

Web 2.0 Technologies of the Self

Maria Bakardjieva · Georgia Gaden

Received: 1 May 2011 / Accepted: 13 May 2011
© Springer-Verlag 2011

Abstract Although no scholarly consensus exists on the issue, the claim that a substantive reconfiguration of the Internet has occurred in the beginning of the 2000s has settled firmly in public common sense. The label tentatively chosen for the new turn in the medium's evolution is Web 2.0. The developments constituting this turn have been contemplated from different perspectives in technical and business publications (O'Reilly 2005), in treatises on "convergence" or "participatory" culture (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins et al. 2009), and could be usefully interrogated by means of political economy concepts such as the "social factory" and "free labor" (Terranova 2004). Marked, or rather symbolically constructed, by these discursive pickets lies a field of practice that the members of the participatory culture, the "producers" (Bruns 2008) of open journalism, blogs, social networking sites and other characteristic Web 2.0 applications inhabit and animate with their everyday thought, decision making and action. This paper undertakes a theoretical exploration of the user practices emerging and consolidating around the new technological and organizational models making up Web 2.0. It is informed by a qualitative study of bloggers and Facebook users conducted through focus group methodology, although the concrete empirical data are not presented here. Rather, the analysis employs the concept of "technologies of the self" by Foucault (1988) as a heuristic device in order to situate Web 2.0 use, first, in a long history of culturally evolved forms of self-constitution and, second, in a complex matrix of relationships with other types of technologies, namely, those of production, sign systems and power. This conceptual choice, we argue, furnishes a study of Web 2.0 use, which holds in balance its liberatory potential and its susceptibility to new forms of domination, rationalization and commodification.

Keywords Web 2.0 · Foucault · Technologies of the self · Critical theory · Social networking sites · Blogs

M. Bakardjieva (✉) · G. Gaden
Department of Communication and Culture, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada
e-mail: bakardji@ucalgary.ca

1 Technologies of the Self from Socrates to Freud

In his later work, Foucault avidly investigated a topic that had not been central to the theorization he is best known for. In his own words, while he had always been interested in the processes of constitution of the subject, for most of his career, his focus had been mainly on practices and systems of coercion (for example, psychiatry and the penitentiary system) or on theoretical and scientific games (such as the analysis of language or the living being; Foucault 1987). In the final years of his life, however, he felt compelled to focus his attention on what he called “practices of the self” (Strozier 2002). These practices, he believed, were central to the lives of Greek and Roman citizens but were later taken over by institutions: religious, educational, medical and psychiatric. Foucault talked about them as “ascetical practices” not in the sense of limitation or abnegation, but in a very general sense: “an exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one’s self and to attain a certain mode of being” (Foucault 1987, p. 2). “Care for the self” in the Greek and Roman worlds was the deliberate effort to construct an ethical self and was highly valued and encouraged. The need for “labor of self on self” (p. 5) was recognized. It was only later, when doctrines, fundamental principles and other prescribed rules of conduct began to dominate the constitution of the subject, that care for the self started being equated with egoistic self-love. So, in short, for Foucault (especially in some of his lectures of the Collège de France), the ways in which the subject actively constitutes him/herself moved to the center of attention. At the same time, he hastened to point out that: “... if I am interested in fact in the way in which the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of self, these practices are not nevertheless something that the subject invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his (sic.) culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group” (p. 11).

In another paper written at approximately the same time, Foucault (1988) describes the practices of the self as “*technologies of the self*” and begins to trace the genealogy of these technologies throughout the history of Western civilization up to early Christianity. Here, he offers very concrete examples and descriptions of the forms that care for the self has taken in different historical periods and under the formative influence of wider social developments.

The goal of this paper is not to examine Foucauldian theory, or even to attempt to apply it consistently to the analysis of the technologies and practices characterizing Web 2.0. Our objective in the following pages is rather to employ the evocative concept of “technologies of the self” as an object to think with, even if sometimes against or beside the grain of Foucault’s work. Thus, we will experiment with the proposition of seeing Web 2.0 media, more specifically blogs and social networking sites, as technologies of the self in the sense implied by Foucault, but without strict allegiance to the nuances of his philosophical analysis.

Foucault (1988) defines technologies of the self as a suite of technologies that:

permit individuals to affect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality. (p. 18)

Interestingly enough, if one tries to come up with concrete examples fitting this definition, reading moral tales would be as good a match as body piercing or tattooing. The actual meaning intended by Foucault can be deduced from the historical review of the evolution of technologies of the self that he offers in his treatise. Before heading out to trace that evolution, however, there is another significant point that has to be noted. Technologies of the self should not be conceptualized in isolation, as they are a member of a larger family of technologies including technologies of production, technologies of sign systems and technologies of power. These four types of technologies, Foucault (1988) maintains, “hardly ever function separately (p. 18), but each plays a key part in the constitution of human beings and requires the individual’s specific modification through training and the acquisition of specific skills and attitudes.” He admits that perhaps in his previous work, he has insisted too much on the technologies of domination and power but has recently become more and more interested in the “interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technologies of the self” (p. 19). Already in this introduction to the notion, one can sense the tension inherent in it. While technologies of the self invite and presuppose active engagement on the part of the subject and thus come closer to the recognition of agency than any other Foucauldian concept (Sawicki 1996, pp. 174–177), they still retain a strong relationship with domination. They are targeted at “individual domination” (Foucault 1988, p. 19) and are closely intertwined with the technologies of domination (of others).

