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# Examining Digital Literacy Practices on Social Network Sites

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*Young adults represent the most avid users of social network sites, and they are also the most concerned with their online identity management, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Madden, 2012). These practices represent important literate activity today, as individuals who are writing online learn to negotiate interfaces, user agreements, and personal data, as well as rhetorical situations. Examining the social, technological, and structural factors that influence digital literacy practices in online environments is crucial to understanding the impact of these sites on writing practices. Applying Brooke's (2009) concept of an "ecology of practice" to writing in digital environments, this article examines the digital literacy practices of one undergraduate student through his self-presentation strategies. In considering the roles that social network sites play in individuals' literacy and identity practices, writing researchers and educators can better understand the literacy practices that students engage in outside of the classroom and the experiences they bring to their academic writing.*

## Introduction

As soon as he wakes up in the morning, Ronnie, an undergraduate student at a large, Midwestern research university, sends a tweet from his phone, which lets his roommates know he's awake. Rather than leaving a paper note for them in the kitchen, Ronnie visits their private group page on Facebook. On his walk to class in the morning, Ronnie takes a picture of some graffiti in front of a local restaurant and sends it to Twitter. Unwinding before orchestra rehearsal on an unseasonably warm day, Ronnie and his roommates blare music from the roof of their apartment building, and Ronnie films a 12-second video of a squirt-gun fight and posts it to Facebook and Twitter. He ends his evening studying in the library on campus, listening to music through the website last.fm, which records his music preferences and shares them with his friends. While he often works alone, Ronnie is always connected to friends on campus and across the country through his use of social network sites, his daily offline activity integrated into his online identity. For Ronnie, social network sites are intricately woven into the tapestry of his daily literacy practices; they play a large role in how he interacts

with others in his personal and professional life as well as how he presents himself to different audiences. For students like Ronnie, everyday literate activity takes place in networked digital environments, which shape their literacy practices and their online and offline lives.

Ronnie's experiences represent common ones for undergraduate students across the United States. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, as of August 2011, 83% of 18–29 year-olds used a social network site (Madden, 2012). Their interactions on these sites were also purposeful, as Pew reports that this age group is that most concerned with online identity management: 71% of them have changed the privacy settings on the sites they use (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Living a “literate life in the information age” (Selfe & Hawisher, 2004) increasingly means learning to navigate these spaces, managing one's identity and online data, and considering complex issues of privacy and representation. Using ethnographic case study data, this article examines how one undergraduate student integrated his use of social network sites into his everyday literacy practices to represent his identity. I approached this case study with three research questions: 1) How does this writer integrate social network sites into his everyday literacy practices? 2) How does this writer use those literacy practices to represent his identity for multiple audience groups on social network sites? 3) How does this writer negotiate site interfaces to represent his identity and communicate with others?

### **Digital Literacy and Ecologies of Practice**

Lankshear and Knobel (2008) define digital literacy as “a shorthand for the myriad social practices and conceptions of engaging in meaning making mediated by texts that are produced, received, distributed, exchanged, etc., via digital codification” (p. 5). The authors argue that while New Literacy Studies has a tradition of studying literacy in context, and also studying self-sponsored or “unofficial” literacy practices, they contend that most work in **New Literacy Studies does not consider “new literacy” practices, particularly digital literacies.** They call for research that considers writers' digital literacy practices in a variety of contexts. From the New London Group's (1996) discussion of multiliteracies, through Selfe and Hawisher's (2004) study of the technological literacy histories of Americans, to the extensive work of a wide array of scholars in analyzing and producing multimodal texts, I extend their notions of literacy and digital literate practice to social network sites specifically.<sup>1</sup>

In the tradition of these scholars, digital literacy practices must be seen within larger systems of literate activity and larger literacy ecologies. Since the “social turn” more than 20 years ago, writing studies has treated writing as a collaborative process situated within specific social and cultural contexts (Bizzell, 1994; Bruffee, 1984). Cooper (1986) describes an ecological framework in which literacy is “an

activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems” (p. 367). One of the important systems in this ecology is technology (DeVoss, McKee, & Selfe, 2009; Fleckenstein, Spinuzzi, Rickly, & Papper, 2008; Nardi & O’Day, 2000; Selfe & Hawisher, 2004). Brooke (2009), in his book *Lingua Fracta*, argues for an attention to “ecologies of practice” with a focus on “conscious, directed activity” in order to trace the ways that rhetorical work happens across an interface and to shift focus from investigating “textual objects” to researching “medial interfaces” (p. 6). Our continued disciplinary emphasis on static text, and our reliance on theories derived from print texts, as Brooke and Prior and Hengst (2010) note, not only puts us out of step with students and the larger culture, but also blinds us to many of the rhetorical affordances of new media. Brooke presents a view of writing processes that do not culminate in products, books or essays but are “special, stabilized instances of an ongoing process conducted at the level of interface” (p. 25).

In focusing on medial interfaces, Brooke argues for an emphasis not on stable products as the results of digital writing, but rather on the digital interface itself as where continuous writing activity happens. Studying social network sites through a focus on ecologies of practice would emphasize the continuous literate activity that takes place on social network sites rather than the distinct texts created through them. In Brooke’s words, this would allow us to consider “the strategies and tactics that we bring to bear on new media at the same time that our technologies constrain and empower us” (p. 41).

Capturing and analyzing this continuous and situated literate activity also means tracing this writing across sites. According to another study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the average adult has profiles on more than one social network site, and many users synchronize certain kinds of content across different sites—from Twitter to Facebook, for example—or they use a site like Tumblr to contain media from a number of the different sites in which they participate (Lenhart et al., 2010). To trace literate activity, then, writing researchers need to follow users across a number of different social network platforms. This article uses Brooke’s ecology of practice to study one writer’s identity representation on social network sites in terms of the perpetual literate activity that is shaped by the multiple social and technological elements of that ecology.

In focusing on social network sites, I use boyd and Ellison’s (2007) definition: “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (para. 4). Popular examples of these kinds of services include Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, and Twitter, but this definition also includes hundreds of similar sites devoted to a variety of interests and groups, such as sites for knitters (Ravelry) and music fans (last.fm).

## **Method**

As Porter (2007) notes, research on digital writing cannot rely on the same methodologies, simply translated to digital environments. Needed instead are methodologies that account for the local digital environments in which writing occurs. In order to trace Ronnie's literate activity across social network sites, I combined data collection methods that allowed me to follow dispersed literate activity across different spaces and over time. While such methods should be adapted to the context, I believe this combination of methods can allow writing researchers to study dispersed literate activity in contexts where writing is often difficult to trace.

### ***Participant Recruitment***

Ronnie's case study is part of a larger study of undergraduate and graduate students' literacy practices on social network sites. The undergraduate students in this study, attending a large, Midwestern research university, were recruited during the Spring 2010 semester by class visits to an advanced composition course focused on composition through a variety of media, including image, audio, and video. As I was interested in studying writing practices that occurred between a number of different social network sites, criteria for participation in this study included a strong presence on social network sites, as judged by an up-to-date profile and daily participation on a social network site and participation in a writing-intensive course. I measured students' participation levels on social network sites through a preliminary questionnaire distributed during my classroom visit, which invited students to indicate if they were interested in talking with me further about their social network site use.

