OVERSHARING: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

by

Anthony L. Hoffmann

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of
Library and Information Science

at
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ABSTRACT

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The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2009
Under the Supervision of Dr. Elizabeth Buchanan

In recent years, the term *overshare* has emerged to describe the act of divulging information that is considered excessive or inappropriate to a given context—an act increasingly associated with communication on popular Web 2.0 platforms and applications. This study employs a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore the ways in which the term has been used in *The Huffington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. Close examination of the ways in which various social actors and actions are discursively legitimated or delegitimated within the sampled texts reveal that oversharing is consistently conceptualized as a negative social practice. Further, analysis shows that the term *overshare* is unequivocally tied to a gendered discourse of the private categorically associated with women. Consequently, usage of the term *overshare* is ideologically charged. It is coded in a strict private/public dichotomy which scholars in communication, privacy, and law have demonstrated as problematic (Nissenbaum, 2004; Rössler, 2004; Solove, 2008). The increasingly popular usage of the

term in conjunction with the rise of widely adopted Web 2.0 applications and philosophies is similarly problematic, and—in light of this study—should serve as a point of critical reflection for researchers and policy makers.

Major Professor	Date

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To Dr. Johannes Britz: Thank you for your tremendous insight and wit during this process. Your perspective has been an invaluable part of my education.

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Chapter 1: The Problem

Statement of the Problem

The concept of "oversharing" is not new. Commonly understood as the divulgence of information excessive or inappropriate to a given context, many of us can recall from personal experience a moment of discomfort as a result of an overshare—disclosure of the graphic details of an awkward medical condition during a formal dinner, for example. But, while such contextual violations are not new, the term *overshare* itself is new, and has risen to prominence in the online realm of social media and Web 2.0.

The challenges presented by social media and Web 2.0 are increasingly well documented (Allen, 2008; Solove, 2008; Zimmer, 2008b). These technologies "[represent] a blurring of the boundaries between Web users and producers, consumption and participation, authority and amateurism, play and work, data and the network, reality and virtuality" (Zimmer, 2008a, p. 1). These blurred boundaries also challenge the notion of context itself. The Web today is littered with examples of such contextual conflicts: jobs lost over posted photos assumed to be private, relationships dissolved over blog postings, or public ridicule and shame over an innocent YouTube video gone viral. The harm done in these cases is often attributed to an Internet user's willingness to overshare. In turn, the term has become practically synonymous with many of social media's most popular applications, like Twitter's microblogging service or Facebook's status updates—both of which allow users to constantly broadcast the details of their lives to friends and family (graphic, mundane, or otherwise).

The increasing ubiquity of "oversharing" led *Webster's New World Dictionary* to make the term their 2008 "Word of the Year" (Webster's New World, 2008). Defining it as “the name given to *TMI (too much information)* [emphasis original], whether willingly offered or inadvertently revealed,” Webster's New World explicitly states that

> *overshare* [emphasis original] is a new word for an old habit made astonishingly easy by modern technology. It is yet another product of digital advances that allow people to record and transmit their lives—in words, videos, and graphics—to anyone with Internet access, friend or foe. (Webster's New World, 2008, ¶ 1)

As this passage indicates, the rise of the term reflects the affordances of Web 2.0 and is indicative of its challenges. However, the term is also an attempt to resolve some of these challenges: to label an expression an *overshare* (or a person an *oversharer*) is an effort to establish a context—to refocus the blurred lines—and posit the offending expression (or person) as inappropriate. In other words, it is an effort to normalize information sharing practices online by assigning a label to modes of expression deemed outside the norm. Like all normative expectations, however, those emerging around the practice of online information sharing reflect the values of the larger cultural framework from which they develop.

Exploring the ways in which the term *overshare* is being used to cultivate normative expectations of information sharing online will help us to better understand the values embedded in the developing culture of the Internet. To do so, I have employed a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the term as it has appeared in various mainstream print media outlets. I have chosen this approach for two reasons: 1) as a method for understanding “how language as a cultural tool mediates relationships of power and privilege in social interactions," (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005, p. 367) CDA is ideal for closely examining the ways in which usage of the term is both informing and informed by the culture from which it emerges and 2) the analysis of language in mass media is "an important element within the research on contemporary processes of social and cultural change" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 2).

A heightened understanding of normative practices developing online is crucial to future thinking and policy development. As information scholars and policy makers, we must be tuned into the values emerging out of popular online culture—such as in social media and Web 2.0 spaces—in order to help shape those values in ways that encourage a fair and open Internet welcome to all people. It is my contention that, in this respect, the term *overshare* is ideologically charged. Using the term—as with all language use—is a political or ideological act; it is an effort to organize online expression between those that are considered appropriate and those that are considered not appropriate. By using the term *overshare*, the mainstream media are directly engaging in this politicized process. A close examination of the term will help us determine which types of expression (or expressers) are being favored by mass media outlets and which are being marginalized.

Definition of Terms

While I recognize that much of the terminology utilized here is heavily debated (Allen, 2008; Widdowson in Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000), I have outlined their working definitions for the context of this thesis below.

Overshare: "Overshare is the name given to TMI (too much information), whether willingly offered or inadvertently revealed. It is the word for both the tedious minutiae on personal websites and blogs and the accidental slips of the tongue in public (or even private) situations" (Webster's New World, 2008). More formally, oversharing can be understood as the divulgence of information excessive or inappropriate to a given context. Also, when referring to overshare as a term, I will continue to use italics. However, when using *overshare* (and its various iterations: *oversharing, ovesharer, overshare-y*) actively in a sentence, I will omit the quotation marks. (For example, I may refer to an instance of the term *overshare* or I may refer to an instance of text as an overshare.)

Web 2.0: In the scope of this thesis, Web 2.0 will indicate those sets of Web sites and services with a style of design and functionality that generally encourage high levels of interactivity and user-generated content (Allen, 2008). Additionally, Web 2.0 users will typically be considered highly engaged and actively involved in creating, maintaining, and expanding content within various applications. This type of media user, who is producing (rather than merely taking in) media, might more aptly be called a "produser" (Allen, 2008, p. 3).

Mainstream media: I use the term "mainstream" to roughly denote the most widely circulated print media as well as the most heavily trafficked online media. It is not meant to carry a value-based connotation. Further, I am concerned primarily with popular text-based media and my study does not include any analysis of accompanying or supplemental multimedia, such as pictures, videos, or audio.

Context: My thinking about context has been largely shaped by Edward Hall and Michael Walzer. In the chapter "Context and Meaning" from his book *Beyond Culture*, Hall (1976) describes culture roughly as a set of rules that determines what details an individual—consciously or unconsciously—ought to perceive and to ignore in a given situation. Similarly, Walzer (1983), in his book *Spheres of Justice*, outlines his concept of separate social spheres, each of which is governed by a distinct set of social goods. Considering these two definitions in relation to one another, I use the term *context* to refer to a social sphere in which individuals are encouraged to pay attention to certain details (and ignore others) as dictated by that sphere's set of social goods. I will visit the concept of context in more detail during the literature review.

Discourse: Within the realm of Critical Discourse Analysis, discourse is understood as "language use conceived as social practice" (Fairclough in Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000, p. 148). It encompasses both social interactions (as commonly understood in language studies) and social constructions of reality (as outlined by post-structural social theory) (Fairclough, 1995, p. 18). Discourse is not isolated; language use cannot be abstracted from the ways in which "they draw on, and transform, social practices" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 5). As such, discourse should be viewed dialectically, concerned with both representations and interactions (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 4). It is both affecting and affected, informing and informed.

Social practice: "Social practices are socially regulated ways of doing things" (van

Leeuwen, 2008, p. 6). Regulation, in this definition, does not mean what we have traditionally come to understand it to mean. Rather, social practice may be "regulated" in a variety of ways, "for instance, through strict prescription, or through traditions, or through the influence of experts and charismatic role models, or through the constraints of technological resources used, and so on" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 7). In the context of this thesis, I am concerned with the social practice of personal information sharing in an online setting.

Scope

My analysis will concentrate on usage of the term *overshare* in mainstream print media—both offline and online—in the United States. My data set will include all available instances of the term (*overshare, oversharing, oversharer, overshare-y, over-share,* etc...) in the sampled publications, whether they immediately refer to the Internet and online life or not. *Overshare* can—and has—been used in offline contexts, but (as evidenced by the aforementioned passage from *Webster's New World*) it is the term's use in relationship to social media and Web 2.0 that has brought it to the forefront. Therefore, exploring how the term is currently being used in offline *and* online contexts will offer us a broader perspective of the term as it has emerged from these new technologies.

While there are extensive conversations regarding oversharing occurring on other Internet platforms besides newspaper websites and blogs (for example, within social networking spaces or on message boards), I am particularly interested with the ways in which the most widely circulated media are conceptualizing the term, as the overall influence and reach of mass media is undeniable in our heavily mediated society

(Fairclough, 1995).

Significance

By closely examining usage of the term *overshare*, I hope to provide new and valuable insight into the emerging normative expectations surrounding personal information sharing on the Internet and, more specifically, within the realm of social media and Web 2.0. It is also my hope that analyzing mainstream media texts will deliver a better understanding as to what types of information sharing practices are being legitimated (or, inversely, delegitimated) on a broadly distributed scale. In short: I hope to expose what (or whose) information, normatively speaking, is appropriate and what (or whose) is TMI—“too much information.”