Foucault (1988) starts his historical exploration in 4–5th century BC Greece with the Socratic tradition, in which young men fulfilled their duty of taking care of the self and thus preparing for public life through on-going dialogue with their mentors. The Stoic approach, which emerged in the 3rd century BC and remained present (if not dominant) until well into the Imperial period, saw the loss of dialogue but retention of the mentor/teacher. Rather than engaging in a Socratic dialogue, the individual would spend time in silence, listening to their mentor or listening to public recitations. At that time, a new technology, writing, became a common tool employed in this practice: “By the Hellenistic age, writing prevailed... Taking care of oneself became linked to constant writing activity. The self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity” (p. 27). With the help of writing, the experience of oneself was “intensified and widened” (p. 28), as attention was paid to nuances of life, mood and reading. Detailed notes of everyday activities and events were taken in order to be examined and contemplated later on for the purpose of self care. The details of daily life are important here, Foucault points out, because “they are you—what you thought, what you felt” (p. 29). The mentor would remain the audience and sounding board for this kind of self-elaboration often through the medium of letters. An illuminating example of this practice is the letter by Marcus Aurelius to his mentor Fronto, 144–145 AD:

I slept somewhat late owing to my slight cold, which seems now to have subsided. So from 5 till 9 A.M., I spent the time partly reading some of Cato’s agriculture, partly in writing not quite such wretched stuff, by heavens, as yesterday. Then, after paying my respects to my father, I relieved my throat, I

will not say by gargling—though the word gargarisso is, I believe, found in Novius and elsewhere—but by swallowing honey water as far as the gullet and ejecting it again. After easing my throat, I went off to my father and attended him at a sacrifice. Then we went to luncheon. What do you think we ate? A wee bit of bread, though I saw others devouring beans, onions and herrings full of roe. We then worked hard at grape-gathering, and had a good sweat, and were merry and, as the poet says, “still left some clusters hanging high as gleanings of the vintage.” After six-o’clock we came home (quoted in Foucault 1988, p. 28).

Also significant, in the Hellenistic and Roman period, the concern with oneself is not only an educational duty of young people but also spans one’s entire life. The varied set of practices of cultivation of self that emerged in the Greco-Roman period would later be refocused around the objective of “knowing oneself,” which in Christianity becomes a prerequisite for self-denunciation.

Early Christian technologies of the self were centered on one’s relationship with God. The self in this case had to be purged and purified through rituals of penitence and self-denial: “Each person has the duty to know who he is...to try to know what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognize temptations, to locate desires, and everyone is obliged to disclose these things either to God or to others in the community and hence to bear public or private witness against oneself” (p.40). The “symbolic, ritual and theatrical” (p. 43) visual representations of self-denial through suffering and (sometimes) death performed by early Christian martyrs were later superseded by the oral confession to a priest or an abbot and the confessional diaries of the monastic tradition. In these confessions, self-examination was directed toward obedience and constant verbalization and policing of thoughts.

The theme of the technologies of the self is further developed by other participants in the Vermont seminar (1982) to which the centerpiece is the paper of Foucault (1988). The secular counterpart of the monastic tradition that extended into the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries was the “account book of one’s state of sin” kept by Puritans (Padden 1988, p.70). It represented another technology of the self intended to ensure permanent monitoring of the soul and the full subordination of thought and deed to church doctrine. From the self-denying Christian who employed technologies of the self to fully subordinate his inner life to God, this trajectory can be traced to the man-centered monologues of Hamlet and his generation in which a historically new type of self was being invented (Rothwell 1988); then to the Enlightenment and Rousseau’s *Confessions* where one seeks to constitute the self by recounting and reflecting on one’s experiences in the secular world (Gutman 1988). In modernity, the search was on for the lost “real self” undertaken in psychoanalysis with its thirst for scientific discovery and belief in basic truths (Hutton 1988).

The idea that practices like these and their pertaining social and technical arrangements could be considered technologies of the self contains two important aspects joined in a dialectical opposition. First, technologies are standardized sets of means and rules established under the dominant rationality of a given social order, marked by its inherent power differentials (Feenberg 1999). In this capacity, technologies of the self would have the potential to carry the dominant social and cultural rationality into the heart of self constitution and thus ensure that the self is

shaped in the image and interest of the dominant order. This goes back to their relationship with the technologies of power and domination. At the same time, the notion of technology presupposes conscious and deliberate usage on the part of practitioners, a process that opens up space for agency, subversion and alternative rationality. To the extent that individuals employ the prevailing technologies of the self imaginatively and reflexively, they will be able to take care of the self in a liberated fashion.