### ***Data Collection***

In order to study Ronnie's literacy practices on social network sites, I followed his online activity for two semesters, Spring 2010 and Fall 2010, and I collected data from the following four sources:

### **Research Interviews**

I conducted periodic open-ended, reflective interviews with Ronnie every several weeks. The interviews focused on Ronnie's personal history with literacy and technology, a profile tour of his social network sites (described below), and on his recent social network site activity and other changes to his social network site use.

### **Online Texts**

The second primary means of data collection was the collection of texts that Ronnie contributed to social network sites. I observed Ronnie's activity online, and I collected the textual record of these interactions, such as status updates to Twitter and Facebook, blog posts, and activity on last.fm and other sites.

### **Time-Use Diary**

The third element of data collection involved a time-use diary, which I adapted from Hart-Davidson (2007), who developed them as a means to visualize the different documents that made up a workplace writing project. I asked Ronnie to complete a time-use diary for three “average days” in order for me to visualize how his social network site use was distributed across his daily activities. I asked him to record the time of the event, the message and its purpose, and the technology through which the message was sent (mobile phone vs. computer, for example).

### **Profile Tour**

During one of our initial interviews, Ronnie took me on a “profile tour” of his social network site accounts. The profile tours were recorded using video screen capture software, a popular means through which to research digital writing practices. (See, e.g., Geisler and Slattery, 2007.) The information discussed in the profile tour gave me an overall sense of how Ronnie perceived his own identity representation online, some history behind that representation, and his perspective on what those representations meant to him.

Collecting data from these various sources allowed me to develop a multi-faceted picture of literate activity in connection with social network sites. The research interviews, for example, allowed me to gauge my own interpretations of comments Ronnie posted online, as well as to gain background information unavailable in the textual activity I recorded. Through the time-use diary, I was able to track literate activity as it was embedded within Ronnie’s daily use of social network sites. The profile tour greatly assisted in my overall view of how Ronnie represented himself online and how each of these different sites worked together within this ecology of practice.

### **Ronnie’s Literate Activity on Social Network Sites**

We can consider the literacy practices Ronnie cultivated on social network sites through his enactment of various aspects of his identity. Through a discussion of the ways in which Ronnie represented himself within different “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and negotiated site interfaces, I demonstrate how Ronnie filtered and processed his offline life through his online activities. I focus on two primary aspects of Ronnie’s literacy practices on social network sites within these ecologies of practice: 1) Ronnie’s identity representations within different communities of practice, and 2) his interactions with the site interfaces.

Ronnie is of Irish and Chinese descent, plays the bass in the orchestra, is an avid blogger, has experience with web design and coding, and is an informatics minor. Social media is both a personal and academic interest of his, and he considers himself an expert user. At the time of the data collection, Ronnie had profiles on the following social network sites: Twitter, Facebook, Blogger, MySpace,

Tumblr, Flickr, YouTube, Last.fm, Linked In, Academia.edu, PureVolume, Digg, LibraryThing, and Ning. Ronnie primarily used a Dell laptop for his social media use; he also bought an iPhone during the course of the study, through which he also updated social network sites. Ronnie had been blogging for six years at the time of the study, having started at the suggestion of a high school English teacher. He began using Facebook in 2006, when the service opened itself up to high school students, primarily to keep in touch with friends who had already graduated. He considered himself an early-adopter of many different social network sites; he joined Twitter in 2008, and he saw his social network site activity as an important part of his self-branding. He reported that he often joined new sites to “claim real estate,” i.e., reserve his username on the site in case it became popular later. On Twitter, Ronnie was conscious of keeping his number of followers higher than the number of people he was following. For him, this number indexed his identity as a producer rather than a consumer on Twitter:

I try to keep my followers greater than the number of people I’m following because, you know, it’s just like my, I guess, weird habit. All the big people who tweet have—tend to have—more followers than people they’re following, so I feel like in a way that I am a publisher and not just someone who’s following people.

Ronnie described himself as a “publisher,” someone who creates content online for others. In this way, Ronnie saw himself as different from the average user, and he worked to present himself as such through his social network site use.

### ***Identity Representation and Audience***

Social network sites flatten audience through what Marwick and boyd (2011) call “context collapse,” where sites group different social networks and histories of friends, family, coworkers and acquaintances within the same category of “friend” or “follower.” One’s friend list on Facebook could include several hundred contacts: extended family members, friends from childhood and from college, coworkers, and professional colleagues, each of whom sees the same updates. Representing or cultivating one’s identity through social network sites is an activity that happens through every tweet and every message sent. Marwick and boyd note that one’s personal network of connections collaborates in this identity construction, in interacting with others and responding to the interests of one’s followers.

Scholars have viewed individual identity as embedded in particular contexts and based in individual performance within certain social constraints (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959). Early scholars of identity online (e.g., Turkle, 1995) saw the Internet as a place where identity was fluid and disconnected from users’ identities in offline spaces, based instead in performance through text. Critiques such as Nakamura’s (2002), however, have drawn attention to the ways in which one’s

online identity is still embedded in, and influenced by, an offline, embodied, self. Scholarship on identity on social network sites focuses on how users build and maintain audience communities. Boyd (2008) followed the “networked publics” teenagers cultivate on social network sites, and Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield, and Vitak (2010) demonstrated how users built social capital on Facebook. For Kirkland (2010), social network sites like MySpace allow young black women space to tell their stories and represent their perspectives through narrative. Sanderson (2008) argues that computer mediated communication also allows writers to shape the message presented about them in online spaces. Through an analysis of Red Sox pitcher Curt Shilling’s blog, Sanderson shows how Shilling used three self-presentation strategies (the critic, committed individual, and accountable person) to counter negative press accounts. While users present their identities online in ways connected to their offline, embodied selves and often connect with people from their offline networks online, they may present different aspects of themselves for different “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Writers engage in sophisticated literacy practices in order to present different aspects of self to these flattened audience structures on social network sites. Self-presentation on social network sites happens in two ways: through the construction of profiles, and through interactions with other social network site users. Here, I will detail Ronnie’s literacy practices through his presentations of self.

For Ronnie, Twitter represented a “stream of consciousness,” as he described it in an interview; he updated Twitter several times per day and connected primarily with close friends and roommates through the site. The information he shared on Twitter varied widely, such as updates on what he’s listening to, thoughts and musings on his way to class, images from his daily life, and questions to his friends about weekend plans or other topics. Some of these tweets were updates on his mood and daily activities:

[exhausted from a busy day but excited for what’s to come] Wed Mar 31 21:56:25 2010 via web<sup>2</sup>

[internet is back after tightening a few connections. if only unclogging the toilet was that easy . . .] 10:29 PM Oct 26th via web

[internet in the apt is strangely dead. thank goodness for smart phones; i can actually get work done, however slow] 10:22 PM Oct 26th via Twitter for iPhone

[dammit yahoo fantasy hockey, you’re really bad at keeping players off the bench when i told you to. i could be up several points right now] 2:09 PM Oct 28th via web

[sleep deprived. thus, acting sporadically. this happens from time to time . . .] 6:27 PM Oct 14th via web



Through these tweets, Ronnie showed himself to be an overcommitted and engaged college student, preoccupied with a busy schedule and sleep-deprived in the first and last tweets, always online, and managing school and leisure tasks online through projects and side activities like fantasy hockey.

