contexts that were formerly denied to them or at least had more established rules governing their access. Though blogs exist in a public context, the roles adopted by bloggers do not necessarily conform to the social expectations of a public audience, nor should they necessarily.

For example, "Intimate conversations can be overheard on buses, philosophical ones in cafes, and playful ones in the park. The target audience is not the public at large, but those for whom the topics of discussion matter" (boyd 2006). As boyd points out, maintaining the distinctions between private and public social contexts is based on socially accepted expectations. Even when in public spaces, there can still be socially constructed expectations of a private or more limited audience. It is possible and necessary to compartmentalize social roles. Though some would argue that the blog and the Internet at large are purely public spaces, "even in the public world of blogging, there is an understanding of a private body. By entering a public square, we do not expect to be molested; likewise, in blogging, we do not

expect to be attacked simply because we are in the public" (2006). What matters is not the space where we adopt these roles but rather the social validation of the roles we adopt from a context-appropriate audience. Roles are perceptual models that define the boundaries of behaviour through the assertion of collectively agreed-upon expectations. These expectations for blogs, however, are not yet as fully developed as other social contexts, and so there is less consensus—or at least overlap—in these perceptual models.

Andrew Weigert, J. Smith Teitge, and Dennis Teitge explain that a "role can be described as *expectations* that have been initiated by validated identities" (40 emphasis in original). The key here when considering the collaborative aspect of the self is validation. We act in ways that we perceive are accepted and with the expectation that in turn that assertion of selfhood will be validated by others who perceive us in relatively the same way. A police officer acts as he perceives a police officer should act given the social context and has a certain set of socially constructed and internalized expectations as to how others should respond and reciprocate toward him in relation to that role. In the same way, a blogger might be similarly defined by adhering to expectations of how a blogger should act. The only problem is, as the blogger John Richards pointed out, is that those expectations are not yet as clearly defined, and there can be conflicting expectations that can lead not only to embarrassment or anxiety but more serious consequences as well.

The particular brand of context collapse facilitated by blogs emphasizes how individual identity is the result of collective processes. The concept of community that Miller and Sheperd pointed to as part of the blogging ideology is clearly evident in the blog *Atheist Revolution*:

One of the great things about the way the web works is that those of us who link to one another are interconnected. This means that what benefits one of us is likely to benefit all of us. Think about it—if a blog links to you, then helping that blog attract more

visitors means that more people are likely to find you as well. This should give all of us a powerful incentive to promote other blogs. (vjack, "Maximizing Reciprocity")

The author, vjack, is talking specifically about increasing traffic (i.e., the quantity and frequency of people visiting a blog or other online media) for one's blog. Though this increase in traffic is not necessarily the goal of every blogger, vjack's point about connection to a larger community and reciprocity has much wider connotations in the construction of identity in online contexts. In another post, vjack goes on to explain that "One of the effective ways of increasing traffic to your blog and being a good citizen of the blogging community is to promote posts on other blogs that link to you." This is because, vjack reasons, public recognition of another blogger through linking or upvoting (i.e., giving a blog or blog post a positive rating, usually through the use of integrated voting buttons) might, in turn, result in a similar, reciprocal recognition from that other blogger, which, again, increases traffic for both blogs (vjack, "Blog Tips").

What's significant to note is how the author frames this reciprocity as "being a good citizen of the blogging community." There is a recognition of the community involvement in the validation not just of other blogs but also other bloggers. In relation to social context, validation is the process by which roles are reinforced through a collaboration of collective agents. In describing what he refers to as the "internal-external dialectic," Jenkins points out that "what people think about us is no less significant than what we think about ourselves. It is not enough simply to assert an identity; that assertion must also be validated, or not, by those with whom we have dealings. *Identity is never unilateral*" (42 emphasis in original). In this way, the self is in constant collaboration with others. We are involved in a continual process of interpretation as the roles we adopt are evaluated both by ourselves and by others in relation to their adherence to the expectations of a given social context. For vjack, one metric of the validation of the social roles adopted by bloggers is through an increase in the quantity of

collective recognition from a wide audience and also, as he later points out, an appropriate audience.

In a post titled "How to Link to Content Without Promoting It" vjack addresses an important dichotomy in considering how the self is constructed:

Links (i.e., URLs) are what makes the web great. We love them, use them regularly, and depend on them for all sorts of things. But once in awhile, we run into problems with our use of links. There are two problems associated with sharing a link to a site you do not wish to promote on your blog or social media accounts (e.g., Twitter, Facebook), both of which are solvable with a little effort:

1. Sharing the link will drive traffic to the site (i.e., when someone reading your content clicks the link, it will take them to the site and boost the site's traffic).
2. Sharing the link will give the site a boost in search engine rankings. (vjack, "How to Link")

Here, vjack makes a very crucial distinction between engagement and validation. It is analogous to the same distinction that so many in the news media fail to make between depiction and advocacy whenever they try to establish a causal relationship between violent content in movies and video games and the violent behaviour of individuals that make up (a very small part of) its audience. In his specific role as an atheist blogger, vjack makes explicit mention numerous times on his blog that though he does not wish to endorse religious beliefs he feels it is also equally important to engage in effective, rational discourse about religion. He wishes to engage with others without necessarily validating their adopted roles.

The process of validation is complicated by the fact that "Although people have (some) control over the signals about themselves that they send to others, we are all at a disadvantage in that we cannot ensure either their 'correct' reception or interpretation, or know with certainty

how they are received or interpreted" (Jenkins 42). In the blog post above, vjack addresses two particular methods of validation in online contexts: increasing traffic and boosting the rankings used by search engines such as Google to determine the hierarchy of displayed search results. Just as in offline contexts, we are not always aware of the ways that our behaviours based on context-specific role expectations will be interpreted by others or if our interpretation of the roles we adopt is attuned to the interpretations of others. Later in this blog post, vjack outlines technical strategies to address the context-specific methods of validation he outlined in order to develop a sense of agency in the validation process. This also serves to highlight that the flow of validation is not unidirectional. Any expression of validation for the role of another is also a form of self-validation, which is why it seems important to vjack and other bloggers to address these sorts of online social constraints. In visiting blogs and other online contexts that espoused philosophical assertions and roles apparently contrary to their own, they were inadvertently contributing to the collective validation of those assertions; however, there also seems to be an underlying anxiety that this contribution would reflect on their own identities. The roles that we choose to validate for others in turn influence our own roles and the perception and validation thereof.

This is significant because the emergence of the self is the result of the internalization of roles based on validation. As "the identity becomes validated and internalized, and one takes on this 'new' identity to add to and synthesize with a growing repertoire of identities" (Weigert et al. 41). The process of validation represents the progression of identity from the collective to the individual. Roles and expectations are social constructs that exist independently from and exterior to the self. As an individual adopts specific roles in relation to the context-specific expectations, they in turn are validated and re-validated and in the process become internalized thereby contributing to the ongoing construction of self.

According to Weigert et al. "From the social constructionist perspective, self is viewed as emergent, as a 'selfing' process, whereby an individual both shapes and is shaped by the situational and cultural contexts within which social interaction takes place" (40). The construction of an individual identity is not the work of a single individual. The self is a combination of various social scripts that are adopted or asserted by an individual and those which are imposed, enforced, or reinforced by other social agents. An individual identity is formed through the processes of assertion, reciprocation, and validation of social roles. The self is "the evolving, self-aware production of a series of interactional relationships that lead to the development of the sense of individuality over the life course" (40). Individual identity marks the border between consciousness and self-consciousness. Above all "we see that identity is a system based on one's own reflexive view of self, perceptions of the expectations or response of others (reflected images), and subsequent reactions to shared reality or 'validation'"(40-41). The self is based on an ongoing reflexive process as it continually positions itself and is positioned in relation to others. A large part of individual agency involves taking an active part in the process even though the outcome – what aspects of the self are validated and how the self is perceived – is largely beyond our control.

An even more explicit form of the collective influence in the construction of the self in a blog is the guest post, where one blogger will submit content for an entire post for the blog of another individual. In a post titled "Intermittent Blogging," the author of the blog *Reason Being* writes that

I have no intention of closing down this blog and every intention of writing daily by late Spring. In the meantime, I will only be able to make sporadic postings. I apologize for that, and look forward to interacting with you all again daily – for that is what makes this so enjoyable! (Richards)

One of the first comments to this post is from a user going by the name of Recovering Agnostic who responds "Would you be interested in the occasional guest post, just to keep things ticking over here? I can usually find a moment to turn something out, either to a brief or just whatever's been going through my head." The author of the blog then readily accepts, expressing admiration for the commenter's blog. There is no offline analogy for this type of social interaction. It's not the same as having a supply teacher or walking a mile in someone else's shoes or trading places with a friend at work. The blog is a social context that allows bloggers to adopt specific roles, yet it is also a manifestation of those roles. It allows for the construction of self, but at the same time it is also a part of that construction. To invite another to contribute to one's construction of self bespeaks a certain level of intimacy and trust, especially since blogs – and this blog in particular – are so closely attributed to individual people. In Marwick and boyd's conception of the networked audience, they assert that "Audience members take turns creating and producing content, and in this 'many-to-many' model the network constantly centers on who is talking, responding, or replying" (129). Through practices such as hosting posts from guest bloggers, blogs demonstrate how deeply the interconnectedness between the individual and the collective runs.

The other important component in relation to the social construction of individual identity that blogs highlight is the importance of language. Though they contain a variety of rich media, the bulk of the content of modern blogs is typically some form of long or short prose. According to Smith and Watson identities "are constructed. They are in language. They are discursive. They are not essential – born, inherited, or natural" (39). Language is a collective, collaborative process and all social interaction must be mediated by it and transmitted through it. The above case of one blogger guest-blogging for another is a prime example of how identity is bound up in language and constituted through linguistic processes.

Language is at once both subject and object. It is used to describe lived experience, but at the same time "experience is discursive, embedded in the language of everyday life and the knowledge produced at everyday sites" (32). We construct language but we are also constructed through language.

Consider the following passage from the blogger Godless Girl who writes about the therapeutic nature of the blog versus traditional offline autobiographical works such as the diary or the journal.

Reading a journal was an investment in someone's inner life. You saw an unashamed, unapologetic view of their thoughts and feelings, and there was a conversation and exchange that followed... **So what happened to the intimacy in my writing?** Did it go away when I limited myself to being "Godless Girl" and writing an "atheist blog?" There are a truck load of atheist bloggers about who usually talk through the same subjects and news bulletins. Nothing is wrong with that, and obviously I enjoy it myself or I wouldn't do it... I don't have a paper journal anymore. I am not interested in keeping one at this time. What I need is the medicinal experience that sending my words out into the universe can provide. Even if it bores a reader or three to absolute insanity, it would be good for me. ("Writing" emphasis in original)

Both a journal and a blog are highly autobiographical practices. They are primarily involved in the construction of the self, and as part of the tradition of the written word, they both represent a very deliberate and purposeful expression of self. Though the typical organization of blog posts in reverse chronological order is meant to evoke a sense of immediacy, most of them are after all "labored or crafted... rather than a quick recording of one's experience" (Lindemann 364). The language used in a blog, therefore, is typically used with a high degree of self-consciousness, and the roles that are enacted by bloggers are incredibly self-reflexive, both in

the written language that bloggers use to express themselves and the available context-specific social scripts that guide behaviour and role validation. Here, Godless Girl demonstrates that self-consciousness and self-reflexivity. She views journal writing as an intimate experience that presents the self in an "unashamed," "unapologetic" manner. At the same time, she confesses that she no longer keeps a paper journal instead opting for a blog, which by her own implications is not nearly as intimate. Again, this demonstrates an awareness of audience, which for blogs is still problematic due to context collapse. It also indicates an interpretation of the kinds of selves that are produced in blogs. Godless Girl implies that the type of self enacted in a blog is somehow less intimate or "raw" than that enacted in a journal; however, at the same time she sees a certain value in blogging that she does not attribute to journal-writing. There is a tension at play here between an interpretation of blogging tinged with the essentialist viewpoint of some "true" or "real" self and the obvious appeal that blogging offers, even though the self constructed in a blog is viewed to be more mediated and less "true."