As an increasingly dominant percentage of our population incorporates (to some extent) communicating personally with others online, a heightened understanding of the normative expectations governing such exchanges will benefit scholars in various areas of Internet research. I believe that an effective analysis of the term *overshare* will contribute to the larger discussions of informational privacy, freedom of expression, and informational transparency online. All three of these areas recognize the importance of boundaries in their research—whether social, political, or otherwise. Further, it will provide a unique platform from which to study the concept of context and how it is mediated in online communication. A better understanding of the term *overshare* will help bring into focus the blurred lines between that which is perceived as simply “information” and that which is perceived as “too much information.”

In the next chapter, I will further explore the term *overshare* as it is popularly conceived. I will then explore some of the literature surrounding the concepts of Web 2.0 and context in order to better situate oversharing in broader sociocultural discourse surrounding personal information sharing online.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Currently, there is little relevant scholarly work directly addressing the issue of oversharing as such. This is most likely the result of two factors. First, popular usage of the term is quite new—it has only risen to prominence since early 2008. Second, it is easily overlooked given its tangential relation to other more widely examined topics in areas such as communication, online culture, and informational privacy. Indeed, as the concept behind oversharing (as discussed in the first chapter) is rather universal, we may ultimately find traces of the concept of oversharing in a wide variety of literature. For example, Luciano Floridi (2005), in his essay *The Ontological Interpretation of Informational Privacy*, touches on the idea while discussing what he calls "passive privacy breach[es]" (p. 194). Consider the following:

> [There is an] issue of informational contamination undermining passive informational privacy; this is the unwilling acquisition of information or data...imposed on someone by some external source. Brainwashing may not occur often, but junkmail, or the case of a person chatting loudly on a mobile near us, are unfortunately very common experiences of passive privacy breach.... (Floridi, 2005, p. 194)

What Floridi essentially (albeit inadvertently) describes here is an overshare—some person (or group of persons) having unwillingly acquired contextually excessive information offered by an offending sharer (or group of sharers).

It is not my intention, however, to tease out the oblique references to oversharing in various scholarly texts. Rather, I will use this section to address some of the popular discussion of oversharing that has taken place online since early 2008. After doing so, I will discuss two sets of scholarly literature—the first being recent and relatively focused literature regarding Web 2.0, and the second being centered around the more loosely defined concept of context. It is within this framework—Web 2.0 and its challenges to context—that we can most effectively situate a critical analysis of the term *overshare*.

Oversharing

On May 25th, 2008, *The New York Times* posted an essay written by Emily Gould, a popular blogger and online journalist. Originally published in their Sunday-released *New York Times Magazine*, the essay—titled "Exposed"—was a meditation on blogging, online existence, and life in general. "One of the strangest and most enthralling aspects of personal blogs," she wrote, "is just how intensely personal they can be. I'm talking 'specific details about someone's S.T.D.'s' personal, 'my infertility treatments' personal" (Gould, 2008, ¶ 9). Unsurprisingly, she refers to the imparting of this level of detail as "oversharing," and Gould's essay can be credited with helping to bolster the term's popularity. She continues, "There are nongynecological overshares, too: 'My dog has cancer' overshares, 'my abusive relationship' overshares" (Gould, 2008, ¶ 9). Certainly, intimate details about one's sex life can constitute oversharing. Even exhausting the banal details of one's daily routine can be seen as a form of oversharing.

More interesting than the essay alone, however, was the fact that—within hours—

the online article had garnered hundreds upon hundreds of comments, many of which were surprisingly vicious:

> Dear Emily,
>
> What a sorry little cyberworld you chose to live in. Do you have a real life as well? Or [sic] is this all you have? You are just a stupid little girl. Go watch the sun set and grow up! - *Richard Streiff, California* (as cited in Gould, 2008, comment 12)
>
> At first, I thought I was reading the sophomore page of the student newspaper at Harding High in Yokelville [sic], Ohio. Then I realized that it was the New York Times. Just awful. - *Ego Nemo, Eastern U.S.* (as cited in Gould, 2008, comment 1)
>
> stop polluting ,find another job [sic] - *phil, 11935* (as cited in Gould, 2008, comment 10)

By the next day, the article had sparked well over 1,000 comments, many of which accused Emily Gould of exactly that which she had mused about: oversharing. The obvious question is, why? Why would a seemingly innocuous look at online life and culture draw such harsh commentary from other online readers? In a discussion about Emily Gould's personal blog on the media and pop culture website *Gawker*, a commenter by the alias of "Cassandra" notes the following:

> Like yea [sic], I got kind of annoyed when her posts seemed to just be lazy and navel-gazing and thoroughly

> checked out. But you know, then we have to look at why our reaction is so strong and out of proportion to her crimes…. Beyond funny comments—which there are plenty of here—there is a rush to polarization on commenting boards that often has little relation in scale or impact with the actual subject at hand. (as cited in Sheila, 2008)

Indeed, it is hard to imagine a patron of an art museum, upon encountering a painting he or she finds displeasing, breaking into an acidic and accusatory public tirade. Such a patron will most likely follow the maxim presented by popular blogger Jason Kottke (2008) (adopted from an episode of *The Simpsons*): "Just. Don't. Look." (¶ 2) When it comes to commentary that one finds distasteful or inappropriate, *just don't look!*

This is not what happened in the case of "Exposed." Not only did people insist on looking and reading, but thousands found it necessary to weigh in on the article. Clearly, something about Gould's oversharing resonated with online readers. I propose that the core of this incident revolves around the affordances of Web 2.0 and the challenges they present to the notion of context.

Web 2.0: New User, New Philosophy

It is not my intention to give an exhaustive account of the various available definitions, applications, and criticisms of Web 2.0. Rather, I wish to use this section to point out a few key iterations of the concept applicable to oversharing. Primarily, I am interested in Web 2.0 from two perspectives: Web 2.0 as user and Web 2.0 as philosophy.

By focusing on these two aspects—and not on Web 2.0 as technology—I hope to discourage an overtly deterministic reading of this study.

"Web 2.0 as User"

Matthew Allen (2008) has written that "Web 2.0 attempts to describe services and activities that create a new kind of media consumer" (p. 3). This new kind of consumer is generally considered to be highly engaged (Allen, 2008), involved in the creative production of content online (Jarrett, 2008), and (to varying degrees) social (Albrechtslund, 2008)—that is to say, not alone. "...Web 2.0 implies a significant acceleration in the number of active participants and the quality and attractiveness of their contributions..." (Allen, 2008, p. 3). Indeed, the very idea of Web 2.0 is built upon the increasingly massive amounts of information being produced by an increasingly large number of actively engaged users (Zimmer, 2008b; Jarrett, 2008; O'Reilly, 2005). As Kylie Jarrett (2008) points out, "it would be difficult to imagine participatory media sites"—such as those that constitute Web 2.0 applications and services—"without [the] creative input of users" (p. 5).

Further, Web 2.0 represents a certain sort of freedom of use, or of user expression, that is not wholly determined by Web 2.0 technology itself.

> Although affordances of particular sites may encourage certain kinds of interaction..., these are rarely fully determining. The individual texture, content, and style of any individual's contribution to their blog, wiki, Flickr image or podcast, although enabled by the interactive

> functions of the technology, are not entirely structured by those affordances. This leaves space for creative expression. (Jarrett, 2008, p. 5)

These creative expressions are, however, increasingly structured by emerging community norms in various spaces online (Jarrett, 2008), given the highly social and participatory nature of many Web 2.0 applications and services (such as social networking sites). The development and enforcement of community standards further speaks to the changing role of users in Web 2.0 from one that is passive to one that is active (Albrechtslund, 2008).

"Web 2.0 as Philosophy"

Along with a new sort of Web user, Web 2.0 also suggests a new philosophy for Web development—on that is both political and social in nature. "It promises to empower creativity, to democratize media production, and to celebrate the individual while also relishing the power of collaboration and social networks" (Zimmer, 2008a, p. 1). Fulfilling such a promise is, no doubt, an immense and complicated task. Consequently, many different, and often contradictory conceptualizations of Web 2.0 have emerged. However, Allen (2008) asserts that

> [it] is not the case...that there are competing definitions for the term: rather, Web 2.0 is a shorthand term for many different things, some in conflict, some overlapping but marked especially by the fact that they are ontologically non-compatible. In short, Web 2.0 is about ideas,

> behaviours, technologies, and ideas all at the same time. (p. 2)

What seems to hold these disparate definitions together, then, is an underlying philosophy that makes certain claims as to what Web 2.0 should both encourage and enable. Based on the literature, I have divided these claims into two parts.

The first part is social, and it prioritizes what Tim O'Reilly (2005) has called "the architecture of participation." Websites and services, according to O'Reilly (2005), should promote participation over publication and syndication over stickiness. I would also claim that the same principles are demanded of Web 2.0's users, and not simply its technologies. Jarrett (2008) has noted "[the] social networking facilities of Web 2.0 are based on the premise that there is no exhaustive use of the technology" (p. 5). In turn, users themselves continually participate rather than simply publish, constantly creating and sharing new information online. "Accordingly, the role of sharing should not be underestimated, as the personal information people share—profiles, activities, beliefs, whereabouts, status, preferences, etc.—represent a level of communication that neither has to be told, nor has to be asked for" (Albrechtslund, 2008, p. 8).

