NETFRAMEWORK AND THE DIGITALIZED-MEDIATIZED SELF

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ABSTRACT *Users leave digital footprints behind via online systems. Mediatized self- representations by human (inter)actions and digitalized automatization imply decisions and dilemmas on account of online participation. Chains of decisions and network impact produce online mediatized selves embedded in the NetFrameWork where net is the internet, the frame is the context by it and work implies the flow process of "always on" (inter)actions. Users learn to adapt and to handle the blended online-offline existence. Consequences are unpredictable: both former and updated records are available in an infinite digital present.*

The first part of this paper introduces the conceptual approach of the digitalized and mediatized self in NetFrameWork. The second part provides an insight into our research-in-progress of personal/professional digital strategies. The qualitative research has focused on strategies with their decision points and interpretation via storylines and metaphors by two segments of different generations. Where is the boundary between personal publicity and privacy in online hyper-connectivity? What are the typical conflicting issues in human/automatized (inter)actions on the Internet and what dilemmas do users have to face in their online self-representation? What is the difference among the observed age groups in online strategy? How can metaphors and storytelling reflect to various digital challenges? The goal of this summary is to present the first results of our research project about digital identity in order to prepare the next research milestone.

KEYWORDS: *digitalized-mediatized self, digital footprint, personal/professional online strategy, NetFrameWork*

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INTRODUCTION

The term NetFrameWork as used in reference to the digital networking side of life refers to the internet as an indispensable tool. The term represents a metaphorical-philosophical approach and is first used with this meaning by the author to highlight users' perspectives in digital contexts. This framework is used to describe web-based digital platforms with online representation and online interconnectivity. The concept of the NetFrameWork also heavily reflects on digitalized and mediatized selves with their activities, representations and offline extensions.

Digital self-representation in the NetFrameWork has become a personal and/or professional strategic issue. Behind the footprints that users leave on online platforms/applications and automatized systems are decision chains relating to the control of public and/or private data and the (self-) consciousness/awareness of digital activities. Privacy is one of the most emphasized issues in this context due to a mixture of traditional and socio-technological norms (Dijck 2013; Hetcher 2004).

Users face various dilemmas and problems in this ongoing process, and are looking for key solutions or best practices for making successful decisions through their personal experiences and through other users' experiences, and by following emerging trends and via examples, storylines and metaphors which are branded on their minds. Our goal is to map these phenomena, relying on a selection of relevant literature to provide a conceptual framework for our inquiry; and second, to give an insight into the present author's research-in-progress that examines personal/professional online strategies.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital footprints are generated by platforms, applications and binary coding. The coded representations produce different (target) audiences and information sharing (Ujhelyi – Szabó 2014) of online selves that observe and interact with other selves. The context is mediatized and digitalized: coded by computers and facilitated by cultural-social-visual effects and contents (among others, Hjarvard 2013). The result is the new media which surrounds us with its constant staging: users try to manage their identities via public roles and also through hidden information.

As Conlin (2006), when describing the essence of online self-representation,

put it: "You are what you post". Online social roles and activities via internet and interconnectivity (Burnett et al. 2003; Rheingold 2002) develop blended online-offline networks (Wellman 2001). Digital identification comes from the impact on the network of data/content/user. Diverse interpersonal goals facilitate the information-related process (Papacharissi 2011) of building connections or personal brands on professional and social platforms. Social media platforms, search engine hits, blog posts, selfies, transactions and further footprints are the digital versions of the early idea of mass media, and a product of automatized systems. Users have audiences and are targeted via the platforms/applications of the new media and analyzed via big data services. The digitalized-mediatized self locates itself and is also localized by user/system activities at different levels of transparency.

Our focus is on online self-representation (among others, Lundby 2008; Qui 2012; Schwartz – Halegoua 2014), on social roles (Goffman 1959), on social identity (Erikson 1968; Tajfel – Turner 1986), and on self-concept as the totality of a person's thoughts and feelings about oneself as an object (Zhao et al. 2008). The major theme of the conceptual background is the strategy of online self-representation for digital identification. Various generations of users learn to develop this phenomenon (Blanchard – Markus 2007) with different perspectives, using different means (Howe – Strauss 1992). Blended offline and online identities (Baker 2009; Walther – Parks 2002) can be viewed from various points of view–from online vulnerability to digital reputation management. The digital data landscape defines and designates users (Sarma – Girão 2009). Observers cannot see the same data sets. They instead perceive different "reality shows" or digital illusions because of the interference of automatized systems (Manovich 2001), and because of various user habits detected by algorithms (Pariser 2012).