Drawing on Clay Calvert, Miller and Sheperd argue that "The blogging subject engages in self-disclosure, and... the blog works to bind together in a recognizable rhetorical form the four functions of self-disclosure: self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control" ("Blogging as Social Action"). Because of its context-specific constraints, blogs make explicit these four functions that in offline contexts would be implicit or unconscious. They highlight that the construction of self through the enactment of roles must necessarily be mediated by some form of language, which itself is always a function of the collective. So any expression of self must also originate with the collective. Joan Scott writes that "Treating the emergence of a new identity as a discursive event is not to introduce a new form of linguistic determinism, nor to deprive subjects of agency. It is to refuse a separation between 'experience' and language and to insist instead on the productive quality of discourse"

(34). The symbolic exchange of language is a means of organizing lived experience into patterns. Yet language is not merely representative or mimetic. Through her act of disclosure on her blog, Godless Girl is not merely writing about herself; she is writing herself. There is no "true" self that can be uncovered as she seems to be suggesting in her analysis of journal and blog writing. Language—like identity—is a process that attributes meaning and value. It is not just the transmission of information but a mode of interpretation. It is through this process of interpretation that we frame and construct our experiences and our selves.

David Herman uses the term "storyworlds" to describe "mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate—or make a deictic shift—as they work to comprehend a narrative" (9). Language provides a "mental model" through which we interpret our network of lived experiences. It is a function of the collective that becomes internalized in each individual. As Smith and Watson assert, consciousness "is always implicated in the processes of social exchange. Since social groups have their languages, each member of the group becomes conscious in and through that language. Thus, autobiographical narrators come to consciousness of who they are, of what identifications and differences they are assigned, or what identities they might adopt through the discourses that surround them" (39). As we have seen with the blogs and bloggers explored so far, the construction of the self is a process of self-actualization. Social context and language do not just provide structural elements with which we enact roles and construct the self; they also provide the cognitive building blocks for how we perceive the world. We come to consciousness through collective, social, and linguistic processes. Identity, then, is not just a classification and categorization of similarities and differences but a cognitive mode. We come to consciousness as we construct the self. Therefore, the roles enacted in blogs and other online

contexts are not less substantial than those in offline contexts; they all contribute to the self-consciousness of the individual. What we do and what we write in blogs matters.

Chapter 3

Collapsing Contexts

I lost my job today. My direct boss and the human resources representative pulled me into one of three relatively tiny conference rooms and informed me that The Company no longer had any use for me. Essentially, they explained, they didn't like what I had expressed on my website. I got fired because of dooce.com.

I guess I could be bitter. I mean, I defended myself rather studiously, explaining that I had never mentioned the company or any employee by name, and that I had exaggerated several characteristics of the personalities showcased in a few of my posts.

But I really don't feel like I have the right to be all that bitter. I made my bed; I'll lie in it, to quote the inimitable Courtney Love. I understood the risk when I wrote certain things about certain figures that key members of my company might discover my website and pooh-pooh my endeavors.

Two weeks ago an anonymous person emailed every vice president of my company to inform them that I had written unsavory things on my personal website. I have yet to determine who sent the email or why this anonymous someone would hide behind a false email address. Conversely, I have devised several ways to torture said anonymous person when his/her identity surfaces. (Armstrong, "Collecting Unemployment")

In February 2002, notable mommy blogger Heather B. Armstrong was fired from her job for content she produced in her blog that referenced her then-company and coworkers. Though, as she points out, she made no explicit reference to the company or specific co-workers and her depictions were often caricatured versions of individuals, her employers nonetheless felt that

the role she enacted in the online context of her blog was sufficient grounds to terminate her employment in an offline context. In a very clear case of context collapse, Armstrong suffered the consequences of the merging of audiences from two distinct social contexts without clearly defined expectations to govern roles and behaviour. Meyrowitz writes that "By changing the boundaries of social situations, electronic media do not simply give us quicker or more thorough access to events and behaviors. They give us, instead, new events and new behaviors" (43). One problem with the collapsing of contexts by new digital media such as blogs is that they create tension between potentially conflicting roles normally enacted by an individual in different social contexts and their related expectations. The other problem, as Meyrowitz points out, is that the collapse of contexts eventually leads to the formation of entirely new social contexts and new roles that are not just the sum totals of combining previous contexts but unique in and of themselves. Conflicts arise when expectations from one social contexts is applied to evaluate and validate the roles enacted by individuals in a different or emergent social context.

Individual identity is the amalgamation of countless different roles enacted in countless different social contexts. Jenny Davis explains that

Social actors hold many roles throughout the life course and simultaneously at any given moment within the life course. For instance, one may be a mother, sister, athlete, student, and exotic dancer. For each role, the social actor maintains particular identity meanings guiding who s/he is, and a network of others who (typically) share these expectations. Although the expectations across roles may coincide neatly, it is most often the case that each role bears slightly different meanings, and in some cases, highly contradictory ones. ("Context Collapse")

We enact different roles in different contexts, but each role still informs all of the others. There is continuity of self across social contexts; however, Davis points out that there is also a necessity and value in compartmentalizing roles and maintaining boundaries between roles and social contexts. Roles and audiences are constructed to address particular exigences with particular interpretations and strategies. Armstrong's role as a blogger was incompatible with the social expectations of her employer who interpreted the blog as a purely public context and assumed a purely public audience. However, social contexts are never entirely public or private. Armstrong herself ironically points this out when she notes that the individual who informed her employer about her blog did so anonymously, maintaining the very same role compartmentalization that he denied her.

In the same blog post, Armstrong goes on to pose several insightful questions about the nature of identity in relation to social context, including the following:

1. Should I lose my job over what I have written on my personal website, especially if I have made sure not to mention specific places, persons, or events by name?
2. At what point does my personal website, regardless of what I've published on the site, affect my professional life? If I am not responsible for the two colliding (meaning, an anonymous person tips off my employer that I run a personal weblog), is it right that my employer should condemn me for expressing personal dissatisfaction? Would it be any different if someone found a notepad on which I had scribbled things about my job and turned it in to my boss?
3. What recourse do I have? ("Collecting Unemployment")

With these questions, Armstrong directly addresses the particular form of context collapse between online and offline social contexts facilitated by new digital media. Should roles enacted through blogs by individuals impact or influence the interpretations of their other roles

in other social contexts? There are valid arguments to be made either way; however it is evident that role expectations for emergent online contexts have not yet been clearly negotiated. What Armstrong's situation emphasized was that identity is constituted as context-specific and the validation of identity is based on gauging whether behaviours associated with particular social scripts are context-appropriate. Though there are no easy answers to questions of context and identity, it is important to consider that "Social reality does not exist in the *sum* of people's behaviors, but in the overall *pattern* of situated behaviors. Therefore, when the dividing line between two distinct situations is moved or removed, social reality will change" (Meyrowitz 42 emphasis in original). That is to say, social roles are validated differently and to varying degrees based on their relation to specific social contexts. Identity is relational and based upon the perception and interpretation of adherence to or violation of relevant social norms. But social norms and expectations are not uniform across contexts and so the same role enacted by the same individual will be assigned different relative values based on their appropriateness to the situation.

In the ongoing dialogue and social negotiations surrounding the boundaries of identities constructed in online spaces, it is necessary to acknowledge that context collapse is not a new phenomenon. Alice Marwick and Nicole Ellison note, for example, that "Mourners experience the desire for openness and publicness, as well as tendencies towards communication contexts that are more private and closed" (379). Context collapse has, however, become "exacerbated by the affordances of social media and dynamics of networked publics, such that the relative segmentation of earlier times becomes more salient, as the relative blending of networked others in the present era takes on default status" (Davis, "Context Collapse"). The ways in which digital media break down boundaries between contexts bring into sharper focus the negotiations of and between contexts. These social negotiations are an ongoing process; they

are not a pre-existing condition for the establishment of societies but established by societies and through social interchange. Blogs allow for greater dissemination of information both within and between social contexts. The issue then becomes how we negotiate the flow of information about ourselves and our established roles.

Helen Nissenbaum outlines a conception of privacy within the framework of what she calls "contextual integrity" and asserts that "What people care most about is not simply *restricting* the flow of information but ensuring that it flows *appropriately*" (2 emphasis in original). Privacy in this sense represents less a state of being and more a sense of agency. According to boyd, "Privacy is not about restricting information; it is about revealing appropriate information in a given context" ("The Politics of 'Real Names'" 30). The collaborative self is engaged in constant negotiations with other agents in various social contexts to determine the appropriateness of the flow of personal information both within and between social contexts. Privacy, then, is not an interior process, but a collective one. In each case it is determined whether and to what degree "context specific informational norms" (Nissenbaum 130) have been violated or upheld in any given social interaction. In Armstrong's case, there was a breakdown in these negotiations. In another blog post, she details the strategies that she had used to ensure the compartmentalization of her identity within different social contexts:

I had never named the company on my website, nor had I ever revealed names of the people whose personalities or characteristics I had used in some of the sketches I had written of co-workers. My purpose in writing about my job WAS NOT to slander the company or to endanger the integrity of their product. ("This is Going to Be A Long One")

It is important to note here that Armstrong is referencing an interview she gave to the Washington Post over a year after she was fired for the content of her blog. She also cites potential legal ramifications as a motivation for continuing her policy of nondisclosure about the specifics of the company she had worked for. Whatever the reasoning, it demonstrates that she determined – based on her interpretation and perception of cultural expectations – what the context specific informational norms were for her particular situation.

Determining the appropriate flow of information among and between social agents, then, plays an important role in the construction of the self. Though drawing on collective narrative norms and needing collaborative validation, the self still needs a sense of agency in order to assert itself. It is necessary to maintain the dichotomy that Nissenbaum identified between maintaining an appropriate flow of information and limiting the flow information. This distinction is especially important in an age where restricting the spread of information is becoming increasingly difficult and, in many cases, unrealistic. Cases like that of Armstrong highlight one of the key battlegrounds where issues of identity are colliding with current conceptions of privacy and the extent to which social contexts can and should influence each other. What Armstrong's situation represented was an example of "role conflict," which Biddle argues "is said to occur when someone is subjected to two or more contradictory expectations whose stipulations the person cannot simultaneously meet in behavior" (160). Although Armstrong had compartmentalized her social roles, the anonymous tipster who alerted her employer in an offline context about her role in the online context of her blog effectively facilitated a collapse of contexts and entangled her in a type of role conflict specific to the digital age. Whether rightly or wrongly, Armstrong's employers determined that the conflicting expectations of her roles as blogger and employee could not be clearly reconciled in their interpretation of the situational norms. Even though Armstrong seemed capable of

compartmentalizing her identity, her employers apparently could not and instead chose to invalidate both conflicting roles instead of evaluating each role as contextually relevant.

