



# 'I make the rules on my Wall': Privacy and identity management practices on Facebook

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## Abstract

Much significant work on the topic of privacy and identity on social network sites (SNSs) stems from the realms of media, information and cultural studies, and sociology eschewing language-based disciplines almost entirely. To redress the balance, this article draws on discourse-centred online ethnography, an approach which blends online ethnography with discourse analysis, to explore how self-presentation on Facebook is regulated by means of privacy. To this end, I analyse a dataset of statuses, comments, links, photographs and interviews from five Greek users. The findings highlight users' creativity and criticality in combining software affordances with linguistic signals and textual practices to manage their privacy and hence their identity.

## Keywords

Audience, computer-mediated discourse, discourse-centred online ethnography, Facebook, Greek users, identity, practices, privacy

## Introduction

In trying to reach a consensus regarding a translation issue one of my informants, Carla, had posted on her Facebook profile, a friend reprimanded her in jest for not starting her sentence with a capital letter right after the full-stop. This article owes its title to Carla's disarming answer to her friend: *λυπάμαι. άί μέικ δε ρουλζ ον μάι γουόλ* (*i'm sorry. i make the rules on my wall*). Not only does she insist on her use of lower case letters, despite

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the remark, but she also encodes her comment in Engreek, that is, Greek-alphabetized English, to foreground her sole ownership of the profile.

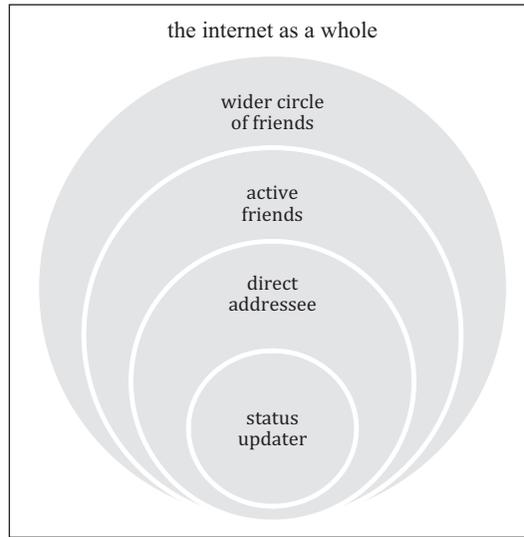
As Papacharissi and Gibson (2011: 86) have shrewdly observed, self-presentation on social network sites (SNSs) involves the production of performances in tandem with the editing of these performances. They claim that such self-editing requires 'acumen for redaction', a kind of literacy that enables users to delete or edit aspects of their identity, presenting thus 'a coherent and polysemic performance of the self that makes sense to multiple publics without compromising one's authentic sense of self'.

Identity online, therefore, is not just something that is 'presented', but it is also 'managed' (Goddard and Geesin, 2011: 56). Yet the current scholarship on the topic comes from the disciplines of media, information and cultural studies, and sociology (e.g. boyd and Marwick, 2011; Papacharissi and Gibson, 2011; Tufekci, 2008), shunning linguistics almost entirely. To address this imbalance, this article intends to explore how self-presentation on the popular SNS of Facebook is regulated by dint of privacy, drawing on discourse-centred online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008), an approach which combines online ethnography with close discourse analysis. Seeing online identity management as a new and primary responsibility for the Internet age (Goddard and Geesin, 2011: 56), in this article I am confronted with the following questions: To what extent do privacy issues affect Facebook participants? What kinds of editorial acumen do they apply to their usage of the site in order to safeguard their identity? Do they deliberately exclude any information because of privacy concerns? Do they leave it vague or implied? In seeking to answer these questions, I rest on two assumptions: (1) identity performance on Facebook varies according to our audience, and (2) privacy constitutes a function of controlling and managing our audience.

This article begins by providing a brief overview of audiences in SNSs. After placing privacy on a broader theoretical canvas, it discusses the ostensible paradox of being private in Facebook's networked public. After charting the methodological course for data collection and analysis, it documents concrete examples of privacy practices adopted by five Greek Facebook users. It closes by recapitulating and reflecting upon the key findings.

## SNS audiences

SNSs are bounded communication platforms that enable the creation of social networks among registered participants, affording them a range of tools for consuming and producing content as well as interacting with other participants (Ellison and boyd, 2013: 158). Identity performance in SNSs is audience-specific. Tufekci (2008) has acknowledged that one of the main incentives in being involved in these digital environments is to be seen by those we wish to be seen by and in ways we wish to be seen. In participating in SNSs, '[w]hat exactly do we want to show and to whom? Who can see us?' (p. 21), she asks. For Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield (2010), SNS audiences fall into three categories: *intended*, *expected* and *unknown*. The *intended* audience refers to the cohorts for whom the online profile is managed and updated. This includes both strong and weak or peripheral ties: current and past intimate friends (some of whom may be international), relatives, colleagues, occasional acquaintances, people who the participant barely knows (e.g. friends of friends



**Figure 1.** Facebook audience design by Tagg and Seargeant (2014) based on Bell (1984).

who have just happened to comment on the same thread and have not met in real life), people with similar tastes, celebrities and public figures, as well as controversial actors – that is to say, those who the user feels ethically and socially compelled to add as contacts (e.g. parents, bosses, teachers or students in the case of the profile host being a teacher).

Obviously, just because this collection of people is considered to be the intended public, it does not necessarily mean that it is the actual public. Agents should manage their identity and disclosure behaviour for their *expected* audience as well, namely, their perception of who is actually viewing what in their profile, irrespective of intent and privacy settings.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, there is the general *unknown* audience on the Web, also called *unspecified others* (Rössler, 2005: 112) and *silent listeners* (Stutzman et al., 2012: 9), and can include the hosting site (Facebook Inc. in the case at hand), third-party applications that track users' behaviours for targeted advertising, potential employers and love partners, governmental entities, marketing companies and other third parties which use SNSs for malicious purposes such as eavesdropping, lurking, even phishing and hacking.

