

Snapchat 'selfies': The case of disappearing data

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Little has been written about the impact of ephemeral messaging technologies such as Snapchat, Wickr and iDelete on learner identities. The authors explore how disappearing social media may enable young people to take up a range of discourses and demonstrate discursive agency in ways that support social mobility through shifting relationships with their peers. Much of this unfolds through the transmission of digital images that promote social flexibility. The visibility, of seeing and being seen, demonstrates a Foucauldian 'gaze' where power plays out through the capacity to be visible and recognisable to others and specific practices (e.g. selfies) become normalised. Social media technologies furnish emergent spaces for underlife activity that foster this gaze. Taking up the Foucault's concept of subjectivities as discursively constituted identity categories, the authors explore the relationship between disappearing media and youth identities.

Keywords: subjectivities, identities, social media, Foucault, 'selfies'

Introduction

Used to post images from the banal (e.g. breakfast cereal) to the explicit (e.g. 'selfies'), disappearing data applications like Snapchat, Wickr and iDelete have rapidly become embedded in Australasian teenage (teen) culture. Closely related to other graphic capturing software (Instagram and Tumblr) these media foster and perpetuate teen cultures. Ephemeral messaging with disappearing data enables users to capture and share temporary moments rather than posting more permanent images. There appears to be a proliferation of these disappearing data applications that rely on data self-destruct mechanisms. Information becomes both disposable and short term (Kotfila, 2014). In keeping with the theme of the conference of offering critical perspectives on the use of emerging technologies, we discuss how the prolific use of graphic technologies among teens enables young people to be co-constituted in discourse – to see and be seen. This social activity can be read as relational positioning (Drewery, 2005) where identity categories or subjectivities are socially constituted in discourse.

Discourses serve to position and define us as subjects. We work with the notion of discourses because they can illuminate social practices - how people combine and integrate "language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular socially recognizable identity[ies]" (Gee, 2011, p. 201). We draw from Foucault (1977) to analyse how social media technologies provide a vehicle for young people to become recognisable to others as a form of self-surveillance. The capacity to mobilise discourse to take up subjectivities can be read as discursive agency (Butler, 1997). We speculate as to how social media can be used as a vehicle for discursive agency. A preliminary analysis of ephemeral messaging media and their potential impact on youth discourses is provided through a brief account of Snapchat, Wickr and iDelete. An exploration of possible implications for youth cultures then follows.

Ephemeral messaging applications and underlife

Non-technology-mediated conversation has always had ephemerality in that, as in-the-moment phenomena, it disappears. Furthermore, teens generate their own language codes and slang in order to shift from dominant adult discourse. Social media interactions that are contingent on being present in a particular time and space enable a ubiquity of image sharing that outstrips the capacity of 'old school' conversations as a means to circulate teen culture. There can be the potential for these new forms of in-the-moment interactions to be captured and shared endlessly in time and space. As a new genre of messaging disappearing data applications, that has a point of difference unlike other forms of social media. They afford a flexible self-destruct timer, enabling the sender to determine how long their message can be viewed before being automatically deleted. Positioned by some media companies as an underground technology that inherently evades detection, we are interested in how ephemeral messaging applications can support the youth discourses that flourish in underlife. Gutiérrez, Rymes and Larson (1995) use Goffman's (1961) notion of 'underlife' to describe how young people contest mainstream discursive practices. They define underlife as the range of activities people develop to distance themselves from expected norms. Popular media commentaries (Stern, 2013) on the competition between Facebook and Snapchat present an economic discourse to suggest that the software giants are in competition to ride the wave of youth culture and that teens may shift media loyalties to evade parents. 'The Economist' (2014) reported that although there is the perception that young people "post less intimate stuff to

Facebook and more risqué material to networks not yet gatecrashed by their parents, [there is] no mass defection under way. Instead, teenagers are using different social networks for different things” (para 6). Following, we briefly outline the approach taken by three software applications that, as emerging technologies, offer users opportunities to produce and delete data through ephemeral messaging.

Wickr, with its mission to provide secure communications, explicitly markets itself on its capacity to disappear. The website posts “The Internet is forever. Your private communications don’t need to be” (Wickr, 2014, online). It markets subterfuge through its alignment with militaristic and neoliberal discourses where emphasis is placed on individuals’ capacity for choice and control. Wickr is a free app providing “military-grade encryption” of text, picture, audio and video messages (Wickr, 2014, online). Wickr states that “numerous governments and corporations” are tracking people and their data and selling this information in ways not understood. They are able to provide “control” to the sender instead of the receiver (or servers in between) (Wickr, 2014, online).