Nissenbaum identifies three key issues related to context specific informational norms associated with social network sites, a categorization in which she includes blogs. First, "the typical sequence begins with individuals posting information about themselves; later, when this information is discovered, it gets them into trouble" (59). The second has to do with "the near-universal practice of posting content about others on one's Web page." (60) The third issue revolves around "the capacity to share and disseminate information but also relies on capacities to monitor and track" (62). At the core of these issues is the tension between potential role conflicts as blogs and other digital media contribute to the further collapsing of contexts. The problem with maintaining the appropriate flow of information in a post-digital age is that we now live in an economy of information. On the one hand, privacy is about ensuring the appropriate flow of information, and on the other hand there is a system that has turned it into a commodity. Nissenbaum writes that "Compounding and complementing powerful capacities to spread information are the equally powerful tools of search and retrieval that enable harvesting, targeted investigation, and aggregation of findings into 'digital dossiers'" (63). Not only do digital media seem to hold powerful motivations for us to post as much information about ourselves as possible, they are also agents of near-infinite dissemination. In other words, we are posting everything with the potential to be seen or heard by everybody. In shaping social expectations for emerging contexts, delineating which audiences or—in the case of blogs and other new digital media, which parts of the networked audience—have the authority to validate certain roles is also a factor in determining the context specific informational norms.

The merging of audiences and negotiations surrounding informational norms in blogs is bound up in the particular social expectations of digital culture. As Sarah Pedersen points out

"Blogging was initially restricted to those who had the necessary programming skills and thus many of the early blogs were related to IT and the Internet in some way" (2). It was an elite environment that few had access to like a clubhouse or a boardroom. Even as the Internet expanded for public consumption, the cost and availability of the technology still kept the numbers manageable enough to maintain the feel of an exclusive community (Rak 171). The struggle to establish clearly defined social rules for digital social contexts and the seemingly constant shifts in social expectations began in true in the early 1990s. The September of 1993 would prove to be a crucial turning point in the development of Internet culture and the culture of new digital media in general. In the days of Usenet—the precursor to the Internet as we know it today—"September was a time when large numbers of newcomers had to be assimilated into the existing Net culture" (Grossman 10). Every September, thousands of college and university students gained access to Usenet through their educational institutions, which were early adopters of this emergent technology. As early and prolific Usenet user Tom Seidenberg put it, September was

The time when college students return to school and start to post stupid questions, repost MAKE MONEY FAST, break rules of netiquette, and just generally make life on Usenet more difficult than at other times of the year. Unfortunately, it has been September since 1993. With the growing sensationalism surrounding the "Information-Superhighway" in the United States, the current September is likely to last into the next century. (qtd in Grossman 10)

These early online pioneers sought somewhat ironically to establish clearly defined and fairly static boundaries to a social context of which they considered themselves to be the legitimate authority. However, what the so-called Eternal September (knowyourmeme.com) represented

was not a resistance to social boundaries and shared expectations, but a process of ongoing negotiation of how those boundaries were drawn and those expectations were managed.

The influx of new Usenet users and the perpetuation of September were given another significant boost in March 1994 when the then-leading Internet services company America Online (AOL) allowed its users to storm the burgeoning cyberspace in record numbers (Grossman 32). The original culture of Usenet users found itself unable to compete with the sheer volume of new users in the sense of maintaining the established "correct" expectations of online social contexts, including the finer points of "netiquette." As the Usenet elite dogmatically clung to their way of doing things what they failed to realize was that social interaction is a process and the social scripts that guide the construction of individual identity are collectively determined and exist independently of any individual. The original Usenet users were engaged in a context collapse of their own as the legions of college students and AOL users began establishing new expectations and social norms, and the authority to validate online identities shifted and expanded to a more diverse networked audience. The problem (if one could call it a problem) was that the Internet—as with all subsequent digital media—was far more fluid and dynamic than any offline social context.

Not only the influx of new users but the mutability of the medium would make it impossible for any minority vanguard to uphold a static set of social expectations against the dissemination of authority to negotiate and validate social norms and expectations in online contexts. That's not to say that relatively stable underlying social scripts cannot develop. However, the real issue for emergent digital cultures is not that they have to deal with the constant influx of new users with their new and varied notions of proper social interaction—not to mention the differentiation of cliques or subcultures—but instead the rate at which social practices are evolving because of it. Perhaps it is not that social contexts created by new digital

media that are inherently unstable; perhaps they merely seem unstable when interpreted through the social framework of offline social contexts.

The social contexts produced by the Internet, while at first deceptively similar to those that had preceded it, are decidedly unlike their predecessors in several fundamental respects. A fallacy occurred – and in some circles is still occurring – when people conceived of and theorized blogs as online journals (Rak 167) and tried to apply the same expectations of information norms. Armstrong acknowledges this process of constant negotiations in establishing social boundaries and expectations:

If you take a look at my archives right now you'll see that they only go back to June 2001, but I started this website several months earlier in February 2001. When my family found my website I took down most of the things I had published up to that point because I realized that almost all of it was much too painful for my family to endure, and I valued my relationship with them more than I valued the freedom to publish my insanity in public. I think that is what's called growing the hell up. ("Oh Canada, eh?")

Unlike her former employer, Armstrong seems able to differentiate between social roles. She negotiated with the collective agents of a particular social context – in this case her family – and determined the context-appropriate boundaries to compartmentalize her different roles and resolve the conflicting expectations. This form of self-censorship is not necessarily the only (or correct) answer, but it seems to have been effective for Armstrong in this case. There are currently no clearly defined social scripts to determine those identity strategies; however, as blogs and other new digital media extend their influence and norms are established, the provisional or transitional expectations that now govern the construction of self in online contexts will eventually stabilize or become more widely acknowledged. Issues that arise now

are about negotiating the overlap between social contexts, to what extent accountability transfers across those boundaries, and whether or not there is a neutral zone to be established as a buffer for potential future conflict.

Armstrong's case is an example of the conflicts arising from the current poorly defined boundaries of privacy in new digital social contexts. In part, this conflict arises from continually evolving expectations of privacy based on a constantly shifting foundation of technological innovation and social expectation. In an age following the rise of the Internet to cultural prominence as well as other technological developments such as the ubiquity of security cameras, cultural developments such as (so-called) reality TV, and legislation such as the Patriot Act in the United States, "we expect to be watched, and concomitantly, we expect to be able to watch others" (Calvert 94). Perhaps the problem arises because although we expect to be watched, we do not expect to be watched *as much as* others.

Jerry Holkins from the popular gaming website *Penny Arcade* offers an analysis of the case of Carly McKinney (AKA Crunk_Bear), a high school teacher in Aurora, Colorado who was put on paid leave after Tweeting provocative pictures of herself as well as comments relating to drug use (Ferner, "#FreeCrunkBear"). Holkins' analysis is a personal treatise of sorts on expectations of informational norms in online social contexts and sheds light both on Armstrong's particular case and blogging and other online practices in general. The first point that Holkins makes is that "The Twitter account that undid her [McKinney] was, to hear her tell it, a 'parody' but it's not entirely clear what it was a parody of, unless it was a commentary on how you can fuck your life up when you forget that there is only one Internet" ("A Teachable Moment"). Traditional separation and delineation between social contexts does not apply to emergent media forms. As Meyrowitz pointed out, the merging of social contexts does not lead to a combination of those social contexts and their incumbent expectations and roles, but

completely new contexts, roles, and expectations. If new digital media have contributed anything to society it is a re-evaluation and a breaking down of boundaries between social contexts. This merging is further complicated by the affordances of digital media. Unlike previous media like the telephone, blogs allow for a much wider audience and much greater and faster dissemination of information. However, "the networked audience," such as that of blogs, "combines a person's social connections, revealing the fiction of discrete face-to-face audiences" (Marwick and boyd 129). That is to say that the social boundaries of blogs are arbitrarily determined and constructed but no more so than the boundaries between offline social contexts. Blogs are (potentially) globally accessible by anybody with Internet-enabled media (e.g., computers, iPods, smart phones, tablets, etc.). Although we may interact with other individuals in a clearly defined social context such as a blog, the fact remains that we are simultaneously interacting with other individuals on the Internet as a whole and engaging a theoretical audience of everyone.

This is tied to another important point Holkins makes: "I treat the Internet like a fucking asp, like a dangerous reptile—my comfort sole squashed down hard on the snakeneck... Your security is only as trustworthy as the worst person on Earth" ("A Teachable Moment"). Though highly cynical and somewhat debatable, it is still a valuable observation about social interaction in online contexts. We tend to make the worst decisions when we assume or envision only the best of all possible outcomes. Bloggers tend to envision an ideal audience. As we saw in discussions of online anonymity, conceiving of a virtual audience is a necessary component to producing a narrative of the self, though it can be a double-edged sword. In discussing the issue of trust as it relates to the creation of identity in blogs, De Laat writes that "On the one hand, seemingly against all the odds, relations characterized by trust may be observed between virtual partners. On the other, such trust may be created in an unorthodox fashion: trust is

simply assumed, not inferred from available evidence" (57). One of the features of many offline social contexts – especially those involving face-to-face interaction – is that there are more cues with which to establish a baseline for determining the trustworthiness (or lack thereof) of one's audience. Though there is, of course, no foolproof method for determining the relative trustworthiness of an audience, offline social contexts offer more verifiable quantitative data per capita than online contexts. De Laat goes on to say that "By sustained writing about the events, thoughts, and emotions of one's life, one is able to discover and develop who one 'is.' On the other hand, there is a need to get to know others, to develop a community of sympathizers. Otherwise there would be no point in publishing one's diary in the open" (60). The issue with constructing an identity on a blog is that while the amount of social cues to determine the relative trustworthiness of a potential audience can be far diminished compared to offline contexts, that determination is crucial in eliciting what kind of self is constructed and presented.

Conceptions of trust and audience are necessary in determining collectively validated social scripts. Armstrong posted on her blog, *dooce*, with a certain assumption of trust in her audience. In this case, the trust was that the roles enacted in this specific online context would not be validated (or invalidated) in the same way in offline contexts and that some degree of compartmentalization of identity could be maintained. The expectation of trust was that either her employers were unaware of what was being posted on her blog or that if they were aware it would not be given the same weight in one social context as it would be given in another. De Laat argues "that public blogging, if undertaken in consciousness of the risks, is to be interpreted as a case of secondary trust: authors simply assume that at least some others out there will be moved by their display of intimacies and react accordingly" (61). Though De Laat is specifically talking about community building in online contexts, his assertion is equally as

relevant to the discussion of role conflict occurring as a result of clashing expectations between online and offline social contexts.

