



## LJMU Research Online

**Lincoln, S and Robards, B**

**Editing the project of the self: Sustained Facebook use and growing up online**

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/4092/>

### Article

**Citation** (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

**Lincoln, S and Robards, B (2017) Editing the project of the self: Sustained Facebook use and growing up online. Journal of Youth Studies, 20 (4). pp. 518-531. ISSN 1469-9680**

LJMU has developed [LJMU Research Online](#) for users to access the research output of the University more effectively. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LJMU Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of the record. Please see the repository URL above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information please contact [researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk)

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/>

**Editing the project of the self: Sustained Facebook use and growing up online**

Sian Lincoln, Liverpool John Moores University, UK

Brady Robards, University of Tasmania, Australia

**Abstract**

Now in operation for over a decade, Facebook comes to serve as a digital record of life for young people who have been using the site through key periods of transition. With significant parts of their social and cultural lives played out on the site, users are able to turn to these profiles – these texts of transition often documenting significant relationships, work lives, education, leisure, and loss – to reflect on how their use of Facebook has come to constitute a life narrative. Like reading old journals or diaries, the act of ‘scrolling back’ through a Facebook profile can be a nostalgic and challenging experience whereby users are confronted with their younger selves. In this paper, we report on findings from qualitative research into sustained use of Facebook by young people in their twenties in Australia and the UK. Here we focus on the ‘editing’ or re-ordering of narratives that our participants engage in while they scroll back through their years (5+) of disclosures – and the disclosures of others – that make up their Facebook Timelines. We present our analysis through three different arenas (employment, family life, and romantic relationships) subject to what we argue here is a reflexive re-ordering of life narratives. We argue that Facebook profiles represent visual manifestations of Giddens’ (1991) reflexive project of the self, that serve not only to communicate a sense of self to others, but that also act as texts of personal reflection and of growing up, subject to ongoing revision.

Keywords: Facebook, young people, editing the self, sustained use, growing up

## Introduction

In 2014, the social network site Facebook celebrated its tenth birthday (author 2014a). Since its development by Mark Zuckerberg and his roommates at Harvard University in 2004 as a way to 'rate' and network with other students, the site has grown exponentially to be used by over 1 billion people, a number of which are people in their teens and twenties (Facebook.com, 2016). For this reason, Facebook now serves as a crucial site upon which life narratives are constructed, shared, reflected upon, and potentially revised. The longevity of the platform raises questions about sustained use, especially for young users. What purpose do continuous 'digital traces' serve in memory-work as users reflect on their personal histories? How do young people make sense of the disclosures they made on Facebook five or more years ago, and do they continue to figure in a current identity-project? What are the implications here for employment, intimate relationships, and familial life?

Over the past decade, Facebook has become a site of and for identity-work (Hogan 2010; Sauter 2013; Duguay 2014), intimacy (Berriman & Thomson 2014), surveillance (Lee & Cook 2015), news (Sveningsoon 2015), political discourse (Vromen, Xenos & Loader 2014) and citizenship (Harris & Roose 2006), alongside a channel for simply keeping in touch with friends (Joinson 2008). As the site approached the end of its first decade in existence, we became interested in this apparent longevity - not really seen of other social network sites such as Facebook's predecessors MySpace, Friendster

and Bebo - and what this long-term potential might mean for users, especially young users who have grown up using Facebook.

Our project, 'Facebook Timelines', explores sustained (five or more years of) use of the site with twenty-somethings, who would have lived through a range of 'rites of passage' during the time they had also been Facebook users. We are interested in how young people in their twenties have used Facebook to order, and potentially re-order, 'growing up' narratives. We are interested both in the 'fateful' (Giddens 1991: 121) and 'critical' (Thomson et al. 2002) moments that punctuate young people's lives, but also the more mundane moments that constitute the everyday. The Facebook Timelines project has sought to uncover how these narratives have been disclosed and represented online. In this respect, we have undertaken 34 in-depth qualitative interviews with young people between the ages of 20 and 29 who have been using Facebook for five years or more. Our approach includes engaging our participants as co-analysts of their own digital traces, asking them to 'scroll back' through their Facebook Timelines with us present, narrating years of disclosures, covering what they (and others) have documented online. We present these findings in this paper.