Other updates were based on his location and interactions with his friends:

[chillin' at smith, psyched to hear my friend [removed] play his dma recital #heheplaybass] Wed Mar 31 19:26:33 2010 via Twiterrific

[eating with the fam at flattop #yum] Wed Mar 31 17:14:55 2010 via Twiterrific

[watching hockey. i'm a good fan] 11:16 PM Oct 28th via Twitter for iPhone

[at brothers with the gang] 10:03 PM Oct 28th via Twitter for iPhone

[fun #minecraft sesh w/ @sammmgh. time for chipotle!] 4:01 PM Oct 14th via web

Through these tweets, Ronnie showed himself to be busy and social, involved in musical performances, video games, and social activities with friends and family. These tweets gave Ronnie's Twitter followers a glimpse of not only his daily thoughts and activities but also his location, which showed Ronnie to be always connected to both his online and offline contacts.

Ronnie also discussed music quite frequently on Twitter, both what he was listening to and his reflections on the music:

[#nowplaying blink-182 - what's my age again?] Sun Mar 28 00:02:38 2010 via Twiterrific

[#nowplaying tom petty] Sat Mar 27 22:53:59 2010 via Twiterrific

[the chorus of the swell season's 'when your mind's made up' is the same chord progression as the verses of blink's 'adam's song' #jackpot] Wed Mar 31 21:09:34 2010

[music: keeping me alive since 1998] 5:35 PM Oct 26th via Twitter for iPhone via web

While Ronnie played bass in the orchestra and in musical theater performances and often discussed that activity online, he was also a fan and connoisseur of indie and alternative rock, and he tweeted about his listening practices often. Though the content was wide-ranging, Ronnie's use of Twitter was constant, and he was always connecting to someone through the site. Through Twitter, Ronnie presented himself as a connected techie, a social college student, and a music fan.

Ronnie's profile on Facebook at the beginning of this study presented his identity in much the same way. He rotated between profile pictures that portrayed himself as a musician, performing in concerts with his bass, to close up "artistic" shots, to one of his face painted in school colors. The information sections of his

Facebook profile were devoted to his favorite quotations and a record of recent and upcoming musical performances. The quotations ranged from Ernest Hemingway (“There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed”) and Mark Twain (“I have never let my schooling interfere with my education”) to Michael Bloomberg (“Being an Eagle Scout means that you took control of your own life. You set an objective, a reasonably complex one for a young man, and you pursued it through difficult times”) and J.R.R. Tolkien (“Not all who wander are lost”). Ronnie’s quotes were populated by writers about writing but also included philosophers like Nietzsche, mathematicians like Paul Erdős, composers like Dmitri Shostakovich and Leonard Bernstein, actors like Bruce Lee, and politicians like Theodore Roosevelt. Coming from almost all men, these quotations speak to the nature of writing, work, music, life, and ambition, portraying Ronnie as thoughtful, well read, and with wide-ranging interests. Through these aspects of his profile, Ronnie’s identity representation was centered around college life, especially his intellectual life and his life as a musician.

The interactive aspect of Ronnie’s identity representation on Facebook was a filtered form of his Twitter account and focused on his college-related activities. He primarily updated Facebook by sending specific tweets to the site through a service called Selective Tweets, but he restricted the content he sent to Facebook significantly. Ronnie described the audiences of the two sites this way:

I use selective tweets on Facebook, so only particular tweets will make it over, pretty much just ones that I know will get a reaction from people who are never using Twitter, because otherwise it’s just kind of like a stream of consciousness. I don’t want that to bother people’s news feeds. . . . [I update Facebook] primarily through Twitter, and it’s not that often. Um, usually, maybe once a week depending on how I feel. I’ll only go to Facebook to update really long things, because you know, there’s a 140 character limit on Twitter, so if I have to, like if I say I have a concert coming up that I want a lot of people to go to, I’ll put that on Facebook and put all the details of it. Um, that’s about it. And I’ll delete it, I’ll clear it as soon as the event is over because I figure it’s information people don’t want to see.

Ronnie updated Facebook with content that he felt would be more appropriate for this wider audience. He would update Facebook with progress on, for example, his graduate school applications, like this update from December 6, 2010:

Excited to see if [Ronnie] will get into grad school at UIUC? Dripping with anticipation? Who knows when our brave adventurer will find out! Stay tuned to see how the story unfolds. If the profile picture gains color, then our hero will have succeeded!

Some of them were a little more inscrutable, like this tweet he also sent to Facebook on October 27, 2010:

[it's an end of an era and i'm seeing clearer that nothing will ever be the same]

Williams (2009) discusses the ways in which individuals on social network sites use popular culture icons and references to represent themselves. The first status update references Ronnie's interest in video games, in using common adventure game tropes to describe his quest to get into graduate school. The second status update, while perhaps also referring to Ronnie's state of mind, is a line from the song "End of an Era" by the band Oliver and the Rememberalls, a band inspired by the Harry Potter series, and the lyrics refer to the first installment of the final Harry Potter film, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, which was to be released in theaters the following month. Through these kinds of updates, Ronnie presented himself as a busy college student and a musician, but also a fan: of rock music, video games, and the Harry Potter series.

Ronnie envisioned different audiences with different concerns and interests on both Facebook and Twitter and constructed his identity on both sites with these audiences in mind. Ronnie had approximately 700 friends on Facebook during this study while sending updates to a list of roughly 200 Twitter followers. The difference in audience size and conventions on Twitter and Facebook—it's socially acceptable to update Twitter 15 times a day but Facebook only a few times a day—contributed to the difference in use as well.

What is also notable are the aspects of Ronnie's embodied self to which he devoted less attention in his online representations. At the top of his Facebook page, Ronnie had his name written in Chinese characters next to the Roman script. Aside from a large photo album devoted to his music group's trip to China and Korea, however, Ronnie did not represent his ethnic heritage (either Chinese or Irish) in his social network site use. Ronnie's academic and extracurricular activities, through mentions of math projects and orchestra performances, along with social events and online gaming, received much more attention. Ronnie represented himself primarily through the activities he participated in and the people he was with rather than through aspects of identity categories like race and ethnicity.

Along with Ronnie's specific audiences, he also adjusted his use of different social network sites based on what he considered to be the community on that site. During the middle of data collection for this study, Ronnie set up a Flickr Pro account, which allowed him to pay a small amount of money to upload more photos and to organize them in unlimited "sets," or albums. He transitioned to hosting all of his blog images through Flickr but said that he also thought carefully about the kinds of images that he was uploading to the Flickr site because of what he saw as valued in the site's community:

Before it would just be kind of random images [on my blog] in my case, but I guess now it's more artsy, more Flickr appropriate, so I don't feel as weird polluting Flickr with blog images because I feel that Flickr is a very community based website.

He saw Flickr-appropriate photos as being more specific:

They're very selective, they're not just random photos, it's not like people uploading albums to Facebook which is pretty much, whatever's in the camera, it's going on Facebook. But you know I have to have appropriate lighting, subject centered, stuff like that, and then yeah, that they all look good I guess.

When developing his profile on Flickr, then, he drew on his previous experience with and views of the site. He saw Flickr as an artsy photography community, and so the information that he shared on the site through his photos needed to fit within that identity as well. Along with artistic shots (Figure 1), Ronnie took a good number of images of his different workspaces on campus (Figure 2) and included other kinds of content he ran across in his daily life, like graffiti (Figure 3), which references the videogame *Portal*. Flickr was a way for Ronnie to host blog images and images he shared on Twitter, and the images he chose were ones that he thought would fit within the Flickr community.