The second claim—possibly necessary to realize the first—is political in nature, emphasizing a democratic ethos. It is, according to Allen (2008), "expressed in traditional democratic terms, emphasizing freedom of choice and the empowerment of individuals.... Web 2.0, it is claimed, positions users of the Internet, both large and small, as relatively equal and equally engaged participants" (p. 3). Jarrett (2008) has discussed what she calls the "strategic denial of authority" demonstrated by large commercial Web producers (p. 5). Whether for legal reasons (such as copyright infringement) or as part of a brand identity (Jarrett, 2008), large Web 2.0 services often attempt to conceal their authority in an effort to encourage the sort of lateral—rather than hierarchical—distribution of participation demanded by Web 2.0. “This strategic denial of authority resonates with the apparently free practices of users as they engage with these sites uploading content, selecting information to retrieve or sharing in community norms” (Jarrett, 2008, p. 5).

Not only does the second claim speak to the empowerment of individuals, but it also indicates a democratization of media consumption. Jarrett (2008) points out that

> [instead] of having content randomly pushed towards them at predetermined times and in predetermined formats, participatory media users have relative control over what and how they engage with a Web 2.0 site. This includes the time of activity both as producer and consumer. The rigid and imposed programming schedules of broadcast television and radio...have ceded to an extensively flexible temporal arrangement in the 24/7 Web. (p. 4)

This is demonstrative of what Allen (2008) means when he says that “within Web 2.0, the focus is on ‘democracy’ as a state of affairs *within the Internet itself* (emphasis original), rather than as a term suggesting ideals of equality in society as a whole...” (p. 3). As a result, the concept of time in relation to communication and media consumption as we understand it offline breaks down under the demands of Web 2.0.

Key aspects of Web 2.0 as both user and philosophy present unique challenges to the concept of context, particularly as it relates to the ways in which we share information. In the next section, I will introduce some ways of thinking about context and briefly discuss these challenges.

Context

My thinking about context has been shaped largely by two texts: Edward Hall's *Beyond Culture* and Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*. Relative to the latter, I have also been influenced by Helen Nissenbaum's theory of privacy as contextual integrity, particularly when it comes to thinking about context in information environments. The fact that all three of these sources come from different disciplines—anthropology, philosophy, and media, culture, and communication respectively—is indicative of the lack of a concentrated discipline in context itself; there is no "Contextual Studies," as it were. However, as context is so integral to our day-to-day existence, any discipline that purports to address human interaction in any form can hardly ignore the concept. Indeed, we can find definitions of context in a diversity of areas.[1]

What I have sought for this study, however, is not a definition of context bound to any specific discipline. Rather, I hope to present an operational definition of context *for context's sake*—a universal account applicable across all disciplines. I believe we find such an account in *Beyond Culture*. According to Hall (1976), context is—at the most basic level—the totality of what one perceives and what one ignores at any given time. "What man chooses to take in, either consciously or unconsciously, is what gives structure and meaning to his world" (Hall, 1976, p. 77). Context, then, is the framework for all human experience. This is what Stanley Fish (1986) means when he asserts that

[1] See Dewey, 1931 for examples in education or Fish, 1986 for examples in critical studies.

> while no institution is so universally in force and so perdurable that the meanings it enables will be normal for ever, some institutions or forms of life are so widely lived in that for a great many people the meanings they enable seem “naturally available” and it takes special effort to see that they are the products of circumstances. (p. 527)

In other words, even the most normalized aspects of human experience are contextually bound.

Where the notion of context becomes difficult is in describing the factors and rules that determine those things that we attend, and those that we ignore. As Hall (1976) readily confesses, the “rules governing what one perceives and is blind to in the course of living are not simple” (p. 76). Identifying and understanding these rules, however, is of utmost importance. If context governs all human experience, then I must insist—for the purposes of this study—that context governs all human communication. In turn, “context determines everything about the nature of the communication and is the foundation on which all subsequent behavior rests” (Hall, 1976, p. 80). With this in mind, it is clear that unpacking the concept of context is no easy task, and I do not wish to do so here. Rather, I would like to point out some key insights that will help us think about the relationship between context and Web 2.0.

Michael Walzer (1983) writes: “Human society is a distributive community. That’s not all it is but it is importantly that: we come together to share, divide, and exchange” (p. 3). More importantly, however, is the fact that “[we] also come together to make the things that are shared, divided, and exchanged...” (Walzer, 1983, p. 3). This is perhaps the most obvious, yet most effective insight in Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*. People do not simply distribute goods to other people: they first conceive and create such goods.

> Goods don't just appear in the hands of distributive agents who do with them as they like or give them out in accordance with some general principle. Rather, goods with their meanings—because of their meaning—are the crucial medium of social relations; they come into people's minds before they come into their hands; distributions are patterned in accordance with shared conceptions of what the goods are and what they are for. (Walzer, 1983, p. 7)

Walzer goes on to illustrate the myriad ways in which these distributions may play out in a variety of "spheres" of contemporary human experience (such as the marketplace, professional office, education, kinship and love, and so on). His spheres quickly begin to resemble what we might think of as contexts, within which it is "the meaning of goods that determines their movement" (Walzer, 1983, p. 8). In other words, the meaning of goods dictates what we attend and what we ignore in a given situation. Further, it is this combination of attention and ignorance that not only determines, but also enables the movement of goods. We might say, then, that context is determined—at least in part—by the social meaning of available goods.

It is the relationship between context and meaning that is of particular importance when thinking about context and Web 2.0. First, consider the following statement by Hall (1976):

> In less complex and fast-moving times, the problem of mutual understanding was not as difficult, because most transactions were conducted with people well known to the speaker or writer, people with similar backgrounds. It is important for conversationalists in any situation...to get to know each other well enough so that they realize what each person is and is not taking into account. This is crucial. (p. 78)

Overlooking the rather folksy nature of Hall's observation, it is easy to see the ways in which the Web and other information technologies enable people to communicate without ever getting "to know each other" on the level Hall is discussing. Hall (1976) later refers to this level of communication as "high-context" communication, which he differentiates from "low-context" communication (p. 79).

> A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. (Hall, 1976, p. 79)

This distinction is important, as it helps us differentiate between meaning and the message. Communication on the Web is text-based (Hall's "explicit code") and therefore naturally low-context. However, given the highly social nature of Web 2.0 users and philosophy (as pointed out earlier), it would be wrong to assume that all communication in Web 2.0 spaces (such as social networking sites) is "low-contexted." Indeed, much of the physical context or personally internalized information that is necessary to understand high-context communication is lost once it is transferred online. Web 2.0 further compounds this problem when one considers the "significant acceleration in the number of active participants" (Allen, 2008, p. 3) it represents. As a result, a great deal of meaning—which I identified, through Walzer, as being integral to determining context—is lost in some online communication. However, just because a context is not readily apparent does not imply that there was no context to begin with.

> [There] *is* a contextual setting and the sign of its presence is precisely the absence of any reference to it. That is, it is impossible even to think of a sentence independently of a context, and when we are asked to consider a sentence for which no context has been specified, we will automatically hear it in the context in which it has been most often encountered. (Fish, 1986, p. 527)

The context within which I may have "most often encountered" a specific sentence will be determined by the meaning I ascribe to the goods relevant to the sentence. However, these meanings may conflict with those ascribed to (though not explicitly coded in) the same goods by the sentence's original author. This, I contend, is where the issue of oversharing resides—in what is lost when high-context communication is conducted over a low-context medium.

In the next section, I will introduce the methodology I have used to begin exploring the complex relationships between oversharing, Web 2.0 and context. I will outline my approach to data collection and analysis and present a brief summary of Critical Discourse Analysis as it applies to this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Data Collection

In this study, I will utilize various tools provided by Critical Discourse Analysis to closely examine a small number of media texts containing the term *overshare* (or any of its variations). For my sample, I will utilize relevant articles from three representative sources: *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Huffington Post*. My original intent was to pull from a much wider collection of both print and online-only sources; however, the resultant data set was too large to support an effective qualitative analysis within the context of this thesis. The three sources chosen, however, provide a sufficient place from which to launch a critical discussion. *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* represent massively distributed print media on either side of the ideological spectrum—with the *Times* leaning generally liberal and the *Journal* leaning generally conservative. At the same time, *The Huffington Post* represents perhaps the most visible and authoritative online-only media publication, as evidenced by recently being the first Internet-based news group to be called on during an official White House press conference (Kurtz, 2009).

I have utilized primarily two methods of searching in order to develop my sample. First, I used the built-in search engines available on each resource's website. As all three sites allow user comments, I immediately filtered out instances where *overshare* (or any of its variations) occurred in a comments thread rather than in the original content. Further, as *The Huffington Post* aggregates content from other websites in addition to producing original posts, I eliminated any instance of *overshare* that did not originate at the website. I also filtered out articles from *The New York Times* that appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* and not in the newspaper. Second, I used Google's site search command (for example, "site:nytimes.com") to again search each site for instances of *overshare* (and variations). This action served to both corroborate the results from the original search and isolate any additional articles that may have been overlooked during the first round of data collection. During this second round of searching Google produced additional hits for both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* (*The Huffington Post*'s internal search engine is powered by Google, and the results were similar on each search). Last, I returned to the original websites, confirming that the newly retrieved articles were indeed available on each source's website. (They were, and—to the best of my knowledge—still are.) While this may raise questions of authority and consistency regarding the utilization of Internet search engines for data collection, I do not believe such questions compromise the goal of this study. The resultant data set presents an ample starting point from which to engage a critical qualitative analysis and discussion.