A focus on the 'sustained', 'longitudinal' use of Facebook has become central to the company's own operating model. In 2011, the 'Timeline' iteration of the Facebook profile was introduced, a feature that neatly archives all available posts by year visibly representing a chronological de-compartmentalising or 'filing' of users' lives year on year. Click on that year and the 'file' expands ready for the user to revisit previous

disclosures, whether made by the profile author themselves or by friends who have tagged the profile author in their own disclosures (status updates, images, links, and so on). In 2012, Facebook introduced the 'year in review' feature that enabled users to create a series of 'highlights' from the previous year based on the number of 'likes' determining the most popular posts, images, videos and so on. This is a feature that has more recently come under criticism for 'celebrating' tragedies such as the death of a family member. In Meyer's (2014) case, an image of his deceased daughter was featured in his 'year in review', surrounded by pictures of people dancing and balloons, in what Meyer described as a kind of 'inadvertent algorithmic cruelty'. In 2014 and in line with their tenth birthday celebrations, Facebook developed the 'look back video' a feature that enabled users to take a nostalgic look back over the last decade of their lives as articulated on Facebook. This feature demonstrated that Facebook wasn't simply a fad, but that the site had become embedded into the everyday lives of its users, who were using it in a sustained way, regularly interacting with and posting to the site (Author, 2014; author, 2014b). What such developments also demonstrate is Facebook's own recognition that the site has become a key portal for users to document their everyday lives, and that their users were literally living out their lives on the site.

Despite discourses of decline and flight from Facebook (see, for instance, Miller 2013; Cannarella & Spechler 2014), it still very much dominates the social web today.

Vromen, Xenos, and Loader (2014) assert the ongoing significance of the site in the lives of between 80 and 94 per cent of young people (16-29 years old, n=3685) in the US, UK, and Australia. Even for the younger segment, aged 13 to 17, the most recent

US data at the time of writing indicated Facebook was still the most popular form of social media with 71% of respondents identifying as users (Lenhart 2015). It is currently unclear whether or not this younger group will become more likely to adopt Facebook over time, or if indeed this does evidence some kind of gradual generational shift. What is clear though - especially from the figures from the broader group from Vromen et al. (2014) - is that young people are not leaving in droves, as they did with MySpace (author 2012) but are still using the site. Instead, there is a 'pivoting' or an opening-out towards a more diverse landscape of digital social media, now including Instagram, WhatsApp (both owned by Facebook), Snapchat and Tumblr. However, despite Facebook's continued centrality, there is clearly a sense of ambivalence and even disdain towards it, producing a curious tension (author 2015).

Our participants spoke of Facebook as being 'past it' in lots of ways; the less cool sibling of sites and apps such as Instagram and Snapchat, yet any 'flight' from the site is (as they tell it) is unlikely to be permanent. They may take 'Facebook vacations' when they temporarily disable their profiles for a set period of time or simply choose to take time away from it, but their profiles hold too much data for them to completely abandon them; for them, the site is a rich archive of images, texts, links and contacts ('friends') that they will undoubtedly dip into again; it is a phone book, contacts list, photo album, video diary of their lives. Of course we can present various criticisms of a Facebook monopoly - and indeed these criticisms are important - but our aim with this project is to investigate the sustained use of the site by young users, and to consider the role Facebook plays in mediating young people's growing up narratives; but also and

perhaps more importantly, how Facebook might be a useful window into the lives of young people more broadly. More specifically in this paper, we are concerned with how narratives of 'growing up' are documented, edited and managed on Facebook. We use the term 'narrative' as an ongoing 'sense making process rather than a finished product in which loose ends knit together in a single story-line' (Ochs and Capps (2001:15 in Hyvarinen 2008: 452) that for our participants is a part of the 'social, cultural and political world' (Hyvarinen 2008: 447) in which they live. Drawing on Hyvarinen's work (2008) we are interested in how narratives are constructed (and the limitations to this given the medium of disclosure), how they change with experience (Plummer, 2001), and the role these narratives play in telling stories of growing up on Facebook.

Engaging our participants in the 'scroll back' method (which we expand upon below) has enabled us to understand the context of our participants' disclosures. In reflecting upon their use of Facebook, we consider the site as an archive of reflexive identity work and we draw upon Giddens' (1991) concept of the 'reflexive project of the self' as a framework through which to explore how this identity work is done by young people using Facebook for a sustained period of time.

## **Methodology**

This paper draws on the Facebook Timelines project conducted with 23 Facebook users in their twenties (average age: 22) who had been using Facebook for more than five years. We were interested in this particular demographic because their use in their teens and twenties would likely coincide with the experience of 'critical' (Thomson et al. 2002) or 'fateful' (Giddens 1991) moments around growing independence (financial,



familial, in terms of mobility, and so on) and key milestones like graduation(s) or getting a job and legislated rites of passage around consent, voting, drinking, driving, and so on. Our sample was generated through a 'call for participants' that was advertised in our respective institutions as well as on Facebook. Prospective participants then contacted the project investigators. In this respect, our sample was 'self-selecting' but this was important because we were seeking participants who had a track record of sustained use of the site. While such an approach is quite risky in terms of guaranteeing adequate representation, we felt our sample reasonably diverse.

Our sample consisted of 18 females and 16 males with a range of educational qualifications from minimum levels (completion of grade 10 in Australia) through to one participant with a PhD. Our participants worked in a range of occupations including: medicine; childcare; retail; hospitality; service work; social media and DJ-ing. We had one male trans participant, two men and one woman who identified as gay, one male who identified as bisexual, and another male participant who was undecided when it came to his sexuality. As we explain in this article and elsewhere (Authors, forthcoming), and as you would expect, gender, sexuality, educational backgrounds and career aspirations had significant impacts the digital traces produced through sustained social media use, and thus the diversity of our sample in this sense is important.