As noted above, Ronnie frequently set up an account on a social network site when it launched in order to "claim real estate" on the site in case it became more popular; for this reason, he started his Twitter account along with accounts on other social network sites (*Academia.edu*, *Tumblr*, *LinkedIn*, and others). Ronnie



FIGURE 1: A *perspective on Ronnie restringing his bass*



FIGURE 2: *One of Ronnie's workspaces on campus*

tended to use the same screen names on each site, a reference to his identity as a musician, and he wanted to keep this name consistent for self-branding possibilities. Starting a new account on a social network site was also Ronnie's way to try on a new persona for himself or a new aspect of his identity. Ronnie joined Academia.edu, for example, while he was working as a math research assistant during the summer. Although he was considering graduate school, he was only beginning to envision a more developed academic identity for himself. Setting up an account on Academia.edu was a way for him to begin to participate in that space in the hope that something bigger would emerge.

### ***Chronotopic Laminations***

Considering Ronnie's literacy practices on social network sites through ecologies of practice makes visible the habitual ways Ronnie integrated his social network



FIGURE 3: *Graffiti in one of Ronnie's workspaces*

site use into his daily literacy practices. His use of these sites, through his various profile pages and the activities he engaged in on each site, helped him manage various aspects of his identity, different friend networks he belonged to, and online and offline activities. We can best understand Ronnie's literacy practices through Prior and Shipka's (2003) concept of chronotopic laminations, which they define as "the

dispersed and fluid chains of places, times, people, and artifacts that come to be tied together in trajectories of literate action, the ways multiple activity footings are simultaneously held and managed” (p. 181). Prior and Shipka note that this work is often difficult to trace, occurring on a morning commute, in an office, a home, a coffee shop—or, with many social network sites, wherever one has cell phone service—yet this kind of writing work is what makes up a literate life, occurring in multiple environments and across physical and digital spaces. Ronnie’s social media use demonstrates the ways in which many social network site users integrate their social network activity into their daily lives. Ronnie had an iPhone that he carried with him everywhere, and he sent updates to Twitter frequently through his phone. He also used it to document his day through images and video, and he sent the images to Twitpic from his phone. Ronnie cited his iPhone as much of the reason that he shared images so frequently and pointed to one example in which he saw an image in a bar that reminded him of his friend (Figure 4):

My friend’s in the, he’s a railroad engineer, so if any time I’ll see a train I kinda tell him about it, so I saw that in the bathroom at [a bar on campus] so I just tweeted him. Just like that.

This example demonstrates the ways in which Ronnie’s location, daily activities, and social networks were laminated onto his literate activity. He frequently photographed an object he encountered in his daily life and shared it with a friend through Twitter or a different social network site. In this way, Ronnie’s use of social network sites represented the way he managed his online and offline activities. Ronnie’s social media use was integrated into his daily activity, and he connected to his personal contacts by documenting his lived experience on social network sites.

It is not unreasonable to say that Ronnie was engaged in at least one social network site most of the time. He checked Twitter constantly from the website, seeing it as a habit, part of his daily routine, and something he did when he was bored:

I guess I usually check it out of habit, just type in the website and go to them and see if anything has changed . . . In a way it’s kind of like a nervous habit, when I’m like, trying to do something else. It’s like, I don’t know what I need to do, I’ll just, I need to do something, though, so I’ll check Twitter.

He also visited Facebook a few times each day from his laptop computer to keep up with his friends. His roommates were on Twitter as well, and the three of them had conversations in the apartment that took place partially in person and partially on Twitter. He stated in an interview:

We’ll mention each other and sometimes when we’re in the apartment. We’ll talk about what’s going on on Twitter and say, hey, did you check out this tweet, or did you check out what I wrote on your wall, which kind of feels weird because it kind of defeats the purpose, you know, I could just tell you in person.

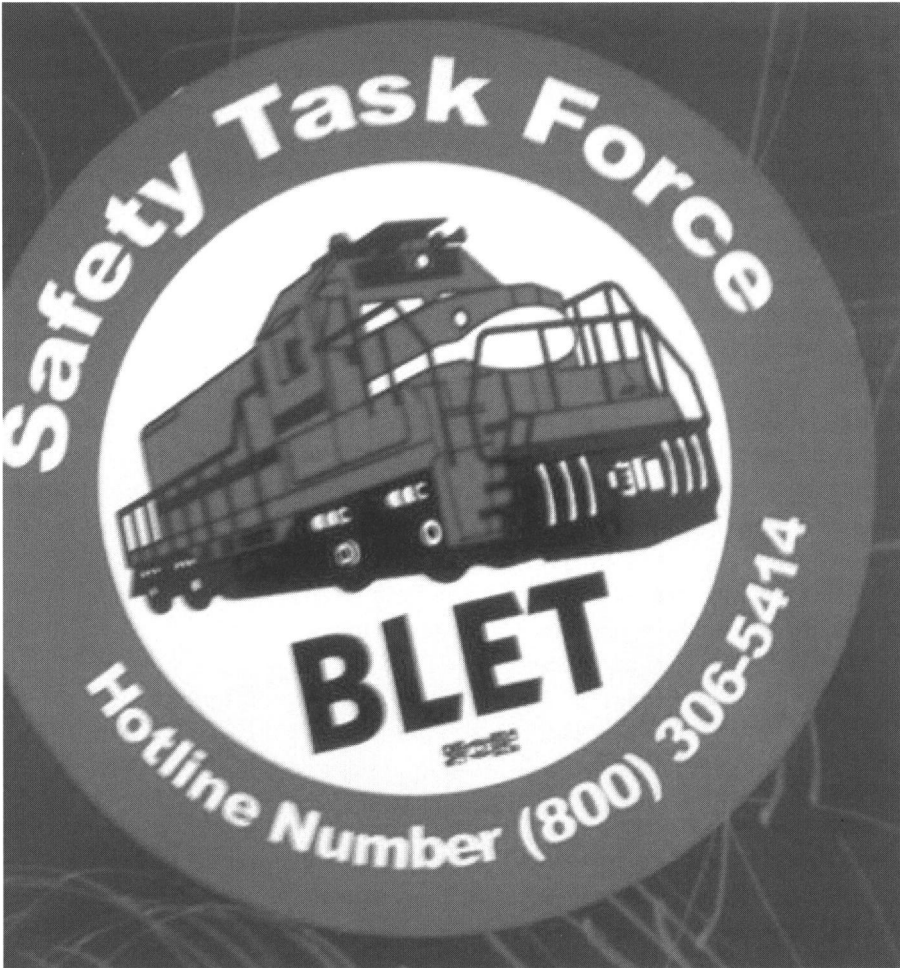


FIGURE 4: *An image Ronnie took with his phone and tweeted to his friend from Twitpic*

Ronnie's roommates, for example, knew when he was awake in the morning not because he left his bedroom, but because he sent a tweet from his phone or computer. Apartment announcements, for example, were also circulated through the Facebook group rather than through physical notes left in common areas.

When Ronnie studied at the library, he usually listened to music through last.fm, which documented the songs he listened to and shared them with his friends. He often tweeted his last.fm activity as well, sharing the songs and artists he was listening to with his contacts:

[#nowplaying tool. specifically, lateralus and 10,000 days. i have some arguments to settle] Sun May 30 13:27:21 2010 via web



[i need to WAKE UP. #nowplaying lady gaga] 10:08 AM Dec 7th, 2010 via web

[room is arranged but needs tidying. got the pc hooked up to the music, though, so it's time to scrobble! #lastfm #nowplaying @paramore] 5:24 PM Dec 31st, 2010 via web

Ronnie's digital literacy practices involved chains of activity that included taking a photo with his iPhone on the way to class and uploading it to Twitpic, sending a link to a video or a news story to a friend, commenting on a friend's Facebook status, and sharing photos of graffiti he saw on his way to class with his roommates through their group Facebook page. Rather than seeing Ronnie's activity on social network sites as discrete and isolated actions, we instead should see that work as part of a larger system of literate activity that traverses a number of different interfaces.