Egosurfing and an awareness of internet usage have demarcated the digital scene. Self-generated and auto-represented interactivity are built via online communities (Buss – Strauss 2009) and via scattered digital footprints (Feher 2015). Self-expression (Pagani et al. 2011), the increasing number of hidden profiles (Puzis – Elovici 2015), and higher levels of online awareness (Phillips 2014) can promote self-representation and digital identification to achieve users' goals. Current habits mainly involve observation and participation. Ninety percent of users are thus engaged, while nine percent collect and share content or data, and only one percent create user-generated content (Schindler – Liller 2012). However, observation also leaves footprints in the form of clicks, hits and further activities. In this case, the lack of a (real) visible online presence may appear strange to some audiences and networks.

Personalized media (Aaltonen et al. 2005) in the form of smart phones/mobile devices/sensors and digitalization via self-strategies have ontological

consequences for mediatization: "we are the message" (McConnell – Huba 2006), and "whoever is not available on the internet does not exist" (Feher 2015). Continuous self-improvement has become a fundamentally important goal (Rab 2016).

Impression management extends this view: self-representation enters the stage with the goal of manipulating information and producing edited images/ illusions (among others, Strohmeier 2002; Dörner 2005; Merkl-Davies 2011). The expectation of positive feedback (Dörner 2005) is based on raising online awareness with targeted activities for users to perceive through displays (Davies 2007).

To understand these phenomena it is important to explore and map the emerging field of digital awareness. Which points of view, or what kind of values, are the focus of the users, and why?

RESEARCH-IN-PROGRESS: PERSONAL ONLINE STRATEGIES

Our work-in-progress research report describes part of a hybrid research design related to personal digital/online strategies. The first stage involved an exploratory phase with a qualitative design using in-depth interviews in preparation for a large-scale quantitative survey. The goal is to define the research framework and prepare exact questions for defining the next milestones.

The research has been hosted by the Budapest Business School, University of Applied Sciences Research Centre, Hungary. Before the empirical research project we tested the relevance of the research questions in cooperation with research partners from Central Eastern Europe, including Uniwersytet Jagielloński, Eötvös Loránd University, Kürt Academy, and Mathias Corvinus Collegium, which provided access to carefully selected, versatile samples from two segments: graduate students from different university faculties who had not yet found a job, and corporate CEOs/decision makers from a selection of the TOP500 companies, according to the Kürt Academy, of varying company size and different industries/markets. The in-depth interviews with 15 graduate students captured the views of the millennial generation, with a lifestyle typical of young people and with social roles as yet undefined. CEOs/decision makers represented a sample of Generation X with responsible social/professional roles and corporate positions, highlighting their more dedicated digital footprints.

The empirical research focused on the phenomenon of the mediatized self in the NetFrameWork in order to complete the exploratory phase of work. The aim

of the in-depth interviews was to map general and universal decision-making circles in an online context with reference to their online representations and control strategies geared at leaving/hiding digital footprints in networks. Because of the concept of the mediatized and networked self, we also studied metaphors, expressions and self-reflexive storytelling. Our assumptions for these segments included the following claims:

A1) The digital projection of self-representation has become a personal strategic issue in the form of the need to avoid lagging behind new digital trends and fashions.

A2) Digital footprints that are partially controlled by users cause a variety of dilemmas, both in personal and professional life.

A3) Conscious decisions support the effective use of online network transparency as regards the mediatized self.

A4) Respondents try to maintain non-mediatized forms of privacy

A5) Participants use interpretative metaphors/expressions and spontaneously engage in self-reflexive storytelling in interviews to expand on their personal digital strategies concerning the digitalized-mediatized context.

We undertook 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews of 60-90 minutes per respondent. To verify our assumptions, we provided guidelines for the topics, as listed below:

– platforms and tools of online communication for the digitalized-mediatized self,

– consequences of reputation management, control, security and the surveillance of online data sets,

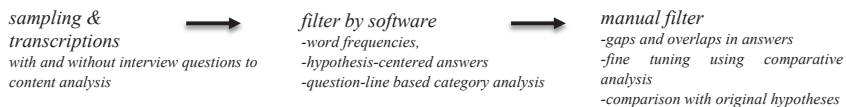– advantages and disadvantages, possible risks and vulnerability in digital networks.

