

Who are you Tweeting to? Context Collapse

Modes of Learning

For this course, the following modes of learning will be used:

- Lecture Notes
- Scholarly Readings
- Self-Quizzes

Introduction

In Theorizing Identity we explored the relationship between social media and identity. Rather than being something you are born with, identity is actually a work in progress. A key theme running throughout all the theories we have explored so far is that your identity is in part influenced by who is watching you.

In Who are you tweeting to? We will investigate the relationship between social media and audiences. In Part 1 we will investigate how social networking sites have reduced the ability to compartmentalize different parts of your life. This is known as "context collapse".

In Part 2, we will explore the concept of imagined audiences, that is, who do you think you are writing to when you post content to social networking sites. We will also discuss the problems that can arise when your imagined reader doesn't quite match the actual people reading what you post to a social networking site.

As you begin this module, please refer to the timeline and make note of any assessments or important dates. If you have any questions, ask your instructor.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this module, you will be able to:

1. Define "first", "second" and "third place".
2. Describe the characteristics of a Third Place.
3. Define context collapse.
4. Discuss the ways the structure and dynamics of social networking sites have influenced how we structure our social interaction with others.

Key Terms and Concepts

Listed below are some important key terms and concepts within this module.

- Third Place
- Context Collapse

Creating Connections

As we discussed in a previous Module, What is Social Media, a media is "social" when it allows you to communicate with another person. We also discussed that social media is popular in part because it taps into our deep-seeded need to make social connections with other people.

In this Module we will begin by discussing the concept of the third place. A social setting outside work and home, the third place is an important venue to make the connections with other people. These connections are what Standage argued are a key part of being human that you were first introduced to in the readings that were part of What is Social Media.

After you have had a chance to familiarize yourself with the concept of the third place, we will discuss two issues that are often discussed in conjunction with third places:

1. The way our modern lives are structured has led to an overall decline in the number of physical/offline third places available to us.
2. Certain online spaces (e.g. massively multiplayer online games) can act as an online-equivalent of a third place.

We will conclude this module with a discussion about the ways social networking sites may be at odds with the sorts of social interaction we expect to be able to have in a third place.

The Third Place

Ray Oldenburg, a sociologist, has written about how human social interaction is influenced by the physical locations in which this social interaction takes place. He argues that our social spaces can be divided into three spaces.

The first space is found inside our home. Here, our primary interactions are with our families or the other people that we share a domestic space with (e.g. roommates, fellow students who live in your dorm, etc.).

The second space is our workplace. Here our primary interactions are with our co-workers, clients, or anyone we communicate with for purposes related to our area of employment. If you work a traditional 40-hour workweek, this will likely be where you spend the majority of your social time. For those not yet old enough to work, their time spent in school would be considered their second place.

Oldenburg argues for the importance of having public gathering places specifically meant for social interaction for social interaction's sake. He calls this space the "third place". These are spaces for socialization outside of our work and home environment that are important both for civic engagement but also ensuring we have a sense of place or belonging in the world.

But what exactly makes a place a "third place"? Oldenburg describes eight defining characteristics:

1. **Neutral Ground:** Participants are free to come and go as they please without any obligations to the space or other patrons.
2. **Leveler:** Your social status or your job does not hold any weight here (e.g. a lawyer and a plumber are equals here). You also do not need to pay an expensive membership fee or have another person vouch for the quality of your character to get in the door to the space.

3. **Conversation is the main activity:** The main activity in a third place is talking with other people in the space. Those who are charismatic or have a good sense of humour are held in high regard.
4. **Accessibility & Accommodation:** The space is easy to access and make accommodations for people who attend on a regular basis.
5. **The Regulars:** Many of the same people can be found in the space on a regular basis, newcomers who start attending frequently will become part of “the regulars” too.
6. **A Low Profile:** Third places have a “lived in” feel. Unlike a fancy restaurant where you might be afraid of breaking something or pronouncing a menu item incorrectly, third places are not pretentious and welcoming to a wide variety of people.
7. **The Mood is Playful:** The tone of conversation is not serious. Hostile debates are not welcome in these spaces.
8. **A Home Away From Home:** Regulars feel a sense of ownership over the space in that they care about it as much as they care about their own home.