Using a ‘Mission Impossible’ tagline of “This message will self destruct”, iDelete, released in March 2013, makes an intertextual move to construct both a strawman big brother argument and a parental authority figure in their line “Safe texting begins here!” (iDelete, 2013, online). It raises the question whether the subtle pun with ‘safe sex’ is intentional. iDelete demonstrates an interesting point of difference from other deleting media in that it physically obscures the data, attempting to implement a form of communication that can only be read by another targeted person. They claim that “text and images are seen through a viewing loop that the receiver can navigate on the touch screen, making it impossible to capture in a screenshot. Screenshot Protection can be turned on or off by the sender depending on the sensitivity of the message” (iDelete, 2013, online).

Snapchat, launched in 2011, with its bright yellow webpage and happy emoticon, conveys a positivity that is echoed in their claim in their online blog that they are “lovingly built” (Snapchat Blog, online). The Snapchat application facilitates the transmission of images and script to individuals or groups with a time limit of up to 10 seconds before the image disappears. The sender determines this timing and after this the receiver no longer has access to the image. Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Evan Spiegel, is quoted as saying that the daily photos shared by users have grown from 20 million in October 2012, to 200 million in June 2013, to a further 350 million in September 2013 (Gallagher, 2013). Snapchat makes it very clear in its ‘Guide for Parents’ that it markets itself to both teens over 13 and adults. To do so, it provides online guidance on the appropriate use of this messaging technology. Senders are sent notification, when possible, if Snapchat detects when the recipient takes a screenshot. “One should always ‘think before you send’ and consider the trustworthiness of the intended recipient(s) before choosing to share an image, video, or message with them—if it’s too sensitive to risk someone else seeing it, then it shouldn’t be sent!” (Snapchat, 2014, online).

The application makers strive to distance themselves from cyber bullying: “If you receive a bullying, abusive or otherwise unwanted message, do not respond to it—responding may encourage further messages. Instead, you should block the user and/or change your privacy settings to prevent future contact from the individual” (Snapchat, 2014, online). There is also online guidance for parents on what to do if they encounter sexually explicit material on their child’s phone. “Ask them to delete any copies they may have saved and inform the recipients of the serious criminal consequences of possessing or distributing sexually explicit images of a minor.” (Snapchat. 2014, online). As it can be possible to screenshot images and save them, there is no security that an image may not reappear in future. The application producers are aware of this and make the dangers explicit such as letting the users know that Snapchat cannot prevent others from making copies of messages (e.g., by saving a screenshot). They do state that if they detect the recipient has captured a screenshot of an image that was sent, they would notify the sender. Snapchat do point out that, “as for any other digital information, there may be ways to access messages while still in temporary storage on recipients’ devices or, forensically, even after they are deleted”. Snapchat should not be used to send messages if the sender wants “to be certain that the recipient cannot keep a copy” (Snapchat. 2014, online).

Writing on sexting (the transmission of sexually explicit digital images or messages) and the legal implications of Snapchat use in the USA, Poltash (2013) describes how the security of self-destructing messages can be illusory. Snapchat’s self-destructing messages make users feel immune from repercussion and the consequences of erased data can make trespasses difficult to both detect and follow up on.

This has encouraged and led directly to the application’s widespread use for sexting... But the application adds an additional layer of complexity. Because Snapchat deletes photos and videos from senders’ phones, recipients’ phones, and its servers, there is no permanent record of its impact on children’s participation. On the one hand, Snapchat functions like contraception,

protecting teenagers who are going to sext regardless of the consequences. On the other hand, it is used to both distribute child pornography and destroy the evidence (Poltash, 2013, p. 21).

These technologies offer users ways to thwart the permanent nature of digital information by allowing it to dissipate almost immediately into obscurity (Kotfila, 2014). The potential impact on youth cultures is explored briefly in the following section.