In effect, very few participants think of every possible person to be a member of their audience. On the contrary, they imagine an audience that is often more constrained. With respect to Facebook, Tagg and Seargeant (2014), following Bell (1984), posit that if there is no direct addressee on Facebook, status updaters are likely to post their message for their active circle of friends, namely, the ones that tend to comment and are expected to comment (Figure 1). Yet, at the same time, their message will also constitute a performance enacted before a broader audience, which does not remain uninvolved and uninterested (the wider circle of friends), as we will see further on. Additionally, beyond their circles of friends, their awareness of the Internet as a whole may affect what and how they post.

Any study on Facebook audiences should take into account two parameters. First, in juxtaposition to blogging and other sorts of social media (e.g. Twitter, Flickr), Facebook is principally concerned with physical friendships and relationships that are initiated offline and then relocated online. Such relocation inescapably involves shared knowledge, views and experiences among members of the audience. Second, the role of the audience is no longer restricted to that of a mere spectator, but now also encompasses producing and socialising (Enli and Thumim, 2012: 87). Hence, the value of knowing one's audience is crucial when trying to determine what is socially acceptable to post or what will be understood and inferred by the engaged readers (boyd, 2010b: 50). This is exactly where privacy enters the game as a function of one's audience (Acquisti and Gross, 2006).

## Privacy and personal information

The question of privacy has become central to the agenda of many disciplines within humanities, including law, philosophy and politics, while it has recently constituted a conundrum among social media entrepreneurs, users and researchers. To put it plainly, privacy is a social norm. Rössler (2005) offers an influential definition of privacy: 'Something counts as private if one can oneself control the access to this "something"' (p. 8), with 'access' being understood both literally and figuratively.

Theorists such as Altman (1977), Nissenbaum (2004), Rössler (2005), Tavani (2008) and Wessels (2012) have classified privacy into the following:

- *Physical/local/territorial privacy*: the right to be left alone, the freedom from intrusion into one's physical space (domestic, workplace or public space).
- *Decisional privacy*: the freedom from intervening in one's choices, decisions and actions.
- *Psychological/mental privacy*: non-intrusion and non-interference into one's thoughts and personal identity.
- *Privacy of communications*: the security and privacy of mail, telephones, email and other forms of communication.
- *Informational privacy*: the control over the flow of an individual's personal information, including contact information and personal communication, and control over the contexts in which this information can be used and appears.

What is of special interest in computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments, and therefore what lies at the core of this article, is informational privacy. But what is meant by *personal information*? The term refers to anything that relates to our name and surname, age, residence, occupation, marital status, physical appearance, education, financial situation, hobbies and interests. It also comprises more sensitive data such as race; nationality; political, philosophical and religious beliefs; health and medical issues; sexual life; prosecutions; and criminal records (Hellenic Data Protection Authority, 2013). Van der Ploeg (1998, in Rössler, 2005: 122) accentuates that the nature of such information should not be taken in essentialist terms but as contextual, for such data acquire meaning and make sense only when occurring in a certain context in which the relevant person can be identified.

## The paradox of Facebook privacy

The bulk of personal information that previous generations deemed private – that is, age, politics, income, religion, sexual preference – is precisely what contemporary SNS cultures display as standard (Livingstone, 2008: 404). To Facebook outsiders, disclosing and sharing willingly such information seems like an irrational compromise of their privacy (Raynes-Goldie, 2010). For insiders, however, it is a crucial issue of how to be public without being in public (boyd and Marwick, 2011) (cf. ‘publicly private’ vs ‘privately public’; Lange, 2007). Privacy practices appear paradoxical, as content-sharing behaviour contradicts the need to avoid or reduce potential disclosure-related harm<sup>2</sup> (Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield, 2010). On one hand, users are nudged towards publicising material that is considered private, while, on the other, they are confronted with four technological affordances (boyd, 2010b: 45–48) that challenge privacy in their interactions:

1. *Persistence*: the online content is automatically recorded and cumulatively archived (e.g. chronological dates in Facebook Timeline).
2. *Replicability*: the content is reproducible (e.g. via the facility ‘Share’).
3. *Scalability*: the content can be available to invisible audiences (e.g. the Ticker on the right-hand side of any Facebook page).
4. *Searchability*: the content can be accessed via search engines (e.g. when the profile is public) or by browsing posts from particular dates in one’s Facebook Timeline.

In this light, privacy becomes a socio-technical activity which involves interaction with the technological system and the group context alike (Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield, 2010). This activity should be conceptualised as a boundary negotiation process of optimisation between disclosure and withdrawal, which ultimately leads to a ‘selective access’ to the self (Tufekci, 2008: 21, 33), what boyd (2008) aptly calls ‘security through obscurity’ (p. 15).

## Methods and data

The data for this article come from a larger discourse-centred online ethnographic study on the construction of identities on Facebook, conducted from May 2010 to April 2013 (Georgalou, 2014). Discourse-centred online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008) coalesces the systematic, longitudinal and repeated observation of online discourse (Facebook profiles here) with direct engagement (face-to-face and/or mediated) with the producers of this online discourse (Facebook profile owners here) and is complementary to the textual analysis of online data.

My five participants, Romanos, Gabriel, Carla, Alkis and Helen (see Table 1 for their demographics and background information), were recruited via convenience sampling (i.e. they were friends of friends). Initially, they were asked to fill in an online questionnaire and then they were invited to participate in a series of semi-structured online interviews via email, instant messaging (IM) and/or Facebook messages. From the time my informants and I became ‘friends’ on Facebook, I conducted bi-weekly observations of

**Table 1.** Participants' demographics and background information.

Participants	Year of birth	Residence	Studies	Occupation
Romanos	1989	Athens	Video game programming	– Technical support to an IT company – Military service (2012–2013)
Gabriel	1990	– Athens – United States (2012–2014)	BA in International & European Studies	MA in European & International Economics student (United States)
Carla	1975	Athens	BA in Translation & Interpreting	Translator of Latin American literature
Alkis	1981	Athens	– BA in Translation & Interpreting – MSc in Services Management	Real estate agent
Helen	1979	– Athens – United Kingdom (each September)	– BA in English Language & Literature – MA in English Language & Literary Studies – PhD in Linguistics	– Lecturer in Academic English (Athens) – English for Academic Purposes (EAP) tutor (United Kingdom)

IT: information technology.

their profiles.<sup>3</sup> My data tapestry was woven by Facebook profile information, status updates, comments, video and article links, photos my informants had taken themselves or had found elsewhere on the Internet, interview excerpts, survey and field notes, as well as my informants' comments on drafts of my analyses. During the research process, we arranged with Helen to meet for a coffee in Athens city centre to introduce ourselves to each other. Part of our discussion centred on Helen's reflection on her and her friends' Facebook practices. After the research process, an informal post hoc interview with Carla took place in another Athenian café. To my data corpus, I added the brief handwritten notes I kept during my face-to-face meetings with Helen and Carla.