Description of Method and Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a methodology "focuses on how language as a cultural tool mediates relationships of power and privilege in social interactions, institutions, and bodies of knowledge" (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005, p. 367). In general, it is a less uniform, more heterogeneous method of discourse analysis, but nonetheless should be distinguished from lowercase critical discourse analysis, as CDA "refers to the brand of analysis that has been informed by Fairclough, Hodge, Kress, Wodak, van Dijk, van Leeuwen, and followers" (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005, p. 367). Indeed, this study draws primarily from Theo van Leeuwen's *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis* (2008) and, to a lesser extent, Norman Fairclough's *Media Discourse* (1995). Further, CDA is concerned with social problems and, as a result, is politically involved and emancipatory in its aims (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000). While it is interested in the relationship between language and power, it is not necessarily interested in language in and of itself.

CDA—especially as outlined by Fairclough (1995)—has been heavily influenced by both critical linguistics and van Dijk's "social-cognitive" model. Critical linguistics (or social semiotics) utilizes systemicist views "of the text as multifunctional, always simultaneously representing the world (ideational function) and enacting social relations and identities (interpersonal function); seeing texts as built out of choices from within available systems of options in vocabulary, grammar, and so forth" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 25). Van Dijk's "social-cognitive" model focuses on discourse practice "as providing a way of linking textual analysis to sociocultural analysis" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 28-29). The link between the textual level and sociocultural level is dialectic, but not direct. Rather, it is mediated at the level of discursive practice—the level where humans engage either the cultural or the textual and, in turn, influence the other. Figure 1 illustrates this concept:

Figure 1: Dialectic relationship of the sociocultural and textual in CDA

Additionally, it is van Dijk's model that allows CDA to distinguish between the concepts of "macrostructure" (central to examining thematic structure) and "microstructure" (central to examining schematic structure) within texts. It is the combination of these two structures that leads to the generation of texts, and "the interpretation of texts involves identifying the wholistic structures which underlie them" (Fairclough, 1995). It should be noted that this study will emphasize thematic (overall *content* of a text) over schematic (overall *form* of a text) structure (Fairclough, 1995, p. 29), as the ways in which newspaper articles and blog posts are technically constructed is not of primary interest here.

Within the thematic structure of each text, I will be concerned primarily with the representations of social actors and social actions, as defined in Theo van Leeuwen (2008). "A social practice first of all needs a set of participants in certain roles... [while] the core of any social practice is a set of actions performed in a sequence, which may be fixed to a greater or lesser degree and which may or may not allow for choice..." (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 8). When considering the emerging social practice of personal information sharing online, these two categories are the most basic and the most essential: the social actors sharing information online and the social action of sharing in and of itself. My analysis of social actors and social actions represented in relation to a text's use of the term *overshare* will revolve around "the discursive construction of legitimation," that is, the ways in which certain actors or actions are legitimized (or, inversely, delegitimized) within a given text, as the production of texts

> involves not just the transformation of social practices into discourses about social practices, but also the addition of contextually specific legitimations of these social practices, answers to the spoken or unspoken questions 'Why should we do this?' or 'Why should we do this in this way?' (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 105)

van Leeuwen (2008) isolates four major categories of legitimation useful for Critical Discourse Analysis:

1. *Authorization*, that is, legitimations by reference to the authority of tradition, custom, law, and/or persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested.
2. *Moral Evaluation*, that is, legitimation by (often very oblique) reference to value systems.
3. *Rationalization*, that is, legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action and to the knowledges that society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity.
4. *Mythopoesis*, that is, legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and

punish nonlegitimate actions. (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 106)

It is through the lens of these four categories that I will examine the social actors and social actions represented within the sampled texts.

Last, though my analysis is concerned with media texts, it is not concerned with the media *per se*, that is, it is not intended to directly engage or criticize the media and media practices. Rather, I have chosen to utilize media texts as a starting point for discussion because of their wide circulation and high visibility, as well as for their utility as benchmarks of social change (Fairclough, 1995). It is my hope that future research on the term *overshare* (and the practice of oversharing) will engage other sources—such as personal blogs and social networking spaces—so that a critical comparison can be made with the media texts examined here.

Research Questions

1. What social actors or actions are represented in relation to each publication use of the term *overshare*?
2. What sorts of social actors are being legitimated (or, inversely, delegitimated) within the texts?
3. What sorts of social actions are being legitimated (or, inversely, delegitimated) within the texts?
4. What do the discursive constructions of legitimation (or, inversely, delegitimation) reveal about emerging normative boundaries for information sharing online?

Researcher Reflexivity

This study, as with qualitative research more generally, will no doubt be an exercise in researcher reflexivity. While CDA may appear in theory to be a straightforward method for examining social problems through language use, it is, in practice, a complicated and (like discourse itself) dialectic process—the data simultaneously informs the research and is informed *by* the subjective position of the qualitative researcher. This reflexive process of interpretation and reflection is both an integral part of qualitative inquiry and one of its perpetual challenges (Flick, 2009, p. 16). Annette Markham (2006) writes,

> [the] challenge is stopping at critical moments or junctures in the project to reflect on what one is actually doing so as to find a good fit between one's activities and one's theoretical premises, balance learned procedure and new contexts, and alter methods of interpretation to better suit the contingencies of the situation. (p. 46)

Validity

In traditional research methodologies, validity and reliability describes the degree to which accurate assumptions and conclusions can be made. Validity in Critical Discourse Analysis is determined by its intelligibility, open-endedness, and explanatory nature. "[The] validity of CDA results is not absolute and immutable but always open to new contexts and information which might cause the results to change" (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000, p. 164). Further, CDA is preconditioned by the usability of its findings; it is concerned with social problems, and its results must be of practical relevance (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000, p. 164).

Limitations

Critical Discourse Analysis has been criticized by conversation and text analysis purists as not being a true analysis but, rather, an ideological interpretation (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000, p. 163). Henry Widdowson, in a discussion between himself and Fairclough, "believes that CDA is, in a dual sense, a biased interpretation: in the first place it is prejudiced on the basis of some ideological commitment, and then it selects for analysis such texts as will support the preferred interpretation" (Widdowson in Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000, p. 163-164). Fairclough has responded to this criticism by pointing out the open-ended nature of results encouraged by CDA (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000, p. 164). Indeed, the research questions I have outlined for this study are open-ended. I seek to use tools provided by Theo van Leeuwen (2008) for CDA in order to begin an exploration of the discourse surrounding oversharing and, hopefully, reveal what that discourse might have to say about the larger socio-cultural practice of information sharing online. The advantage of CDA as opposed to other methods of analysis is that these positions and commitments are made explicit from the start, as pointed out by Fairclough (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000, p. 164).

I also recognize the impact that media convergence may have on Critical Discourse Analysis. For instance, *The Huffington Post* aggregates content from other sites by taking text and images and re-presenting them alongside other *Post* articles and in the visual style of the *Post*'s website. On the level of discursive consumption (as represented in Figure 1), this may have an influence on the way an average reader approaches and interprets *The Huffington Post*. Also, I am using online versions of newspaper articles from *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* that appeared offline, in print. The conversion from paper document to Web document—aesthetically and contextually—certainly has an impact on the generation, consumption, and dissemination of a text. As a result, future research on the relationship between discourse and media convergence may influence later readings of this study. However, I do not wish to engage the issue here. Rather, I have chosen to focus on a close textual analysis as outlined by Critical Discourse Analysis and Theo van Leeuwen (2008).

Conclusion

The preceding chapters present the new phenomenon of the term *overshare* and the ways in which it relates to a larger discussion of Web 2.0 and context. In this chapter I have outlined the method by which I intend to further explore the issue in the context of this study. By closely examining the popular conception of oversharing though mainstream media texts, I hope to provide unique insight into the emerging values and normative expectations surrounding the issue of personal information sharing online.

Chapter 4: Overview

Introduction

In the following chapters, I will examine the legitimation (or delegitimation) of social actors and actions by first addressing the publications individually, and subsequently presenting a general discussion of the findings. In the current chapter, however, I will present the data broadly, providing an overview that will benefit critical discussion later in the study.

Articles, Writers, and Date Ranges

The online searching method outlined in the previous chapter wielded a much larger number of articles than are ultimately contained in the dataset. This is the result of three factors. First, every attempted search returned some number of repetitive results (two or more results referencing the same article/webpage). Second, the searches also included results for user profile pages (all three publications allow user accounts) and articles where the term *overshare* (or its variations) appeared in a comments thread, and not in the article itself. While discussions of *overshare* occurring in such Web spaces as commenting threads are important, they are not the focus of this study. Third, I decided to use only those articles from both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* that appeared in print, as opposed to content published exclusively online. This excluded a number of results from both publications' wide selection of blogs and online editorials. In doing so, I was able to keep the dataset at a size conducive to an effective Critical Discourse Analysis while also providing an interesting counterpoint to *The Huffington*

Post, which is published exclusively online.[2]

The resultant data set contains a total of 30 articles using some form of the term *overshare*. The breakdown by publication is demonstrated in Table 1:

Publication	# of Articles
Huffington Post	11
New York Times	13
Wall Street Journal	5
Total	29

Table 1: Total number of articles by publication

The most striking figure here is the noticeably small number of articles found in the *The Wall Street Journal* compared to *The Huffington Post* and *The New York Times*. While I originally attributed the disparity to the *Journal*'s relatively right-leaning nature (compared to the *Times* and the *Post*, both of which lean relatively towards the political left), later qualitative analysis did not explicitly support this conclusion. The disparity may, however, be due to the general thematic content of the *Journal*, which primarily covers business and financial news. While *The New York Times* used some variation of *overshare* in the context of business and finance (as did the *Journal*), it also used it in a wide variety of other contexts, whereas the *Journal* did not.[3]

Across the 29 articles there are at least 17 different writers, distributed as follows:

- *The Huffington Post*: Three different writers. One writer used some variation of

2 I recognize that there is a relationship between the print and online-only content of *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* that may have implications for this study. However, this relationship is not of primary concern here. If there is a meaningful distinction between instances of *overshare* in the print versus the online-only content at either publication, then it is my hope that this study will serve as an effective point of comparison.