The recordings of the in-depth interviews were transcribed for content analysis using software (Sporkforge, Tagxedo, MAXQDA). The use of software tools focused on word frequencies, highlights as assumption-centered answers, and a comparative analysis of elements based on the following categories:

– terminology in transcripts with cognitive and emotional relationships to the topic, elements of a strategic approach: gaps and overlaps,

– a direct focus on the context of identity, control and security, reputation, online visibility, privacy, network impacts, following best practices,

– the filter of metaphors/expressions, and personal/representative storytelling.

After the first software filtering step, the methodological approach required comparative manual analysis using eight categories: sample details,

word/terminology frequencies as contexts, strategies, focus on reputation, highlighted control/security subjects, focus on privacy settings, metaphors, and personal storytelling. These categories provided the framework for fine-tuning overlapping findings and differences.

Flowchart of content analysis based on answers in the interviews:

sampling & transcriptions		filter by software		manual filter
with and without interview questions to content analysis	→	*-word frequencies,* *-hypothesis-centered answers* *-question-line based category analysis*	→	*-gaps and overlaps in answers* *-fine tuning using comparative analysis* *-comparison with original hypotheses*

The research was limited in terms of the number of interviews, but the 'a minimum of 15 interviews' rule of Bauer and Gaskell (2007) was met twice over. The procedure for preparing and working through the empirical project proved appropriate.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

From our qualitative research, results identified a sample of restrained, characteristically conscious, congruence-focused participants with dilemmas and uncertainties relating to internet usage.

There were already differences between generations. The focus of graduate students was rooted in themselves and in their social embeddedness. These individuals identify themselves as much as 70-80 percent with how they see themselves in the NetFrameWork. Some participants have already used fake identities to make observations, save personal data, or for university tasks. Other users/digital forms of automatization also leave digital footprints of their own behind–concerning the remaining 20-30 percent of the sample. Their observations defined them as living a temporary student lifestyle, and their spontaneous statements relating to common patterns of online self-representation emphasized the virtualized self and the desire for protection of privacy and control over the internet, as the following sentences show:

1. *Whoever is not available on the internet does not exist.*
2. *Whatever comes out on the internet with reference to me, and whatever is missing concerning me, is important on account of my personal life.*
3. *I am mostly in control of the information concerning me on the internet.*

Decision-maker/CEO respondents focus on their visible/transparent/responsible/sample-giving professional role and on the authenticity of their profiles. They do not highlight the use of social media and do not connect the informal style of social platforms with their formal business roles. The scope for this generation is the whole internet, and their responsibility within it. Professional/career status and goals are listed in first and third place in importance, and these individuals prefer online monitoring over offline processes.

1. *Data produced on the internet with reference to me and data that stays hidden or is lacking on the internet concerning me are important because of my (socio-cultural) status and career.*
2. *We have to monitor our online presence more carefully than we do our offline one.*
3. *I use the internet in order to reach my goals efficiently.*

Based on these statements and on research assumptions (see above) we summarize respondents' replies in the following sections.

A1 The digital projection of self-representation has become a personal strategic issue in the form of the need to avoid lagging behind new digital trends and fashions.

The first assumption was confirmed. The NetFrameWork has become indispensable and respondents have strategies for online self-representation. The major issues for them are control and the ideal reputation (Oravec 2012). However, the need to reduce potential risks is also important on platforms. A majority of their decisions concerning self-representation are focused around timelines. Respondents emphasized in most interviews that once something appeared on the internet it would leave digital footprints behind forever. "To be digitally" refers to an ongoing vulnerability in a surveillance culture. There are no relevant differences between age groups: both view and manage online self-representation via (self-)control as a strategic issue, and in most cases their decisions take that into account.

However, their focus is not the same. Millennials highlighted the importance of the "keep in touch" factor concerning social media compared with the "reference" factor of decision makers concerning the total internet in terms of strategic thinking. Millennial participants, who were born between 1982 and

2004 (Howe – Strauss 2000), focused on their own strategies with fledgling habit. Decision-maker respondents are concerned with collective, personal and professional strategic issues. They mostly follow networks for the purpose of establishing references, checking competitors and communicating within corporate networks of their own. Their personal and non-corporate professional strategic principles are intertwined with collective complex networks. The results, besides personal strategy, are policies, rules and recommendations.

All participants from both segments are working on creating a more effective strategy to meet their goals and challenges in the future. Most of them declared that "you have to plan for the impossible." They are following peers and experts to identify role models, patterns and best practices for themselves.

A2 Digital footprints that are partially controlled by users cause a variety of dilemmas both in personal and professional life.