Interviews took place between 2014 and 2016. For convenience, participants were from Liverpool in the UK, and Launceston, Tasmania in Australia. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured in-depth interviews, that lasted anywhere from one

hour to two hours, and involved 'scrolling back' through Facebook Timelines (also known as profiles) with our participants. The participants themselves were in control of the computer (or in several cases, a smartphone) during the scroll back, but were invited to narrate and reflect on what they were seeing for the voice recording. Recordings were transcribed and coded thematically, to reveal common (and not so common) themes for analysis. Themes such as education, family life and intimate relationships are discussed in this article (see also author forthcoming).

The Facebook Timeline represents an immensely personal and sometimes confronting record of a person's life. With this in mind, we recruited our participants as co-analysts with whom we would 'scroll back' through their Timelines, and invite them to reflect openly rather than rely entirely on our own analyses. In doing this, as the researchers looked on, participants navigated their way through their own profiles, narrating the content as year upon year of their Timeline was opened up exposing more and more about their lives as they (and their friends) had documented it.

We describe our participants as 'co-analysts' of their own digital traces for several reasons. First, we sought to create a research scenario where participants were empowered to contribute their own interpretation of their digital traces to the research. This 'scroll back' method, layered with the reflections, insights, and analyses of participants produced rich, complex narratives that we as researchers would not have been able to decode from scrolling back through these Timelines ourselves. Second, the 'scroll back' method also has the potential to serve a pedagogical function, where

asking participants to scroll back and reflect in some detail on their past disclosures can be revelatory. We sought to press on, and even enhance, social media literacies, and to explore how conventions for 'being' on Facebook had developed, how their friending practices had evolved, how they made decisions about what to disclose/not to disclose on Facebook and to reflect on the value of Facebook as an archive of 'growing up' not only for researchers but also - and importantly - for the participants themselves. This process has revealed much about the ways in which young people are using Facebook as an archive of their reflexive project of the self that not only probes reflection on how their selves are projected 'outwardly' but also how they are understood 'inwardly'.

### **Facebook Timelines and the Reflexive Project of the Self**

One of the central tenets in Giddens' theory of the reflexive project of the self is that selves are made, not inherited or static. Individuals continually work on, reflect on, and revise their self-projects. Giddens describes the 'stable individual' as someone with 'a feeling of biographical continuity which he or she is able to grasp reflexively and, to a greater or lesser degree, communicate to others' (1991:54). Although this theory does run the risk of placing too much emphasis on agency at the cost of carefully considering cultural and structural forces (Adams, 2003) that also shape this reflexive self-project, the concept nonetheless still carries much theoretical weight in discourses of identity and is operationalised in various contexts. Thomson (2007), for example, considers the curriculum vitae (CV) as a modern manifestation of the reflexive project of the self that requires a very specific ordering of self-narratives for a particular outcome: gaining employment. Educational achievements, employment histories, special skills and

sometimes - especially for young people - hobbies and interests, become carefully organised into the CV to present a particular narrative, embellishing some truths and leaving out others. As Thomson (2007: 80) explains, 'story-telling (to ourselves and others) is central to...the reflexive project of the self. As we re-work existing narratives and forge new ones, we invent and reinvent who it is possible to be'.

Conceptualising the profiles that constitute social network sites as 'transition texts', as manifestations and archives of Giddens' 'reflexive project of the self' has allowed us, in this study, to examine and - in collaboration with our participants - analyse long-term growing up narratives. For a number of our participants, the Timeline is the ultimate visual manifestation of the reflexive project where their lives and the lives of their friends are constantly being revised, updated and reworked. We also acknowledge that this process isn't solely in the hands of the user but is also subject to the mechanisms of Facebook itself (through adverts for example) and Facebook 'friends' whose 'liking', 'tagging' or sharing other people's disclosures (images, videos and so on) manipulates the profile beyond its intended perimeters. As Bucher (2012: 1168) explains, '[a]kin to the algorithmic logic of search engines, Facebook deploys an automated and predetermined selection mechanism to establish relevancy... ultimately demarcating the field of visibility for that media space.' Thus, the ordering of narratives in the News Feed is not entirely within the control of users themselves, at least in terms of Bucher's 'fields of visibility'. For our purposes, however, we focus on the Timeline itself, where the profile author *does* have some control.