While we may spend a lot of time interacting with others in our workplace or school, the distinction between the sorts of conversations that happen in a second versus third place are important:

“...third places are defined as neutral grounds where individuals can enter and leave as they see fit without having to ask permission or receive an invitation (as one might in a private space) and without having to “play host” for anyone else. Compare, for example, weekday attendance at the workplace to happy hour attendance at the neighborhood tavern. The former is a second place, marked by financial obligation and rules that structure who is expected to be where and for how long; the latter is a third place, marked by relative freedom of movement.”

(Steinkuler & Williams, 2006)

Examples of third places from popular culture include:

“Central Perk”, the coffee shop that served as a home away from home for the main characters of *Friends*.

The local barbershop that provided a place for neighbourhood teens to play video games and hang out featured in Netflix’s *Luke Cage*.

The specifics of the physical location are less important than the ability for a group of people to congregate and have conversations. A residential street lined with houses with front-facing porches that are used by residents to converse with their neighbours would function as a third place just as much as a low-cost recreational bowling league. The most important thing is the ability to “hang out” with other visitors to the space.

Modern life and the disappearing third place

This need to have friends and a place to belong is something that sociologists have investigated for quite some time. For example Georg Simmel was researching social connections in the early 1900s. He too argued for the need to have a place other than work and home where one can socialize:

“To be sure, it is for the sake of special needs and interests that men unite in economic associations or blood fraternities, in cult societies or robber bands. But, above and beyond their special content, all these associations are accompanied by a feeling for, by a satisfaction in, the very fact that one is associated with others and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others.”

(Simmel, 1949)

While third places and the need for a social space outside of work and home have long been considered essential, in his book *The Great Good Place* Oldenburg makes the case for what he sees as the reasons for the decrease in the amount of socialization in the lives of adults in the United States. The post war exodus from the inner cities to the suburbs has led to longer commutes and a decrease in the amount of unstructured leisure time for many adults.

At the same time, the widespread availability of television and personal entertainment devices (e.g. DVD players) mean that we are less likely to need to leave our homes to find entertainment to fill what little leisure time we have.

Despite indications that our social spheres have been dramatically reduced than what previous generations would have experienced and that a return to the third place is needed, there are structural constraints that make such change difficult. In the preface to *The Code of the City: Standards and the Hidden Language of Place Making*, Eran Ben-Joseph describes being fresh out of graduate school and when he and his business partner were offered the opportunity to assist with planning a subdivision, they were full of optimism.

However, reality soon struck:

“With little business experience but with freshly minted academic enthusiasm and dreams of planning utopias, we went out to change suburbia. No more cookie-cutter homes, rectangular lots, and standardized street patterns. We envisioned a new type of development, one of continuous interplay between space and people, where boulders, ravines, fauna, and flora were interrelated with the human habitat.

The reality of development hit us in the face. Minimum lot sizes, setback requirements, right-of-way regulations, roadway-width standards, fire truck access codes, maximum-density allowances, and so on could have only one outcome: things would be the same as they had always been.” (Ben-Joseph, 2005, preface).

This quote serves as an example of just how difficult it can be to make changes to suburban living environments as the bylaws and building regulations that keep our neighbourhoods safe and quiet also work to discourage socialization in public spaces.

Online Third Places

Our day-to-day lives are structured in a very different manner than in previous generations. Rather than living in urban centers, many of us now live in suburban areas that do not have public gathering places that allow third places to develop. Places that would previously become a third place (e.g. a public park) are subject to noise bylaws that discourage it being used as a meeting place.

However, Oldenburg may be shortsighted to write-off all electronic gadgetry, especially those that allow us to access online social media. Because our offline lives do not necessarily provide us with the time or opportunity to become a regular at a coffee shop with a vibrant social environment, many of us have sought out social interactions in online venues. In the Modules you have completed to date, you have been introduced to the ways that online social networking sites have provided opportunities to make connections with new friends, or re-connect with existing friends who may have moved far enough away that face-to-face interaction is difficult.