All five informants were asked to sign a consent form in which they were assured that their material would remain confidential and would be used for academic purposes solely. Concerning the use of third-party comments in the study, I either asked for their posters' permission or asked my subjects to do so on my behalf. Throughout my dataset, I have preserved pseudonymity for my informants and anonymity for other Facebook users. In terms of privacy, a significant first leap was already taken by my informants themselves who had set their profiles to be seen by friends-only so that their content was neither searchable nor retrievable. Carla was the only one of the five informants who uploaded custom posts (for specific audiences within a friends-only list), a tactic she adopted in 2013. Contrary to my other interviewees, Alkis did not provide any basic demographic information (occupation, hometown, marital status, education and birth date) in his profile page, while he had set his friends' list as invisible. As he elucidated,

In the beginning I wasn't so [careful with privacy]. Quite the opposite: I had given much personal data like education, work and much more. In the end, I realised that, since the overwhelming majority of those added to my Facebook are friends and acquaintances of mine, they know such details about me. I don't have to display my history online. My friends' list is invisible even to my friends, as you saw, not only to strangers/not added contacts.<sup>4</sup>

While my observation of Alkis' profile was still inchoate, I noticed he had deleted all his posts from 2007 to 2010. In a follow-up interview, I raised the issue and he provided a personal and insightful commentary on privacy. I kept on combing through my whole data corpus, as it accumulated, and decided that it would be worth exploring privacy through the spectrum of my participants' discourse practices extracting implications for identity presentation.

Facebook users have to make critical decisions on how to come to grips with the sharing of their personal information. Such decisions require an advanced form of literacy – not just digital, but socio-cultural and ethical as well (Debatin et al., 2009: 102). As Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield (2010) have pointed out, the customisation of privacy settings heralds a shift in users' identity orientation as they can divorce themselves from a large group and social identities. In order to view and customise their privacy settings, users should click on the gear icon in the upper right corner of their Facebook page and select 'Privacy Settings' from the dropdown menu. I found that my informants' privacy on Facebook was shaped by the following:

- the underlying architecture of the privacy settings software;
- their personal values (boyd and Marwick, 2011) as expressed through specific stylistic and linguistic choices;
- creatively combining software affordances with linguistic signals and other textual practices.

Thus, viewing privacy as my informants' ability to control access to their identity (cf. Rössler, 2005: 111), this article will address their textual practices.<sup>5</sup> Here, I understand textual practices as a certain sort of literacy practices, namely, the practical ways of utilising written language as well as the socio-cultural meanings and cognitions that underlie these practices (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Barton and Lee, 2013).

With a view to providing a multi-perspectival view of my informants' privacy practices, my analysis here utilises two sets of data: interview excerpts and Facebook posts. The interviews granted me access to my informants' illuminating insights and understandings of their personal policies and (shared) experiences with and around their texts. Facebook posts, on the other hand, allowed me to trace, frame and analyse their practices in context. Due to the different nature of the data at hand, my focus varies from the description of users' actions to the regulation of their visibility and the pragmatics of their behaviour.

The next section opens the empirical discussion, which will revolve around encoding meanings in plain sight, making audience-specific references, reserving a code, challenging persistence, avoiding comments, and changing CMC medium.

# 'You talk in riddles, old man': Encoding meanings in plain sight

A common tactic to achieve privacy is the uploading of ambiguous statuses like this one:

Example 1



Carla wrote this update, which is actually a song lyric by The Divine Comedy, a Northern Irish band, to suggest that she was going to their concert in Athens, on 13 December 2010. Yet the lyric was misinterpreted by a friend who took it literally and commented:

Example 2



Can I ask something from the journey? When you return to Athens I want you to bring me two photos of what you liked most from your WHOLE journey. Kisses, have a nice journey!!

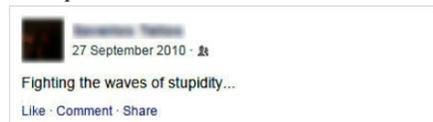
This is an example of how Carla hides information in plain sight and thus segments her audiences by anchoring in culture-specific knowledge to provide the right interpretive lens. What we witness here is an instance of 'expectancy violation' (Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield, 2010), that is, an incongruity between the intended audience (those who read and recognise the lyric) and the expected audience (those who read the lyric as being Carla's words).

Vagueness has a similar function to ambiguity. However, while in ambiguity, there are two or more competing distinct meanings; in vagueness, no meaning can be clearly identified (Channell, 1994), as in the cases below:

Example 3



Example 4



Example 5



Example 6



In Example 3, one of Carla's friends made a guess that she had travelled somewhere where the temperature was -17.7°C. Another friend highlighted the vagueness and wrote

her *me grifous milas geronta* (you talk in riddles, old man), alluding to a punch line from a joke, widely reproduced among speakers of Greek slang. Actually, what Carla meant was that she had lost 17.7 kg. Example 4 lacks any cue, or clue, on who exactly is stupid and how Romanos is dealing with it. Such updates save a lot of effort for their posters as they express complaints in a discreet manner without directly attacking anyone's *face*.<sup>6</sup>

Encoded statuses can also contain presuppositions (i.e. assumptions based on background knowledge), as becomes manifest in Example 5 (Translation: *SaNaVi TeLaRa in new adventures...*). *New* presupposes that there were old adventures too, whereas *SaNaVi TeLaRa* is an acronym made from Romanos' friends' names and can be decoded only by those who are in the know, for example, the two people who liked the particular update.