Problems arise in digital social contexts because unlike offline social contexts, where individuals interact face to face, the entirety of potential audiences of the self is not always readily apparent. Nor are they as homogeneous as audiences in offline social contexts. This is not to say that there may not be diversity or dissent among audiences in offline contexts. However, in traditional offline contexts the roles of the audience are usually more clearly contextually defined in scope. Whether talking to family members at home or addressing an auditorium full of students and their parents at a graduation ceremony, the nature of the audience is determined by the context as is the nature of the collaboration between the self and the audience. De Laat's argument about assumptions of trust based on the perceived potential for the positive validation of an identity does not account for the mobilization of agents across social contexts and especially between those online and those offline. In the case of Armstrong, her assumption of trust in her potential online audience did not account for the crosspollination of information across social contexts. Because traditional offline contexts are so ingrained, judging what constitutes appropriate flows of information is easier because we can often determine – although sometimes only in a very general sense – audience intent. As in any social context, assumptions about audience intent on a blog – especially assumptions of positive intent – can lead to gross violations in the flow of personal information.

Some level of assumption, though, is necessary for interacting within social contexts. Assumptions are predictive models of expected audience response. Within the larger context of the Internet, however, traditional models cannot account for the intentions – general or otherwise – of such a potentially wide-ranging audience. Holkins' point that "You can get away with a lot if you don't tell people you did something, or, like, take pictures of you doing those

things and then distribute them globally" ("A Teachable Moment") underlines the fact that the boundaries between social contexts are not inherent but constructed and negotiated. While it has always been true that control over the flow of personal information becomes more complex the larger the social context, it becomes complicated even further not only by the increased scope of the potential audience online but also specifically because of the nature of online contexts as a new form of public privacy. Privacy is an illusion in the sense that it is constructed through social interchange and social consensus of context specific informational norms. In offline contexts the illusion is easier to maintain because of both the ways identity is mediated and the established social norms. Benjamin Franklin had it right when he so pithily observed that "Three can keep a secret if two of them are dead" (1735). With each individual who is allowed access to the personal information of another, whether consensually or not, the risk of a violation of contextual norms increases. It is only through ongoing discourse that social expectations for emergent contexts like blogs can be established.

Finally, Holkins points out the interaction between social contexts: "I'm not of the opinion that you need to go to jail or get fired for this kind of stuff, but I don't work for the school board, who can't get enough of shit like this... Adjudicating moral panics looks like work, and 'looking like they're working' is all these people ever do" ("A Teachable Moment"). The validation of social roles is complicated by the collapsing of social contexts which can affect the relative authority of social agents. There is also a parallel to be drawn here with the example of the Eternal September paradigm as outlined by Grossman. Just as the Usenet users felt unable to cope with the influx of new AOL users and unwilling to adapt to new social scripts, there are those caught up in trying to defend the traditional offline social scripts against an influx of new "users" of their own. As more and more people are interacting in online social contexts, they are increasingly challenging the dominant offline social narratives governing the

construction of self, specifically those relating to the balance between maintaining the continuity of self with the need to differentiate the roles and the relative value placed on them among numerous, increasingly transparent, and overlapping social contexts.

Just as Armstrong questioned the relative accountability of an individual across social contexts ("Collecting Unemployment"), there are issues related to the degree of responsibility that should be attributed to the self based on differentiated roles across social contexts. In her description of contextual integrity, Nissenbaum invokes Michael Walzer, who writes that "different social goods ought to be distributed for different reasons, in accordance with different procedures, by different agents" (6). That is to say, all social contexts were not created equal. There is not and should not be a direct, one-to-one correlation among the role expectations of differentiated social spheres. Walzer goes on to argue that "no citizen's standing in one sphere or with regard to one social good can be undercut by his standing in some other sphere, with regard to some other good" (19). This is especially significant when engaging with issues of online identity.

It is essentially the Bill Clinton Argument. In 1998, the then-president of the United States was embroiled in a political scandal and facing impeachment due to (later confirmed) allegations about an extramarital affair. In situating the blog within a cultural context, Miller and Sheperd argue that "The Clinton-Lewinsky scandal can be seen as a representative anecdote for a significant cultural trend in the 1990's, the weakening boundary between the public and the private and the expansion of celebrity culture to politics and beyond" ("Blogging as Social Action"). In terms of identity, the entire case could basically be boiled down to one question: Would the private actions of the man interfere with his role as president? In other words, were the "social goods" that were significant for an individual in one social context of any relevance in another? It is not necessarily important *that* agents in one social context are aware of the roles

adopted by their peers in other social contexts; what is of greater importance is *how* and *if* those roles are interpreted to have any relative value outside of the context in which they were adopted and who should have the social authority to validate or invalidate those roles.

Walzer goes even further as he outlines an equation to encompass his conception of social justice: "The critique of dominance and domination points toward an open-ended distributive principle. *No social good x should be distributed to men and women who possess some other good y merely because they possess y and without regard to the meaning of x*" (19 emphasis in original). A relevant corollary would be that neither should a social good be denied based on the same principle. Issues of social justice aside, the implications of Walzer's theories are important in a much broader sense. Despite Walzer's portrayal of the autonomy of social spheres—roughly equivalent to my conception of social contexts—the fact that he identifies the values of "social goods" as relative to the social sphere in which they are disseminated is extremely important in conceptualizing the collaborative self. The fact is that issues of social justice such as privacy in blogs and other online social contexts are more complex because no social context is truly autonomous from all others. What matters, then, is how we collectively define and interpret social expectations and how we balance an acknowledgement of the continuity of self with the need to compartmentalize context-specific roles.

What is needed now in this postmodern, hyper self-conscious age is a new approach to managing the flow of personal information and the social norms surrounding that flow based on the (increasingly accurate) assumption that everybody knows everything about everybody else or at least has that potential. Traditional expectations of privacy are no longer valid in the online age. From her About page at *dooce*, Armstrong highlights an important dichotomy in online informational norms:

In February 2001, I launched dooce.com as a place to write about pop culture, music, and my life as a single woman. I never expected more than a couple of dozen people to read it. A year later I was fired from my job for this website because I had written stories that included people in my workplace. My advice to you is BE YE NOT SO STUPID. Never write about work on the internet unless your boss knows and sanctions the fact that YOU ARE WRITING ABOUT WORK ON THE INTERNET. If you are the boss, however, you should be aware that when you order Prada online and then talk about it out loud that you are making it very hard for those around you to take you seriously.

Armstrong outlines several important points. The first is about maintaining a level of self-awareness of the social contexts and related expectations when adopting and enacting roles. In constructing identity there are ongoing negotiations between the self and the collective. In order to maintain a balance, these negotiations currently need to have explicit clauses to mitigate role conflict and context collapse and to address Walzer's theory of social capital. Armstrong makes it very clear with her caps-heavy paragraph that in order to maintain some kind of equilibrium among social contexts it is necessary to maintain an open dialogue with the relevant social agents, especially where the consequences could potentially be more severe. However, she also makes it very clear that expectations of privacy do not flow in only one direction. We can't have it both ways. It is highly illogical to argue for the termination of employment for the discussion of work-related subjects on a personal blog when people freely discuss subjects of a personal nature in the workplace.

Armstrong also makes the case for personal responsibility in relation to her firing: "But I really don't feel like I have the right to be all that bitter. I made my bed; I'll lie in it, to quote the inimitable Courtney Love. I understood the risk when I wrote certain things about certain

figures that key members of my company might discover my website and pooh-pooh my endeavors" ("Collecting Unemployment"). Though the construction of identity is a collective process and context specific informational norms are negotiated and maintained among social agents, as individuals we still have agency. Current social negotiations in regards to the compartmentalization of social roles are significant to address because "While temporary breakdowns lead only to confusion and disruption, however, permanent or long-term breakdowns lead to the birth of new behavior patterns" (Meyrowitz 44). Emergent social contexts and roles will eventually stabilize and become adopted social norms. Enabling dialogue surrounding these emergent expectations will help to facilitate that process.

Chapter 4

Mediated Selves

"When we read content, even on the Internet, it is only natural that we want it to be reliable and accurate. If we cannot trust the source, then we are unlikely to stick around. Trust matters." (vjack)

Blogs produce a unique blurring of the public and the private. They are an emergent social context with their own increasingly distinct roles and negotiated social expectations. Differentiated social contexts are constructed to meet specific exigences and so produce contextually-specific selves. The motivations and strategies for the construction of self through blogs are, therefore, both unique and necessary. Miller and Sheperd argue that "Because the personal form of the blog is what seems to both motivate and satisfy the readers and writers of blogs and thus to have particular evolutionary survival value, we suspect that the generic exigence that motivates bloggers is related less to the need for information than to the self and the relations between selves" ("Blogging as Social Action"). Part of what motivates blogging is self-elucidation and self-definition. The construction of self stems from collective social processes; however, each individual also comes to self-consciousness through the internalization of those processes. Constructing identity is at once an extremely public and incredibly intimate process, and so the differentiated roles enacted and validated in blogs can be seen as an attempt to reconcile these personal and communal needs.

Consider the following passage from a blog post titled "What I'd Like to say to my friends & family on Facebook and Twitter:"

What follows is what I would like to say to my Facebook friends specifically, and a few of my Twitter followers as well, I would do so, but I'm afraid I'd be left friendless by the

end of the day... So here it is for all of you to enjoy! I'm sure many of you have had similar experiences as well, so I hope some of you find this encouraging. (Voight)

This particular blogger seemingly seeks a paradoxical relationship with his imagined audience. He addresses the thoughts he would like to share to an audience he feels he cannot actually share them with. At the same time he is also addressing another audience with which he feels he can share these thoughts. There is a combination of desire for disclosure and the need for self-compartmentalization. Calvert sheds light on these tensions with the conception of "mediated exhibitionism" and "mediated voyeurism." Mediated voyeurism is "the consumption of revealing images of and information about others' apparently revealed and unguarded lives, often yet not always for purposes of entertainment... through the means of the mass media and the Internet" (Calvert 2). Mediated exhibitionism, on the other hand, is the willingness of individuals to become publically recognized objects and serves four functions: self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control (83). As the blogger vjack explains on his About page regarding his foray into blogging "I knew next to nothing about blogging but hoped that writing in such a forum might help me to organize my thoughts and eventually reach out to others." The difference between mediated exhibitionism and traditional notions of exhibitionism might be seen as the desire for disclosure versus the desire for exposure. As Calvert points out, mediated exhibitionism is a way to clarify and solidify notions of the self while at the same time building social relationships. The balance then becomes engaging in self-disclosure while still maintaining differentiated roles and mitigating context collapse.

In chronicling the findings from her "cyberethnographic" (39) study of personal mommy bloggers, Aimée Morrison outlines the primary exigences that elicit the construction of these blogs as "emotional release and the development of a satisfying and coherent group identity in

which to contextualize, and through which to adapt to, personal experience" (41). Morrison's description of this particular group of bloggers illustrates the functions served by mediated exhibitionism described by Calvert. Blogging is a way to self-reflexively construct an identity while at the same time developing social relationships to facilitate the process of social validation and establish a sense of agency. It is significant to note that "Personal mommy bloggers organize their writings around the intimate details of their private lives, expressing the greatest comfort in writing about the most personal topics" (41). We see, as Calvert suggests, that mediated exhibitionism is not about negative attention-seeking behaviour, but rather controlled disclosure for the purpose of organizing self-conception and self-perception by networking with a community. It is not surprising, then, that "the more that bloggers disclose about their personal lives, the more tightly bonded they feel to the communities in which they participate" (Morrison 41).

