Faceless Ecologies:
Determining Author Control in the Distribution of Facebook Posts

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In this article, Del Mastro explores how ecology can affect the way people express themselves when posting content on social media. He specifically looks at elements of Facebook that can and cannot be controlled by users in order to determine how ecology might limit or manipulate self-expression and author ownership online.

I thought I would start this article by asking you to imagine a time without the Internet, thinking that it would provide some profound insight into how useful it is and how dependent on it we've become. But I don't think you need me to tell you that we rely heavily on this mysterious force that enables us to consume and distribute information quickly and efficiently across the globe. What I would like to do, though, is ask you to think for a moment about the *environment* of the Internet. You see, it doesn't matter if we're creating a blog, sending an email, interacting with social media, or engaging with any other task because everything we create online is quickly dispersed throughout the "world" of the Internet. Just think of the memes that we see repeated from one random site to another; trying to imagine where they began is often as fruitless an endeavor as trying to predict where they'll end. After all, once something goes online, it's anyone's guess what will happen to it. This phenomenon can be as exciting and entertaining as it is dangerous, and in the spirit of understanding it better I'd like you to join me in thinking about the *ecology* of the Internet.

According to Joyce Walker, **ecology** can be understood as "the physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing . . . these environmental factors can become very active in some situations in shaping

or interacting with our textual productions" (76). Think, for example, how weather might impact the way an outdoor speech is delivered, or how a status update can affect or interrupt a paper you're writing. When we create something, there are forces surrounding us that impact the production, distribution, and reception of our work. Thinking about a different genre, we can't text someone without a device to create the message—we can try to write a similar note using pen and paper, but then it's no longer a text message—it's just a conventional note. If you use social media, try to remember when you didn't and first started. There's a good chance that, before creating your first profile on Facebook—or Myspace for those who remember the old days, or Xanga for those who remember Pangaea— you probably looked at a friend's profile to see what it should look like, and you, perhaps, tailored your own profile to fit the style and design of your friend's. In such an instance, you were introduced to what that particular social media platform could allow you to do, and this informed your own use of it.

So, when you're creating something, the materials you have access to and the people who will have access to the finished product are just some examples of what we mean when we say *ecology*, the forces that exist outside of our texts but nevertheless impact the way we create and perceive them. It doesn't matter if we're sending an email, Tweet, or—in the case of this article—a Facebook post; there are biological and environmental forces at work that impact our decisions and dictate what we can actually accomplish when we produce writing.

These forces, in turn, influence how we compose our unique stories when we are creating and sharing online. For those of us who use social media, we understand that part of the ecology of these various sites involves rules and regulations that dictate how we can create interesting texts and ideas while logged in. For example, Twitter has its character limit, Snapchat requires its users to utilize image-producing technology, and Facebook is structured so that images and texts must be uploaded into designated spaces. Ecology, then, is an important element when we share our ideas and experiences online, which got me thinking. Considering that we are dependent on the rules of a particular site when we're online, and we can only compose ideas within the limitations of those rules, who really controls the story we tell about ourselves when we post online? After all, social media is a way to catalogue our journeys through life but—if we are dependent on the ecology of online spaces—are we truly able to compose our life stories the way we want, or are our experiences filtered by the genre conventions of social media? In short, who really controls the content of our posts?

Understanding Ecology and Facebook

Social media is an enormous topic that expands well beyond the length requirement of a *Grassroots* article, so, for the purpose of my study, I want

to apply this question specifically to Facebook. When composing texts or distributing images and videos on Facebook we like to think that we have control over our posts and, consequently, the way we characterize ourselves online. I question the accuracy of this belief. Thinking back to ecology, there are rules and conditions that apply to our use of Facebook. We can't, for example, post a status update or an image unless it's in the proper box (Figure 1):
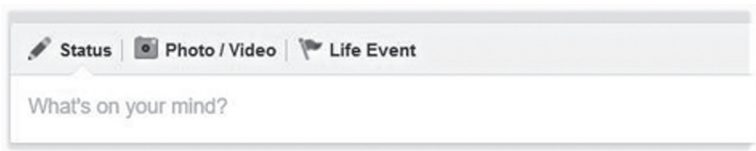

Figure 1: An example of one such proper box.

And, once we've written a post or submitted an image, we cannot necessarily control how our audience interacts with—and interprets—our texts. In short, whenever we post something on Facebook, we are doing so under the rules and restrictions of that site. As I considered these restrictions, I began to wonder whether these limitations alone were a hindrance to expressing ourselves online. After all, do we really have full freedom to characterize and represent ourselves when we play by the rules of someone else?