Another glue that keeps together a private sphere of friends on Facebook is in-group language and inside jokes (Papacharissi, 2010: 315). As Romanos corroborates,

I often upload on Facebook things that in a way constitute inside jokes with my close friends. ... My language changes depending on whom I'm addressing. In the case of an inside joke, my language will be more 'internetese' and more familiar [to my friends].

To grasp Example 6, we need to recall (see Table 1) that Romanos was working in an information technology (IT) company and has studied videogame programming. Here, he expresses his inner state via a gaming and geeky reference. QQ initially appeared in massively multiplayer online (MMO) games to represent either a set of crying eyes or to assert quitting. By decontextualising (i.e. taking it out of its original context) and recontextualising (i.e. integrating and modifying) this QQ reference into his status, Romanos either wishes to modestly externalise his sadness for something or his thoughts of giving up a person or a situation – once again, ambiguity is at work.

A significant cultural depository to which Facebook participants have recourse in order to articulate targeted messages is song lyrics.<sup>7</sup> Although many people dismiss them as fairly trivial, the foci of lyrics tackle primarily the communication and the signification of underlying cultural values and identities (Machin, 2010; Sophiadi, 2014). Carla admits that when she mentions a lyric in one of her posts, then this lyric

may be a 'secret' message for a friend (however this is only my intent and the recipient may not get the message sometimes ...;-)

Such secret messages could, for instance, be hidden in the lyrics read in Example 7, having a very particular *you* in mind:

#### Example 7



By publishing similar *secret* messages in her Facebook profile, Carla engages in what boyd and Marwick (2011) have diagnosed as *social steganography* (from the Greek word *στεγανογραφία*, meaning concealed writing): a privacy strategy – in fact, it is a reconstruction of an age-old practice dating back to Ancient Greece and Egypt – used in CMC spaces to camouflage information in public view, creating a message that can be read in one way by those who have the inferential capacity to understand the codes and read differently by those who cannot. Social steganography indicates care about privacy, misinterpretation and segmented communication strategies (boyd, 2010c). Its power does not reside in strong encryption, but in the fact that the audience members do not think to search for a hidden message (boyd and Marwick, 2011) unless they have very close ties to the poster. During our face-to-face meeting, Helen divulged to me that she can recognise particular patterns in lyric and music uploading on Facebook as regards the sentimental situation of her most intimate friends. Similar behaviour is spotted when users do not copy specific lyrics at all – even the title of the song alone can do the whole work of conveying a message (see Georgalou, 2014: Chapter 8).

This tactic is not always successful, however; things that are supposed to mean one thing can often be misinterpreted or overlooked. Carla points to this fact in the interview excerpt above: *the recipient may not get the message sometimes ...;-).*

The examples thus far have manifested that audience partitioning can be achieved by means of ambiguity, vagueness, presuppositions, in-group language and social steganography. However, situations and addressees do not always have to be so vaguely identified for privacy to be locked up. We will see how in the next section.

## 'Dedicated – you know!': Making audience-specific references

In Example 8, Alkis' addressee is very specific while unnamed:

### Example 8

True friendships are not lost!!  
Dedicated -you know!- I don't want you to be sad!  
Everything will be OK!

[Title of the embedded song: *The Friends*]

Alkis perceives the audience as consisting of *you* and *me* (*you know!*, *I don't want you to be sad!*). His intention is to console a friend via posting a song about the meaning of friendship. Notably, in lieu of posting the song directly to his friend's Wall (one speculation is that his friend's Wall might have been locked), he does so on his own without revealing the contact's name in all likelihood for reasons of not exposing him or her. In

this fashion, Alkis shows concern for his friend's privacy and the incident that has dismayed him or her. This example makes it clear that the protection of privacy does not solely signify the protection from others, but also the protection of relations and within relations (cf. Rössler, 2005: 192). Furthermore, contrary to Carla's aforesaid statement (*the recipient may not get the message sometimes*), the situation here is too overt for Alkis' addressee not to catch the message.

In Example 9, Alkis has posted a video from the American TV series *Beverly Hills* in which one of the female protagonists, Donna, is not allowed to participate in the graduation ceremony:

#### Example 9



[name of friend 1], [name of friend 2] [name of friend 3] [name of friend 4] [name of friend 5] etc. etc. I dedicate this to us from today that we start until the graduation!:-)

Alkis introduces an instance of *address*, that is to say, the explicit mentioning of the intended audience in the text (Myers, 2010: 78) by deploying Facebook's name-mentioning/-tagging facility to refer to five specific fellow students. In this way, he alienates the rest of his audience, encouraging those five participants to respond (three of them indeed responded). His accompanying comment sets in motion an intra-group graduate student identity, using first plural person: *μας* (*us*) and *ξεκινάμε* (*we start*). Only the cognoscenti can decipher the meaning of the time adverbial phrase *today that we start*, namely, the day they started defending their MA theses.

### 'Nagyon nagyon': Reserving a code

Another practice in which users engage to negotiate privacy is code-switching, namely, the use of more than one linguistic variety when writing comments to particular addressees (see also Androutsopoulos, 2013a). Helen has a relationship with a Hungarian man, who lives in Budapest. They do not speak each other's language aside from certain words and expressions. They normally communicate in English. Talking about this issue, Helen has said,

What you may have seen in my profile is a lot of code switching ... and especially as regards interactions with my partner. You may see there something in Hungarian (which unfortunately I don't speak):-)

As shown in Example 10, when Helen uploaded the photo of a landscape while returning to Athens from Budapest, her partner wrote her a comment mixing Greek with English while Helen chose to answer in Hungarian:

## Example 10



Helen's partner: oh love, beautiful picture, but now I miss you!