Interactions between the individual and the community are governed a great deal by audience expectations. As Marwick and boyd point out, "Every participant in a communicative act has an *imagined audience*" (115 emphasis in original) that functions as an organizational framework. By anticipating or extrapolating how an imagined audience will react to specific roles and behaviours based on their knowledge of social norms, individuals either implicitly or explicitly adjust their role enactment accordingly. Much like Paul De Laat's conception of trust in blogs (57), the blogging audience is assumed. Though an individual identity is constructed largely in relation to the expectations established by a collective audience, that audience is, in turn, at least partially constructed by the individual. We are at once shaped by our audience and a part of it. One of the issues for bloggers is managing the potential variance between the imagined audience and the actual audience of their blogs. In a medium such as a blog, which has a networked audience that allows social agents to have access to social contexts and roles

that may have previously been unavailable to them, the risk of context collapse is exacerbated. There are many strategies bloggers use to deal with this breaking down of social boundaries, but one of the most significant is the use of pseudonyms to compartmentalize roles for particular audiences. As Morrison points out in her study of personal mommy bloggers, "many bloggers do not share their legal names online, instead writing pseudonymously" (47).

Bloggers use pseudonyms to establish and maintain differentiated roles in different social contexts. To understand how bloggers use this strategy to manage their identities, it is important to understand the close link – and also difference – between pseudonymity and anonymity. In the earliest post in her blog archives, the blogger Godless Girl explains that

Yes, GodlessGirl.com is anonymous. You should be happy that I even admit my gender. Now you can send me love notes! When I was young and still quite stupid, I would spray my personal information and most intimate experiences into my blogs. Now that I have been freed from that internet adolescence, I am learning the value of biting my tongue. And yet, even as I keep some facts to myself, I also feel compelled to become as forthright as possible about my feelings and thoughts. You can't beat "Honesty is the best policy" for an appropriate aphorism. Consider GodlessGirl.com an experiment in both privacy and honesty.

Expect profanity, disorganization, and occasional typos (with my sincerest fake apologies); and for goodness sake send me hate mail if I ever use a double negative, try on emo jeans, or get my facts wrong. ("The WTF of GodlessGirl.com")

This blog post outlines the tension between the desire to disclose intimate thoughts and feelings and the need to mitigate collapsing contexts. Anonymity might be thought of as an attempt to create a hard boundary between social contexts and maintain compartmentalized audiences. It is a failsafe of sorts to diminish as much as possible the risk for context collapse and pursuant

role confusion. Anonymity, then, is not an absence of identity but the lack of connection to a legally verifiable and billable identity. Like in the courtroom, it's not about what you may or may not know but about what you can prove. So many of our narratives of identity revolve around what can be documented and substantiated through legally verifiable means. Our identities in offline social contexts can be culturally validated through fulfilling traditional social expectations of authenticity: a driver's license, a passport, a birth certificate, a SIN number, a fixed address, a diploma or a degree, a marriage certificate, a bank account, a credit card, a credit history, etc.

Stone points this out when she discusses the contextualization of the body:

Accountability traditionally referred to the physical body and most visibly took the form of laws that fixed the physical body within a judiciary field whose fiduciary characteristics were precisely determined – the census, the introduction of street addresses, passports, telephone numbers – the deployment and documentation of citizenship in all their forms, which is to say, fine-tuning surveillance and control in the interests of producing a more "stable," manageable citizen. (90)

Though in a majority of social situations we may not be called upon to provide such evidence, there is still the underlying sense in offline social contexts that when we are interacting with other individuals we are interacting with legally identifiable and provable identities. There is a sense that if a police officer walked into the room and asked everybody to provide evidence of his or her identity, a quick scan of drivers licences, health cards, or other photo ID would, indeed, prove that everybody is "who he or she says they are."

Although some bloggers do reveal information that would easily allow others to associate their online roles with their offline roles, many blogs for many reasons do not provide this same sense of legal validation and verifiability. On blogs there are not always traditional

offline indicators of a "valid" or verifiable identity. The dominant offline narrative of identity quickly falls apart and traditional social contracts related to identity are no longer verifiable. However, legal and capitalistic narratives are only one way to constitute identity. According to Jenkins, the "institutional order" of human experience, that is "the human world of pattern and organization, of established-ways-of-doing-things" (39), represents one of the most significant ways of constructing the self. He goes on to say that

Institutions are among the more important contexts within which identification becomes consequential. Institutions are established patterns of practice, recognized as such by actors, which have force as 'the way things are done.' Institutionalized identities are distinctive due to their particular combination of the individual and the collective. Particularly relevant are those institutions which the sociological literature recognises as *organisations*. Organisations are organised and task-oriented collectivities: they are groups. They are also constituted as networks of differentiated membership positions which bestow specific individual identities upon their incumbents. (45 emphasis in original)

Jenkins is referring to institutions and organisations not only as formally recognized collectives such as corporations or governments but also as less formalized collective social associations. In blogs, it is still possible to "authenticate" an individual identity within the collective; however, the social standard for measuring that authenticity is based upon other collectively acknowledged criteria. Anonymity online, then, is not the absence of identity, but rather an identity divorced from two of the dominant offline narratives of identity.

In the absence of these narratives, roles are enacted in very different ways with very different expectations. For Sherry Turkle, anonymity on the internet is a way to "play a role as close to or as far away from your *real* self as you choose" (183 emphasis added). Though

published in 1995, Turkle's statement is representative of how many people still view identity in online contexts today. There is a cultural narrative that still draws a distinction between "real" offline identities and "virtual" online identities, privileging the authenticity of the former over the latter and implying segregation between the two. When discussing anonymity specifically within the context of MUDs (Multi User Domains), Turkle refers to the development of an online identity as creating a "persona" which, again, "can be as close to your *real* self as you choose" (184 emphasis added). She gets close to providing an antithesis when she writes that the anonymity of MUDs offers "ample room for individuals to express unexplored parts of themselves" (185), but there is still the implication that this expression is more of an outlet for some unrealized potential of the user in offline social contexts and not a part of his or her "real" identity. This conceptualization sees online identity as multiple, yet fractured; constructed, yet inauthentic; initiated by an offline identity, yet not continuous with it.

Anonymity in blogs is a vehicle for the production of differentiated social roles for an individual. As Turkle points out, users in online media still maintain and adhere to specific role expectations. Anonymity is key because it paves the way for pseudonymity. Judith Donath argued that anonymous internet users can communicate with each other in online social contexts, but "there is no accretion of personal histories in their interactions; reputation of any kind is impossible in a purely anonymous environment" (53). On the other hand, she maintains that pseudonymous users "may have a well-established reputation in the virtual domain; a pseudonymous message may thus come with a wealth of contextual information about the sender" (53-54). Pseudonymity is the social practice of an individual adopting and enacting a role in a social context for an audience that does not have knowledge of many of the other roles adopted and enacted by that individual in other social contexts. In blogs, as in many other online social contexts, this practice is facilitated by the adoption of a screen name or "handle"

that bears little to no resemblance to the legal name of its adopter. The significance of pseudonymity can be seen as one blogger reflects that "'*Sabio Lantz*' is the pen name I use to protect both my professional and personal relations. Funny, though—I have used the name so long now, that it feels like my 'real' name." (Lantz, *triangulations*). The roles enacted on a blog are no more or less substantive than the roles enacted in offline social contexts. The self is always constructed, whether it be online or offline, so it is both erroneous and unhelpful to argue for the authenticity of one context while railing against the supposed artifice of another. Each role—whether online or offline—contributes to the construction of identity. Bloggers' roles are not incongruent and disparate from roles enacted in offline social contexts. It is, however, necessary at times to compartmentalize roles that are context-appropriate to help ensure validation by similarly context-appropriate social agents.

For some, pseudonymity and anonymity are seen as methods to defer or mitigate personal responsibility: that the person using these identity strategies is attempting to mislead others and hide something. In her analysis of the Google Plus "real names" policy, danah boyd suggests that some people "point to the issue of people using pseudonyms to obscure their identity and, in theory, 'protect' their reputation;" however, she argues that "The assumption baked into this is that the observer is qualified to actually assess someone's reputation. All too often, and especially with marginalized people, the observer takes someone out of context and judges them inappropriately based on what they get online" ("Real Names' Policies"). As boyd points out, the reputational argument against pseudonymity is flawed because of assumptions about the homogeneity of audience authority. Simply because audiences have been integrated into the same network it does not mean that they can or should have the appropriate social authority to authenticate every aspect of an individual. Even in offline social contexts this self-compartmentalization is recognized as an effective method to ensure the appropriate flow of

information. One example is the publication of anonymous sources by newspapers "When the journalists know the actual identity and credibility of the person, and decide it is a public good to protect their identity" (Dash, "If Your Website's Full"). As a society, we already make distinctions between the differentiated roles enacted by the same individual. Blogs serve to illustrate the sort of discourse at play in contextualizing and locating identity. There are politics of power at play in the establishment of identity; however, power should not always be able to be transferred laterally to differentiated audiences across social contexts.

Helen Kennedy suggests that identities constructed in online contexts are not necessarily isolated from offline identity and should not be considered completely separate from offline contexts (871). Conventional wisdom might see the strategy of pseudonymity adopted by bloggers as separate from some "real" self and systemically inauthentic. However, Kennedy's analysis of the Her@ online writing project led her to conclude that the concept of anonymity when constructing identity in online contexts was complicated by several factors. At first it seemed clear that students involved in the project "showed no sign of wanting to hide their gender and ethnicity and so 'benefit' from the possibility of anonymity that cyberspace offered them" (867). Instead, many of the students actually "made explicit and implicit references to their gender and ethnicity in their homepages, just as it is central to their identity" (867). Later, after interviewing the students, Kennedy found that despite including seemingly clear indications of their offline identity on their homepages there was still a feeling of anonymity. As a result, Kennedy makes the distinction "between *being* anonymous and *feeling* anonymous, which arguably derives from the dual role of the world wide web as both public... and private" (870 emphasis in original).

One atheist blogger reflects on the practice of blogging anonymously and outlines the certain tensions he feels while engaging in the mediated exhibitionism enabled by blogs:

I would like to be able to replace my handle with my real name and perhaps even add a photo of myself. Why? Among the more trivial reasons are things like enhancing my credibility, gaining a greater sense of ownership over my writings here, and serving as a better model for other atheists seeking to be more open about their views. These reasons are not trivial in any absolute sense; I only label them this way in comparison to what I perceive as a more important reason...

If I am going to be perfectly honest with myself here, I suppose I should confess that there is another reason to "come out" in the way I have described. I feel like I'm hiding, and that is unpleasant. This makes me feel like a bit of a hypocrite. I mean, who am I to call for increased atheist activism when I can't even use my real name here? That makes me feel like a fraud. (vjack, "Trapped")

The irony here, of course, is that at the same time this blogger feels that there is something inauthentic about the role he is enacting through his blog, he is also engaged in the very same sort of disclosure that Calvert argued leads to self-clarification and relationship-building. Here, the blogger's pseudonymity has allowed him a very important method of self-reflexivity where he carefully and consciously outlines the sort of self he is enacting. Despite expressing feelings of dishonesty and hypocrisy, the blogger is engaging with a community in order to validate his online role. As Miller and Sheperd argue, "The subject selects, displays, and comments upon the mediated reality of the internet, becoming thereby a validated part of that reality and defining for itself and for others its own nature or rather a rhetorical version of its own nature" ("Blogging as Social Action"). It is not his anonymity that allows for this social interchange and role validation but his pseudonymity, which allows him to enact a role while at the same time questioning and reflecting on that role.