The first step in my research was to understand better what Facebook actually is. Since I'm working with a popular social media site, it's important to understand the environment from which posts and images will be distributed. Understanding this environment means comprehending the ecology of Facebook as a genre. To do this, let's explore what we mean when we describe ecology as the physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of whatever text we happen to be producing. With regards to Facebook, we can create and share all kinds of texts on our profile pages whenever we access the site, but those texts that we actually produce are limited to the posts we compose. Those posts cannot exist without Facebook. Facebook, then, is a necessary **activity system**[1] in place that allows us to distribute our messages, and its rules and conventions help to shape the discourses we create.

So, then, how can we define that great cyber-garden of cat memes, vacation albums, and regrettable political posts known as Facebook? Well, according to the source, Facebook's mission is to "give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. People use Facebook

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[1] Loosely defined, activity systems are cooperative interactions aimed at achieving a goal. For example, if your goal is to create private invitations for a party, you might use Facebook to create a group page that advertises the event. Like any activity system, Facebook has certain rules and conventions that need to be followed, and these rules are shaped and informed by the environmental forces and rules that exist within Facebook (for example, the fact that Facebook gives you the option to create a private group is part of its rules; how you design your private group and where you post it within Facebook are informed by the site's ecology).

to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them" (Facebook). In the words of the good people of Facebook, their goal and function is to allow members of their online community to connect and share with the world. This is the framework we'll use for this article when trying to define and understand authorial control of posts created on this social networking service. After all, if expressing what matters to an individual is a key concept in Facebook's mission statement, then it's absolutely necessary to comprehend as completely as possible who controls those texts of self-expression.

Ecology's Role in Author Control

My goal in this study is to demonstrate whether we, as authors of our Facebook posts, actually have control over those texts we create while online. In order to start this research, I needed to look at the terms of using Facebook—you know, that stuff we're supposed to look at before we make online accounts for anything but don't actually bother to do. For the greater good, I bothered to do that. Here's what I found from Facebook's own policies web page, which, as of this moment, was last updated on January 30, 2015: "You own all of the content and information you post on Facebook, and you can control how it is shared through your privacy and application settings" (Facebook). Whoops. There goes my research topic. It looks like we really *do* control the stuff we post online.

But wait (he wrote in the voice of Billy Mays), there's more. Yes, according to Facebook we all own and have the ability to manipulate the posts that we create, but this ownership comes with a few conditions:

> For content that is covered by intellectual property rights, like photos and videos (IP content), you specifically give us the following permission, subject to your privacy and application settings: you grant us a non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license to use any IP content that you post on or in connection with Facebook (IP License). This IP License ends when you delete your IP content or your account unless your content has been shared with others, and they have not deleted it . . . When you delete IP content, it is deleted in a manner similar to emptying the recycle bin on a computer. However, you understand that removed content may persist in backup copies for a reasonable period of time (but will not be available to others). (Facebook)

So stuff posted on the Internet lingers on the Internet, and Facebook makes mention of the fact that copies of this data will not be made available to others during the mysterious duration of a "reasonable time period." This information is an important aspect of Facebook's ecology; while we may not interact with these rules directly or immediately, they nevertheless inform what we can and cannot do on the site, specifically looking at the composition

of texts produced while logged into Facebook. We cannot, for example, delete a post completely the way we might erase other forms of our writing because texts produced on Facebook may linger online for a "reasonable amount of time" despite our efforts to remove them. Equally important, if your content has been shared with others—which, of course, it has—and *they* have not deleted it, then it's unlikely you'll ever be able to completely delete your posts.

Now, what interests me most about this cited material is the mention of our *privacy settings*, particularly because this is an element of Facebook's ecology that we have a degree of control over. Many of us are aware that sometimes we don't always post the most respectable or intelligent of things online and that these posts can one day return to haunt us while seeking employment, internships, etc. However, we believe that if we are mindful of our privacy settings we can avoid calamity.