Helen: you too my heart!! very very much ...

With this choice, on one hand Helen frames symmetrical alignment and intimacy (Tsiplakou, 2009), as her partner used Greek in his own comment, while on the other she reserves a specific code of communication with him which distances her other readership.

The next example illustrates a whole sequence in Spanish between Carla and FBUI,<sup>8</sup> a Greek female friend and Carla's first teacher in Spanish. The dialogue takes place underneath Carla's London photo album:

## Example 11



FBUI: When did you travel to London Carla?

Carla: Approximately three weeks ago my dear

FBUI: how nice! how long did you stay? business or pleasure?

Carla: only 5 days ... pleasure. I went to visit some friends:-) if only I could have stayed more!

In our post hoc interview, Carla offered a detailed and emotionally laden account of the relationship she maintains with her teacher. Back in her undergraduate years in Corfu, Carla was studying translation in English and French; yet she wished to learn a new foreign language. The idea of Spanish, suggested by her mother, immediately thrilled Carla. Together with a fellow student they placed an ad asking for a teacher of Spanish. A young Greek woman, who had grown up in Argentina and was at that time living in Corfu, responded. Carla described me how zealous and inspirational her teacher was. After a certain period of intensive Spanish courses, the teacher decided to return to Argentina for personal reasons. Although Carla felt very sad, she tried not to lose contact with her. Carla now lives in Athens pursuing a career in Latin American literature translation, whereas her teacher moved to the United States where she works as an interpreter. Since both women became friends on Facebook, they have communicated more often and almost exclusively in Spanish.

The choice of language in Example 11 (of course one can easily copy and paste the excerpt into Google Translate to catch the gist of the interaction) can be seen as a positive politeness strategy which on one hand indexes an in-group identity, while on the other it minimises imposition discouraging non-Spanish speakers from intervening

with further more or less intrusive questions about Carla's trip. As pointed out by Tsiplakou (2009), such language practice is adopted 'emblematically ... to signal (or construct) ... ingroup solidarity, and, concomitantly, to index overarching in-group rapport' (p. 385). Apart from generating group solidarity, code choice also cultivates identity-as-performance within localised communities of practice (Tsiplakou, 2009: 386); it gums together the two women's collective past and present identities as former teacher and student of Spanish and as current professionals of Spanish who share common history, background knowledge, interpretative frameworks, practices and repertoires.

In both Examples 10 and 11, participants draw on their available languages in order to contextualise their comments as addressed to very specific members of their Facebook audience. It follows from this that a typical discourse function of code-switching, addressee specification (Gumperz, 1982), finds new, fertile ground in SNSs blurring the dichotomies between public and private discourse (Androutsopoulos, 2013b).

## **'Why don't you go to another Wall?' Challenging persistence**

### *Self-censorship: Sporadic deletion of user's own Wall posts*

Self-censorship is a textual practice which shows high awareness of privacy issues. This is so because it destabilises the persistent nature of Facebook converting into a more ephemeral space (Marwick and boyd, 2011). One type of self-censorship<sup>9</sup> concerns the sporadic removal of the user's own Wall posts. Alkis below enumerates the main reasons why he *cleans* his Wall:

Generally I proceed to 'cleaning' from time to time [...] The reasons are that some things may not express me anymore (rare reason but it has happened) or my Wall has been 'crammed'. Additionally, deleting isolated comments would be equal to some kind of censorship (if we're talking about others' comments). Another important reason is trying to provide the less possible information about me to Facebook or to whoever has access to my Wall against my will (or my privacy settings).

Alkis here echoes Papacharissi and Gibson's (2011) assertion that an online profile is not a static object but an ongoing process always subject to editing. First, he gets rid of things that no longer express him. Although such a practice seldom happens, it constitutes a token of how fleeting and contingent identities may be. The second, rather vague, reason is that his Wall is full of information which he does not proceed to specify. In one of our first interviews, Alkis had admitted that he sometimes deletes his posts because of the follow-up comments by close friends who reveal personal data that he does not want to be openly publicised. It is useful to remember at this point that comments do not just create a dialogue between two interlocutors; instead, they should be seen as 'a performance of social connection before a broader audience' (boyd, 2010b: 45). Alkis prefers to delete the whole post rather than individual comments because that would be equal to some kind of censorship. His last reason, the blocking of access to his data, introduces

the rhetoric of *me* (*my Wall, my will, my privacy settings*) against *them* (*Facebook, whoever*).

As mentioned earlier, during my ethnographic observation, I noticed that there were no posts at all on Alkis' Wall from 7 December 2007 to 21 October 2010, quite a long time span. In asking him whether he had deactivated his profile during that period or deleted all his posts along with friends' comments, he explicates,

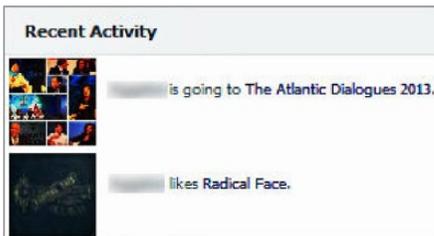
I didn't face any kind of criticism/bullying or even stalking etc. Simply, when the issue of privacy on Facebook got on my nerves for the first time, I deleted everything (since the date I joined) from my Wall.

What is unfolded here is the tension between 'agency' and 'structure' (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006: 10), according to which users construe their identity as they wish, while, on the other hand, identity construction is confined by institutionalised power structures. As can be seen, Alkis resorts to the emotionally laden expression *got on my nerves*. However, he is still an active member of Facebook's networked topology. Instead of deactivating or shutting down his account, he chooses to contradict and repurpose the very usage of SNSs.

### *Self-censorship: Deletion of recent activity*

A second type of self-censorship is that of deleting all recent activity. Example 12 shows recent activity in Gabriel's Timeline:

Example 12



As Gabriel points out in the next extract, he has deleted some of his recent activities principally for personal reasons, referring to his grumbling ex-girlfriend:

It has happened to delete posts or activity (or even untag a photo now that I'm thinking of it) in the past for personal reasons (i.e. an ex girlfriend who was complaining about every little thing!) ...