Along with moving across different interfaces, Ronnie's experience also documents the complex ways in which activities on social network sites bridge online and offline spaces. Interactions are often initiated online and end in some kind of offline activity; Ronnie contacted friends through either Facebook or Twitter to plan social events for later that evening. Ronnie also used Twitter as he would text messaging to plan meet-ups with his friends. In one instance, he tweeted his plans to have dinner at a campus restaurant and invited others to meet him there. Sitting at a table in the restaurant, he read replies on Twitter on his phone, and he used Twitter as he would texting, through which he learned that several of his friends planned to join him. Ronnie's activity complicates easy boundaries between sites as online and offline activity become fully integrated into his daily life.

### ***Managing Online Personas***

Along with directing different aspects of his identity to specific social network sites, Ronnie developed a separate persona with a completely different name entirely: he maintained separate social network profiles for what he called his "musical alter ego," and he maintained under that name a Tumblr blog, a Facebook fan page, a MySpace music page, and a PureVolume account (a site for musical artists to share their work, similar to the MySpace music pages). (See Figure 5 for the layout of his musical Tumblr blog.)

Through this Tumblr blog, Ronnie presented song lyrics, song sketches, and other material through audio, video, and text. He described the reasons for the separation of these sites as related to audience:

Sure, I certainly enjoy going by my real name every now and then but this is "Creative [Ronnie]." The [Ronnie] that people don't get to see because he never has enough time in the day to write music and usually spends his time just performing it. :)

This strategy enabled him to direct content to a specific audience, people who were not his friends but were interested in his music:

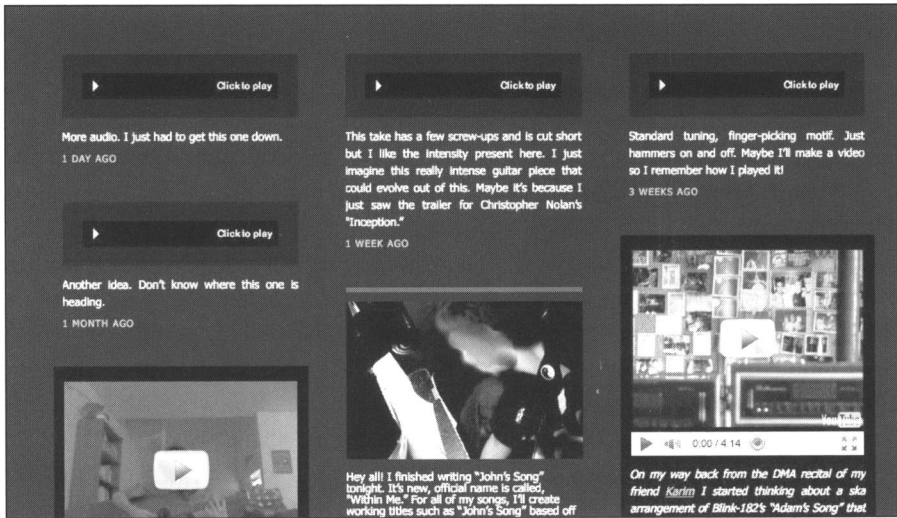


FIGURE 5: *Layout on Ronnie's music Tumblr account*

And I guess I segment it cause I if I want, if people are going to look at my musical self, they don't, they're probably not interested in seeing my blogging self, or you know the photos I take on Flickr or whatever, so I keep that separate more for them, not so much because I don't want them to see my other self. That's why I think, okay, they're here just to see my music, so that's what I'll just give them.

Through Ronnie's musical alter ego, he represented a specific part of his identity for a specific audience, one populated by musicians and fellow music lovers who were interested in his work as a musician but perhaps less interested in his personal life. While many social network site users maintain profiles for professional identities, Ronnie was unique in that he made the identity separation more complete. In creating a new name and "alter ego" to this persona, Ronnie constructed an identity that he marked as different from those he presented using his other screen names. Ronnie stated that he was not concerned about connecting his music to his other online identities, and he did in fact list his real name on the Facebook page for his alter ego. He did not link to his other social media accounts through the music accounts, however, demonstrating that he wanted to keep the two separate. A large part of the literate activity that Ronnie engaged in on social network sites involved managing content to construct his identity for specific audiences. Ronnie's use of Facebook and Twitter demonstrated how he negotiated flattened audience structures to share information with and represent himself to both groups, providing more and unfiltered information on Twitter and updating information more strategically on Facebook. Through his musical alter ego, Ronnie conceived of a particular audience and created a specific persona in response.

Ronnie also maintained a few other Twitter accounts that represented more specialized audiences, one connected to this music alter ego and his Tumblr site

under that name, and another connected to his blog, which simply linked to his recent blog posts. He described his primary account as “just my main, my go to. I write my own thoughts on it.” The other accounts were more specific: “I guess they’re through lenses, um, mostly just the music one because I don’t use the [blog account] for anything else. But yeah, I just I guess I use it like anyone else would use Twitter, I’d use that one normally, and then the other ones are different. They’re held back.”

Ronnie saw this as something that made it easy for his audience to follow more targeted information: “I guess that’s just more for benefit of people who are following me in certain capacities. If they just want, like, music updates, then that’s what that Twitter’s for. Then they don’t have to follow my actual Twitter and see all the random stuff I talk about.” As Sanderson (2008) discusses with Schilling’s blog, social network sites allow Ronnie to present a specific view of himself on a specific site for his imagined audience, and in this case, Ronnie presented this identity through a completely different name.

### ***Authoring a Self on Social Network Sites***

Ronnie highlighted different aspects of his life through various screen names on specific social network site accounts. One activity he participated in, a prank that capitalized on his practice of experimentation on social network sites, was also a way of trying on a different identity. On April 1, Ronnie changed his Facebook relationship status to “in a relationship” with Alison Moreau. Eleven friends “liked” his status, and four friends commented on it. Over the next several days, Ronnie and Alison exchanged a series of messages on Facebook and Twitter, tapering off around April 8. But Ronnie and his girlfriend didn’t break up; she never existed. She was an April Fool’s Day prank Ronnie concocted:

I decided that day, I was like, I need to prank someone really well, and um, on my news feed a bunch of people had gotten into relationships and people were doing pranks like being engaged, but they weren’t very elaborate, you knew they were fake, and like, I want to really prank someone.

Ronnie described how he created this persona using an alternate university email address and pictures from the website of College Humor’s Hottest Girl of 2008. He gave her a story, telling friends that they met over spring break. He set the privacy settings on Facebook so that no one could see how many friends she had, but her profile pictures and all her information were visible. He listed her as graduating from a high school not far from his hometown, but one that none of his friends had attended. Ronnie found a number of pictures of this girl posing with a camera, so he played up photography as a hobby for this character as well. Ronnie wrote her detailed profile on Facebook by copying sections of favorite movies and music from his female friends’ profiles: her profile listed her musical

interests as ranging from Led Zeppelin and the Beatles to Vampire Weekend and Sara Bareilles and some of her favorite movies as *Fight Club* and *Pride and Prejudice*. He also made sure that her writing style was much different from his own, using the convention of some social network site users of repeating the last letter of words multiple times for emphasis.