Social positioning through a panoptical gaze

Carah (2014, p. 137) highlights how social media platforms “continuously assemble identities, cultural practices and social spaces in relation to one another”. In cyber environments, young people are constituted through available discourse. Identities are recognised and defined through their positioning in discourses and it is through discourse that we recognise each other as subjects (Butler, 1997). It is common to assume that we have unitary knowable identities and we make consistent choices located within only one discourse (Davies & Harré, 2000). Although, as Davies and Harré point out, we struggle to “produce a story of ourselves which is unitary and consistent, [we are] thus not aware of the way in which the taking up of one discursive practice or another... shapes the knowing or telling we can do.” (p. 103). Rather than viewing identity as static and innate, we see individuals as constructed and contested subjects (Grant, 1997) who are rendered both visible and invisible through discourse. “The gaze” is a concept that was first coined by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan to describe how by becoming visible to others one feels hyperaware (Krips, 2010). Drawing from Jeremy Bentham’s penitentiary concept, Michel Foucault (1977) adapted “the gaze” as a commentary on surveillance using the image of a panopticon. A panopticon consists of a central observation tower enclosed by a concentric ring of outlying cells (Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992). The observers in the tower ‘gaze’ directly into the cells, which are only open to the front. For those in the cells, there is a clear view of the tower, but they don’t have any contact from those in other cells.

Deploying the notion of the ‘panoptical gaze,’ we have questioned how social media can be used by young people as surveillance devices, inviting the gaze of others and enabling them to scrutinize themselves. Ringrose (2011), in an exploration of teen girls’ performances of sexual identity in social networking sites, observes that there is sexual regulation, agency and experimentation present in relation to how teen girls navigate sexualization online. “Young people must continuously negotiate and make choices around which images and words to use to construct and perform their sexual identities in semi-public spaces” (Ringrose, 2011, p. 101).

Furthermore, Ringrose challenges knee jerk reactions to teen use of social media, highlighting that the notion of digital sexual subjectivity is not a new thing. She argues that teens are experimenting as much as they have always done except this exploration is now taking place in the context of “a visual cyber culture” (Thomas, 2004 in Ringrose, 2011, p. 101). In these cyber cultures, there are “normative forms of gendered and sexualized visual self-representation” that are common to contemporary media contexts and “must be managed in the construction of a semi-public digital sexual subjectivity” (Ringrose, 2011, p. 102). These subjectivities can be seen in the ‘selfie,’ when young people of both genders pout for the camera and post numerous shots online to elicit the gaze and approval of peers. Ringrose (2011) draws from Rosalind Gill to explore the term “technology of the sexy” as “a key regulative dimension or ‘technology’ of enacting idealized ‘sexy’ femininity across mainstream ‘postfeminist’ media and advertising, so that girls and women are “required to be skilled in [and take pleasure in] a variety of sexual behaviours” (p. 110). It is problematic, Ringrose notes, that the imperative to convey a sexy ‘selfie’ online can translate into an expectation of perfectionism to be demonstrated in face to face relationships as well. Thus relational positioning in online contexts has the potential to impact subsequent subjectivities.

The use of ephemeral messaging applications is complex and their use cannot be interpreted as simply disempowering an objectified group. Moreover, it can be argued that the willingness of young people to act upon the discourses that regulate and define them can read as discursive agency (Butler, 1997). The individual’s capacity to constitute discourse may be unconscious yet still agentic. Youdell (2006) points out that there can be multiple degrees of both intent and understanding amongst subjects in terms of embedded meanings and effects of discourses. She observes that subjects do not necessarily regurgitate discourse unwittingly, nor are discourses cited knowingly, as they are not necessarily explicitly known to the subject and/or audience. As such, Youdell notes, subjects need not be self-consciously alert to the discourses deployed in order for their familiar and embedded meanings to be inscribed.

Rather than trying to stop or regulate young people’s use of ephemeral messaging, we can learn from them by exploring how social media can offer long-lasting insights into the discursive use of power and the negotiation of “identity formation, status negotiation, and peer-to-peer sociality” (boyd, 2007, p. 1). Mikulec (2012, p. 10)

argues that “given the continually changing landscape of the educational environment, both in schools and online, pre-service teachers must be aware of how their words and actions made public and in print through social networking sites can affect them now and in their future classrooms”.

Conclusion

We conclude that the use of self-destructing media among young people in Australasia has the potential to afford opportunities for students to constitute agentic discursive identities. These media have implications for how young people project specific subjectivities and engage in self-surveillance practices. This space is rich for further research exploration.

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