### *Other-censorship*

Privacy is not solely a function of our disclosures, but of the disclosures about us by other Facebook members too (boyd, 2007). From this perspective, privacy also refers to

the ability to control what is said about us (Raynes-Goldie, 2010). The boundaries between privacy and publicity can be delineated via the practice of censoring other people's posts. The process of untagging belongs to that category. Consider what my participants say on the issue:

I've untagged a photograph which was a collage a friend had made in a stupid application and I didn't like it. I must have untagged one depicting me in a party because I didn't like the photo at all! and I think that in a slightly joking yet serious enough way I had asked my friend to remove the photograph! (Alkis)

I've untagged a photograph because I didn't like it and it had been uploaded by someone else. ah and another photo in which I wasn't even depicted, you know those photos in which they tag you to something because you've been to particular bars etc. (Romanos)

I've untagged photographs in which my friends have tagged me without asking me, because I don't want people who don't know me to have access to who I am and what I do and I think that in this way I somehow 'secure' some personal information/moments. (Carla)

A name mention in a post or being tagged in a picture may often lead to disclosure about a user without prior knowledge or consent. In this light, West and Trester (2013: 139) have perceived tagging as a threat to one's positive face (see Note 6). In these cases, privacy requires 'interpersonal management' and 'coordination' (Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield, 2010) such as untagging the photograph at hand or asking the friend who uploaded it to remove it. After the Timeline launch, Facebook allowed users to review a photograph or a post in which they were tagged before it appeared on their Wall and then decide whether they wanted it to be there or not. My participants provide legitimate reasons on why they have resorted to untagging. Alkis and Romanos put forth an aesthetics criterion (*I didn't like it, I didn't like the photo at all!, I didn't like it*), nevertheless without specifying what exactly had disturbed them, that is, their own appearance or the portrayed situation (if, for instance, they were eating, drinking, smoking, doing a grimace, had a particular pose, did not like their outfit and so on). Romanos mentions he untagged a photo in which he was not depicted, but it might have revealed a place he had been and did not wish others to become aware of it or considered this kind of tagging as trivial. Conversely, Alkis does not admit openly he has untagged photographs, given his cautious language (*I must have untagged, I think that*). Finally, Carla shows major concern for her unknown audience since once she is tagged, she appears on the original poster's network, that is, to people she does not know. This kind of censorship thus allows her to secure her personal life.

Besides untagging, users also delete others' comments. Gabriel understands Facebook as a kind of personal space where he can express political opinions. However, when he receives personal insults that have nothing to do with politics, he opts for removing such comments:

I often use Facebook to express political opinions, indirectly or directly, this of course draws criticism, which is welcome. Problems and censorship arise when there are personal references driven mostly from malevolence rather than political opinion. Then I censor and perhaps I

delete comments because I don't accept uncalled-for insults in something that even typically is considered my personal space.

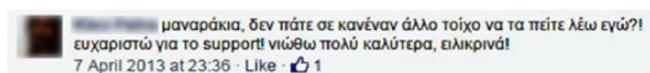
Alkis, on the other hand, deletes friends' comments that may reveal personal information against his will:

I have deleted [comments] mainly because close friends of mine have revealed personal data which I don't want to be known to everyone!

I have discerned cases in which my participants do not delete comments, but warn or reprimand their friends when they consider that they are writing inappropriate or irrelevant stuff on their Walls and that they should either stop or continue their discussion elsewhere:

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#### Example 13



hey fellas [+diminutive], why don't you go to another Wall to chat I suggest?! thanks for the support! I'm feeling much better, honestly!

---

#### Example 14



please this type of conversations should take place in a distinct section of Facebook (leave and go elsewhere et cetera)... regarding the hotel, hilton please ... no joking

---

In one of her statuses, Carla confessed to her network that someone had stolen the copper natural gas pipes from her parents' home. Although her friends expressed their sympathy towards her, a couple of them diverted the conversation to virtually irrelevant topics. Example 13 shows Carla's response, an indirect plead to stop 'dirtying' her Wall in such a crucial moment. Example 14 pivots around a similar theme. Underneath a picture depicting Gabriel preparing a seminar with another friend, two female contacts started writing comments relating to hotel rooms during their pending trip abroad for a conference.

Users perceive their profiles as a holding of theirs. As appears from the preceding examples, they do not delete their friends' comments, but deploy witty ways to make them realise that what they are doing is improper. Carla uses the chatty address *μαναράκια* (*fellas*) to draw their attention as well as the interrobang (!?) to formulate her rhetorical question. Gabriel, on the other hand, makes an intertextual link to a successful Greek ice-cream commercial.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 2.** Posting photos without comments.



**Figure 3.** Posting photos without comments. (Translation: solidarity of workers – banks' wealth belongs to us – nationalisation without compensation).

## **'No dirty linen in public': Avoiding comments and changing CMC medium**

### *Avoiding commenting*

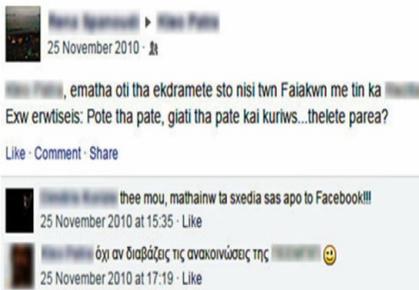
Another method to assert control over privacy is to avoid commenting. Helen has been very worried about the political and financial situation in Greece since the outbreak of the debt crisis in 2009. She often uploads photos (e.g. Figures 2 and 3) she has taken herself from demonstrations held in Athens. Nonetheless, she usually just posts without further comments so as not to appear affiliated with a particular political party or being identified with any kind of movement. Consider what she says:

I want to give my own version of an event to report on an event in my own way without making an explicit political comment generally I'm careful with that

By dint of her 'bare' posts, Helen makes wordless yet very powerful statements. Her practice is reminiscent of Georgakopoulou's (2014) remark: 'Implying a position results in an implied selection of a specific audience as the designated one for a particular posting' (p. 527). Helen's specific audience includes Facebook members who experience and are concerned about the Greek crisis either from the inside (Greek residents) or from a distance (Greeks living abroad), as well as friends from abroad who have knowledge of and interest in the current Greek reality.