Another characteristic of the technologies of the self that stands out in Foucault's discussion is their functioning as a conduit of the interaction between the self and a public of some sort. That public is singular and concrete in the case of the dialogical or epistolary relationship with a master and the confessional disclosure of one's thoughts and feelings in front of the abbot. In some instances, the public is the same self who employs the technology (personal diaries), but at a different point in time and with a different purpose in mind. It is abstract and omniscient in the case of direct sharing with God through dairies of sin. And then it gradually opens up to include the real or imagined audience in the theatre witnessing the Hamletian monologue or the reading public poring over Rousseau's or another author's confessions. It appears that the "labor of self on self" typically oscillates across a self-other frontier and invites or assumes the gaze of another.

This observation would not come as a surprise to those familiar with symbolic interactionism which postulates the perennial flow of meaningful symbols between "I" and others as the main driver of the emergence of "me," the socialized self (Mead 1934). To think about the constitution of the self as being consciously performed by individuals using socially provided technologies, however, takes us beyond the primordial and spontaneous world of symbolic interaction, where the "I" instinctively looks for the reflection of its own image in the eyes of others. The dramaturgical model of the "presentation of the self in everyday life" by Goffman (1959) begins to sketch the contours of conventional practices resembling technology, but it does not go far enough in imbuing these practices with social historicity, material instrumentality and power relations. Neither does it examine carefully enough the nature and origins of the subjective intent that may be at work in them. The expressions given and backstage relaxation of behavioral norms conceptualized by Goffman (1959) appear to be universal and inherent ways in which the self is performed at the archetypal social scene. The concept of technology of the self anchors these and other similar activities simultaneously into the concrete social order and the situated intentions of reflexive agents.

2 Fast Forward to Web 2.0

How does the web of rather eccentric concepts and issues spun above connect with the pertinent realities of Web 2.0? Dipping into more contemporary social theory, the current condition of Western civilization can be described as one necessitating intensive and perpetual labor of self on self. We live in the time of "do-it-yourself biographies" (Beck 2001) when the self has become a "reflexive project" (Giddens 1991). Giddens (1991) characterizes the dynamic interplay between agency and structure in the process of self constitution under the conditions of high modernity as

follows: The reflexive project of the self “consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives” and “takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems” (p. 5). The more daily life involves a dialectical exchange between the local and the global, the more individuals are “forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options” (p. 5). Beck (2001), for his part, depicts a social landscape in which, following the decline of tradition and the social welfare state, the individual has been isolated as the main bearer of responsibility for his or her own fate:

The ethic of individual self-fulfillment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society. The choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of individual identity, is the central character of our time (Beck 2001, p. 22)

But then, what are the practices of the self that enable the late modern individual to fulfill this calling? What are the technologies that society places at his or her disposal for achieving that end? Most certainly the technologies of previous eras centered on the family, the church, education and the workplace—on tradition, stable institutions and social welfare—would prove inadequate to the new project of the self. Notably, as Thompson (1995) has argued, the process of self-formation throughout modernity has been also “increasingly nourished by mediated symbolic materials, greatly expanding the range of options available to individuals...” (quoted in Slevin 2000, p. 157). Typical modern mass media, however, with their centralized and paternalistic organization fail to equip properly the pursuits of the reflexive self that require “the processing of contradictory information, dialogue, negotiation, compromise” (Beck 2001, p. 26) in the process of active management of one’s own life.

A late modern medium such as the Internet offers a different base of resources for the active and reflexive shaping of the self. Earlier media brought a stream of events and experiences from around the globe into the local setting of the subject who had to accept or appropriate the presented content. Giddens characterizes “the *intrusion* of distance events into everyday consciousness” (p. 27) as one of the major features of mediated experience in modern times. The interactive nature of the Internet, in contrast, allows a movement that goes the other way round. From within her local setting, the individual can reach into globally distributed resources of information. Importantly, this new kind of mediation makes the local agenda leading in the interaction between local and global. It allows the *elective mobilization* of distant symbolic resources into everyday consciousness and opens a space for dealing with diversity, contradiction and negotiation.