The distinction Kennedy makes between being anonymous and feeling anonymous marks the boundary between anonymity and pseudonymity. Anonymity is a mode of concealing compartmentalized roles from specific, discrete audiences while pseudonymity is a mode of revealing and enacting carefully chosen and constructed roles. Despite lacking traditional offline cues and evidence that allow us to verify and validate an individual's identity, in many ways it is very difficult to completely conceal differentiated aspects of one's identity. Joseph Schmitz writes that

although physical appearance, dress, and other status cues recede, educational competencies and linguistic skills increase in importance. Computer-communication media are not neutral with regard to culture, education, and socio-economic class. And electronic persons are not more 'equal' than proximate individuals, we just use different criteria to rate them. (85)

Internet "grammar Nazis" have been the bane of millions of individuals online for years; however, they do emphasize the growing importance of linguistic analysis in the interpretation of identity in online social contexts. As Schmitz points out, even without the traditional offline experience of face-to-face communication, there are still other cultural markers online that can point to a corresponding offline identity. Sherry Turkle mirrors this sentiment when describing the difficulties involved in "gender swapping" online. Because of the deeply intimate knowledge and great effort it would take "understanding how gender inflects speech, manner, the interpretation of experience" (212), it would be extremely difficult to authentically pose as a member of the opposite sex for long without being detected.

In another sense, pseudonymity in and of itself is not inauthentic because it is impossible to "fake" your identity. Jerome Bruner writes that "In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives" (15 emphasis in original).

Blogging is autobiographical in the sense that it is a method of self-clarification that facilitates self-reflexivity. Especially in the examples of the personal atheist bloggers we have examined, blogs are typically considered to represent an individual despite their deeply embedded network tendencies. Blogs offer an outlet for self-narration and Gilbert Garza argues that "narratives are not merely representations of reality, nor are they merely subjective elaborations of reality" but that "they are the vehicles for the very production of that reality" (188). The pseudonymity of bloggers is not a way to conceal aspects of the self, but rather to enact roles that are more clearly delineated and context-appropriate. This allows individuals to express themselves without being hindered by the anxieties accompanying context collapse. In this sense you can never not be who you are. In Turkle's conception of online identity, anonymity is empowering because the chance to be nobody leads to the ability to become anybody. For Kennedy, anonymity is empowering because it allows you to be yourself. Pseudonymity, therefore, is not necessarily deceitful as vjack seems to suggest in his blog post but a means to create a more open environment in which to elucidate our understanding of the self.

Another blogger outlines what he sees as the possible consequences both positive and negative that pseudonymity affords:

There are very good reasons to use a pseudonym on a blog. Perhaps you have opinions that are contrary to the majority in your region, and you face serious consequences if your identity gets out; Lord knows, many atheists have that particular problem. Or perhaps you just want to use the internet to have a conversation, and would rather it not lead to greater and more intrusive involvement; I know women who'd rather not see an escalation of an interaction from people who don't know how to graciously accept a "no." Sometimes people sensibly try to limit their commitment to the

internet and the often too aggressive efforts by the internet to commit to them. All things in moderation and all that.

But there are also bad reasons to use a pseudonym on a blog. The very worst? Some people use anonymity to empower their ability to be a shithead. They snipe and sneer, they hide behind fake names, they use multiple sock puppets to generate the illusion that more people support their hatred, and also to prevent people from blocking them – they want to force you to read their venom. (PZ Myers, "I support your right")

The first part of this blog excerpt is in line with many of the reasons for maintaining pseudonymity in online contexts that deal with mitigating context collapse. Pseudonymity allows individuals to enact contextually situated and identifiable roles while creating or maintaining boundaries between social contexts. However, in the second paragraph, the blogger addresses an issue in the larger discourse surrounding online anonymity. Some argue that anonymity and pseudonymity in online contexts enable and/or encourage socially disruptive, morally despicable, and even illegal behaviour because there is a disconnect between the action and the consequence. These same people would also argue that the benefit of disallowing the use of pseudonyms would outweigh any negative consequences. Using the rhetoric of accountability, some people assert that traditional legal and social consequences would help limit harassment, bullying, and other undesirable behaviours.

Although socially disruptive behaviour in online contexts is problematic, any argument against the practice of pseudonymity as a whole is equally as problematic because "The people who most heavily rely on pseudonyms in online spaces are those who are most marginalized by systems of power" (boyd, "'Real Names' Policies"). The benefits of mediated exhibitionism that blogs provide in allowing both an expression and reaffirmation of the self that might not otherwise be permitted provide a social affordance far greater than the social dissonance

enacted by a small minority. As boyd goes on to argue, "Not everyone is safer by giving out their real name. Quite the opposite; many people are far LESS safe when they are identifiable. And those who are least safe are often those who are most vulnerable" ("Real Names' Policies"). It is typically those who have the least to lose from collapsing contexts that argue against strategies of anonymity and pseudonymity and position these methods of identity negotiation as dishonest or misleading. The blogger PZ Myers supports anonymity and emphasizes the important dichotomy between those who benefit from pseudonymous constructions of identity and those who abuse them. Later in the same blog post, he outlines several context-specific online strategies he uses for mitigating the potential abuses of anonymity and pseudonymity, such as banning users on an individual basis, exposing their IP and email addresses, and "dropping dox" ("I support your right"), which is an online colloquialism referring to the unwilling revelation of another individual's personal information thereby linking their roles enacted in online contexts to their fiduciary identities in offline contexts. Whether or not these practices are considered to be ethical or to violate certain inalienable individual rights is beyond the scope of this paper and a matter for ongoing social negotiations. What's important to note is that the technological affordances of online mediums such as blogs allow for social practices that can facilitate the benefits of pseudonymity for those who require them while mitigating the harm caused by those who would abuse them.

PZ Myers and boyd both raise important points relating to responsibility and accountability and their relation to social context. Just as identity is situationally contingent, so is accountability. Similar to Walzer's conception of social justice, accountability can only be considered contextually. Should we be held accountable for our behaviours and the choices we make as we enact roles in the multitude of social contexts in which we interact with others on a daily basis? The short answer is yes. We should always be held accountable for the choices we

make. The question is: If and to what degree should that accountability transfer between social contexts? Unfortunately, there is no universally applicable answer. There is no simple way to determine if and when accountability should be applied because

There is no universal context, no matter how many times geeks want to tell you that you can be one person to everyone at every point. But just because people are doing what it takes to be appropriate in different contexts, to protect their safety, and to make certain that they are not judged out of context, doesn't mean that everyone is a huckster.

Rather, people are responsibly and reasonably responding to the structural conditions of these new media." (boyd, "Real Names' Policies").

The practice of pseudonymity is one strategy that allows individuals to construct and stabilize their identities within a community without the possible negative influences and consequences of a networked audience and the subsequent collapsing of contexts. Issues of accountability and responsibility, then, must also be considered contextually and addressed through ongoing social negotiations to meet the particular needs of emergent social contexts.

Chapter 5

Validated Selves

"As a single mother, the overwhelming concern for me was being able to pay the bills.

Thanks to the insurance, my out of pocket was minimal, so for all of those Wal-Mart bashers, my advice is don't speak about what you don't know." (admin, "Don't speak")

Notions of authenticity play a large part in the establishment of individual selfhood; however, these notions are problematic because "there is no such thing as universal authenticity; rather, the authentic is a localized, temporally situated social construct that varies widely based on community" (Marwick and boyd "I Tweet Honestly"). And yet, authenticity remains an integral metric for interpreting and evaluating identity. In the construction of an individual identity, it is not enough to adopt roles and behaviours in relation to social expectations and the perception of audience. Those roles and behaviours must also be interpreted and assessed by other contextually appropriate social agents who then provide feedback, which is part of the process of validation. Authenticity is not adherence to a singular, "true" version of the self, because there is no such thing. Rather, it is the degree to which the enactment of a role is perceived to adhere to or violate social expectations and also the manner in which it is perceived to adhere to or violate those expectations.

Corporate blogs – that is, blogs that are run by and for large companies – can be seen as an example of how notions of authenticity come into play in the social validation of identity. Cornelius Puschmann offers a detailed genre analysis of a prime example of corporate blogging in his article "Lies at Wal-Mart: Style and the Subversion of Genre in the *Life at Wal-Mart* Blog." The excerpt above is from the tellingly titled blog post "Don't speak about what you don't know" from Wal-Mart's now-discontinued corporate blog, *Life at Wal-Mart*. Though there is an

obvious corporate rhetoric at play with the prescriptive title of the post and the content of the post itself, that in and of itself is not the basis for the evaluation and validation of social expectations. At its most basic, rhetoric might be thought of "as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I.2). Individuals – as much as corporations – engage in rhetorical discourse, albeit in different contexts and for different reasons. So a corporation like Wal-Mart attempting to persuade potential customers that their products are worth buying or that it is an organization worth supporting is not necessarily inauthentic because that is what corporations are expected to do. However, what the *Life at Wal-Mart* blog demonstrates is how incongruities arise when certain context-specific social expectations are violated: in this instance for a very specific rhetorical purpose. In the case of Wal-Mart's corporate blog, a specific type of role confusion is facilitated when competing and irreconcilable sets of expectations about individual and collective identity are conflated for rhetorical purposes that are incompatible with both. As Puschmann points out "A signature quality of blog use in corporate environments is the tension between the communicative goals of the individual and those of the organization and the reoccurring question of how the two can be clearly delineated and prioritized" (56).

Puschmann's analysis of the *Life at Wal-Mart* blog is meant to be an argument for the blog as genre by providing a negative example. As he further explains "Exploitation can be regarded as a proof for the existence of a genre, since the exploiter must assume that his audience will recognize the genre he is imitating based on formal criteria if he wants his manipulation to succeed" (51). Likewise, the violation of social norms proves the existence of social norms and how those norms are interpreted by social agents. Though blogs are an emergent social context and roles and expectations have not yet been completely clearly defined, there are still emergent expectations at play. Consider the following blog post:

Mark F., Hiring Manager, Mount Crawford, Va.

With the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina upon us, I wanted to express my appreciation for what the company did for me during that time last year. I was in Louisiana for the storm. Born and raised outside of New Orleans, I lost my home to Katrina. I was working at Distribution Center 6048 at the time and as traumatic as the whole catastrophe was, the good people at my DC supported me. I don't know if I could have made it without them or Wal Mart. I am at DC 7045 now, and even though the memories of Katrina haunt me, I know I work for a company that stood by me and thousands of others just like me. This is one of the reasons I am proud to be an associate at Wal mart. (admin, "I lost my home")

Though clearly attributed to a single individual through the use of the personal pronoun "I," there is a disparity created between the roles of author and publisher (Puschmann 64) as the name of the blog post author – the user identified as admin – differs from the name of the supposed author of the story, who is identified at the beginning of the post as Mark F. This is different from most personal blogs where that separation does not exist, and each blog post is attributed to a single individual whether through the use of a name or pseudonym. Though this post may indeed have been written by Mark F., this violation of the typical signifiers of compliance with social norms creates a dissonance with potential audiences and calls into question the authenticity of the blogger's identity.