For example, these are some of the Facebook and Twitter updates Ronnie wrote as Alison:

Register for fall classes tomorrowww... Graduation seems right around the corner. Not sure how I feel about that... :/

Blah, I miss my family alreadyyy.... :( Summer, I'm pining for you!

Just arrived home for the weekend. Looking forward to seeing Amy tomorroww!

It's so nice out todayyy <3

Along with the repeated letters, Alison also used hearts and exclamation points, stylistic features that did not appear in Ronnie's own updates. Ronnie also used an equals sign for his own emoticons online, like =), so he consciously made sure that Alison used colons instead. In these examples, featuring enthusiastic and cheerful conversations on everything from future plans to the weather, Ronnie sought to provide a contrast to his own status updates both in content and in voice. Although Alison worried about the same things Ronnie did, namely, life after graduation, Ronnie's creation of Alison's profile provided a contrast to his own perspective.

Alison's Facebook page (Figure 6) includes many images of her with a camera and was Ronnie's attempt to create what he saw as a quintessential profile for female undergraduate students at his institution: pretty, blonde, cheerful and a fan of popular culture content. In using images from College Humor's Hottest Girl of 2008, however, this profile is also an idealized, stereotypical version of both a college student and a girlfriend.

Ronnie constructed Alison's persona not only through her profile page but also through her status updates and interactions. Ronnie and Alison had many public conversations on both Facebook and Twitter. Ronnie had his laptop logged into his Twitter account and his iPhone logged into Alison's Twitter account. Like many Facebook users, they shared links, primarily music videos in their case, which emphasized Ronnie's interest in music. Alison's comment to Ronnie on one of the videos she posted on his wall (Figure 7)—“I'm thinking about stuff, I'm sure you are too”—presented her as an interested and supportive partner, one as introspective a thinker as Ronnie, someone who was connected to Ronnie's inner emotional life. Ronnie also presented Alison as someone who appreciated his literary tastes.

**Alison Moreau** [Add as Friend](#)

Wall Info Photos

Alison only shares some of her profile information with everyone. If you know Alison, send her a message or add her as a friend.

**Basic Information**

Networks: [View](#)

Sex: Female

Current City: [View](#)

Birthday: June 13, 1989

Hometown: [View](#)

Relationship Status: Single

Interested In: Men

Religious Views: God is love ▼

**Likes and Interests**

Interests: photography, reading, writing (sometimes, hehe), being with friends, movies, fun!

Favorite Music: The Beatles, U2, Led Zeppelin, Regina Spektor, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Carrie Underwood, The Rocket Summer, The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, The Who, Train, Queen, Coldplay, Nickel Creek, Vampire Weekend, Copeland, Sara Bareilles

Favorite TV Shows: What I Like About You, The Office, How I Met Your Mother, One Tree Hill

Favorite Movies: Fight Club, American History X, 12 Angry Men, To Kill A Mockingbird, Boondock Saints, Seven, Memento, Death at a Funeral, Batman, Wicker Park, Pride and Prejudice, The Princess Bride, The Notebook, The Goonies, The Breakfast Club

Send Alison a Message  
Poke Alison

Live. Laugh. Love.

**Information**

Networks: [View](#)

Relationship Status: Single

Birthday: June 13, 1989

FIGURE 6: *Alison's Facebook profile page*

**Alison Moreau** I'm thinking about stuff... :/ I'm sure you are too, so we'll have to meet up back at school and compare notes. :) ♥

**The Rocket Summer - Hills And Valleys**  
www.youtube.com  
Music video by The Rocket Summer performing Hills And Valleys. (C) 2010 The Island Def Jam Music Group

April 4 at 1:52am · Comment · Like · Share · See Wall-to-Wall

**[User]** I'm looking forward to it. :) I'm blogging right now!  
April 4 at 2:01am

Write a comment...

FIGURE 7: *Alison's post on Ronnie's wall*

Commenting on his status update from *The Great Gatsby*, she writes, “:) This is why I keep you around” (Figure 8).

Ronnie often emphasized Alison's physical location, which was either somewhere on campus or at home over Easter weekend. Ronnie's sister, who was in on the joke, suggested that Alison be present at their Easter dinner, and so on both Twitter and Facebook, Ronnie's posts emphasized that not only were he and

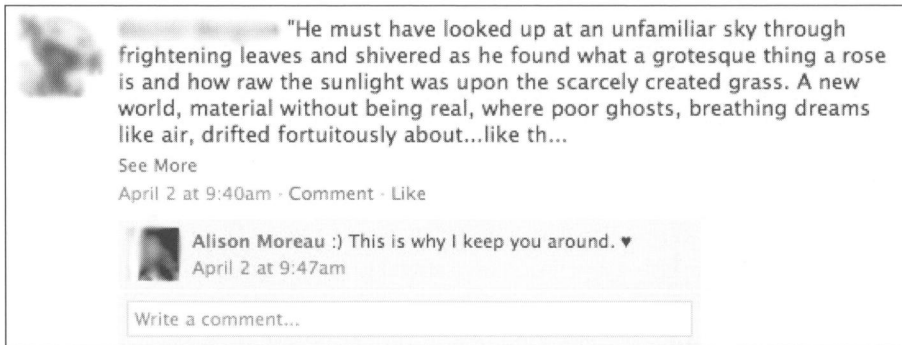


FIGURE 8: Alison's comment on Ronnie's Facebook status update

Alison together but that they were also with his sister (the other Twitter handle mentioned in the post). Alison then commented on that status, reinforcing their common location. Alison also had a number of conversations with Ronnie's friends who friended her, both people who were in on the prank and those who weren't, including discussions about hometowns, majors, and plans after college.

While Ronnie told a few people about the prank from the start, within a few days most of his friends on Twitter knew it was a prank, and by April 9, Ronnie had changed his relationship status. Several people expressed their concern over the end of Ronnie's relationship, while others were angry he had pulled the prank. This situation led to a final tweet from Alison's account—"Some people just have no sense of humor... :/ So, who's up for some fun and games?"—and this tweet from Ronnie's Twitter account—"[just killed one of my characters, @alison\_m. today is a sad day for creativity]."

Ronnie's creation of Alison is certainly not a new practice online; this kind of identity play is well documented in Turkle's (1995) book *Life on the Screen*. I wouldn't suggest that Ronnie's creation of this character allowed him to experiment



FIGURE 9: Ronnie's Facebook and Twitter activity, emphasizing Alison's location

with his identity, though his reliance on some gender stereotypes to create Alison is reminiscent of what Nakamura (2002) calls identity tourism. While text-based MUDs and MOOs have faded in popularity, Internet users do create fake profiles all of the time. Friendster, an early social network site, met its downfall by trying to police fake accounts, and fake celebrity accounts are common on Twitter. Yet identity is also created through sustained interaction with individuals across multiple platforms. As filmmakers Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost chronicle in the 2010 film *Catfish*, creating a persona on a social network site involves not just one person but an entire network of corroborating individuals and activities. These interactions frequently traverse online and offline boundaries, such as Ronnie's interactions with his roommates. Ronnie tried to keep up this aspect of his fake character with the frequent references to location. Part of Ronnie's inability to keep up the fake profile, then, lay in Alison's inability to participate in all of the forums, online and offline, that she plausibly should have.