However, social networking sites are not the only venue for online social interaction. For some researchers, online video games, especially the persistent online worlds shared by thousands of players in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) have become a virtual third place.

In their study of virtual third places, Constance Steinkuler and Dmitri Williams, two researchers who have spent the last decade studying how players interact in online games, they describe how the virtual world of a Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) exhibit the qualities of a third place:

1. **Neutral Ground:** There is no obligation to play. Additionally, players use a pseudonym and therefore they are free to socialize with other players without feeling an obligation to discuss the specifics of their offline lives.
2. **Leveler:** A player's success in game is based solely on their skill, determination, and hard work. It is very rare for one's offline status to be evoked in the gamespace of a MMOG.
3. **Conversation is the main activity:** MMOGs are the site of constant conversation. Many of the tasks that a player is asked to complete in these games require collaboration with fellow players, and conversation is a byproduct of this cooperation.
4. **Accessibility & Accommodation:** Your social status or your job does not hold any weight here (e.g. a lawyer and a plumber are equals here). You also do not need to pay an expensive membership fee or have another person vouch for the quality of your character to get in the door to the space.
5. **The Regulars:** In a MMOG, players can form permanent social groupings called "guilds". These guilds function much the same way that a group of regulars at a coffee shop would function: a set group of people who will be around at the same time and are reliable collaborators to tackle in-game challenges with.
6. **A Low Profile:** Of all the characteristics of a third place, "a low profile" is the one that doesn't quite map. Here Steinkuler and Williams note that most MMOGs borrow heavily from fantasy genres and do not necessarily appear homely or lived in.
7. **The Mood is Playful:** Even when participating in particularly difficult challenges, Steinkuler and Williams observed players cracking jokes and having a good time.
8. **A Home Away From Home:** Despite a lack of obligation to interact with other players in a way that necessitates discussing their offline lives, Steinkuler and Williams found that MMOG players often do forge long-lasting friendships with other players.

MMOGs are a form of social media and despite what Oldenburg might argue, do indeed act as a virtual third place for their participants.

Context Collapse

While MMOGs are a type of social media that act as a virtual third place, the social networking sites that make up the bulk of this course content require special consideration.

The explosive popularity of social networking sites is in part because they offer an outlet for socialization and interaction that has become increasingly absent from our offline lives.

This is not a negative (recall that in *What is Social Media*, Standage argued that social networking sites are attractive because they address a deep-seeded need for humans to be social). However, the particular affordances of social networking sites - that is, the features of a site, its user interface, and what it allows you to do (or not do) – might be at odds with the social interaction provided by participating in a third place.

In *What is Social Media?* You were reminded that social networking sites are privately held websites that make the majority (if not all) of their income via advertising. In order to ensure that advertisers are reaching the best possible audiences for their products, social networking sites ask for a large amount of personal information. In *Theorizing Identity* you were also given the opportunity to read part of the Facebook terms of service that requires users to register under the name that you are known as in your day-to-day life. You also read about how despite there was the belief that users could make new identities, most Internet users actually created online profiles that mirrored their offline lives.

In the Terms of Service for most social networking sites you will be exploring through your participation in the course wiki, you may have noticed that you have likely agreed to only creating a single profile on that particular site. In addition to only having one profile, you likely will have registered under your real name (or the name that you are commonly referred to as in your day-to-day life).

Should you choose to make your profile discoverable by other users, having your profile attached to your real name makes you easily findable. This is a double-edged sword: you can be easily found, but this also means that you will be found by people from all different parts of your life. This means that you no longer have the option of compartmentalizing different parts of your social life. This disintegration of boundaries between parts of your life is known as “context collapse”.

Previously, when our social interaction happened exclusively in offline spaces, there would be physical boundaries between the different parts of our lives. Indeed, it would be very rare for you to live, work, and play all in the same location. You could put on different masks depending on your location and the audience you were interacting with. But if you have only one social network profile, it means that you have only one central hub to make connections across these different spaces.