Another blog post, this time attributed to Joe R., provides an even clearer example of the conflicting roles of the individual and the organization at play:

Joe R., Market Fashion Merchandiser, Midland, Texas

With all the criticism that our company has taken these past few years I am very pleased with the decision our company has made to promote people to vote. I know we

do not nor should we tell people how to vote, but making associates aware of those candidates who wish ill on this great company and on our associates will help loyal associates make informed decisions when entering the voting booth.

In the light of recent scandals on both sides of the aisle, some Americans may decide to "sit this one out." I encourage you not to do this, because by not voting you are voting. The person with the views opposite yours would love for you to stay home, however I encourage you to go out and vote for the best of the candidates, regardless of their weakness or failures to satisfy your political views. I personally would like to have more conservative candidates than we have had in many years, but if they are not in we need to vote for the next best one. (admin, "I am very pleased")

Though at first this blog post might seem to be representative of an individual identity, the specifics of the corporate and political rhetoric are addressing a context-specific exigence more likely to be of relevance to a collective such as a corporate entity. While individuals can express interest in the democratic process, it seems less likely that they would be concerned about "candidates who wish ill on this great company" rather than candidates proposing to raise taxes or with social policies that might directly or indirectly affect them. Then there is the rather conspicuous mention Joe R. makes of wanting more conservative candidates, who—especially in the United States—are traditionally perceived to be supporters of big businesses (such as Wal-Mart) and other capitalistic institutions. This is particularly glaring after the overall message of the blog post seemed to be a non-partisan argument for supporting the democratic process at large rather than campaigning for a particular political viewpoint.

Jan Schmidt argues that "speaking in one's own personal voice and being open for dialogue rather than engaging in one-way-communication are core elements readers have come to expect from blog communication, be it in private online journals, corporate blogs, or political

blogs" (1413). The examples of Wal-Mart blog posts we've seen thus far have subverted the contextual expectations both of the differentiated selfhood of the blogger and of the community networking strategies typically associated with blogging. In his analysis of *Life at Wal-Mart*, Puschmann points out that several of the media-specific affordances available to bloggers that facilitate contextually situated social interaction are absent from this blog. He observes that "none of the entries contain hyperlinks... none of the entries cite other blogs, or any other sources... none of the entries contain literal interactional cues" and "none of the entries contain any metalanguage that refers to blogging or the Internet" (64). This is in stark contrast to the atheist blogs and Armstrong's blog *dooce* that we have previously explored. A cursory glance at the first page of any of these blogs will find countless examples of all of the social signifiers Puschmann identified as being absent from Wal-Mart's ill-fated blog.

Perhaps the most telling signal on Puschmann's list is the total lack of self-reflexivity, which is a key component of the mediated exhibitionism that blogs facilitate. The atheist bloggers and Armstrong had countless examples of blog posts analyzing and reflecting both on the practice of blogging and on their roles as bloggers. As Miller and Sheperd argue, "the blog's public disclosure, its exhibitionism, yields an intensification of the self, a reflexive elaboration of identity" ("Blogging as Social Action"). The process of constructing an individual identity is self-reflexive as we internalize social expectations and in turn evaluate their validity. Miller and Sheperd go on to say that "In a culture in which the real is both public and mediated, the blog makes 'real' the reflexive effort to establish the self against the forces of fragmentation, through expression and connection, through disclosure" ("Blogging as Social Action"). None of this self-reflexivity and self-consciousness is evident in the *Life at Wal-Mart* blog post examples.

What the Wal-Mart blog posts demonstrate is a particular kind of role confusion based on the conflicting prioritization of personal and institutional expectations. In their book *Naked Conversations: How Blogs are Changing the Way Businesses Talk With Customers*, Robert Scoble and Shel Israel give detailed advice to corporations about how to harness the blog as a marketing tool. In the introduction of their book, Scoble and Israel explain why they feel blogs are an important tool for businesses: "We envision a day in the near future when companies that *don't* blog will be held suspect to some degree, with people wondering whether those companies have something to hide or whether the owners are worried about what the people who work for them have to say" (1 emphasis in original). This demonstrates an awareness of the power that the disclosure typical of blogs has in building social relationships. It also demonstrates an awareness of the process of social validation in establishing authenticity. Scoble and Israel use the specific example of establishing authenticity through imperfection: "One blog pioneer, Dave Winer, calls it 'come-as-you-are conversations' and says he enjoys seeing an occasional typo because it reveals authenticity, showing you are reading the *unfiltered work* of a *real person*" (4 emphasis added).

This view of establishing authenticity is problematic because it is based on essentialist notions that there is one true self that people either conform to or not and that there are universal signifiers of that true self. Stone writes that "Our commonsense notions of community and of the bodies from which communities are formed take as starting points, among others, that communities are made up of aggregations of individual 'selves' and that each 'self' is equipped with a single physical body" (84-5). She summarizes this concept with the acronym BUGS, which stands for "a body unit grounded in a self" (85). This view of identity is tied to notions of authenticity and authority that position language as a tool used to reveal elements of a core self. Drawing on Mead in an analysis of social interaction on blogs, Robert

MacDougall writes that "*individuals* are always born out of the social environment within which they have been nurtured – incorporating whatever peculiarities that environment entails" (86 emphasis in original). The authenticity of an identity cannot be revealed through language as Scoble and Israel suggest. There is no "real person" that can be "filtered" or "unfiltered," mediated or unmediated. Identity is authenticated through language as it symbolically situates an individual in relation to others through collectively recognized meanings

Authenticity in the case of corporate blogs can be established only through recognition of and coherence with the appropriate signifiers not only in a given social context but also in the appropriate spectrum of that social context. By trying to establish authenticity through the appropriation of social expectations of uniqueness and individuality typically associated with individuals, corporations run the risk of creating cognitive dissonance and alienating the very audiences they wish to attract. The only way that authenticity can be validated is if it is first constructed as contextually appropriate. For personal blogs, errors in spelling and grammar can be indicators of authenticity; for corporate blogs, there is an expectation that "corporate lawyers and PR professionals" will proofread and edit content (Scoble and Israel 191) because the identity being established is one of professionalism and not of casualness. If a self fails to recognize or intentionally disregards contextual expectations, then authenticity becomes extremely difficult to establish.

Scoble and Israel's conception of blogs is based on the assumption that they represent an undifferentiated social context. However, social contexts are never entirely bounded and represent a range of situated behaviours and expectations rather than prescribed, immutable social norms that individuals must follow. Though blogging is typically seen as an individual, personal assertion of self, there are blogs run by groups and institutions that do not conform to this expectation that are still blogs. As boyd explains,

The practice of blogging is also not bounded and does not signal a set of shared values and goals, even if there are some common ones. Early adopters believed that blogging is about the ability to speak freely to a large audience with no limiting authority or editorial control. As institutions become interested in blogs as a potential market, blogs are emerging with controlled content, and yet these are still blogs. While there are prototypical values in blogging, there are no universal ones embodied by all bloggers.

("A blogger's blog")

What Scoble and Israel assumed and what the *Life at Wal-Mart* blog demonstrates is an assumption that the expectations used to validate an individual's identity as authentic are the same ones used to validate a corporation's authenticity. Social contexts, though, are no more unitary than the identities they facilitate. Corporate blogs and personal blogs share some common expectations and social scripts that mark them as blogs; however, they are also differentiated by distinct signifiers. This phenomenon is typically recognized through the identification of sub-genre or sub-media or sub-culture. The prefix "sub," however, is misleading in that it signifies subordination. There is no uniform genre or culture of blogs to which sub-genres or sub-cultures are subordinate. Instead, blogs might be defined as a macro-culture representing a stratified range of micro-cultures.

Though social signifiers that signal authenticity differ based on social context, they can also vary within a social context. Bakhtin describes a phenomenon he refers to as heteroglossia, which is the "internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 262). He goes on to say that

At any given moment of its evolution, language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the word (according to formal linguistic markers, especially phonetic), but also... into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social

groups, 'professional' and 'generic' languages, languages of generations and so forth.

(272)

In this framework, the stratification of society into different contexts is based upon linguistic variances related to situated, shared meanings. Because the meanings of linguistic signifiers are under constant social negotiation, their meanings are always in flux and are not uniform across or even within social contexts. Notions of authenticity are further complicated by the fact that social contexts do not represent a core group of roles and expectations but a *range* of roles and expectations.

Puschmann points out this range of expectations within the social context of blogs. He argues that blogs "are assumed to be the raw, unfiltered and essentially ego-centric expression of individuals" and since "his communicative goals are relatively overt and essentially predictable: presenting oneself in a positive way, preserving face and gaining recognition in the blogosphere" that "These obvious and... *familiar* goals of any social interaction between individuals can be contrasted with the covert and impersonal goals of the corporation" (80 emphasis in original). Though Puschmann generalizes the rhetorical goals of blogs, he makes an important point about the social expectations associated with them. There are expectations about blogs in general, but there are also specific expectations about personal blogs and specific expectations about corporate blogs. If personal blogs might be expected to be the self-reflexive expression of an individual, then corporate blogs might reasonably be assumed to address social exigences relevant to corporations such as marketability and profitability. Puschmann points out that "Since everything published in *Life at Wal-Mart* is licensed by Wal-Mart, all opinions expressed there can be assumed to be endorsed by the corporate entity, even though it is theoretically possible for the blog's maintainers to claim otherwise" (72). It is not that Wal-Mart's blog was inauthentic because it tried to construct authenticity using socially recognized

signifiers. Authenticity is always constructed and contextually situated. Where *Life at Wal-Mart* might be considered inauthentic was in its attempt to illicit validation for a corporate blog by appropriating the signifiers associated with personal blogs.

Nowhere is this confusion of role expectations more evident in *Life at Wal-Mart* than in the blog posts that relate the stories of various employees meeting Wal-Mart's founder, Sam Walton, who is always referred to as Mr. Sam.

Tim J., Optical Division, Bentonville, Ark.

In the fall of 1987 I was a receiving manager in Store 72 in Pittsburg, Kan. As the receiving crew was taking their afternoon break, I looked across to the break room door to see who was walking in. Much to my surprise it was Mr. Sam, dressed in overalls, a flannel shirt, Wal-Mart ball cap and boots that looked like they had been around since before Old Roy's days.