3 I will return to the matter of contexts in the following section.

overshare in at least three different articles, while an additional six articles are not attributed to any author.

- *The New York Times*: Nine different writers. Three writers each used the term in two separate articles, with one additional article being attributed to "The Editors."
- *The Wall Street Journal*: Five different writers.

Within the set of 17 writers, I compared the total number of female to male writers in the event that one gender proved to use the term more often than the other. Table 2 explains the breakdown of writers in each publication by gender.

	Huffington Post	*New York Times*	*Wall Street Journal*	Total
Female	2	7	3	11
Male	3	6	2	11
Unknown	6	1	0	7

Table 2: Total number of writers by publication, broken down by gender

As the chart demonstrates, usage of the term *overshare* cannot be drawn along strict gender lines within any single publication or across the dataset as a whole.

Perhaps the most interesting discovery comes from a broad look at the range of years represented in the dataset, as shown in Table 3.

	*Huffington Post**	*New York Times*	*Wall Street Journal*	Totals
1998		1		1
1999				0
2000		2		2
2001				0
2002				0
2003			1	1
2004				0
2005				0
2006			1	1
2007	1		1	2
2008	7	7		14
2009**	3	3	2	8

**The Huffington Post* was launched in 2005.
**Data contains articles from January, 2009 – May, 2009 only.

Table 3: Total number of articles by publication, broken down by year of publication

As indicated by the Webster's New World "Word of the Year" award, the term *overshare* clearly rose to prominence in 2008, with almost twice as many instances as all previous years combined. It is also clear that the term has retained its popularity into 2009, since the dataset contains only articles published between January and May of 2009 and some variation of *overshare* has already appeared over half as many times as in the previous year. I was most surprised to find, however, that the first instance of the term *overshare* appeared in *The New York Times* as early as 1998. Put in perspective, the term predates both the terms *blog* ("It's the links, stupid," 2006) and *Web 2.0* (O'Reilly, 2005) (coined in 1999 and 2004, respectively). In fact, there were at least five instances of the term in print prior to the rise of Web 2.0. These examples will provide unique insights into the relationship between the term *overshare* and Web 2.0 in subsequent chapters.

Additionally, these five instances occurred before *The Huffington Post* was launched in 2005. Rather than serving to distort the dataset in any way, these instances of the term in print will provide an interesting point of contrast to the later online-only only usage of the term by the *Post*.

Orders of Discourse

According to CDA, the structure of any given text is ultimately determined by a variety of choices—grammatically, structurally, and thematically. Norman Fairclough (1995) organizes these choices into two major categories: choice relations and chain relations. Choice relations refer primarily to the grammatical (linguistic) and structural (schematic) makeup of the text (Fairclough, 1995). Chain relations, on the other hand, refer to the intertextuality of a given text—its relationship to other texts, explicitly or implicitly, which are similarly constructed or engage similar subject matter (Fairclough, 1995, p. 76-78).

Analyzing intertextuality can be a difficult and complicated process, as most texts draw upon and transform a wide variety of other texts. However, it is possible to isolate certain common aspects relevant to this study. In this section, I am most interested in the chain relations of the different discourses drawn upon in the dataset. Discourse, in this sense, means something slightly different from the general definition used throughout the study. Rather, when speaking of a plurality of discourses—orders of discourse (Foucault, 1972)—I mean something closer to Fairclough's definition of "discourse as a particular way of constructing a particular (domain of) social practice" (1995, p. 76). While the totality of available discourses to draw upon may seem limitless, I have coded the most apparent orders of discourse present in the dataset—all of the texts draw upon one or more of these orders simultaneously (for example, a text may discuss an Internet-related trend in and of itself, or it may discuss the same trend in the context of the family, in which case it will draw from both discourse of the Internet and discourse of the family). Table 4 presents the available orders of discourse, organized by the total number of articles in each publication that have drawn upon a given order.

	Huffington Post	*New York Times*	*Wall Street Journal*	Total
Internet Culture	2	4	1	7
Celebrity	5	1		6
Entertainment	5	1		6
Family	2	2	1	5
Media	3	2		5
Business		1	3	4
Politics	4			4
Arts		1	1	2
Fiction		2		2
Gender	1	1		2
Personal Discovery		2		2
Diversity		1		1
Finance		1		1
Music		1		1
Real Estate		1		1
Relationships		1		1

Table 4: Available orders of discourse by publication

Consistent with current popular usage, the term *overshare* is most commonly connected to discourses of Internet culture, most frequently in relation to blogging and social networking. Most surprising, however, was the overall diversity of discourses drawn upon across the dataset. This is particularly true of *The New York Times*, which engaged at least 15 different orders of discourse in articles. However, eight of the 15 orders (entertainment, family, media, gender, personal discovery, relationships, diversity, and real estate) were engaged in print prior to 2008, when the first instance of the term in connection to Internet culture appeared. Further, *The Huffington Post* articles contained no instance of the term prior to 2008 and none of the 3 *Wall Street Journal* articles that appeared before 2008 drew from the discourse of Internet culture.

Conclusion

A broad look at the dataset seems to both support and negate statements I made in the first chapter. As I stated at the beginning and the data confirm, oversharing (as a concept) is not new. The data also demonstrate that, contrary to my original claims, the term *overshare* is not new either—it has been in use in the media for more than a decade. However, the data clearly indicate that usage of the term *in relation to* Internet culture—and in particular, Web 2.0—is a recent development.

In the next chapter, I will turn to the legitimation (and delegitimation) of social actors in relation to usage of the term *overshare*. Understanding the timeline of the dataset and the available orders of discourse will benefit discussion in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 5: Social Actors

Introduction

While oversharing itself is a type of social action, it implies one or more social actors. These social actors are real people, a "set of participants in certain roles" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 7). This observation may seem obvious, but an important distinction stems from it: technology does not overshare—*people* overshare. While a computer or mobile phone or electronic device may make available information that is inappropriate or excessive to a given context, it would be awkward to say that these technologies "overshare." For example, Google search could be described as both excessive and inappropriate, as a simple search may result in more than a million hits (excessive), many of which will be irrelevant (inappropriate) to the original query. Still, we do not accuse Google of oversharing. In this sense, oversharing is a uniquely human event; it is only possible in human-to-human communication.

It follows, then, that any instance of the term *overshare* in the sampled articles will be either explicitly or implicitly linked to some social actor or set of actors. In this chapter, I will begin to isolate these social actors and examine the ways in which they are legitimated or delegitimated by the text.

The Huffington Post

Of the three publications, *The Huffington Post* presented the least dynamic field of social actors. Every use of the term *overshare* occurred in reference to some form of media personality—celebrities, commentators and bloggers. Further, the variety of celebrities and commentators covered was limited: three of the eleven articles cited the women of popular daytime talk show *The View* (both collectively and individually) and another two articles cited musician/celebrity Pete Wentz, member of the popular rock band Fall Out Boy. The remaining articles cover political commentators (3), bloggers (2), and other daytime talk show personalities (1).

In many instances, the term *overshare* occurs as an objectivization, that is, an action that is "realized by nominalizations or process nouns which either function as subject or object of the clause...or form part of a prepositional phrase" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 63). Objectivization serves a variety of purposes, one of which is to classify or label actions. Typically, this occurs in order to premodify another part of a given phrase by abstracting and declaring some quality or aspect from it (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 65). This process is best explained by illustration. The following example comes from one of the two articles where Pete Wentz serves as the focal point:

> New dad Pete Wentz continues his oversharing about wife Ashley Simpson by announcing Monday he has sampled her breastmilk. ("Pete Wentz...," 2008, ¶ 1)

Here, *oversharing* occurs as an objectivated nominal that premodifies the subsequent prepositional phrases, establishing a semantic relationship between *oversharing* and both *wife Ashley Simpson* and *announcing*. The first objectivization abstracts an aspect of Wentz's announcement (e.g. that it is an overshare) in order to label it. In turn, use of the term *oversharing* delegitimizes the announcement by the process of moral evaluation, as oversharing in this case carries the negative connotation of impropriety (as evidenced by the use of *oversharing* as opposed to simply *sharing*). Additionally, use of the verb *continues* implies that this sort of inappropriate behavior is a consistent or habitual aspect of Wentz, delegitimating not only the action, but the social actor as well.

Moral evaluation was by far the most common legitimating/delegitimating function of *overshare* in *The Huffington Post*, frequently realized by comparison or analogy. Consider the following two quotes:

> Monday night Elisabeth Hasselbeck told Jay Leno about her January White House visit, including an overshare of all the poopy-diaper details. (Thomson, 2009, ¶ 1)
>
> Pete Wentz took a break from oversharing about his sex life and wife Ashley Simpson's breast milk to show a more tender side: a photo of five-week-old baby boy Bronx Mowgli in a holiday greeting. ("Bronx Mowgli photo...," 2008, ¶ 1)

Both instances contain an implicit comparison that serves to evaluate the term *overshare*. In the first, the visit to the White House is normalized by simply being "told," while the "poopy-diaper details," in contrast, constitute "an overshare." In the second, oversharing is something the social actor (Wentz) takes "a break from" in order to engage in a different, more acceptable act (as indicated by the positive value connotation of "tender side"), thus positing *oversharing* as contrary to acceptable practice.

