

**When journalists go backstage: Reassessing privacy for social media**  
**By Alfred Hermida**  
**Graduate School of Journalism, University of British Columbia**

Presented at the annual conference of the Association of Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication, Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> August 2008

In this talk, I will explore how the explosion in social media on the internet is changing the ways journalists work and the issues this raised in terms of privacy and ethical behaviour. I will argue that journalists need to take account of the context in which personal details are published on social networking sites and reassess approach to privacy and intrusion.

The name Ashley Alexandra Dupre may be familiar. Otherwise known as Kristen, she was identified as the woman at the centre of New York Governor Eliot Spitzer's sex scandal.

In the space of a few hours, the life of this 22-year-old became public property - journalists were able to uncover a wealth of information about her, from photos of her in a bikini to intimate personal details of her troubled childhood.

Her instant fame, or infamy, led Ms Dupre's lawyer to lash out at the media for thrusting his client into the limelight without her consent and publishing suggestive photos.

But she made it easy for journalists. Like so many young adults, she lived much of her life online, providing revealing personal information on social networking sites for anyone who cared to read it.

In the words of veteran editor Roy Greenslade:

“When stories break it is customary for reporters to do all they can to discover as much as possible about the people involved. The willingness of people to place so much material about themselves on the net has made that task much easier for journalists.”

In the past, the media would have turned to family or friends to find personal photos of people who suddenly find themselves in the headlines.

The growth of social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook has made it much easier to get hold of this material. Since it is digital, it is easy to copy and replicate across the web. And it all gets indexed and cached by Google, making it easy to find.

The way the media feeds on the personal material on social media sites raises questions about what can be considered public or private in an Internet age.

There has been an explosion in social media. Web 2.0 is characterised by online social applications, where we leave a digital breadcrumb, through photos on Flickr, profile on Facebook, posting to NowPublic, blogs on Wordpress, videos on Revver

To suggest that social media is new is slightly misleading. After all some of the most popular early internet applications were message boards and forums. What has changed is the scale of involvement and the emergence of accessible and compelling online social platforms that enable interaction, collaboration and the sharing of content

Research conducted this year by Universal McCann into the impact of social underlined what other similar surveys have found. There is an ongoing shift towards participation, with users increasingly producing their own content.

Take one snapshot of the study into social networking sites, used by an estimated 300 million people worldwide. According to Universal McCann report, these have evolved into platforms to organize a user's internet experience, with people posting a massive variety of content.

Much of the information available on this very public forum is what might have been considered private. We can understand what is happening by applying the notions of frontstage and backstage spaces developed by sociologist Erving Goffman.

Goffman argued that every person actively creates different "presentations of self." Some of these are intended for the public - what he called "frontstage". Others are presentations of self only for private spaces - what he referred to as "backstage."

The frontstage space is where we perform our various roles, as teacher or as student. But the backstage spaces where, in a sense, we step out of character, perhaps showing revealing behaviour that would be inappropriate in a public context.

Until recently, most of the interactions between journalists and the public were largely frontstage interactions. But digital technologies, and in particular social networking sites, change all this.

Now journalists are routinely going backstage in pursuit of a story – After the shootings at Virginia Tech last April, many students were upset by the way reporters trawled social networking sites for people affected by the tragedy. The students thought of these spaces as private and were critical of the practice of digital door-stepping by reporters.

Some of us might be surprised that anyone would consider a webpage to be private. But it is helpful to understand why teens might consider MySpace to be their backstage.

The internet has become the place to hang out for teens. Instead of chatting in the playground, or going to the shopping mall, today's youth go online. One of the leading researchers into these new social spaces is danah boyd, a PhD candidate at the University of California (Berkeley). She argues that as parents have tended to restrict the physical

movements of their children, teens have turned to the Internet to escape from these physical limits.

Social networking sites offer an arena for teens to do what teens do – express themselves, make friends and make sense of their place in the world. Profile pages are a place to say, “this is me” to friends, which explains why some MySpace pages are a cacophony of design. They reflect a stereotypical teenager’s bedroom.

A teenager might consider this virtual bedroom as a private space, open only to friends. This is their backstage. But it is also part of a global network of information, where anything you publish will be archived, be discoverable through a search, and be easily copied and disseminated to anyone in the world.

boyd argues that most people who join social networking sites believe in the concept of “security through obscurity”. The idea here is that unless someone is of particular note, why would anyone be interested in their profile page or their comments.

In this context, privacy comes through obscurity. This is a very different way of thinking about privacy. It is less about being able to control information about oneself, or about being left alone. But more about being one of millions, finding privacy in the masses.

This collapses as soon as one of those names in the masses becomes “newsworthy”. Instead of being famous to 15 people, we become famous to millions. Suddenly your backstage presence takes frontstage, made public is a much broader audience than was intended. The result is that we have a generation growing up online that think very differently about privacy as technology has transformed perceptions of what’s public and what’s private.

Research in the UK indicates public unease with journalists using material from social media. A recent survey conducted for the newspaper watchdog, the Press Complaints Commission, found that almost four out of five people online would change information they publish about themselves on the internet if they thought the material would later be reproduced in the mainstream media.

Despite these concerns, only just over half of users think before posting information that it might later be used by third parties without their consent. The survey also found that 89% wanted guidelines to help prevent personal information - such as private photographs - being used without consent. The regulator shied away from new rules, talking instead about self-regulation, perhaps recognizing the challenges in trying to control the web.

For journalists the question becomes what newspapers and magazines may legitimately publish and what can rightly be considered private at a time when these lines are becoming blurred.

This debate is emerging in the UK media, as traditional definitions of privacy fit somewhat uneasily into social media. This is from Siobhain Butterworth, who is the readers' editor for The Guardian Newspaper"

"Privacy is about intrusion rather than secrecy and the question is whether you have a reasonable expectation that something is private, rather than whether you have done or said something in public. These concepts are not easy to apply to social networking sites where the point of the exercise is to share information with others."

In this context, it is valuable to apply the notion of frontstage and backstage to social media. We need to understand the context in which personal details or photos were published and assess the impact of their use in the media.

Some news organizations are realizing the social media requires a rethink of established practices. Earlier this year, the BBC tackled the question of using personal photos from social networking sites at a meeting of its Editorial Policy board, which sets out editorial guidelines. This is what it said:

"The ease of availability of a picture does not remove our responsibility to assess the sensitivities in using it. Simply because material may have been put into the public domain may not always give the media the right to exploit its existence.

The use of a picture by the BBC brings material to a much wider public than a personal website that would only be found with very specific search criteria, as the corporation has acknowledged:

"Consideration should be given to the context in which it was originally published including the intended audience, the impact of re-use on those who may be grieving or distressed, and the legal issues of privacy and copyright."

This sort of internal debate is healthy for the media. Journalists should consider the context in which information was posted on social networking sites. People use different sites for different reasons - they might be on Facebook just talking to friends, on Flickr sharing photos with their family and on MySpace to publicise their music. These spaces have emerged as the virtual backstage for a generation of digital natives.

This is not to say that people don't also have a responsibility too in posting private details online. To quote the person who started it all, Tim Berners-Lee:

"Imagine that everything you are typing is being read by the person you are applying to for your first job. Imagine that it's all going to be seen by your parents and your grandparents and your grandchildren as well"