The existing literature clearly covers the many strategies and techniques employed by young people for impression management and the presentation of self on Facebook. Marwick and boyd (2014a, 2014b) provide a particularly cogent overview and set of insights into the 'tactics and strategies' of teens in the US around context control, protecting privacy, and negotiating trust. For instance, they tell the story of one participant, Carmen, who hid the meaning of a status update in a cultural reference that only her friends would 'get', thus 'encoding drama' (1059), that her mother (and other people out of the loop) would not be able to interpret in the way Carmen had intended. Marwick and boyd (2014) talk about this as a form of social steganography. Another of their participants, Shamika, would regularly delete comments and messages after she had read them, subverting the usual 'persistent by default' approach taken by Facebook.

Sauter (2013) has written about the role of writing on Facebook as a tool for self-formation (aligning neatly with Giddens' reflexive project of self) while Mendelson and Papacharissi (2011) have studied the role of images - especially profile pictures - in the presentation of self on Facebook. The application of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework is well rehearsed (see, for instance, effective summaries by Hogan 2010 and Pinch 2010). What is less clear, however, is the extent to which young users are actively *revising* their 'project of self' as mediated on Facebook, potentially years after initial disclosures. For the remainder of this article we explore the phenomenon of 'editing' the reflexive project of the self on Facebook, following sustained use of the site.

## **Editing the Facebook Self**

As Facebook has retained its status as the most widely used form of digital social media longer than any other platform, so too have the digital traces inscribed by sustained use become lengthy. For some young users, this means revising, reordering, and 'editing' these digital traces such that the reflexive project of self is communicated as intended as they 'grow up'. In the following sections we discuss three interrelated 'arenas' of life and thus elements of the reflexive project of self: employment, family, and romantic relationships. We follow here Thomson et al.'s (2004) typology of four interrelated and overlapping arenas of life: education, employment, domestic (including family and romantic relationships), and leisure that often trigger the process of self editing. We focus on just two of these arenas (employment and domestic) while further dividing the domestic to attend to both familial and romantic relationships, as in our study these were framed as distinctive life arenas by our participants. As we will demonstrate, each arena constitutes an important part of the reflexive project of self, and how these dimensions of the Facebook Timeline manifest.

We begin by considering the theme of employment, which for our participants in their twenties was a key aspect of their lives that they were now making decisions about. Our research revealed the extent to which an acceptable employment profile on Facebook became a priority for young people faced with the prospect of competing in the job market, and how they were making conscious efforts to 'tidy up' their profiles. This presented an important transitional moment where scrolling back through years of content became significant.

*Employment: 'Tidying up' a Profile*

While we acknowledge that the transition from education to employment is not linear and is reversible and contested (Arnett 2004; Wyn & Woodman 2006), a number of the participants who have taken part in this study are in higher education, undertaking apprenticeships or some form of study, and are at a point in their lives when they are thinking about their employment futures. In this respect, participants spoke explicitly about 'cleaning up' and 'making presentable' their profiles to a new audience of potential employers as checking Facebook profiles becomes common practice as part of the recruitment process, thus a mediated version of themselves on social network sites became an important part of recruitment.

In some instances (and professions) the cleaning up of profiles is actively promoted, for example through careers talks. Two Australian medical students, Andrea (22) and Dina (23) both explained how they had been coached in a job seeking seminar about the recruitment process involving Google and Facebook searches. Some of the strategies recent graduates that were known to Andrea and Dina had used to enact a level of privacy involved to changing their names on Facebook (technically a violation of Facebook's Terms and Conditions) or, alternatively, going back through their profiles to 'tidy up'. Andrea explained:

People came and talked to us about how to apply for jobs. And they [said]... we'll do a Google search on you and we'll look at the first two pages... so I think that was an incentive for people to change their name on Facebook... [or] 'tidy up' their profiles.

As this quote demonstrates, Dina is aware that Facebook is ranked high up on a Google search and thus, this should be the first site for revision ready for viewing by potential employees. Dina spoke explicitly about 'transitioning' from a young student to a 'grown up' professional, moving away from the 'carefree' youthful days to a (professional) life of responsibility that particularly comes with the medical profession.

I guess we've been aware for a while that transitioning from someone who is a student to someone who is working in the medical field, responsible for other people, it was a certain accepted kind of way you were meant to conduct yourself on social media... particularly for photos, but also for what you posted...

There are a number of interesting points here with regards to these young people editing the way they are represented on Facebook. First, the quote highlights that the rhetoric of the revision of social network sites is embedded into young peoples' professional development, and consequently they are re-thinking their intended Facebook audience. Second, what we see in action is Andrea and Dina revising and editing their own digital traces that were initially intended for a very different and somewhat narrow audience: their Facebook friends made up predominantly of family and friends, but now re-configuring to include recruitment agencies, professional bodies, associations and so on. In line with this, Andrea spoke about deleting 'stupid things' like 'I had so many electric [static] shocks today' that seem banal and irrelevant representing a younger self when such disclosures would have amused its intended audience. But now the context of these disclosures has shifted. In retrospect, Andrea



recoiled at the youthful banality of these everyday disclosures. Dina explained in more detail her process of deleting some things, but not others:

I didn't delete all of them but I deleted the ones where you look messy. Either you're sweaty from all your dancing, you're very drunk or people are doing silly things in the background because you do think 'what would a patient think of that?' They'd want to know you were having fun, so dressing up or having a couple of drinks, that's fine but when you maybe start to make bad decisions and look like you're making bad decisions, that's probably where you have to draw the line.