In the case of the two articles addressing bloggers, both instances of the term *overshare* occur as objectivizations via descriptivization, that is, they are "represented as more or less permanent qualities of social actors" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 65). The first example is in reference to Jessica Cutler, author of the controversial blog *The*

Washingtonienne. It should be noted that the actual use of the term originated at the popular media news and gossip website, *Gawker*, and was directly quoted by *The Huffington Post* (the article is not attributed to any author).

> She was the young oversharing blogger who got fired from Capitol Hill because she blogged up a storm about her after-work sexual exploits—much of it with older, well-known politicos, some of it paid. ("Jessica Cutler...," 2008, ¶ 1)

Here, *oversharing* is presented as a more or less permanent attribute of the blogger, Jessica Cutler. Subsequently, the act of blogging (at least in the manner by which Cutler went about it) is delegitimated by what van Leeuwen (2008) refers to as "instrumental rationalization," which is "founded on the principle of success, of 'whether it works or not,' i.e., on a rationality of means and ends" (p. 113). In this case, Cutler's blogging achieved a negative result (being fired), which has the effect of delegitimating her actions. If we recall Fairclough's (1995) definitions of choice and chain relations, we can isolate two unique forces at work in this statement. First, in terms of chain relations, *The Huffington Post* is deliberately aligning itself with an outside publication (*Gawker*) by citing it directly and offering no critique of the borrowed quotation, which, in turn, reinforces (or legitimates) *Gawker*'s delegitimation of Cutler. Second, in terms of choice relations, both publications (*Gawker* by publishing the statement and *The Huffington Post* by quoting it) chose to focus on her being fired as the result of oversharing, rather than on the fact that she was offered a book deal based on her blog. If the book deal had been offered as a positive end result of her oversharing, the act (and actor) would have actually be *legitimated* through instrumental rationalization, rather than delegitimated.

In contrast, the second descriptivized use of *overshare* in relation to a blogger does present a book deal as a legitimating result of the act of blogging. As we will see, however, the social actor engaged in blogging (in this case, Emily Gould) is delegitimated in other ways.

> Grab thee your tank tops and crumpled sundresses, ladies, because a new trend has been born: blog-diary-tattoo-themed books by oversharing twentysomethings who can't help who they love and can't help writing about it. Former Gawker editor and recent *NYT* mag cover girl Emily Gould has sold her book, *And the Heart Says "Whatever"*, in what we hear was a "significant deal," as publishing insiders say (it's unreported, by the chatter is $350K, and we heard it too). (Sklar, 2008, ¶ 1)

Again, *oversharing* is descriptivized, presented as a more or less permanent quality of a certain type of person, namely trendy and romantically involved young women. While the second sentence announces Gould's book deal, the first sentence works to delegitimate Gould through a process of distillation, that is, by "abstracting qualities from actions or reactions" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 69). Distillations of this sort serve a legitimating function through their positive or negative connotations, distilled from an action in order to evaluate it. In this case, the distilled qualities include gender ("ladies"), age ("twentysomethings"), and materialism ("tank tops and crumpled sundresses"). In combination, these qualities create a negative connotation of a woman who is both young and shallow.[4] This, as well as use of the word *trend* (suggesting impermanence) ultimately undermines Gould's book deal, which in and of itself would have served as an instrumental rationalization of her blogging habits.

The distillation of gender, as in the above example, is representative of an overall gendered evaluation of oversharing in *The Huffington Post*. Of the eleven instances of the term *overshare*, seven of them were attributed to women. Even the two instances attributed to Pete Wentz contain explicit references to his wife (their mutual sex life and her reproductive functions). While one instance was gender-neutral (Linkins, 2008?), it would appear that, in the context of *The Huffington Post*, oversharing is an overwhelmingly gendered act.

This evaluation is perhaps best illustrated by the only occurrence of the term *overshare* attributed to a man other than Pete Wentz. The article, "CNN's Jack Cafferty Confesses 'Crush' On Michelle Obama," begins as follows:

> Everybody's oversharing now! Here's CNN's Jack Cafferty, whose curmudgeonly heart has been lit ablaze in a way that Wolf Blitzer could never quite manage...." (Linkins, 2009, ¶ 1)

Again, *oversharing* occurs as an objectivization (in this case, the object of the sentence). However, unlike the objectivizations of the term used for moral evaluation, this instance is an example of authorization via conformity. "In the case of conformity...the answer to the 'why' question is...'because that's what everybody else does' or 'because that's what most people do'" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 109). In this sentence, authorization via

4 I take shallowness to be implied by the materialistic reference to clothing. It is worth noting that the sentence did not ask the "ladies" to grab a pen and paper, or even a laptop, which would actually be more appropriate in the context of writing a book.

conformity is realized through high frequency modality ("[Everybody is] oversharing now!"). As the article takes on a mocking tone, and does not at any point condone Cafferty's overshare, the appeal to conformity appears to delegitimize the practice. More curious, however, is the use of the words *everybody* and *now*. In combination, these terms imply that other people had been oversharing prior to Cafferty's confession, but somehow his doing so means that a general "everybody" is now engaged in the practice of oversharing. This suggests that the social actor symbolized by Cafferty—a professional, middle-aged white man—is representative of a more appropriate and resilient standard of information sharing. In other words, "everybody" was not oversharing until a professional, middle-aged white man was oversharing, too. Taken alone, this may be a weak assertion. Given *The Huffington Post*'s consistently gendered usage of *overshare*, however, it seems to be an appropriate reading.

The New York Times

The New York Times presented a greater diversity of social actors than any other sampled publication. Use of the term *overshare* appeared in relation to celebrities, parents, Web users, homebuyers, money club members, as well as everyday people and—in two instances—a fictional character. Also, as pointed out in the previous chapter, the *Times* had the widest date range of occurrences, with the earliest instance appearing as early as 1998. Closer examination of the texts revealed a marked difference in usage of the term in early articles (1998-2001) versus usage in later articles (2008-2009).

The first instance of the term *overshare* appeared the publication's "Habitats" section and was used in an entirely offline context—the text contains no references to the

Web or the Internet whatsoever. The article details the home buying and renovating experience of a former United Nations aide searching for a home in New York City that would provide the same vibrant atmosphere as places he had lived abroad. After finding an impoverished Spanish-speaking area of the South Bronx that suited his tastes, the aide went on to contrast his new neighborhood with New York City's Upper West Side (where he had been living):

> It was not at all like the Upper West Side. "There you're lucky if you get a hello in the elevator," he said. In fact, in an elevator once, making what he considered to be neighborly conversation, someone told him that he "overshares." (Hall, 1998, ¶ 11)

Here, unlike most uses of the term, *overshare* is not objectivized. It is used by the unnamed speaker as a straightforward delegitimation through moral evaluation. The article, on the other hand, delegitimates the unnamed speaker's standards, painting them as uptight (rather than "neighborly") and the entire text serves to further delegitimate the unnamed speaker by means of mythopoesis, that is, the telling of a story that rewards certain behaviors or decisions (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 117-118) (in this case, the aide finds a home and happiness by escaping the "uptight" Upper West Side). I would like to also point out that the agency of the overshare is made explicit: the aide is the person who engages the overshare ("he 'overshares'"). This will be an important distinction when we examine later uses of the term.

Other early instances of the term are found in two separate installments of the same column by a single author in the year 2000. The first instance is a clear moral evaluation by comparison:

> Robert Frost wrote, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” The same, I guess, can be said about a camera. It’s hard to imagine it in this moment of pervasive reality TV and voyeuristic talk shows, with people sharing and oversharing at the least provocation. (Morris, 2000a, ¶ 3)

In this instance, *oversharing* is directly compared to *sharing* (“people sharing and oversharing”) in such a way that *oversharing* is established as the more extreme of the two actions. Further, a semantic relationship is established between *pervasive/voyeuristic* and *sharing/oversharing*, connecting the negative connotation of the former words to the latter ones. The second article carries the use of the term dramatically further: it is the only example in the entire dataset where the term overshare appears multiple times in a single text. In fact, the article, titled “Don’t Spill It on Me,” is dedicated solely to the concept of oversharing. Given its expansive use of the term, it is worth quoting at some length:

> Overshare isn’t just a noun. It’s also an accusation (a way of calling “Foul!”) in a culture in which people don’t know how to put the brakes on. It’s Carnie Wilson in Us Weekly discussing the stomach and intestinal surgery that cut her weight by 150 pounds, adding that after having her “tummy tucked and boobs lifted” she’s going to have sex all the time. It’s unsolicited lectures from friends on colonics. It’s a kid at the Yankees parade holding up an “I skipped

> school" sign for a photographer.
>
> Overshare is Woody Harrelson talking about his tantric sex habits, Bob Dole on erectile dysfunction, Jay Leno questioning Al Gore about a Rolling Stone cover deemed "too sexy" and Jim Carrey telling Details [sic] magazine that he could have "a tumor on the side of my [sic] head" and people would still be jealous. It's Kathleen Turner nude in "The Graduate" in London, and anything about "The Vagina Monologues." (Morris, 2000b, ¶ 5-6)

The absence of any reference to the Internet or the Web is curious, given the writer's comprehensive list of qualifying overshares. However, the article was written in 2000—just one year after the term *blog* was coined and four years before the emergence of Web 2.0. For the writer, the term *overshare* itself is legitimated by its positive utility (instrumental rationalization) as a noun and "an accusation." The article then goes on to delegitimate the *practice* of oversharing by means of authorization, summoning the voices of two expert authorities to comment on the practice:

> "People are sharing without consideration of who they're sharing with and whether or not they want to hear it," said Gordon Wheeler, a psychologist and the author of "Beyond Individualism," published this year by the Analytic Press. (Morris, 2000b, ¶ 7)
>
> "Society is commonly too cheap," Henry David Thoreau wrote. It's hard to disagree.... (Morris, 2000b, ¶ 10)

While the writer is clearly bemoaning a certain media climate of overshare, the agency of the offending overshares is made (at least implicitly) clear in both articles. People—celebrities, musicians, children, politicians—are "sharing and oversharing" in a variety of ways.