However, to the extent that Web 1.0 was dominated by solitary, even if self-initiated, practices of searching and drawing on symbolic resources, it offered limited affordance to the practices of the self. It did not support adequately their essential element highlighted in the beginning, namely, the opening oneself up to the scrutiny of a public, of crisscrossing the self–other frontier. The individual remained atomized and isolated even if connected to the proverbial knowledge at his or her fingertips: global symbolic resources available on demand and demand driven by one’s own local need and will. There were reactions to atomization and attempts to

reach out to others going on already in the womb of Web 1.0 to be sure. It would be interesting to trace how technologies, such as online communities, personal Web sites and chats, led the way to the explosion of do-it-yourself content and conversation media and always-there personal networks which came to be seen as the distinctive features of Web 2.0. For the argument that we are building here, it is important to understand that Internet technology slowly but surely gave rise to a swarm of novel technologies of the self. In the remainder of this paper, we will analyze the potential implications of these technologies and the kind of care for the self they support. “As there are different forms of care, there are different forms of self,” says Foucault (1988, p. 22). Another question to be explored concerns the interplay between liberty and domination, ethical choice and imposition set in motion by the Web 2.0 technologies of the self. The technologies on which we will focus our examination are blogs and social networking sites.

3 The Rise of the Popular Self

The fact that Web 2.0 technologies are centered on the self has been noticed and scorned by commentators as Foucault may well have predicted: “MySpace is about me, me, me, and look at me and look at me” (Fairfax Digital News 2007 cited in Livingstone 2008, p. 395). As heirs to Christian morality, we tend to see the preoccupation with the self as egoistic and narcissistic, something to discourage rather than foster (Foucault 1988). Equally puzzling and unpalatable is the tendency of the users of Web 2.0 to expose themselves to a wide and undifferentiated audience (boyd 2006a; Nussbaum 2007). It is not for the ear or eye of the master, the priest or God himself that these subjects disclose the minute details of their thoughts and deeds. Neither is that disclosure limited to the theatrical floor or an enlightened elite readership. Web 2.0 practitioners strip their souls bare for the ear and eye of anybody who passes by. Of course, this is more a theoretical possibility than an empirical reality. At the end of the day, those who pass by are often well-known others or, most typically in the case of blogs, others who share interests, struggles and commitments with the blog’s author.¹ Audiences of the performance of the self self-select and respond selectively. Our empirical data along with earlier research (Nardi et al. 2004; Viégas 2005) demonstrate that blog readers form a diffuse network which becomes the authority to which the subject orients its self-making project. The fuzzy boundaries of that network are a source of both risk and opportunity (Livingstone 2008) that the individual at the centre is ready and willing to take in the name of the care of—advancing, expanding or transforming—one’s self. As symbolic interactionists have described, the self quivers and changes as it rubs symbolically against other people; however, in this case, the process is intentional and reflexive. It is set into motion with the help of a willfully employed technology. This intentionality does not suggest that subjects always know and can fully control

¹ The question of who exactly forms the audience of blogs is a complex one and the empirical evidence collected to date is controversial (see Brake 2009). The claim we make here is based on the accounts of the bloggers we interviewed and reflects their perception of their audience, not an objective study of that audience.

the effects of the operations they perform “on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being” (Foucault 1988, p. 18) using Web 2.0. They are simply keen to engage in experimentation with their selves, something that the late modern condition makes not only possible but also imperative (Beck 2001, p. 26). At the same time, Web 2.0 practitioners test the powers and limitations of the technologies at their disposal, flex them and bend them inventing new tricks and tactics along the way.

Analysts have already sought and found liberating effects of Internet-based technologies of the self in early studies of virtual communities (Turkle 1995) as well as in the context of Web 2.0 (boyd 2006b). The newly found ability of lay people, previously confined to the status of consumers, to apply their selves to the creation of culture and cultural communities has been noticed and celebrated (Jenkins 2006; Bruns and Jacobs 2006). What has remained relatively understudied is the question of how these technologies might serve as conduits of domination (media descriptions of the “horrors of the Internet” notwithstanding). To address this question, analysis needs to focus on their relationships with the other types of technologies identified by Foucault (1988): technologies of production, technologies of sign systems and technologies of power. Several interesting dynamics can be discerned in this knot of different technologies with potentially high significance for the practices of the self. We will try to propose a few possible routes for investigating these dynamics.

In an era of converging media and “convergence culture” (Jenkins 2006), Web 2.0 technologies of the self are tightly intertwined with technologies of sign systems such as the mass communication media, the cultural industries and the multisensory discourses they propagate. A study of MySpace profiles, for example, documents the function of this site as a stage for the performance of taste (Liu 2007). This is an activity in which the self is being expressed in the terms of the semiotic systems of popular culture: music, film, television, clothing and so forth. The user interface of MySpace invokes directly the symbols of this culture: your favorite band, film, book, song. The self in MySpace is written not on a clean slate, but through a drop-down menu and a form-filling exercise inviting the individual to map him or herself out along the axes of cultural taste. The widespread practice of bloggers to post links to and excerpts from media texts (Herring et al. 2005) on their personal blogs offers another revealing illustration of the organic, fluent and live connection between Web 2.0 technologies of the self and the prevailing technologies of sign systems such as media and the cultural industry. Technical convergence seems to go hand in hand with ideological convergence, and even though users manipulate the symbols borrowed from mass media and commercial culture relatively freely, their imagination is framed by the properties and semantics of the building material. This certainly is not the only possible scenario for the interaction between these two types of technologies, but its abundance across the blogosphere and social networking platforms is a cause for a pause in the liberation enthusiasm.