Dina is actively assuming the subject position of a future patient, imagining what they would expect from her, their future doctor, and how she might revise her own impression to align with that identity: fun, but capable of making good decisions. "Bad decisions" don't equate to responsibility, trust and so on that define the medical profession; "messy" posts present ambiguity about what might be going on in an image. Dina is also concerned about how her image is managed for her future patients, thus editing self beyond the initial recruitment process. As they move towards their own conceptions of 'adulthood' and the prospect of professional employment in careers that they have been training in for five or more years, Andrea and Dina are having to re-work and edit existing content for a different audience. In essence, they are editing their own growing up narratives.

Third, there is a labour involved here, and also a level of reluctance amidst the recognition that this is part of the recruitment process and part of being a professional. However, in considering this editing a bit of a chore, there is also the recognition that balance is important (professional and fun). Dina's comments represent the wider

significance of Facebook as a medium through which to represent oneself and is recognition that Facebook is a key portal through which recruiters can find out more about you. Too little information looks odd (as other participants also pointed out); you have something to hide, while too much leaves content open to mis-interpretation. Thus, a careful balance needs to be struck in the editing process. Dina further explained, 'I think it would be weird trying to eliminate it all, because it's been a pretty significant part of my life'.

Of course, the 'intended Facebook audience' of our young participants is by no means static, and alongside their own growing up narratives and transitions, the 'friends list' evolves and changes too demonstrating command over who can view content. Participants often spoke about 'culling' their Facebook friends list, by deleting, for instance, old school friends, previous workmates or friends of friends who they no longer had other forms of contact with, and in a number of instances who they simply no longer remembered. As our participants' uses of Facebook have matured so too have their friending practices and their organisation of their own audiences. In this respect then, it seems a natural progression to be thinking about future intended audiences, although as these examples demonstrate this is in many respects being actively initiated by potential employers, tutors, and so on. Managing one's Facebook audience is a facet of editing the self on Facebook that demonstrates this is not just about what one sees on a profile but is also a 'behind the scenes' activity that adds another dimension to the notion of ongoing reflexive identity work on Facebook.

What these audience management and editing practices also represent are the ways in which our participants are thinking about how they want to present themselves in digital social spaces, as with physical social spaces (job interviews, in bars and nightclubs, while on dates, and so on). In many ways such practices are reminiscent of Thomson's (2007) analogy of the CV in which certain aspects of one's identity are embellished, fore-fronted or erased for the purposes of 'projecting' an 'ideal' self that a potential employer would be interested in. The strategies employed to manage a professional identity as discussed above can also be carried through into other realms of life, for example the family and home. In the following sections we develop our discussion exploring the ways in which these strategies shift between digital and physical contexts and consider how they are managed in relation to personal (rather than professional) life (family and relationships). Here we discuss how the notion of 'editing of self' on Facebook is a process managed offline (or back stage to draw on Goffman's terminology (1959)) then projected through Facebook via texts and images. We also consider this in reverse in our discussion (for example, when an event happens on Facebook that sparks an argument offline) when relationships are compromised by different types of disclosures and their interpretation by different, shifting audiences. This discussion highlights how significant sites like Facebook now are in mediating contemporary relationships.

#### *Family and Home: Managing familial ties*

Mary, a 27-year-old Australian finance worker, regularly reflected on her family – especially her father – when scrolling back through her Facebook Timeline. Her parents

are divorced and re-married, and Mary has both full- and step-brothers and sisters. She talked about Facebook as important in keeping in touch with this big and dispersed family, and as we scrolled back through her Timeline, it was clear that family played a significant part in her life as mediated on the site. She recounted stories of sleeping on her father's couch after a particularly bad breakup, and how certain images on her profile reminder her of that time in her life. She mentioned her father 17 times during the interview, prompted by the images and disclosures on her profile. However, her father would also tend to post 'emotional stuff' on Facebook that she felt was not appropriate and sometimes upset her. Despite describing their relationship as close, she made the decision to remove him from her 'friends list' on Facebook (de-friending or 'deleting' him):

Mary: I'm not friends with him [Dad] on Facebook anymore just because he posts emotional stuff about family, friends and stuff. There's a time and place for that and Facebook shouldn't be one. So Dad and I aren't friends anymore on Facebook

Interviewer: How did he take that?

Mary: He was a bit offended but I don't like... if I sit there at work and if I open Facebook and see something that pisses me off it ruins the whole day.