It is the concept of agency that most distinctly separates early usage of the term *overshare* from later usage. In the above examples, the term is always agentialized, that is, "represented as brought about by human agency" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 66). Later instances of *overshare* are largely deagentialized, or "represented as brought about in other ways, impervious to human agency—through natural forces, unconscious processes, and so on" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 66). Deagentialization is often achieved through various forms of objectivization, as demonstrated in the following examples. The first comes from an article discussing the nature of "defriending" on popular social network Facebook:

> Facebook, which now has more than 150 million members, has clearly been built on the back of the culture of oversharing. Many members broadcast the mundane details of their lives through a "status update" feature, which lets people—nay, encourages them—to describe the contents of their lunch or the virulence of their bronchitis. (Quenqua, 2009a, ¶ 16)

Here, the objectivized instance of *oversharing* is deagentialized by means of existentialization: it is represented as something that "simply exists" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 67), i.e., "the culture of oversharing." The same process is at work in the next example, from an article detailing a reviewer's response to Rachel Kauder Nalebuff's *My Little Red Book*, which features various women reflecting on their first menstrual cycle:

> Though Jacobs, an editor at large at The New York Observer, is known for her salty, saucy writing about modern urban life, don't count on her to spill the bans on her own embarrassing rites of passage anytime soon. "I deeply respect Nalebuff's contribution to feminist scholarship, but am also repulsed by the current vogue for mass overshare," she wrote in an e-mail message. (Editors, 2009, ¶ 2)

While both of the preceding uses are deagentialized through existentialization, *overshare* can also be deagentialized by means of naturalization, "which [links] actions and reactions to specific interpretations of material processes" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 68). In the following instance, *overshare* is linked to a material process of consumption as outlined by the author:

> That night, in the spirit of California, we watched episode after episode of "Entourage" while eating bad Chinese food and drinking vodka, the guaranteed recipe for emotional oversharing. And so, as the night grew later, I cried as I told him how much I would miss him, how he was the only guy in New York who understood me. (Davies, 2008, ¶ 38)

Though deagentialization is not directly connected to processes of legitimation and delegitimation, the overall effect of obscuring the agency of overshare achieves a degree of both. Deleting human agency and existentializing the term *overshare* serves to legitimate a standalone discourse of oversharing. At the same time, Web users and others who might overshare are ultimately disempowered, explained away as merely part of a cultural trend, the "current vogue for mass overshare." Even in the articles where some agency can be discerned, it is never made explicit, as in the following example:

> But the social ease of Facebook makes it easy to look frivolous, all of the experts warned. If you tend to overshare, people in your network will quickly learn about the breakup of your marriage or your love of Jell-O shots. (Tribble, 2008, ¶ 31)

At first glance, the quote appears to assign agency ("you") to the overshare. However, the phrase does not actually say "If you overshare…." Rather, by using the verb *tend,* oversharing is established as an existential quality that may or may not be directly connected to "you," the human agent.

The deletion of agency also served to obscure the gender associated with oversharing in a number of the articles. Six of the 13 articles did not directly connect the action of oversharing to any one particular gender. Of the remaining seven articles, however, five associated the act of oversharing to a woman, while only two attributed oversharing to a man (one being the previous example of the United Nations aide and the other occurring in reference to Pete Wentz). Clearly, the instances where a social actor can be tied to the act of oversharing support a gendered reading of the term. Oversharing is, at least somewhat, something women do more often than men according to *The New York Times*.

The Wall Street Journal

Though *The Wall Street Journal* represents just five of the 31 articles sampled, it demonstrates a number of qualities that make it unique as a subset. It contains the first use of the term in relation to the Internet (in 2003) and the only publication to use it in a headline. Also, the publication posts no instances of the term in 2008—the year which *overshare* rose to prominence. Each of the five texts summon the voices of expert authorities to comment on some issue or issues related to oversharing (except in one instance, where the expert authority *is* the voice using the term, rather than commenting on it).

The use of *overshare* in *The Wall Street Journal* is overwhelmingly deagentialized. It is almost always realized as an existentialized objectivization, as in the following headline:

> To Fight E-Mail Oversharing, Firms Try New Rules, Software (Zaslow, 2003, n.p.)

Here, oversharing is presented as something that simply exists in the context of the technology (in this case, as an occupational hazard of using e-mail's CC line). Oversharing is also explained as something that exists exclusively online:

> Critics say it's the latest form of oversharing online—the equivalent of posting your every move on Twitter or Facebook—and only reinforces parents' worst habits. (Gamerman, 2009, ¶ 3)

It is also realized in descriptive form, as a more or less general quality of "today's...

Internet culture:"

> He used his dot-com millions to fund experimental art projects—surveillance-themed works that seemed to anticipate today's over-sharing Internet culture of blogs, Twitter, and social-networking sites. (Alter, 2009, ¶ 2)

In all of the instances of oversharing, the term itself serves to delegitimate the associated social actors and actions. *Overshare*, in this respect, carries a negative connotation that provides a moral evaluation of the overall statement.

In the single agentialized instance of *overshare*, the term is used by a social actor to reinforce (or legitimate) authority. In this case, the social actor in question is an advertising vice president called upon by *The Wall Street Journal* to give tips on how to most effectively use Microsoft's PowerPoint presentation program. After delivering a list of PowerPoint "don'ts," the vice president states:

> "Oh, do you want to hear more pet peeves? I'll over-share anyway," he wrote. (Sandberg, 2006, ¶ 3)

In this case, the social actor recognizes the excess of his information sharing (qualifying it as an "over-share"), but proceeds anyway, reinforcing his status as expert authority on the matter. While *over-share* is recognized as a negative social action, the actor's ability to continue despite this assertion further legitimates his voice in the matter.

As a result of the overwhelmingly deagentialized use of *overshare*, the term was never directly connected to any one gender (save for the single agentialized instance, where the male social actor attributed it to himself). This deagentialized use of the term also served to construct oversharing as a general attribute of online culture, rather than as a specific quality attributed to any single actor or group of actors (such as women or men). However, the expert voices called upon for comment in the articles did demonstrate some interesting gender divisions. In cases where an expert was called upon to comment on the idea of sharing information, the expert was almost always a woman, as in the following example:

> "Oversharing in an interview is the most dangerous thing you can do," concurs Annie Stevens, a managing partner at ClearRock, a Boston executive-coaching and outplacement concern. (Lublin, 2009, ¶ 4)

On the other hand, the voices called upon to comment on the *effects* of oversharing in a given context—such as the workplace—were almost always men. While the following example does not contain the term *overshare*, it occurs in the article that utilizes the term in the headline ("To Fight Email Oversharing, Firms Try New Rules, Software") establishing oversharing as the general focus of the article:

> Last year, Mr. Stratten, a corporate trainer in Toronto, worked at a manufacturing firm where employees seemed addicted to trading "reply to all" e-mails. (Zaslow, 2003, ¶ 11)

While it is not the purpose of this study to examine the methods by which various publications assign expert voices to subjects and why, the delineation of expert voices in these texts appears at least tangentially related to the gendered readings of *overshare* presented by the other two publications. However, the relationship is—admittedly—not an explicit one.

Discussion

It is unsurprising that the act of oversharing was consistently realized as a delegitimated social action. The word itself contains its own moral evaluation—the prefix *over* attaches a negative connotation to the root *share* (much as in other evaluative compound verbs, such as *overreach*, *overreact*, and *overdo*). Indeed, the *Webster's New World* definition presented in the first chapter reflects this negative connotation, as do uses of the term across *The Huffington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.

In the instances where *overshare* was discernibly connected to human agency, a distinctly gendered pattern began to emerge. Of the 29 articles examined, 12 attributed oversharing to a woman or a group of women, while only six instances were attributed to a man (none of the instances attributed *overshare* to a group of men). The gendered division remains if we break down the instances where agency can be determined by other categories, as well. For example, if we examine the 13 instances of *overshare* that occurred in relation to some sort of media personality (celebrity, commentator, or blogger), seven are attributed to a woman or women, four are attributed to a man (three of which cite Pete Wentz specifically), and one attributed to media personalities of both genders. It would appear then, where agency is concerned, the answer to the question, "whose information is *TMI*—too much information?" is, for the most part, "women's information."

In terms of the agentialization and deagentialization of *overshare*, a division is evident between the print publications and *The Huffington Post*, which is published exclusively online. The print articles published in 2008 and 2009 by *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* most frequently deagentialize the term *overshare*, most often existentializing it as an aspect of "today's Internet culture," as in "the culture of oversharing." This, however, was not generally true of *The New York Times* early usage of *overshare*, which was consistently agentialized and never connected to discourses of the Internet. It is only after 2008 that we find *overshare* being used in an online context. In fact, if we place the emergence of the term *Web 2.0* at 2004, we find it to be situated midway between the last of *The New York Times*' early uses of the term (Morris, 2000b) and the first of its later uses (Tribble, 2008). Indeed, the impact of Web 2.0 on later usage of the term cannot be ignored, given that seven of the 12 instances of *overshare* in the *Times* and the *Journal* after 2008 are connected to some discourse of the Internet as embodied by either Web 2.0 users or philosophies.