The relationship of the Web 2.0 technologies of the self and technologies of production is slightly less transparent and its analysis needs a thoughtful selection of an entry point. We find such an entry point in the discussion of “free labor” in the network society by Terranova (2004). Networks, as Castells (1996) has argued, constitute the production infrastructure of contemporary western societies. Once again in this area, technical convergence paves the way toward a closer than ever

intertwining of practices of the self with economic production. The labor of self on self, paradoxically, becomes part of the “free labor,” “pleasurably embraced” and often “shamelessly exploited,” on which the digital economy heavily relies (Terranova 2004, p. 78). The digital economy, Terranova contends, is a field of experimentation with free/cultural affective labor (p. 79). This experimentation takes many forms spanning the more traditional worklike software development of the open-source movement on one end and the largely ephemeral and invisible labor of AOL community leaders and personal Web site builders, chats, mailing lists and other amateur forms of production, on the other. Note that the fan fiction and fan community creation so eloquently praised by Jenkins (2006) also fit this bill. Free labor is free in the sense that it is willingly exerted as an outburst of creative energy and self-actualization. Its shape and substance are not predetermined and imposed by the factory process or managerial plan. It is unpaid labor, and yet is often valorized and channeled into the profit-making enterprise of a capitalist organization. Terranova’s main example is that of the practice of AOL which relied on the commitment and time invested in online community development by numerous volunteer moderators. While the company made tremendous profits in the process, these moderators were never compensated in any way other than gaining prestige among their fellow community participants and a pleasurable feeling of self-fulfillment. With the growth of Web 2.0, a researcher does not need to search for such examples in court proceedings or specialized publications. We live them everyday when we invest time, work and creativity to update our Facebook profile in the morning and hear on the evening news that Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg is now the third richest person in the world.

Free labor has flooded large sectors of the digital economy. The early experimentation with it has yielded triumphant (for now) business models. Many thousands of bloggers toil away on their computers in the hope that they will attract the number of hits large enough to recommend them as potentially profitable to a company or advertising agency. The self that comes out in these blogs gets appropriately molded to fit into that project of mass attraction and eventual profitability. On social networking sites, users do not need to achieve star status to be profitable to the enterprise. By virtue of employing the technology even if in the least sophisticated way, they lend their profiles and their selves to data mining and network marketing. Thus, reaffirming the Smythe (1994) dictum, media make money from the inconspicuous work of audiences. Certainly, with the kind of labor they do, immaterial and playful, as it may be, social networking service (SNS) users go a long way further than television audiences who created economic value by simply watching advertising. It may be too harsh to claim that SNS profile makers willingly attune themselves to the commercial machinery. They, however, have very little recourse against the on-going appropriation of their self-expression into new advertising mechanisms which translate every interest and experience shared by them into a potential consumption trigger. This kind of incorporation is not about capital’s descending on authentic culture, Terranova (2004) has argued, but represents “a more immanent process of channeling of collective labor (even as cultural labor) into monetary flows and its structuration within capitalist business practices” (p. 80). Let us be reminded: to the extent that Web 2.0 technologies are technologies of the self (in the hands of the self and for the constitution of the self),

the channeling of the labor of their users into monetary flows and capitalist business practices means one thing: the unprecedented blending of technologies of production and technologies of the self. To its credit, digital capitalism has managed to extract profit from the immaterial but profuse labor of self on self.

Finally, we will draw loosely on the “ludification theory” proposed by Grimes and Feenberg (2009) in the context of online games to discuss the “rationalizing” effect that Web 2.0 technologies have on the practices of the self. Grimes and Feenberg rework a series of theoretical interpretations of play and games to develop a continuum of forms of play starting from the completely free, unstructured and spontaneous playfulness found in everyday life and ending with the strictly rule-governed, highly standardized and often institutionalized games. In many respects, this continuum can be thought of as illustrating the submission of play to technologies of power. Our leading interest in looking for parallels between forms of play and of Web 2.0 use is to establish in what ways and to what extent technologies of power penetrate and/or emerge amid the practices of the self furnished by Web 2.0 technologies.

As noted in the discussion of Foucault’s texts, the technologies of the self have always contained the element of the other, often an authoritative other for that, whose advice and judgment has presided over the workings of the soul and has offered guidance in the care for the self. In this sense, technologies of the self are always imbued with power, but that power can have different sources and forms. And, importantly, it can be to different degrees disputable and reversible, which for Foucault is the main indicator of liberty (see Foucault 1987). Power could stem from the moral authority of an individual master or spiritual advisor, with whom the subject engages in a nurturing dialogue, or it could be the upshot of a tightly regulated procedure, to which he or she has no choice but to submit. The nature and form of the power present in technologies of the self depend on the way in which these technologies coalesce with society’s technologies of power/domination.