Despite being close to her father and talking about Facebook as a useful way of keeping in touch with family, Mary deleted her father on Facebook because she didn't want to see his 'emotional' posts. This might appear ruthless in one sense, but there's also a clear strategy of self-care here. For Mary, this was a kind of strategic form of

context control as she sought not just to order and re-order her own reflexive project of self but also how she consumed (or did not consume) the disclosures of others.

At this point, our formulation of Facebook as a visual manifestation and ordering of the reflexive project of self reaches a boundary. Here, it is not just the performative act of posting a selfie or describing an experience in a status update or linking to a news story, but something more complex. Thomson (2007), who extends Giddens' theory of the reflexive project of self, explains that 'storytelling (to ourselves and others) is central to the construction of a reflexive project of self', it here at this boundary through Mary's example, that *storytelling to self* is worth drawing attention to. Mary's use of Facebook involves this kind of daily dialogue where she reads and interacts with her wider network, in this case with her father. Despite the tension it caused with her father, she made the decision to remove him from her daily 'feed' of content on the site, thus re-ordering that conversation with self.

Family can also play a significant role in first establishing a presence on a social network site, before any posts are even made, as Alice (20 from the UK) explained when talking about initially setting up her Bebo and then Facebook accounts:

Alice: I think for Bebo I sat down with my dad just so he could watch to make sure the information going in wasn't like age or like home or whatever. I think he sent me a picture of myself that had like a hat over my face so that you wouldn't see my face so that I could upload that as my profile picture.

Interviewer: Really? Your dad gave you that?

Alice: Yeah, my dad sent me that. So they allowed me to have it but they were like if you use a picture that...

Interviewer: Yeah.

Alice: Like sees you... but for Facebook I was older so I knew what I was doing then... I think my friend might have come over to help me set that one up. Just because I wasn't really sure how it all worked and they kind of just brought up the page and told me what to do and then I filled it all in when they left.

At the start of her social media use Alice was guided by her father, who wasn't on Facebook at that point. They discussed privacy and the extent to which one should reveal details about themselves on social network sites. In effect, what Alice's father was doing was ensuring she made informed choices about the story she would tell about herself online, setting boundaries of disclosure for her as a novice user before she posts anything. The boundaries of disclosure in the scenario are set through the use of an analysed photograph that was selected for her to use as her profile picture. Such practices then translated (at least in the first instance, while still 'new' on the site) onto Facebook. However, after several years of use and with a self-proclaimed maturity, Alice discloses 'critical moments' on the site including images in which she is identifiable. When scrolling back with the researcher, Alice reveals a photograph of her drinking before a night out with friends at which point she announces: 'this is pre-drinks. That's my first fish bowl [a large fish bowl shaped glass to drink from]' So while her family, namely her father was significant in socialising her into social media use, Alice still feels able to 'story-tell' within the framework of safety and responsibility initially set out.

*Relationships: 'It's complicated'*

The relationship status on Facebook is a point of messiness and complication for many of our participants, yet their engagement with this status plays a crucial role in their growing up narratives. The following discussion of this engagement presents a clear example of the extent to which the site has become integrated into young people's everyday reflexive selves, further revealing how actions on Facebook blur the line between the digital and the physical.

The ways in which a new relationship plays out on Facebook can be important. In the words of one of our participants, if a relationship is 'Facebook official' then it is a *real* relationship. But changing a status from 'single' to 'in a relationship' and then, sometimes, back again is not so straight forward and there are varying degrees of complication.

Take for example Tina (22, from the UK) who had broken up with her girlfriend 6 months before our interview although they were still friends on Facebook. De-friending was not an option for Tina because 'all hell would break loose... she likes drama and it would end up being an argument'. This notion of drama was certainly not new to the relationship which had been defined as dramatic throughout, both in digital and physical spaces. The complication for Tina and her ex-girlfriend lay in the different ways they 'told the story' of their relationship with each other to themselves and their network on Facebook with Tina preferring to make their relationship entirely visible. The levels of relationship exposure varied. For example, Tina was keen to tag her girlfriend in images and mention her in posts, even though her girlfriend did not reciprocate. For Tina, their

relationship played a significant part in her projection of self on the site and this played out even when the relationship came to an end.

Tina had a particular strategy for re-ordering her reflexive project of self as mediated on Facebook, such that the relationship tie was removed but it was done so subtly without performative fanfare. First, she hid the relationship status. Hiding the relationship status – making it visible only to herself – represented a sort of ‘suspension’ of the relationship for Tina; it’s ‘not showing’ places the status ‘under review’ leaving time for personal reflection on it’s ending before going ‘Facebook live’ with the ‘single’ status. This is critical, again resonating with Thomson’s (2007: 80) theorisation of the reflexive project of self as predicated on ‘storytelling to ourselves’.

Then, and while the status is hidden, Tina took her name off their ‘in a relationship’ tag. For Tina, this meant that she was not making a statement on Facebook about their split; rather the profile was edited subtly, over a period of time so that eventually the status can be removed.