Or *can* we? Suppose you were to post a picture of yourself on Facebook, or a witty paragraph filled with your life's musings, without minding the privacy setting. Naturally, you consider yourself the controller of this post because you created it and uploaded it to a wider audience. This was done by design, and now you have a published text created in the world of Facebook. You're an author, Harry. Congratulations. But here's the issue that provoked my inquiry into this topic: once you've created something and submitted it to the world at large, what degree of control do you have over your own creation, as opposed to the (potentially) countless people who might have access to that post immediately after its creation? I needed to understand what happens to public posts, so I consulted Facebook's terms again: "When you publish content or information using the Public setting, it means that you are allowing everyone, including people off of Facebook, to access and use that information, and to associate it with you (i.e., your name and profile picture)" (Facebook). One might find this mildly disconcerting. Anything posted publicly on Facebook becomes fair game for people to access and, more than that, *use*. So if you create something and submit it for public consumption, it will be used by that public. Perhaps it can even be manipulated and altered. In that case, your control over the text—indeed, your ownership of it—has passed on to the next intrepid explorer of the World Wide Web. What a strange thought, that the picture you posted of your dear Aunt Meredith could now belong to a man named Steve living in his mom's basement somewhere in rural Idaho.

But this exchange of textual control is contingent on keeping the privacy setting public on one's posts, so I needed to experiment with something a little more restricted. A little while ago, I posted a picture on my Facebook account that was set to be visible only to my friends. I then asked a friend to share that post on her wall. She then asked a third friend to share the post on her wall. Every time that post was shared, it continued to be visible to the friends of the post's new owner, and every time it was shared my name was still attached to it. In a matter of seconds, that post was visible to 886 people. It became clear

to me that anything online could be quickly distributed to a larger audience than was originally intended, and the initial author of the shared post has little control over where it goes once it has been picked up by a new person. The ability to share a post, which is part of Facebook's ecology, can impact what happens to that post despite an author's original intentions.

I want to try to illustrate my point further, though, because the purpose of Facebook is to share and network. The things we share are personal to our life experiences; in essence, we are publicizing our life stories to people who are a part of our lives, but also to people who are not emotionally invested in what we do. I want to tackle this concept of creating life narratives in order to illustrate the full implications of losing control of our posts. So if you'll humor me, I'm going to try and compose a narrative of my life to see how it can be potentially manipulated or misinterpreted. Here's the post I'll use (Figure 2):

Figure 2: A Portrait
of the *Grassroots*
Writer as a
Young Man.

This picture exists on my Facebook wall and was originally shared with me by another individual. In other words, I did not create this post in the sense that I physically selected it and uploaded it. Instead, it was shared with me and has my named tagged on it, meaning it is visible to my friends and the friends of the actual owner. However, I believe that *I* am now the owner of this post, especially since I have power to edit and transfer it to other people whom I choose. If I wanted to, for example, I could post a clever title for the picture (I'm thinking something like, "He showed me a whole new world").

I can also manipulate how this picture is received by a wider audience; at the moment, it is simply a photo without caption or location. Suppose I edit the post to add the location of the photo—in this case, The Prater in Vienna, Austria. Now I can play with how people view the post; at first, it was just a silly picture of me, but now I've given it context and, since it's a foreign context, it might inspire a little more intrigue. Maybe more people will like it (Wow, he's in Austria!), maybe it will inspire jealousy (Why can't I be in Austria?), and maybe it will inspire raw,

unabridged hatred (I don't care where he is—I still can't stand his face). In any case, I've manipulated a post that I previously had no control over, and wasn't given control over until it was posted by another person. In short, I didn't just become the owner of someone else's post; I became *the* author of a new post completely. I created a new conversation, and all I had to do was fiddle with someone else's image. I've considered factors beyond my control—how the post will concretely be distributed on Facebook and interpreted by my audience, chosen or otherwise—and this awareness of ecology has impacted the effect of the text.

Ok, I hear you saying—sure you were able to take a picture that was already *shared with you* and create a new context for it, but that doesn't mean the original owner has lost control of her initial post. She could, after all, delete the post, and then no one has ownership of it.

But I still would.

Think about it—all I have to do is make that post my profile picture, and then it doesn't matter what happens to the first post that was shared with me because now I'm the only one with access to it. Except I'm not. Anyone who can see my profile through their own has access to that picture. In fact, I didn't even take a screen shot of the picture from my profile when I uploaded it to this article. I *downloaded* it straight from Facebook. You know, the same trick any of your friends can do with any of your photographs online.

Now to be clear, Facebook does occasionally provide us with privacy reminders whenever the personal narratives we construct online are distributed or engaged with in ways we may not have perceived. Consider the screenshot posted below, which I received after a friend of a friend interacted with one of my posts (Figure 3):

You're in control of who can see the things you post

Andrew, it looks like someone who isn't your friend recently liked one of your posts. We want to make sure you know who can see the things you post. To learn more, check out Privacy Basics.