Locking one's Wall is one way of preventing the dissemination of personal information. Carla's Wall is open though and friends can post content on it. In learning about Carla's forthcoming business journey to Corfu, FBU1, in Example 15, took the opportunity to write on her Wall and ask some further enlightening questions. In the meantime, FBU2 expresses his surprise in learning such news from Facebook. Carla pulls him up telling him that he should have consulted a professional website for translators they both use:

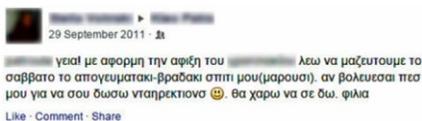
#### Example 15



FBU1 [writes on Carla's Wall]: Carla, I've heard that you're going on an excursion to Corfu with [name of friend]. I have questions: When are you going, why are you going and mainly ... do you want company?  
 FBU2: my god, I learn about your plans from Facebook!!!  
 Carla: No if you read the announcements on our site :-)

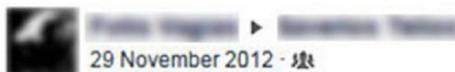
FBU1's disclosure of Carla's upcoming location (Corfu) to her peers is framed as an invasion of her locational privacy (cf. Gordon and de Souza e Silva, 2011: 137). Notice that Carla leaves the initial questions unanswered, at least in front of her Facebook audience. This practice of leaving messages unanswered because they require personal information to be given publicly is common among my participants. Here are two other examples:

#### Example 16



Carla hi! due to [name of friend]'s arrival I'm thinking of organising a gathering on Saturday evening at my home. If it is convenient tell me so that I give you directions :). I'll be glad to see you. Kisses  
 (from Carla's Timeline)

## Example 17



που χάθηκες ρε;

hey where have you been lost

Like · Comment · Share

(from Romanos' Timeline)

Profile hosts leave such invitations for coordination or questions by their friends without any further comments or Likes. This is plausible considering, for instance, that if Carla in Example 16 had responded positively, then all mutual contacts, as well as those who are not mutual but visit Carla's profile, would have been informed about where she would be on that Saturday night. Had she answered negatively, then she would have probably appeared to her network as uninterested in her friend's arrival. The question in Example 17 should not be considered as mere phatic communion (i.e. language used to show rapport amongst interactants), given it was posed when Romanos had been doing his military service. Such a question anticipates a detailed answer from Romanos which he chooses not to give in public. It seems that for both Carla and Romanos, the safest way is to continue the conversation elsewhere, perhaps via a Facebook message, IM, an email, SMS or a phone call (see later).

### Changing CMC medium

Alkis, in circumstances akin to the above, has a tendency to state the problem explicitly and propose a change of CMC medium, recognising the perforated nature of Facebook. Let me give you one of the several similar examples I have collected from his profile. A friend had posted a video song on Alkis' Wall. They talked a bit about the song and then their interaction went like this:

## Example 18



FBU: How's life?

Alkis: Let's not wash our dirty linen in public ;) Let's go to inbox!

FBU1: Right!:)

Alkis prefers not to discuss his news in public, suggesting to his friend that they change their CMC medium, that is, to move from Wall comments to their Facebook inbox messages where they can feel more comfortable to chat, just the two of them.

## Conclusion

Participation, and concomitantly presence, on Facebook is predicated upon publicness and disclosure which constitute the default (boyd and Marwick, 2011). Yet crafting,

**Table 2.** Practices that combine Facebook affordances with linguistic signals and textual choices.

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ambiguity</li> <li>• Vagueness</li> <li>• Presupposition</li> <li>• Recontextualisation</li> <li>• In-group language/jargon</li> <li>• Social steganography</li> <li>• Audience-oriented references</li> <li>• Code-switching</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-censorship           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Removing Wall posts</li> <li>– Deleting recent activity</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Other-censorship           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Photo/text untagging</li> <li>– Deleting others' comment</li> </ul> </li> <li>• No comment           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Own post</li> <li>– Other post</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Change CMC medium</li> </ul>
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CMC: computer-mediated communication.

updating and monitoring a Facebook profile do not necessarily entail that we have to include every single detail about ourselves. Providing detailed ethnographic descriptions of five Greek Facebook users' (more or less) conscious textual and linguistic practices (summarised in Table 2), along with analysis of their actual discourse, this article enhances our understanding of privacy and identity management on SNSs. As the findings suggest, users appear to deeply care about privacy and 'contextual integrity' (Nissenbaum, 2004), namely, the nature of information that they think of as appropriate, permissible, expected or even demanded to be revealed and disseminated within the given context of Facebook. By adopting these practices, my informants showed that they are creative, they have shared personal and social criteria on what to leave/delete, they are competent in manipulating language(s), they are skilful in using the system to their advantage and they are critical of the system and other users as well (each informant with different forms of criticality).

By valuing privacy, both personally and socially, users value their identity. Protecting their informational privacy is equal to asserting control over their self-presentation, that is, control of how they wish to present, stage and craft themselves; to whom they want to do so; to what extent, in which contexts and under which circumstances (cf. Ellison et al., 2011: 20; Rössler, 2005: 116). The analysis has provided insights not only into how participants want to see themselves, but most importantly on how and by whom they want to be seen, recognised and validated, confirming Papacharissi and Gibson's (2011) observation that 'privacy concerns who partakes in our construction of identity' (p. 80).

A plausible, yet vexing, question that emerges from the discussion in this article is the following: How could we characterise the realm of Facebook – public, semi-public or private? In my view, the most proper answer comes from Enli and Thumim (2012), who regard Facebook as 'a public sphere where individual users contribute with private postings and through their activities negotiate the degree of intimacy' (p. 92). Put more minimally, Facebook posts are public by default and private through effort (boyd, 2010a). Therefore, partaking in Facebook's networked public trying at the same time not to be public is not an oxymoron but an 'agentic act' (Livingstone, 2008: 409) by means of which users protect their identity.