In their analysis of online games, Grimes and Feenberg (2009) acknowledge the growing resemblance and interpenetration between production and leisure activities and the numerous ways in which online games give rise to monetary economies and represent sites of free labor. In an interesting next move, they venture to go beyond the registration of this “economic encroachment” and to study “how games themselves come to display the same characteristics of rationalization as other institutions of social order and control” (p. 108). “Rationalization” here is shorthand for the processes of structuring, stratification, selection and expulsion, and the control over subjects that is based on them. Through commodification and technologization, Grimes and Feenberg argue, games are transformed into yet another realm governed by social rationality. This results in the introduction of strict formal rules, fixed criteria and rigidly defined measurable units designed to frame and control the experience of both players and audience. Such a tightly organized quantifiable experience lends itself readily to commodification:

As games and play are transformed into an increasingly rationalized set of activities involving huge populations for extended periods, they institutionalize a form of social order. The mass of spectator-players is now organized by the technology of the game much as markets organize consumers, state

bureaucracies organize citizens, and production technology organizes workers. (Grimes and Feenberg 2009, p. 108)

Grimes and Feenberg distinguish several transformations in the historical evolution of play which are also stages through which particular games can pass in their movement from unscripted spontaneity toward rationalization. The first transition is that from everyday playfulness to organized play. Compare, for example, students playing on their own in the school yard and a game organized for the same students in the same setting, but scripted and led by a supervisor. The second transformation constrains play activities into fixed temporal and spatial conditions. Think of the scheduled practice of beginning hockey players at the local skating rink. The third transition fully transforms a game into a rational system. Play becomes bound by strict rules, quantitative measurements and an institutionalized structure of skills and roles. It is thus ripe for commercial exploitation and profound technical mediation. In the case of online games, the rational structure of the game is programmed into the technical code and player interface and, in this way, can be tightly enforced.

With this model in mind, we would like to move back to the territory of Web 2.0 and examine the structure of interactions inscribed into social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. A logical place to start the application of the model is the larger playing field of social interaction in general. That field hosts a continuum of interactional forms very similar to the one described in the area of play. It includes the everyday chatter of unstructured and spontaneous interactions among fellow men and women; the conventionalized rituals characteristic of particular areas of activity and institutions; the highly structured and tightly regulated relational protocols in formal contexts such as the court of law, the military or the stock exchange; and finally, the interaction enwrapped within technological platforms that structure and control exchanges (for example, various broadcast media formats and groupware designs).

The processes through which the self was constituted vis-à-vis his or her peer group and the wider circle of people he or she would call “friends” used to be located close to the free, spontaneous and authentic pole of this continuum before it was invaded by a horde of new technologies: e-mail, online chats, mobile phones and others.² These technologies necessitated some degree of ordering and the evolution of informal protocols (see Ling and Pedersen 2005; Cooper 2001; Ling 1997), but they only affected isolated streams in the overall tangle that made up the interaction among friend couples and groups. They were instrumental technologies with relatively limited application and yet with important effects on the ways relationships were conducted. However, with the widespread use of social networking sites, the terrain of friendship was fundamentally transformed. Social networking sites are a hermeneutic technology in the sense introduced by Ihde (1990) (see also Bakardjieva 2005), because they insert themselves between the actual world of friendship relations and the person who is an actor in that world. All of a sudden, the landscape of a continent

² Although it is also true that “old” communication has always been technologically mediated to some degree.

previously experienced first hand in the course of a multitude of meetings, conversations, gift exchanges, joint activities, etc., is captured on a technical carrier. The user is invited to perceive and create his or her world of friendships through that technical interface. From this moment on, the technical carrier is going to select and structure the kinds of interactions that constitute friendship. The drop-down menu is going to be the mode through which the self is presented to his or her group of friends; these friends will be counted and quantified in precise ways and the interactions between and among individuals will unfold on a highly visible public stage. Like it or not, the self of the profile holder will be constituted by these different data streams. He or she will be easily compared to others, ranked and placed into categories for different purposes including marketing. In short, the self will continuously expose its thoughts and deeds to the scrutiny and judgment of its network in the hope to achieve not moral guidance, pardon or salvation, but the major reward that this environment offers, the main currency which animates its moral economy: popularity (our own empirical data; see also Rosenblum 2007; Zywicki and Danowski 2008).

This state of affairs in the area of technologically mediated social interaction then closely resembles the final stage of transformation of games into systems of social rationality. The same formula that brought games under the strict rule of corporations and bureaucracies is playing out here with still unknown consequences. What is becoming obvious is that friendly social interaction is profitable to site owners and that, within this new system of social rationality itself, new forms of power are emerging. Among these are the institutionalization of peer pressure and the stratification of participants on the basis of popularity closely tied to market values and commercial culture stereotypes. To put it figuratively, the guy who went on a tropical vacation and hugged the girls dressed as fashion models shoots up to the top of the ladder. The popular self is the true hero of social networking.