In creating Alison, Ronnie demonstrated his ability to use his knowledge of social network site structures, settings, audiences, and genre and discourse conventions to construct an identity that, for a time, at least, passed for authentic. Ronnie was interested in determining whether or not he could create a plausible fiction on social network sites in order to both exercise and demonstrate his technological skill and gain some kind of power over his friends on these sites by fooling them.

While Ronnie framed this activity in terms of a prank, I suggest that it was another activity through which Ronnie was able to try on a different persona for himself, that of a boyfriend. Ronnie was originally drawn to this prank through the number of his own contacts on Facebook who had broadcast their updated relationship statuses. Like the Academia.edu account, Alison was a way for Ronnie to consider himself in a new light and to present himself rhetorically in a new way. The number and types of conversations he and Alison exchanged over Facebook and Twitter, like the examples above, positioned Alison as a confidante and insider to Ronnie's online musings, someone to share thoughts with via blog posts, status updates, and other material. Ronnie's construction of Alison involved his literacy skills through this ecology of practice: by integrating his knowledge of genre and discourse conventions, technological affordances, and self-presentation skills, he created a believable composition on online interfaces.

### **Discussion: Shaping Technologies and Agency**

A primary component of Ronnie's literacy practices on social network sites was the technology used within this ecology of practice. Examining Ronnie's literate activity across these interfaces involves a consideration of their influence within this ecology of practice. While Ronnie's "relationship" with Alison lasted for just a week, he listed himself as in a relationship with her several months later to make a different statement. Over the course of the study, Ronnie began to have serious

concerns about privacy and ownership of his information on Facebook and about the ways many of his peers did not question information on Facebook. Shortly after Facebook changed its privacy setting configurations in April 2010, which created somewhat of a firestorm in the media,<sup>3</sup> he went back to listing Alison as his girlfriend and added fake siblings. He changed his high school to Hogwarts' School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and his current employer to the Ministry of Magic.<sup>4</sup> He described this decision in this way: "I guess it's some sort of a statement. So many people just kind of go with what's on Facebook and trust it. There's really no basis other than assuming people are honest." As an expert user, Ronnie saw himself in a place to both distinguish himself from his other Facebook friends and to make a statement about the ways that his friends use Facebook and others' information on the site.

Ronnie described himself as sympathetic to the cause of Diaspora, a decentralized social network site started in reaction to Facebook's 2010 policy changes. In the six months after Facebook changed its privacy settings, he migrated most of his information off of the site. He then used his blog, hosted on his own domain, to hold most of his information, including his CV. All of his profiles on social network sites linked back to this blog. He used this organization for two reasons: he was able to update information in just one place, and he left as little information with Facebook as possible:

I don't mind the information being out there. I guess having it in Facebook's hands kinda bugs me. . . . I've seen Facebook as less of a location where I operate out of and more of just a satellite social network, so I'm just taking everything I can and just moving it out and making it as minimal as possible. That's also why I don't fill out any information on any of my other social networks like Digg or Flickr. I don't fill out anything but a little blurb that says where I am and then the link that goes straight to my website. Because I don't want to maintain all of that. . . Any information I put on there is not really telling a full picture, so I'll send people to my blog, which says things much more accurately. Even if it's just my interests and my favorite movies and stuff like that. You know, just kind of seeing how information represents me, and I guess my take on it.

Because Ronnie used social network sites to organize different aspects of his life, he was particularly attuned to the different ways in which his information was dispersed and used, and this was a process that he wanted to have control over.

Ronnie's experience represents that of a savvy social network site user; he spent a significant amount of time on these sites, and he spent even more time thinking about the information he shared through them. What is most interesting about Ronnie's case is that he had no concerns about his information being online and publicly visible. His blog, for example, contained a good deal of information about his everyday reflections as well as a detailed CV of both his academic and musical pursuits. What Ronnie was concerned about, however, was who owned his information and what they could do with it. By putting primarily false information on



Facebook, Ronnie prevented Facebook from profiting from that information, while also sending his peers a message about their own use of information on the site.

Oudshoorn and Pinch (2003) note the importance of studying users' connections to and take-up of technologies and to study those technologies within "their context of use" (p. 2). Technologies are accompanied with scripts about their use, which enable and constrain certain actions, and users can align with these scripts or resist them, adjusting these technologies for their own usage through an "anti-program," a user's program that is at odds with the designers' program (Akrich & Latour, 1992). Ronnie took up social network sites in his own way to resist the expectations of the designers and their scripts. He created a fictional Facebook profile and changed his own information on the site when Facebook encouraged its users to represent "authentic" and even legal offline identities.<sup>5</sup>

Part of managing one's online identity, I argue, involves small interventions like this, ways for individuals to adapt the interfaces of social network sites to work more effectively for their needs. Johnson-Eilola (2005) uses the term "conceptual objects" to discuss the ways that objects only have meaning within "specific, contingent, dynamic contexts" (p. 26), and these meanings are often not ones considered by the designers of these objects. While social network sites often place a number of restrictions on users' activities, individual users adapt these guidelines for their own uses and their own meanings.

Although popular press accounts suggest that young adults have no concept of privacy online, Ronnie's experience instead coincides with the Pew study mentioned above, which found young adults to be the most active and reflective online identity managers (Madden & Smith, 2010). Ronnie's anxiety over ownership of his information and his continual attempts to control its presentation demonstrate the constant work individuals like Ronnie engage to manage their life and identity on social network sites. Frequent technology changes means that these practices can be both time consuming and never ending.

Composing on social network sites also means working with and against the affordances and constraints of these commercially owned interfaces. The literate activity that individuals engage in on social network sites is, of course, produced under a number of rhetorical, social, and technological constraints. In terms of the available means of persuasion for writers in digital environments, social network sites restrict many of the design elements available to writers of webtexts who are able to design html pages through the use of cascading style sheets (css), Flash, and other media elements. Content on social network sites is restricted within the parameters of their limited templates, which gives some scholars the sense that rhetorical expression on these sites is confined to filling out forms. Arola (2010) discusses the trajectory from the personal homepage to the social network site profile, specifically the Facebook profile, describing the possibilities for design, and also the design literacies, that these sites limit. Tech industry blogger Rick Schwartz (2010) has called sites like Facebook and Twitter "training wheels for the Internet"

in that these sites make users comfortable going online within certain parameters that apply specific constraints.

There have always been technological, material, social, and rhetorical constraints placed on literacy (Brandt, 2001), and social network sites provide one example through which to consider how writers work within specific forms of constraints to represent themselves in digital spaces and to interact with others. Ronnie's experiences demonstrate how individuals modify these templates for their own use. Ronnie had experience in web design, having created the website for his hometown historical society while still in high school. While Ronnie did not use these skills as frequently in college, they still played a role in his social network use. He tailored his Blogger site by writing his own code, which allowed him to customize information placement on the blog to focus on the things he found most important. Ronnie moved from Blogger to Word Press in order to have even more freedom with his design, building his own template into more of a portfolio style that allowed for links to his CV and a résumé detailing his performance experience.