It is useful to bear in mind, though, that the effort to protect privacy can vary enormously among users. Privacy is not the same for everyone. Rössler (2005) posits that '[t]he dividing line between what is to be regarded as public and what as private is a constructed one and has not been laid down once and for all' (p. 9). Privacy choices, thus, are expressions of individual subjective preferences, thoughts, feelings, images, self-definitions and self-interpretations also affected by the role of socio-cultural norms, asymmetric information, bounded rationality, cognitive biases and the environment by and large (boyd and Marwick, 2011; Rössler, 2005: 140; Stutzman et al., 2012: 9). So, my list of linguistic and textual practices should be taken not as exhaustive, but as a snapshot. Apart from the users who value privacy in distinctive ways, Facebook too is a 'moving target' with new applications and extra privacy features being developed and implemented incessantly (Debatin et al., 2009; Stutzman et al., 2012). Changes in technology are highly likely to be accompanied by changes in users' attitudes towards privacy. For example, after Facebook's facelift with the arrival of the Timeline in 2011, Helen rethought some of her personal information and removed her partner's name from her profile, keeping just the field 'In a relationship' without specifying with whom. As time passes and users become even more dexterous with new technologies, they will invent new, more innovative and witty ways to shield their privacy.

One important caveat needs to be taken into account: privacy is unavoidably predetermined by Facebook's architecture. Participants represent themselves using Facebook's language and frameworks (Enli and Thumim, 2012: 101). Even if they have customised their privacy settings, what they achieve is only a compromised or prescribed autonomy negotiated within the terms that Facebook has defined (Papacharissi and Gibson, 2011). Alkis, in our interview, clarifies that

Despite the privacy settings that I have carefully chosen, maybe some people can still have access (friends of friends or I don't know who else) and you don't have to give food for thought to any curious person that ferrets out. . . . I have just been intensely puzzled over ... how skillfully or even clumsily [Facebook] spurs us ... on giving 'out there' everything about us.

Of course, users can protest against Facebook's privacy standards by playing with the format and showing that they are critical (Enli and Thumim, 2012: 101), as Alkis has opted to do by refusing to provide any demographic information or opting for other mediums of communication. In the end, is it worth it to have a profile on Facebook or not? Grimmelmann (2009) deploys a wonderful metaphor:

It's true that using Facebook can be hazardous to your privacy, but a hammer can also be hazardous to your thumb. People need tools, and sometimes they need dangerous tools. Hammers are physically dangerous; Facebook is socially dangerous. We shouldn't ban hammers, and we shouldn't ban Facebook.

In this article, I have endeavoured to show that Facebook is a social tool which equips individuals with a multitude of literacy and linguistic practices on how to share their personal information, constructing thus meaningful identities and forging reciprocal

relationships. The findings at hand have opened up new critical domains in need of further investigation. Do the different levels of privacy, as traced in this study, indicate that there could be problems for collecting a corpus of Facebook texts? Would Goffman's distinction between giving and giving off an impression be relevant to users' privacy practices? Do issues of privacy challenge ideas of personhood and distinctiveness? Is privacy an age-graded matter? Another direction for future research could target private communication on Facebook through messages. How is Facebook used for organising and micro-coordinating life, a kind of vernacular literacy reported by Barton and Lee (2013)? Has it replaced email or text-messaging? To what extent do users favour private messaging to writing public comments on their profiles? These are both promising and untrodden areas for discourse studies.

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### Notes

1. For the ways in which users handle the phenomenon of *context collapse*, namely, the flattening of multiple diverse audiences on social network sites (SNSs), see Marwick and boyd (2011), Androutopoulos (2014) and Georgalou (2014: Chapters 7 and 9).
2. For a review of Facebook's privacy failures, see Debatin et al. (2009) and Newsourcing (2012).
3. I added my informants as friends to the profile I already owned to allow a degree of mutuality with them. As I was given access to their profiles, I thought it would be fair they were also given access to mine. Taking into account the challenging aspect of this choice, I adjusted some of my privacy settings pertaining to visibility of content and list of friends. I speculate that my respondents may have done similar customisations.
4. The interviews were originally conducted in Greek.
5. The ways of applying privacy settings to one's profile (e.g. custom uploads, blocking, separate profiles, hidden friend list) are outside the scope of this study.
6. *Face* is the public self-image that people try to protect (Goffman, 1955). In politeness theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) distinguished between *positive* and *negative face*. *Positive face* refers to one's self-esteem (the desire to be liked, admired, ratified and related to positivity), while *negative face* pertains to one's freedom to act (the desire not to be imposed upon). Certain (verbal) acts in social interaction have the potential to damage or threaten another person's positive face (e.g. insulting the hearer or expressing disapproval for something the hearer likes) or negative face (e.g. giving an order to the hearer and thereby restricting their freedom). Such acts are known as *face-threatening acts* (FTAs).
7. For more on the use of lyrics in SNSs as second-order information, that is, information which is 'not actually said' but rather constitutes the 'background knowledge of a situation and expectations of communication', see Gershon (2010: 125–130).

8. The acronym FBU stands for Facebook User and is used for my informants' friends. Different Facebook participants are enumerated for ease of reference (e.g. FBU1, FBU2, FBU3).
9. Das and Kramer (2013) discuss a different type of self-censorship, *last-minute self-censorship*, namely, content that users typed on Facebook but decided not to publish.
10. You can watch the commercial here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YN72ZsADhg>. The plot is as follows: A bunch of young men are rehearsing a rock song on a ground floor. An old man appears outside their window and shouts, inter alia: 'Μας έχετε τρελάνει. Να φύγετε κύριε, να πάτε αλλού' [You've driven us crazy. Leave, sir, and go elsewhere].

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## Author biography

Mariza Georgalou has recently been awarded a PhD from Lancaster University's Department of Linguistics and English Language. Her research focuses on social media discourse analysis and computer-mediated communication.