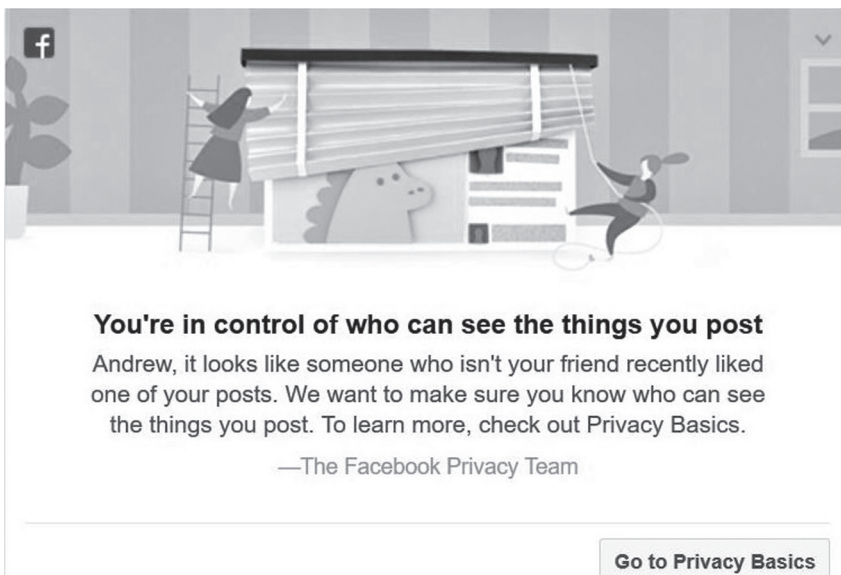—The Facebook Privacy Team

Go to Privacy Basics

Figure 3: One of many privacy notifications Facebook sends its users.

This reminder from Facebook permits me to consider the distribution of my texts and potentially change the way my audience can interact with it, even after I have submitted it. In a sense, I am given a greater degree of control because Facebook has made me aware of a potential breech in my profile's security. The particular post mentioned in the image above was shared with my friends, which includes the friends of a person I tagged in the post. I do not know all her friends, so I can't possibly comprehend how they might interact with my text. Facebook saw this as an opportunity to remind me that I can control the distribution of my posts. By itself, this suggests that I have greater autonomy within my profile. The message itself even indicates that *I* have the control. But think for a moment about ecology. This message does not always appear, and the conditions set for determining the privacy of my posts are still dictated by the rules of Facebook. Whether they remind me of their Privacy Basics or not, I am still bound by the rules of those Privacy Basics. Also, even if I did change the privacy setting, who's to say how the newly defined audience for my text will interact with it? What if the Facebook warning was too late and someone already downloaded the image and is distributing it beyond the scope of my reach?

Can I really be in control of my online privacy if my options for privacy were determined by someone else? Is my only real choice whether or not to *have* the profile?

Interpreting the Results

Whenever we create original content—whether it's online or not—we are impacted by the ecology of our chosen medium. The environment of the Internet provides tremendous flexibility when distributing our writing, photos, etc., and virtually any text created on a social media site can be transferred to a different place and given a new context. Trying to understand these shifting contexts is part of what influenced my study for this article. I thought I could prove without a doubt that control and ownership are easily passed from person to person online, which would mean that an online author is at the mercy of the Internet, but I think there's still some gray area in the conversation. I do believe that ecology limits the content that we are able to create online, but I don't think our ability to express ourselves accurately is impaired by the rules and regulations of social media; rather, I believe ecology, if it can adversely impact anything, affects the *distribution* of our content. After all, I can think I'm sending an innocent inside joke to a friend on Facebook, but that can easily be picked up by a friend of my friend who can then take the post out of context and misrepresent my narrative. But, regardless of what happens to the text, the available options for how it is

initially created—and the means by which it is distributed—are determined by environmental factors existing beyond our control. These factors are part of the ecology of the sites we use and, while we may choose whether or not to interact with them, we cannot circumvent those options; they are controlled and defined by their respective sites.

In that sense, we need to be aware of the conventions of a genre when we begin to compose texts within it (so maybe we *should* read the user agreement forms? Gross.), but we also need to be mindful of the ecologies of online social networks. After all, information from one can easily transfer to another, and I believe this is how tenuous ownership of texts can potentially be manipulated and passed over to new owners. There are faceless rules and conventions dictated by the ecologies of the environments where those posts were made. All genres are produced within certain environments, and the final product of any literate activity will be informed by that environment. So, do we have complete control over our Facebook posts? Maybe. I can appreciate that that's a vague answer, but here's something I know with greater confidence: regardless of who controls what, we'll likely continue to engage with social media as a means to communicate, network, and share our stories. So, let's take a break and go back to our cat memes.

Works Cited

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