The reading for this module, “Friend or faculty: Social networking sites, dual relationships, and context collapse in higher education” by Sugimoto et al. serves as a case study for context collapse in action. In the past, you may have run into your teachers out and about in your neighbourhood, perhaps while at the grocery store or in line at a coffee shop.

According to Sugimoto interactions between teachers and students in these situations tended to be brief – a nod or a very quick and superficial conversation that acknowledged that they knew each other. This has now changed in the age of ubiquitous social network site participation. By accepting friend or follow requests from their students, the previously rigid social boundaries have become porous.

Previously, a teacher would stop performing their “teacher identity” as soon as class was dismissed and the last student left their classroom. In the times they ran into a student outside of the classroom they could put their teacher mask on again briefly, but for the most part they could keep their work lives and personal lives (or second and third place) separated. This becomes a much more difficult task if they

choose to maintain a single social network profile and are open to making connections with people from all three of their social places.

Looking Forward

It is important to be aware of any policies or regulations your employer has about social media interaction between employees, or between employees and clients. This is in part to protect the professional identity of the company, but it also acts to protect the privacy of employees too.

Now that we have identified the collapsing boundaries between our different social spheres (home, work, and third places), we will turn our attention to audiences. In Part 2 of this Module, we will explore audiences, both real and imagined, and ask questions about who do we think is reading our social media posts versus who can actually read them.

Module Summary

In this module we have explored:

1. The historical ways social interaction has been divided into first (home), second (work/school), and third places (leisure spaces).
2. The decline of specifically delineated third spaces, which researchers have attributed to the increased number of people who live in suburban environments, as well as easy access to inexpensive entertainment such as television or DVDs.
3. The structure of social networking sites and how they encourage users to have a single profile that accurately summarizes your “real” or offline life.
4. How third places can exist in online spaces, using Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) as an example.
5. How the structure of social networking sites has led to the inability to compartmentalize elements of our social lives, otherwise known as “context collapse”.

Knowledge Check

The following questions provide an opportunity for you to see what you remember and understand so far. Answer the questions to the best of your ability.

Question 1: Match the name of the social space with the description. Ray Oldenburg described three sites of social interaction.

Descriptions:

- Social interaction with the people you live with (family, roommates, etc.)
- Social interaction with your coworkers or classmates.
- A social space that is separated from your work and home.

Three sites:

- Second Place
- Third Place
- First Place

Question 2: Which of the following are not one of the eight characteristics of a third place?

- A. Low cost or free entry
- B. A group of regulars
- C. Assigned seating
- D. Neutral ground

Question 3: The Toronto Club is an exclusive club that requires a fee of \$100,000 when applying to become a member, and then a yearly membership fee of \$10,000. Based on these requirements to belong, would Oldenburg consider The Toronto Club a third place?

- A. Yes
- B. No

Question 4: Massively Multiplayer Online Games match all eight characteristics of a third place.

- A. True
- B. False

Question 5: Context collapse is a result of not being able to compartmentalize your social interactions.

- A. True
- B. False

Question 6: What qualities of a social networking site can contribute to context collapse?

- A. Terms of service that only allow you to have one profile on the site.
- B. Requirement that you sign up using your real name OR the name you are known as in your day-to-day life.
- C. Both A and B
- D. None of above

You have completed Who are you Tweeting to? Context Collapse.

Remember to:

- ✓ Check the timeline before you proceed to the next module to ensure you have completed any assignments as required.
- ✓ Check with your instructor if you have any questions.

Works Cited

Ben-Joseph, E. (2005). *The Code of the City: Standards and the Hidden Language of Place Making*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Oldenburg, R. (1997). *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. Marlowe & Co., New York.

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Sugimoto, C., Hank, C., Bowman, T., & Pomerantz, J. (2015). Friend or faculty: Social networking sites, dual relationships, and context collapse in higher education. *First Monday*, 20(3).

Steinkuehler, C. A., & Williams, D. (2006). Where everybody knows your (screen) name: Online games as "third places". *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(4), 885-909.