What we see here is the reflexive project of self being managed in quite complex, continuous ways. Being able to project still being in a relationship on Facebook helped Tina come to terms with the break up gradually, with the eventual removal of the ‘in a relationship’ status signifying a point at which she felt reconciled with her new status. The Facebook relationship status in some ways created an ‘in-between’ space in which her relationship status could be suspended while the relationship had come to an end.



Facebook was used to mediate the relationship in a way that was useful in the context of her reflexive self. In reflecting upon the representation of her relationships on Facebook in the future Tina said 'I'd keep it totally off it from now on'. The process of editing self – and the relationship with another – in this context was too complicated.

Ali (23, from the UK) described Facebook as 'damaging' after practically living out a 5 year relationship with an ex-girlfriend on the site:

In sixth form I was seeing this girl for a long time; on and off for about five years. And I remember that the sole reason why we had so many problems was Facebook. Like literally I'm not joking, for five years every problem we had you could source it back to something or someone saying or seeing something on Facebook... You know and then she went to Australia and it continued because even though she was thousands of miles away, Facebook made that connection so close we still had problems.

Ali's ex-girlfriend's rather obsessive behaviour on the site meant that many of his disclosures, especially made on female friends' profiles, were used as something to argue about. As Ali remarked: 'Facebook was the go to thing for her to check up on me'. There are several interesting aspects about this use in the context of a project of self and how this plays out on the site. Firstly, Ali talks about the notion of 'sourcing back' on Facebook, whether that be sourcing back problems in the relationship to Facebook or his ex-girlfriend repeatedly sourcing back to his profile in an attempt to keep tabs on him during the relationship and when it had ended. This continued even when they had decided to de-friend each other on the site as the ex-girlfriend then started using her mother's profile to find out what Ali was doing.

What we see in action here are the ways in which Facebook *refracted* this relationship, that is the direction of the relationship changed depending on the nature of (Ali's) disclosures made on the site, and how they translated into their relationship. Secondly, as a source Facebook features prominently in the reflective project of self of Ali's girlfriend, and crucially, it is not just her profile that is utilised in the project. When with Ali her project of self was often determined by the disclosures *he* had made and her subsequent reactions to them on the site. This relentless surveillance subsequently led Ali to limit the disclosures he made, or making them somewhere else (private messaging) and thus the site *necessarily* becomes less significant in his reflexive project of self.

### **Conclusion: Facebook as an archive of the 'reflexive project of self'**

This article has explored sustained Facebook use by young people in their twenties and the ways in which they use the site for ongoing identity-work as part of their 'reflexive projects of self' (Giddens 1991). This study has revealed the extent to which Facebook mediates contemporary life narratives, and how critical moments and key transitions such as embarking on a professional career or an intimate relationship act as 'triggers' for the revision of a Facebook profile when content is edited to re-align identity with new imaginings of audience (Facebook friends) as well as the user. As our discussion highlights, the reflexive project of self is not simply about managing content posted on the site, but is multi-dimensional, shifting between digital and physical contexts and in-between different audiences. We have drawn on 3 key 'arenas' (employment, family life, and romantic relationships) as identified by our participants to explore how users make sense of their disclosures and the disclosures of others on Facebook, and how, over time, they continue to order, organise, and revise these digital manifestations of identity projects.

In the context of employment, and the prospect of embarking on a professional life, our data has revealed the significance of Facebook as a platform used to find out more about a potential employee, but moreover it has revealed the multi-dimensional approach that users take to the site. In revising their profile content (and thus their identities), they are placing themselves in the position of the professional self, the potential employer and the client. At the same time, they are revising their 'audience' accordingly, managing their 'friends list'. Critical arenas such as these act as triggers for our participants who when faced with the prospect of becoming a competitor in the job market, scroll back over years of Facebook content to remove ambiguous, 'messy' material that could jeopardise their employment opportunities. Alongside this, as our participants have grown older, their perception of the content posted on the site has changed, and thus scrolling back (either alone or as part of the research process) through this content enables users to reflect upon its relevance to their current identity and profile, editing as appropriate.

Another arena comes in relation to family life and the complications that can be caused by having family members as Facebook friends. The examples drawn upon above capture negotiations that take place before and after disclosures are made on the site. Whether it be parents ensuring their children use the site safely, taking a lead in selecting profile photos, or children managing access to their parents' profile, these negotiations figure into the identity projected on the site in the context of a familial arena.

The final arena that we discuss that also acts as a trigger for profile revision is romantic and intimate relationships. A number of our participants spoke about Facebook as a first 'port of call' when meeting someone of potential romantic interest. We draw on examples from our data that demonstrate how embedded in relationships Facebook can become to the point at which it serves as a site of contestation and complications. Our data also demonstrates the significance of Facebook in relationship perception and representation, which as we demonstrate may not be the same for all parties. In this

respect, Facebook itself become a trigger for problems, arguments, and drama in the relationship as disclosures 'refract' back into the relationship as it plays out offline.