Grimes and Feenberg's analysis does not stop at the point of extreme rationalization and commercialization of play and we do not intend to leave our own argument mired in pessimism either. We know too much about the inventive, devious and subversive tactics of users (de Certeau 1984; Feenberg 1999; Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003; Bakardjieva 2005) by now to imagine that system rationality will carry the day unopposed. Even a cursory glance on the empirical usage data that we and others have collected identifies developments that point beyond the prospect of full subjection of the Web 2.0 technologies of the self to the rationality prevalent in their conterminous technologies of production, sign systems and power. As we argued earlier, technologies come to life only in the hands of human operators, practitioners who are situated in a much wider and richer network of relations and experiences than a single technology, no matter how totalizing, is able to encompass. To the underlying rationality of the technical script users counterpoise their situated rationalities, intentions and actions (Feenberg 1999). In result, a variety of user-generated practices anchored in the technology crop up and take hold (Bakardjieva 2005).

As users gain experience and expand their repertoire of practices, the intentional and increasingly skillful employment of Web 2.0 technologies comes to "informate" (Zuboff 1988) their care of the self. For Zuboff, to "informate" is the capacity of

computers to “introduce an additional dimension of reflexivity,” to produce “a voice that symbolically renders events, objects and processes so that they become visible, knowable and shareable in a new way” (Zuboff 1988). The hermeneutic quality of social networking sites, for example, allows users to see and interpret their interactions with others from a new perspective. The creative labor that they invest in Web 2.0 technologies and practices helps bloggers and SNS participants to find new affinities and solidarities far outreaching their immediate interaction circles. Not surprisingly, along with the vanity fair (of amassing friends and posting fancy self-flattering pictures and stories) in an equally viable stream of Web 2.0 activities, users come together as a political force to resist the commercial imperatives, to formulate civic concerns and mobilize for action. As we have argued elsewhere (Bakardjieva 2009, 2010), Web 2.0 has the potential to smoothly bridge the interpersonal with the political.

Users, as a category if not always as individuals, never stop struggling for the liberty to make informed choices and to negotiate the terms of their self constitution and interaction with others. One unglamorous strategy to that effect is exemplified by users’ efforts to draw boundaries around Web 2.0 technologies and to deny them the chance to take over their lives and relationships (see Hartmann 2006 for a similar observation concerning earlier Internet technologies). Despite pervasive design and marketing attempts to channel the majority of users’ social interactions through SNS, users resist and employ inventive tactics for compartmentalizing and orchestrating their communication with others, so that a lot of it flows through alternative platforms and mediation modes (our own empirical data).

4 Conclusion

The shine of novelty on the surface of Web 2.0 technologies should not conceal the fact that they are aligned with a sequence of technologies of the self, stemming from Antiquity and stretching into the future. The practices of care for the self originated in Ancient Greece have gone through a long series of twists and turns, but they can still be clearly recognized in the image of the personal blog and the SNS profile. The richly invocative Foucauldian concept of “technologies of the self” fits so neatly as a caption for these new phenomena simply because they are technologies, because they lie at the hands of the self and are intentionally employed by him or her in order to “affect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being” (Foucault 1988, p. 18).

In our study of the discussions and narratives of bloggers and Facebook users, we have found that recognition of the dialectics contained in the notion of technologies of the self prompts an analysis that eschews the one-sided interpretation of the social and cultural significance of Web 2.0 technologies. One useful outcome of such an analysis would be a clearer understanding of the interplay between liberation and domination involved in these technologies and the practices of the self to which they become conduits. What kind of selves poised in what relation to the public and political world do these practices help constitute? The answer to this question holds the key to a more reflexive, critical and ultimately more liberated user engagement with Web 2.0.

Acknowledgment The development of the ideas presented in this article has benefited from feedback and discussions in the context of the symposium Cultural Technologies/Culture of Technologies at Södertörn University, Stockholm held in October 2009, the 4S Annual Conference in Washington, DC, 2009 and the inspiring workshop “Who Am I Online?” organized in Århus in May 2010.