Ronnie also adjusted templates on social network sites for his own purposes. Facebook used to include certain default fields on one's profile where individuals defined themselves primarily by the consumption of various media, listing favorite music, movies, television shows, and favorite quotations and writing an open description in the *About Me* section. Ronnie declined to fill these sections out, finding these boxes too limiting to explain, for example, his musical tastes. His entire Info section contains a long list of quotations. This space was limited by the template, so he used the *About Me* section to include additional quotations. He also used an app called *Extended Info* to list his upcoming concerts and performances. Before Facebook moved to a tab format for the application boxes users could add to their profiles, Ronnie was able to move his boxes around and place the *Extended Info* section underneath his regular profile information. Facebook's tab design for profile pages gave him less freedom on placement, however, and placed the *Extended Info* to the side of his main profile. When Ronnie switched to the new profile in December 2010, which eliminated the tab design on the top of the page and allowed for even fewer layout options, he manipulated the way the images were displayed to create one continuous image along the side and top of his profile.<sup>6</sup> Templates such as the ones on Facebook do strongly limit users' choices, and users like Ronnie have more sophisticated web authoring skills that perhaps encourage them to seek out ways to modify the sites. Ronnie's case points to how users often explore the means available to represent themselves within the interface's design.

Ronnie's concern about the ownership of his information also points to important implications for the kinds of writing individuals engage in on social network sites. As Brandt (2001) argues, literacy has always been a "resource" that individuals seek to attain for particular ends. Literacy sponsors, whether school, state, economic, church, military, or family, have helped individuals achieve these

literacies and have shaped, withheld, and profited from them. Corporate sponsors of literacy have always existed—in sponsoring writing contests, manufacturing writing tools, and supporting employees in attaining certain kinds of literacy skills. Viewing social network sites as corporate literacy sponsors extends this idea, but seeing social network sites as literacy sponsors also has different implications for writers and their work. Social network site users keep the sites going not through their monetary subscriptions to these services but through their data, which these sites then monetize and sell to advertisers. Writers on social network sites, and their data, are the products that social network sites sell.

Suggesting future trends for the teaching of composition, McKee (2011) points to important policy issues that will influence the future of writing and the teaching of writing. Among these is the issue of corporate data mining; described by Google as “interest-based ads” and by Facebook as “instant personalization,” these companies collect information from their users, sell that information to advertisers, and then provide targeted ads for users on these sites. Although Ronnie was able to subvert the design of the social network sites he used for his own purposes, such practices do not interrupt Facebook’s business model, and using social network sites like Facebook means that one pays for the service with one’s personal data.

Much of this work is hidden from the daily activity individuals engage in on social network sites, and this corporate sponsorship and its implications are not always clear. Facebook, for example, has a public comment period when the company changes the site’s privacy policies, publishing the text of the policy on their website beforehand and allowing users to comment on these policies. It is unclear, however, how many users read these policies, understand their consequences, and participate in the public comment process or how Facebook takes up (or does not take up) the public comments in their finalized policies. Exploring the literacy practices surrounding the various aspects of these policies is important work for writing researchers as well.

### **Conclusion: Considering Social Network Sites as Sites of Literacy**

Ronnie represents a rather extreme case of social network site use, both through the number of sites he used and the amount of activity he engaged in on each site. He does, however, represent one of what Sheridan, Street, and Bloome (2000) call “telling cases,” which Sheridan-Rabideau (2008) describes as cases that “exceed what generalized theories might expect of them and work against the flattening theoretical appraisals that offer predictable answers” (Sheridan-Rabideau, 2008, p. 8). Ronnie’s practices and the situations he confronts in representing himself online make visible the issues that many others confront in their social network site use, usually in more subtle ways, when engaging in common activities such as sharing family and vacation photos or making comments on a political issue or event. Studying students like Ronnie, then, calls attention to the stakes for literacy

and identity representation within social network sites, most especially rhetorical questions of authorship, audience, and privacy, as individuals share information through structures that flatten multiple groups of contacts into one audience.

Ronnie's everyday literacy practices are embedded within an ecology of practice that is shaped by social and technological influences on his writing and his self-presentation on social network sites. For Ronnie, social network sites index a nexus of information through which he manages and organizes various aspects of his life. Ronnie's activity within these spaces represents important literacy work that relies on his knowledge of site infrastructure, genre conventions, and audience. From his use of Facebook templates to his creation of the character of Alison across two different platforms, we can see the use of social network sites by people like Ronnie as rhetorically complex activities for writing researchers to study. Easy access to social network sites via mobile phones and laptop computers means that these sites play ever larger roles in individuals' everyday literacy practices. Even more importantly, these are not sites that users go to once a day; rather, users like Ronnie send short updates frequently, integrating these sites into their everyday activities to the point that it is not possible to draw sharp distinctions between online and offline identities and activities. Ronnie's experience also shows that managing information on these services and navigating their complicated settings requires sophisticated literacy skills.

Viewing social network sites as part of larger systems of literate activity can be a productive way to trace their influence on individuals' literate lives. As people participate in social network sites, they encounter important questions about data management and ownership, privacy, and identity representation. For students like Ronnie, spending time on social network sites means developing digital literacies to negotiate the new rhetorical situations they encounter, where one status update is broadcast to many different friend groups and where social media companies frequently change privacy configurations. The online activity that individuals engage in on social network sites does not just stay online; students integrate social network sites into their daily literacy practices. Writing researchers need to consider how these literacy practices are connected to academic literacy practices and how these different influences on literacy work together.

Viewing this rich literate activity as part of students' everyday lives will give us a greater understanding of the literacy experiences they bring with them to the classroom. Drawing on data from a longitudinal study of student writing at Stanford, Lunsford et al. (2008) argue that students are not only writing more, but are also effective in crafting and communicating specific messages to specific audiences. According to this study, 38% of the writing that the student participants completed happened outside of the classroom, and much of this writing happened online. Similarly, a study by Grabill et al. (2010) in the Writing in Digital Environments research group found that first-year college students engaged in digital writing most frequently, primarily on mobile phones, social network sites,

and email. Students like Ronnie develop sophisticated rhetorical and literacy skills through these environments. Rather than focusing only on the ways that social network sites might be used in the classroom, considering the ways students integrate the use of such sites into their daily lives can help researchers and teachers better understand students' writing activities and digital literacy practices within digital environments.

## NOTES

1. Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola (1999) have criticized the move of computers and writing scholars to extend the term literacy to other forms of multimodal texts because of literacy's historical associations as a discrete skill. I am mindful of these critiques and of the complicated histories that a term like literacy invokes, including histories of colonization and repression. However, I believe that literacy is still a productive term within writing studies and, more specifically, within computers and writing, especially when considered "not as a monolithic term but as a cloud of sometimes contradictory nexus points among different positions. Literacy can be seen as not a skill but a process of situating and resituating representations in social spaces" (Wysocki & Johnson-Eilola, 1999, p. 367).
2. Ronnie always enclosed his tweets in square brackets, both as a matter of style and because of site design. Ronnie often forwarded tweets to Facebook, which used to use a "Ronnie is. . ." construction for all of his updates. The brackets preserved the grammar of his original tweet when he sent them to Facebook. When Facebook changed this construction, Ronnie continued to use the square brackets, which became a signifying feature of his tweets. He would occasionally send updates from his roommates' accounts if they left Twitter open on their computers, using square brackets for these updates as well to signify his authorship.
3. See, for example, Kirkpatrick (2010) and Fletcher (2010).
4. Hogwarts and the Ministry of Magic are both references to the Harry Potter series, of which Ronnie is a fan.
5. Facebook has suspended the accounts of users they believe to be created under false names and identities. The site's policy for reinstating an account that has been suspended as fake requires a scanned ID card to reinstate the account.
6. Ronnie was inspired in this profile alteration by Alexandre Oudin's profile (<http://www.facebook.com/alexandre.oudin>), which is described by Milian (2010) on CNN's website.

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