Facebook profiles are significant life archives for users who have been using the site for a sustained period of time. Scrolling back through the Timeline with our participants has allowed us to reflect with them on who they were, who they are now, and who they want to be in the future. The large amount of data held within these Facebook Timelines tell multiple stories of the users' lives, co-produced by their friends, but as they grow up these stories change in significance, become irrelevant, or are deemed inappropriate to one's current identity. In this respect, editing enables users to reflexively re-order their life narratives and identities and to align them with how they understand their sense of self and how they want to communicate this to others. As we have argued, this editing presents its challenges, but also highlights the sophisticated strategies employed by young people to manage ongoing identity-work on Facebook.

### **List of References**

- Adams, M. (2003). 'The reflexive self and culture: a critique', *British Journal of Sociology*, 54(2), 221–238.
- Arnett, JJ. (2004) *Emerging Adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Berriman, L., & Thomson, R. (2014). Spectacles of intimacy? Mapping the moral landscape of teenage social media. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1–15.  
<http://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2014.992323>
- Boyd, d. (2014) *It's Complicated: The social lives of networked teens* (New haven: Yale University Press).

Bucher, T. (2012) 'Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook', *New Media & Society*, 14(7): 1164-1180.

Cannarella, J., & Spechler, J. A. (2014). Epidemiological modeling of online social network dynamics. <http://arxiv.org/abs/1401.4208>

Duguay, S. (2014). "He has a way gayer Facebook than I do": Investigating sexual identity disclosure and context collapse on a social networking site. *New Media & Society*, online first: <http://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814549930>

Facebook.com (2016) 'Company Info: Facebook News Room', accessed online, February 25, 2016: <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>

Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (California: Stanford University Press).

Goffman, E. (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, London: Penguin.

Harris, A., & Roose, J. (2013). DIY citizenship amongst young Muslims: experiences of the "ordinary." *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(6), 794–813.

<http://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.844782>

Hogan B (2010) 'The presentation of self in the age of social media: distinguishing performances and exhibitions online', *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30(6): 377–386.

Joinson, A. (2008). 'Looking at', 'Looking up' or "Keeping up with" People? Motives and Uses of Facebook. Presented at the Computer-Human Interaction 2008.

Lee, A., & Cook, P. S. (2015). The conditions of exposure and immediacy: Internet surveillance and Generation Y. *Journal of Sociology*, 51(3), 674–688.

- Lenhart, A. (2015). 'Teens, Social Media & Technology Overview: 2015', Pew Research Centre: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015>
- Livingstone, S. (2002) *Young People and New Media: Childhood and the Changing Media Environment* (London: Sage).
- Marwick, A. E., & boyd, d. (2014a) 'Networked privacy: How teenagers negotiate context in social media. *New Media & Society*', 16(7), 1051–1067.
- Marwick, AE, & boyd, d (2014a). "It's just drama": teen perspectives on conflict and aggression in a networked era. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(9), 1187–1204
- Mendelson, A.L. and Papacharissi, Z. (2011) 'Look at us: collective narcissism in college students Facebook photo galleries', In: Papacharissi Z (ed.) *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, New York: Routledge, pp. 251–273.
- Meyer, E. (2014) 'Inadvertent Algorithmic Cruelty', [meyerweb.org](http://meyerweb.org), accessed online July 17, 2015: <http://meyerweb.com/eric/thoughts/2014/12/24/inadvertent-algorithmic-cruelty/>
- Miller, D. (2013) 'Facebook's so uncool, but it's morphing into a different beast', *The Conversation*, accessed online July 17, 2015: <https://theconversation.com/facebooks-so-uncool-but-its-morphing-into-a-different-beast-21548>
- Pinch, T. (2010) 'The invisible technologies of Goffman's sociology from the merry-go-round to the internet', *Technology and Culture*, 51(2): 409–424.

- Sauter, T. (2013). 'What's on your mind?' Writing on Facebook as a tool for self-formation', *New Media & Society*, 16(5), 823–839.
- Sveningsson, M. (2015). "It's Only a Pastime, Really": Young People's Experiences of Social Media as a Source of News about Public Affairs. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 1–11. <http://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115604855>
- Thomson, R. Bell, R. Holland, J. Henderson, S. McGrellis, S. and Sharpe, S. (2002). 'Critical moments: choice, chance and opportunity in young people's narratives of transition', *Sociology*, 36(2) pp. 335–354.
- Thomson, R. (2007) 'A biographical perspective' In M. J. Kehily, *Understanding youth: Perspectives, identities and practices*. Sage, pp. 73-106.
- Vromen, A., Xenos, M. A., & Loader, B. (2014). Young people, social media and connective action: from organisational maintenance to everyday political talk. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18(1), 80–100.  
<http://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2014.933198>
- Wyn, J., & Woodman, D. (2006) 'Generation, Youth and Social Change in Australia', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9(5), 495–514.