References

- Bakardjieva, M. (2005). *Internet society: The Internet in everyday life*. London: Sage.
- Bakardjieva, M. (2009). Subactivism: lifeworld and politics in the age of the Internet. *Information Society*, 25, 91–104.
- Bakardjieva, M. (2010). The Internet and subactivism: Cultivating young citizenship in everyday life. In T. Olson & P. Dahlgren (Eds.), *Young people, ICTs, and democracy*. Nordicom: Gothenburg.
- Beck, U. (2001). *Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. London: Sage Publications.
- boyd, D. (2006a). Friends, friendsters, and top 8: writing community into being on social network sites. *First Monday*, 11(12).
- boyd, D. (2006b). Identity production in a networked culture: Why youth heart MySpace. Talk at American Association for the Advancement of Sciences (AAAS-2006). St. Louis, MO. <http://www.danah.org/papers/AAAS2006.html>.
- Brake, D. R. (2009). ‘As if nobody’s reading’?: *The imagined audience and socio-technical biases in personal blogging practice in the UK*. PhD thesis, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK. Retrieved from <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/25535/>, p. 198.
- Bruns, A., & Jacobs, J. (Eds.). (2006). *Uses of blogs*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Bruns, A. (2008). *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and beyond: From production to produsage*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Castells, M. (1996). *The rise of the network society (Information age, vol. 2)*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Cooper, G. (2001). *The mutable mobile: Social theory in the wireless world*. New York: Springer.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. California Press.
- Feenberg, A. (1999). *Questioning technology*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1987). The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom. In J. Bernhauer & D. Rasmussen (Eds.), *The final Foucault*. Boston: MIT Press.
- Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the self. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 16–49). Amherst: Univ. Massachusetts Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Grimes, S., & Feenberg, A. (2009). Rationalizing play: a critical theory of digital gaming. *The Information Society*, 25(2), 105–118.
- Gutman, H. (1988). Rousseau’s confessions: A technology of the self. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 99–120). Amherst: Univ. Massachusetts Press.
- Hartmann, M. (2006). The triple articulation of ICT: Media as technological objects, symbolic environments and individual texts. In T. Berker, M. Hartmann, Y. Punie, & K. Ward (Eds.), *Domestication of media and technology* (pp. 80–102). Maidenhead and New York: Open Univ. Press.
- Herring, S., Kouper, I., Paolillo, J., Scheidt, A-L, Tyworth, M., Welsch, P., et al. (2005). Conversations in the blogosphere: An analysis “from the bottom up.” In: *Proceedings of the 38th Hawaii international conference on system sciences*, pp. 1–11.
- Hutton, P. (1988). Foucault, Freud and the technologies of the self. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 121–144). Amherst: Univ. Massachusetts Press.
- Ihde, D. (1990). *Technology and the lifeworld: From garden to earth*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York Univ. Press.

- Jenkins, H. (with Puroshotma, R., Clinton, K., Weigel, M., & Robison, A.) (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ling, R. (1997). One can talk about mobile manners! The use of mobile telephones in inappropriate situations. In L. Haddon (Ed.), *Communications on the move: The experience of mobile telephony in the 1990s. COST 248 report*. Farsta: Tells.
- Ling, R., & Pedersen, P. E. (2005). *Mobile communications: Re-negotiation of the social sphere*. London: Springer.
- Liu, H. (2007). Social network profiles as taste performances. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1). <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/liu.html>.
- Livingstone, S. (2008). Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: teenagers' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression. *New Media & Society*, 10, 393–411.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). In C. W. Morris (Ed.), *Mind, self, and society: From the perspective of a social behaviorist (with an Introduction)*. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press.
- Nardi, B. A., Schiano, D. J., & Gumbrecht, M. (2004). Blogging as social activity, or, would you let 900 million people read your diary? *Proceedings of the 2004 ACM conference on computer supported cooperative work*, pp. 222–231.
- Nussbaum, E. (2007). 'Say everything,' New York. February 12, 2007. <http://nymag.com/news/features/27341/>.
- O'Reilly, T. (2005). What is Web 2.0: Design patterns and business models for the next generation of software. <http://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>.
- Oudshoorn, N., & Pinch, T. (2003). *How users matter: The co-construction of users and technology*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Padden, W. (1988). Theaters of humility and suspicion: Desert saints and New England puritans. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 64–79). Amherst: Univ. Massachusetts Press.
- Rosenblum, D. (2007). What anyone can know: the privacy risks of social networking sites. *IEEE Security and Privacy*, 5(3), 40–49. May/June 2007.
- Rothwell, K. (1988). Hamlet's "glass of fashion": Power, self and the reformation. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 80–98). Amherst: Univ. Massachusetts Press.
- Sawicki, J. (1996). Feminism, Foucault, and 'subjects' of power and freedom. In S. J. Hekman (Ed.), *Feminist interpretations of Michel Foucault* (pp. 159–178). Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press.
- Slevin, J. (2000). *The internet and society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Smythe, D. W. (1994). Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism. In T. Guback (Ed.), *Counterclockwise: Perspectives on communication* (pp. 263–291). Boulder: Westview Press.
- Strozier, R. (2002). *Foucault, subjectivity and identity: Historical constructions of subject and self*. Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press.
- Terranova, T. (2004). *Network culture: Politics for the information age*. London, Ann Arbor: Pluto Press.
- Thompson, J. (1995). *The media and modernity: A social theory of the media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Viégas, F. B. (2005). Bloggers' expectations of privacy and accountability: An initial survey. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(3).
- Zuboff, S. (1988). *In the age of the smart machine: The future of work and power* (p. 1988). New York: Basic Books.
- Zywica, J., & Danowski, J. (2008). The faces of facebookers: investigating social enhancement and social compensation hypotheses; predicting Facebook™ and offline popularity from sociability and self-esteem, and mapping the meanings of popularity with semantic networks. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 14(1), 1–34.