Now, Mr. Sam had been in the store two other times in 1986, but he was wearing a navy blue suit. I guess it was a little shocking to see Mr. Sam in hunting clothes, even though we had all heard the stories of him touring stores dressed this way. Mr. Sam shook everyone's hand, thanked us for all our hard work and bought everyone a pop since it was a warm autumn day. By this time our break was over and Mr. Sam returned with us to receiving and helped us unload the last bit of freight that we had for the day. When I'm asked about Mr. Sam I always relate this story since it's such a shining example of his character, concern and interest in his fellow associates. (admin, "Mr. Sam shook everyone's hand")

This story about Tim J.'s encounter with Mr. Sam demonstrates not only the conflicting rhetorical strategies at play in attempting to simultaneously address both personal and corporate exigences but also a decentralization of self uncharacteristic of either personal or

corporate blogs. Despite being shaped by different aspects of a range of social expectations, "Even in company blogs where a clearly defined organizational goal takes obvious precedent over the blogger's personal motives, the presence of the blogger can still be recognized" (Puschmann 56). Even though *Life at Wal-Mart* was a corporate blog, it is still generally understood that "where there is a blog there must also be a blogger" (57). In a conversation, there is focus not only on what is being said but also on the speaker. In this blog post, any trace of a blogger's voice is lost behind the layers of corporate rhetoric to the point of it being little more than a blatant public relations attempt to cast Mr. Sam in a personal and personable light. Because the blog post is presented under the guise of an individual, it signals to its audience that – whether personal or corporate – there is, or should be, an individual self somewhere to which it can be connected and substantiated. According to Weigert et al. "Validation occurs when another social actor recognizes and reacts to that identity. Thus, one successfully claims an identity only if the intended behaviour becomes an 'object' towards which others orient their behavior" (41). There can be no validation of identity in this blog, for there is no evident identity to validate.

When giving out advice to potential corporate bloggers, Scoble and Israel write that "The stories you tell will decide your personal brand identity, and they become embedded in the corporate brand" (185). As they point out, identity is linguistically situated and mediated. Jenny Davis writes that "it is through narrative that we *become* the self of the stories we tell" (327 emphasis in original). Of all the examples of blogs we've looked at, perhaps this is no more evident than in the corporate blog *Life at Wal-Mart* where there is no sense of any particular self that is being narrated. Even the last example that relates the story of Tim J. meeting Mr. Sam, it is Mr. Sam that seems to lack any real selfhood, and as Puschmann points out "it is not the *biographical* Sam Walton who is in fact the subject of these entries, but the paternal authority of

Wal-Mart the corporate entity" (73 emphasis in original). In order to validate a self, there must first be a self that can be presented in relation to other social agents.

The use of language in socially contextualizing the self is significant not only because it is an organizational model of interpretation, but also because it is a cognitive model of understanding the self. Authenticity is about the perception of whether or not the subject maintains both situational and internal consistency. Something is deemed to be authentic if it is validated according to the specific expectations of a given social context. According to David Grazian, authenticity is "the ability of a place or event to conform to an idealized representation of reality" (10). We validate an identity as authentic based both on the linguistically mediated social expectations of a given social context and on the internalized cognitive model based on those expectations. Herman explains that "a sequence of actions, states, and events qualifies as a narrative by virtue of how it situates remarkable or tellable occurrences against a backdrop of stereotypical expectations about the world" (85). Without socially contextual expectations, we would not be able to situate and evaluate emergent experiences as we went about our lives. Social expectations offer the starting point, but then each narrative is customized based on the specific experiences of the individual so that "our story" becomes "my story." As Bruner puts it we "become variants of the culture's canonical forms" (15). In this way we are able to maintain culturally shared and communally understood narratives yet also maintain a sense of individual identity.

Puschmann argues that from a cognitive perspective "blogging can be conceptualized as an amalgam of formal, technical, stylistic and cultural aspects, which together form a recognizable conceptual category – the *blog prototype*" (58 emphasis in original). This "blog prototype" serves as the basis for the validation of selves produced in and through blogs as authentic or not. The conception of what constitutes blogs and blogging varies based not only

on individual interpretations but also on a range of social expectations; however, there are still communal "stereotypical expectations" that serve as a common ideological framework to help measure acceptable and unacceptable variances in the enactment of roles and the interaction between both individuals and collectives.

If these stereotypical expectations are negotiated through linguistically mediated social interaction, then

Who I have relationships with, and the nature of those relationships – who I identify with – contributes to who I am, and says something to others about me. What's more, other people can either validate who or what I claim to be, refute it or attempt to float an alternative: power and authority are critical in determining whose definition counts (Jenkins 71).

Though there are a range of social cues and expectations for blogs, there are also some common ones related to community interaction and feedback such as hyperlinks and comments sections. One of the key social expectations of blogs, as with most digital media, is interconnectedness. Identity is always constituted through and by a social context, but blogs make that connection to a larger network of social agents emphatically clear. Puschmann asserts that "In contrast to traditional means of publishing there is almost a symmetry of power between the different parties, with everyone being able to equally contribute to the discussion in a typical scenario" (58). We come to understanding and consciousness of the self only through this collaborative network. As Jenkins points out, determining and constructing an identity is not a simple process, but an ongoing interaction dependent on cycles of validation and reciprocity.

Brian Pentland and Martha Feldman use the term "narrative network" (781) as way to conceptually situate the construction of self through both language and digital media. In their example of a brief narrative of an individual buying an airplane ticket on his laptop, they

identify four examples of how the narrative can be understood as organized or conceptualized as a network: first, that the story has other participants, second, that there are "simultaneous, parallel stories" of other individuals purchasing airline tickets, third, that there are "alternative ways in which each of these stories can unfold," and fourth, there are "other intersecting stories" including, in this case, narratives surrounding the set prices of the airline tickets and the utility of the Internet in allowing for the purchase of the tickets online (783). This narrative network was evident in the atheist blogs I examined as common practices of comments and hyperlinks as well as allowing posts from guest bloggers demonstrated this interconnectedness with other community members. The self that each of them constructed in their blogs was not the work of any single individual effort but the result of a nexus of countless other narratives. It is only through the feedback of our social connections that the self can be authenticated or validated. As the *Life at Wal-Mart* blog demonstrates, without this narrative network of social connections, any signifiers of authenticity become difficult – if not impossible – to validate.

As identity is contextually situated, so, it follows, must processes of validation be similarly situated. Authenticity is based on the validation of the roles enacted in differentiated social contexts through social interaction. It is only through acknowledging contextually-appropriate signifiers and recognizing social norms that an authentic self can be created. It is important to keep in mind that

What we consider authentic constantly changes, and what symbols or signifiers mark a thing as authentic or inauthentic differ contextually. The fact that we constantly vary self-presentation based on audience reveals authenticity as a construct: are we more or less authentic with our book club or gym partner? Whether we are viewed as authentic depends on the definition imposed by the person doing the judging. (Marwick and boyd "I Tweet Honestly")

There are no universal markers of authenticity and no ways to guarantee that one's identity will be validated as authentic by a given audience. Grazian writes that "the search for authenticity is never ending, but always expresses a fantasy that the experience of an idealized reality might render our lives more meaningful" (240). Authenticity – like identity – is ultimately a meaning-making process. It is also a collaborative process. As we engage in the validation of the identities and roles of others, we are also ultimately engaged in a process of self-validation.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Identity is a collaborative process, and it is one fraught with countless pitfalls. The examples we've seen of the selves constructed by bloggers demonstrate that identity is dependent upon social processes involving contextually specific roles, expectations, and audiences as well as on the media-specific affordances that influence their construction and allow for their interaction. In exploring notions of privacy, anonymity, and authenticity in blogs, it can be seen how identity is the result of interactions between appropriate agents situated in differentiated social contexts. We've also seen how notions of self can be problematized as new media such as blogs continue to blur the boundaries between social contexts. This collapsing of contexts was demonstrated in Armstrong's loss of employment due to the content she posted on her blog *dooce* as well as the fears expressed by the atheist bloggers of the potential social repercussions of revealing their beliefs to particular audiences. Like the social contexts in which they are produced, selves are based on a process of ongoing negotiation to establish normative ranges of expectations.

Despite this differentiation of social roles, the identity of an individual is still continuous across social contexts. The roles enacted in a blog are not entirely divorced from the roles enacted by bloggers in offline contexts. Even though a particular audience may not be aware of all of the roles that make up our identities, all of those roles are nonetheless enacted and unified by a single individual, and each informs all of the others, even if that influence is not overtly recognized or felt. Miller and Sheperd contend that "Bloggers... seem less interested in role playing than in locating, or constructing, for themselves and for others, an identity that they can understand as unitary, as real. The blog thus seems to us to be a counter-movement to

postmodern destabilization" ("Blogging as Social Action"). The practice of blogging and the selves constructed in blogs represent a view of self as continuous but also compartmentalized based on the need to address particular social exigences for and with contextually situated audiences. Identity is not fragmented but differentiated based on differing social expectations and norms.

It is important, therefore, that we maintain an open and ongoing dialogue establishing and re-establishing social boundaries as the need arises. And even though individual identity is the result of collective practices, we still have individual agency. Meyrowitz writes that

We are not entirely powerless in the face of the situations that exist in the culture we are born into. Since situations are created by us, they can also be changed by us. People, especially people in positions of authority, can define new situations. Legislators, judges, and administrators frequently do so. Similarly, individuals often make contracts with each other to define or to redefine their interactions. (26)

The self is at once constructed by an audience, but it is also part of that audience. Though we exist as embodied individuals and enact differentiated social roles based on our own unique interpretations, we are also part of the social contexts that shape the construction of our own identity and the identities of others.

Blogs also serve to demonstrate how the self is situated linguistically within a social context. Paul John Eakin writes that when we engage in practices of life writing "we do something even more fundamental – we establish ourselves as persons: I am someone, someone who has lived a valuable life, a value affirmed precisely by any story's implicit claim that it is worth telling and hearing" (5). This is in keeping with Calvert's theory of mediated exhibitionism, which functioned as a strategy for the self-reflexive confirmation of an individual identity through the mediated disclosure of the semi-private, semi-public social context that

blogs provide. Blogs clearly demonstrate the tension between the centripetal forces of the intimate reflexive self and the centrifugal forces related to being a part of a larger social network and also how these forces work in tandem to both clarify notions of self and connect to a community.

Though some, like those who ran the *Life at Wal-Mart* blog, would try to construct an identity based on essentialist views of one "true" self, there are no universally applicable expectations or signifiers of authenticity. Identity is adaptive, constructed in response to perceived social expectations and interpretations of shared ideological frameworks. Identity is also a cognitive mode as we internalize social expectations and they inform our perception. Jenkins defines the self as "an individual's reflexive sense of her or his own particular identity, constituted *vis-à-vis* others in terms of similarity and difference, without which she or he wouldn't know who they are and hence wouldn't be able to act" (49). Blogs not only allow for the construction and interpretation of self; they also represent a set of embedded and emergent cognitive models. The kinds of selves we produce are tied to our modes of perception and interpretation. As the self is constituted so is self-consciousness

David Bolter and Richard Grusin refer to a process that they have coined "remediation," which is "the representation of one medium in another" (45). We are invariably the content of the social contexts and media through which we are constituted, but we are also part of them. Blogging and identity are, above all, reciprocal processes. We are involved in a constant feedback loop with other social agents in linguistically situated and mediated social contexts. Media and social contexts remodel our cognitive processes so that the subject that experiences them is never the same as the one that was constituted through them. According to Bolter and Grusin "*all* mediation is remediation... Our culture conceives of each medium or constellation of media as it responds to, redeploys, competes with, and reforms other media" (55 emphasis in

original). Identity might be thought of as self-remediation. As we move forward and tensions surrounding the construction of identity arise in emergent social contexts such as blogs, it is necessary to understand the integral link between the self and the collective to develop effective and socially responsible strategies that will facilitate developing notions of self.

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