The second assumption was also confirmed. Respondents know that the impact of digital system automatization and other users' activities in transparent or semi-transparent networks cause random effects and online accidents. Participants cannot manage and control these situations, which creates dilemmas and problems for them. Their ambition to manage all digital footprints is a never-ending task associated with successes, challenges, and also with failures. Their status as observers is normal: they report that they only engage in a few activities online in comparison with their typical position as observers (as validated by the related literature).

The topic of identity theft cropped up in several interviews. Sites with adult or political activism-related content reportedly used respondents' names and photos in some cases. Self-updates were sometimes intentionally destroyed this way (deleted by respondents) who then needed to build new accounts/profiles. The information labyrinth of online services and extreme posts by family members were other problems that were mentioned.

The sample of decision makers emphasized the human factor. To an information technology specialist all systems are vulnerable, and using automated protection systems is like fighting windmills. In contrast, the human factor may really create unexpected situations. The biggest problem is that human behavior cannot be completely forecast and controlled. A CEOs junior family members are sometimes victims of cyberbullying because of human factors. This type of vulnerability also appears in the delegation of online communication activities: data and content may be handled by assistants,

colleagues or family members. "Being on the wrong side is a major risk" – as a respondent claimed in one of the interviews. The advantage of delegating tasks may generate more noise around several points of identification. In this case, control is applied in an indirect way.

A3 Conscious decisions support the effective use of online network transparency as regards the mediatized self.

Respondents are generally confident and self-conscious, so they do not really worry about their digitalized-mediatized selves. However, others, especially younger members of families and friends or colleagues with more extreme behavior, may reject collaboration or attempts to increase efficiency through raising awareness. Their own conscious decisions support their mediatized selves in terms of online network transparency, but this support is not always successful because of network effects, automatized services and further factors. When their real selves are confronted by additional challenges, they are semi-intuitively responded to based on an associated/unconscious background or on familiar patterns. The mediatization of the self underlines the process of identification, online activities and behavior, as well as the creation of interesting stories and mistakes via online communication. Conscious decisions are necessary but not sufficient to sustain respondents' online transparency.

A desire to maintain privacy and protect themselves and their connections from publicity and manipulation is definitely consciously pursued by both samples/generations. Millennial participants showed a higher level of awareness in terms of online mediatized networks than the younger generation, and also higher level than their parents. They interpreted themselves as links between users of varying age groups, and as having a mission to advocate for digital security and a trendy online communication style.

Decision-maker respondents use corporate policies and recommendations as a form of collective consciousness. One of them emphasized her main rule thus: "do not waste your resources for busy online communication". These respondents have a level of personal awareness about (1) informal connections, and (2) future career plans. Almost half of all participants are very active online, are early adopters of digital developments, and are building professional self-brands via online business network services. Some of them have future career plans, but these are not transparent, and neither are these updated self-representations maintaining the image of a corporate background. The third assumption is confirmed.

A4 Respondents try to maintain non-mediatized forms of privacy.

The fourth assumption was confirmed. All respondents want to hide at least one component of their private life. Full publicity seems to be associated with the potential for vulnerability. Bank transactions, registration data, and consumption of content via the deep web, adult content, torrent peer-to-peer networks, use of dating sites, and connecting to sites related to political or religious activism are sensitive personal issues, according to respondents. Respondents do not have enough skill nor time to protect all these personal/ sensitive data. This result is different to Livingstone's findings (2014) which identified the result as changes in privacy settings. The hard data used in this latter study compared to our soft data may be the reason for this difference, self-observation being more subjective–which may also be considered a weakness of qualitative research.

Millennial respondents commonly use social media services to track others. They are curious about others' private lives, and are at the same time increasingly keen to protect their own private affairs. The current results show marked differences as regards monitoring their ex-partners' online activity. Respondents are repeatedly confronted online with situations featuring intimacy. Decision makers try to protect their own and their family's privacy. As one of them stated: "I try to hide my divorce and my dating site activities". Most of the respondents had defined rules with family members to protect their privacy. To their knowledge, their limits of access to devices reduce risks.

A5 Participants use interpretative metaphors and spontaneously engage in self-reflexive storytelling in interviews to expand their personal digital strategy concerning digitalized-mediatized context.

The fifth assumption was also confirmed. All respondents had stories, and most of them also used metaphors and expressions to describe them. The stories and metaphors came from random topics, and were spontaneous. The common metaphor was that of "big brother", used to refer to surveillance: everybody is watching everybody else.

Millennials used the expressions "digital footprint" and "voyeurism" with reference to self-representation and to observation status (see the conceptual framework). Decision makers preferred expressions with potentially multifocal interpretations, such as "cruel weapon," "stamp", "long-term practices", and

"bunch of grapes". 'Bunch of grapes' and 'long-term practices' emphasize possibilities, complexity and challenges. 'Cruel weapon' and 'stamp' refer to risks that apply to all network participants, all the time. Decision makers often employed a more complex interpretation of their strategy via digital tools, while the younger generation focused solely on the use of digital tools.

Storytelling offers a different proposition. Millennial respondents had many more stories with which to interpret the NetFrameWork using self-reflexivity. Many of them do not remember how they used to search for people and content before the era of NetFrameWork.

At the same time, through egosurfing they monitor other users' activities and other users' effects. Based on observations, participants modify their self-representation attitudes and activities by posting content from their everyday lives, or taking more secure control of sensitive data. Some of the Millennials in the sample also extended such modified behavior to offline situations to avoid records being made or the sharing of awkward moments with other users. Some of them do not display a sense of humor in their feedback or comments in social media, which makes their decisions about their online presence more complicated. For instance, one post of a certificate not only received praise but also the witty question, "where did you buy it?" Respondents prefer humor when it can be used against others in their own posts. The majority take posting about personal success seriously, and do not joke about it.

Most of this age group emphasized self-reflection as it related to relationships and to love. This causes dilemmas for the group because of online dating services and timeline transparency in social media. Dating sites and applications often created disappointing experiences because of fake, outdated or non-relevant profiles. One of the participants was worried about splitting up with a partner in the future: her shared post captured a celebrated moment from a memorable date from a new relationship, but if the relationship ends this will become an awkward topic for her social media audience/network. The dilemma thus relates to future/expected timeline activity.

Decision-maker respondents had fewer stories and presented different views. Only two typical personal forms of self-reflection appeared in their storylines: one concerning the online transparency of a family member leading to cyberbullying, and another concerning their future career plans via a non-independent profile. In some cases, decision makers asked for deletions of the media records: the reason was sensitive stories about a family member, or negative experiences with sensitive topics. Due to their requests, these storylines are not included in the corpus.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Digitalized-mediatized selves decide about the shaping of their representation via the tools of online control and self-representation in NetFrameWorks. Conflicting issues and dilemmas force individuals to make decisions in digital environments. Awareness, examples, and also intuition support their choices, activities and projections. Meanwhile, the impact of networks is also defined by accidental and random events. The pursuit of self-identity and the maintenance of reputation are the focus of participants' everyday routines. The second level of preferences highlights the importance of control and security. Reference to strategic issues appeared frequently. Taken together, this appears in the form of ambition rather than implementation. The reason behind such uncertainty and incompleteness is the rapidly changing digital environment, and the difference among generations. Interviewees are learning the role of mediated selves in a renewable online environment in which privacy is gradually disappearing. Expressions, metaphors and storylines capture these situations using positive, neutral or negative overtones and help interpret users' online vulnerabilities and challenges. We have mapped several elements of these so as to identify patterns and questions which can encapsulate personal online strategies in our segments.

This study was designed to assess the effects of digital identity. Revealing statements can be made based on the results of qualitative research. The major questions are the following: how can we exist in terms of internet information flow, how important is it to control digital identity, and how significant is it to hide one's personal life.

To conclude in a nutshell, offline and online identities converge and blur. This finding is in line with those of similar research projects and reports about trends (among others, Foresight Future 2013; Lindsay et al. 2012; Hongladarom 2011). This result supports the aforementioned claim: both older and updated online records are available in an infinite digital present. Users face various dilemmas and problems in the ongoing process of building their own digital identities. The most important questions for both generations are related to control and privacy. The younger generation is more self- and future-oriented, while decision makers are driven by human factors and organizational policies. With a higher level of responsibility and extended networks, the perspective widens, and with it, the degree of self-reflection decreases.

Decision-maker/CEO respondents focus on their visible/transparent/ responsible/sample-giving professional roles and on the authenticity of their profiles. In this attempt, the use of social media is not highlighted. Such individuals disconnect the informal style of social platforms from their formal

business codes. For this generation, with their responsible roles, the scope of use is the entire internet. Professional/career status and goals are in first and third place, and these respondents prefer online monitoring to offline.

As regards further research, we are working on a similar research project in South-East Asia with two similar segments: higher education students and CEOs/decision makers. At the end of the exploratory phase we will possess a 60-interview unit from two major regions that will support a comparative analysis and the preparation of a large-scale piece of quantitative research with a focus on personal online strategies. The hybrid design research project will generate quantitative and qualitative findings in preparation for a final control study. The goal is to define the scope of personal strategies of self-representation and online control.

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