Usage of the term in print stands in direct contrast to usage of the term online by *The Huffington Post*. Here, every instance of the term was either explicitly or implicitly agentialized, that is, tied to human agency. In no instances was it existentialized and presented as a general aspect of communication online. Rather, it was always attributed to an individual (for instance, Pete Wentz) or an identifiable group (like "twentysomething" women). Within the context of this Internet only publication, social actors are still imbued with some degree of agency (if only to be deligitmated in other ways). Within the context of print publications, however, it seems that social actors are increasingly disempowered, merely swept up in the "current vogue for mass overshare."

In the next chapter, I will focus on the types of social action most commonly associated with instances of the term *overshare*. If examination of social actors helped us to better understand *whose* information is *TMI*, then an examination of social action should help us determine *what* information is also too much information.

Chapter 6: Social Actions

Introduction

While oversharing is itself a social action, it is not *the* social action I wish to focus on in this chapter. The previous chapter sufficiently demonstrated the ways in which all three sampled publications delegitimate oversharing, establishing it as a negative social action through processes of moral evaluation and rationalization. However, oversharing cannot stand alone as a social action: just as it requires social actors, it also requires a connection to additional social actions. In other words, one cannot overshare about nothing—it invariably contains information or connections to information that represent other social actions, and it is with these social actions that I am concerned with here.

In order to examine the social actions connected to usage of the term *overshare*, I will return to the plurality of discourses introduced in Chapter Four. As I discussed then, all texts contain a set of chain relations that determine its relationship to other texts, also as a text's intertextuality (Fairclough, 1995, p. 76-78). Intertextuality, in turn, is achieved through the various discourses drawn upon during the course of a given text. When thinking about the plurality of discourses, it is helpful to think of discourse as "the language used in representing a given social practice from a particular point of view" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 56). In this chapter, *overshare* will be taken to connote a specific point of view, namely the point of view of information sharing practices. However, I find it awkward to use the phrase *point of view* in this way. Instead, I will use the term *lens* in its place, so that we might say certain social actions are represented through the lens of information sharing practices (within which oversharing is positioned as a negative action).

The Huffington Post

One way to discern what social actions are connected to the term *overshare* is to make an inventory of those things a social actor is accused of oversharing about, which I will attempt to do for each publication. Isolating such social actions is easiest when the term *overshare* occurs as a full or auxiliary phrasal verb, that is, a verb followed by a preposition (typically *about*), as in the following example:

> She smiled and looked cute at the bar, but when approached by potential suitors she woefully overshared about divorce, her custody battle, and diabetes. ("Sherri Shepherd...," 2008, ¶ 1)

Here, the topics connected to overshare are clear: "divorce, her custody battle, and diabetes." These three topics can then be tied to the social actions (and overarching discourses) of marriage, family, and medical issues.[5] However, the representations of social actions relative to use of *overshare* are not always so neat, such as in the article regarding Emily Gould's book deal:

> ...blog-diary-tattoo-themed books by oversharing twentysomethings who can't help who they love and can't help writing about it. (Sklar, 2008, ¶ 1)

As discussed in the previous chapter, *overshare* is realized as a descriptivized

5 Often times, a social action may be realized as a topic or condition, such as "diabetes" in the preceding example. However, topics and conditions are representative of the social processes that generate them. In the case of diabetes, I have used medical issues to connote a typical social action that consists of illness, diagnosis, and treatment.

objectivization (here, in adjectival form) that connects to the noun *twentysomethings*. In this case, the twentysomethings are not the offending action, but the offending actors, so in order to determine the action relative to *oversharing*, we must identify the action relative to *twentysomethings*. In this case, we can safely assume that the offending action is writing ("can't help writing") about romantic connections ("who they love"), which we can then connect to the discourses of romance and relationships.

Of the eleven articles sampled from *The Huffington Post*, ten were connected to some combination of discourses on relationships (marital or otherwise), sex and romance, or parenthood and reproduction:

- CNN's Jack Cafferty confessing a "crush" on First Lady Michelle Obama (Linkins, 2009, ¶ 1) (sex and romance)
- *The New York Time's* sex and relationship column "Modern Love," described as "the paper of record's Sunday overshare" (Linkins, 2008a, ¶ 1) (sex and romance; intimate relationships)
- Jessica Cutler, the "oversharing blogger" who wrote about "her after-work sexual exploits" ("Jessica Cutler...," 2008) (sex and romance)
- Pete Wentz continuing "his oversharing about wife Ashley Simpson by announcing...he has sampled her breast milk" ("Pete Wentz...," 2008, ¶ 1) (intimate relationships; parenthood and reproduction)
- Pete Wentz taking "a break from oversharing about his sex life and wife Ashley Simpson's breast milk" (Bronx Mowgli photo...," 2008, ¶ 1) (sex and romance; intimate relationships; parenthood and reproduction)
- The women of *The View*, who, "[with] an hour to fill and zero guests, ...turned to

sex talk," eventually "getting bleeped and oversharing" ("What happens when...," 2007, ¶ 1) (sex and romance)

- *The View*'s Elisabeth Hasselbeck telling Jay Leno "all the poopy-diaper details" of her 15-month-old son's need for a diaper change while visiting the White House (Thomson, 2009, ¶ 1) (parenthood and reproduction)
- *Saturday Night Live*'s Kristin Wiig performing an impression of popular daytime talk show host Kathie Lee Gifford, who is described as "an oversharing Katie [sic] Lee Gifford ('I am *so* menopausal!') [emphasis original] ("SNL: Kathie Lee...," 2009, ¶ 2) (parenthood and reproduction)
- Twentysomethings writing about romantic connections (Sklar, 2008) (sex and romance)
- *The View*'s Sherri Shepherd oversharing "about divorce, her custody battle, and diabetes" ("Sherri Shepherd...," 2008, ¶ 1) (intimate relationships; parenthood and reproduction).

Only one instance of the term *overshare* occurred in connection to none of the topics listed above. In the article, there is mention of a controversial statement made by Hillary Rodham Clinton during the 2008 United States presidential campaign (Schor, 2008). The statement, which referenced the assassination of former Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, is referred to as the "HRC RFK overshare" (Linkins, 2008, ¶ 30).

The New York Times

Overall, *The New York Times* presented the most diverse inventory of social actions connected to use of the term *overshare*. Qualifying overshares ranged from sex to finances to banal and excessive detail. In the article that used the term more than once, at least 7 different discourses were easily recognizable. Despite this total diversity, however, 8 of the 14 sampled articles from the *Times* drew upon discourses of sex and romance, intimate relationships, or parenthood and reproduction:

- A woman's "babbling" as the result of being romantically attracted to a man (Lippman, 2008a, ¶ 3) (sex and romance)
- The story of a woman's husband leaving her while she was recovering from cancer (Lippman, 2008b, ¶ 13-14) (intimate relationships)
- A woman's "emotional oversharing" about her feelings for a man (Davies, 2008, ¶ 38) (sex and romance; intimate relationships)
- Menstruation (Editors, 2009, ¶ 2) (parenthood and reproduction)
- Social networks for new parents that enable "baby overshare" (Sweeney, 2008, ¶ 6) (parenthood and reproduction)
- Pete Wentz posting "some unfortunate photos of his nether regions" on the Internet (Caramanica, 2008, ¶ 2) (sex and romance)
- Sex, erectile dysfunction, nudity, *The Vagina Monologues*, *Sex and the City* (Morris, 2008b, ¶ 5-8) (sex and romance; parenthood and reproduction)
- The breakup of a marriage (Tribble, 2008, ¶ 31) (intimate relationships).

Three of the above examples were also connected to discourses of Web 2.0: "baby overshare" on social networks, Wentz's posting of "unfortunate photos" on the Internet, and the breakup of a marriage (which was revealed via Facebook). An additional two articles also referenced Web 2.0 users and applications. In these articles, however, oversharing was not connected to any specific social action or topic. Rather, it was cited as a general attribute of the total amount of sharing going on in Web 2.0 spaces, most often realized in the text by an existentialization of the term *overshare* paired with two or more examples of information qualifying as overshares (for example, see Tribble, 2009 and Quenqua, 2009a, as cited in the previous chapter). All of the six articles that connected *overshare* and Web 2.0 appeared in 2008 and 2009, suggesting an emerging discursive construction of overshare as a common feature of online existence, as illustrated by the earlier example that declared Facebook as "built on the back of the culture of oversharing" (Quenqua, 2009a, ¶ 16). One additional *Times* article does not directly connect *overshare* to the Internet; however, the overall text does draw on a discourse of the Internet, as the author's "emotional oversharing" (Davies, 2008, ¶ 38) occurred while conversing with a man she met on the website Craigslist. The three remaining articles that occurred in 2008 and 2009 cited oversharing as a current trend, as in the "current vogue for mass overshare" (Editors, 2009, ¶ 2), "oversharing, as current parlance had it" (Lippman, 2008a, ¶ 3), and "people think oversharing is a phenomenon limited to the young" (Lippman, 2008b, 14).

The Wall Street Journal

Four of the five articles from *The Wall Street Journal* connected *overshare* to some discourse of computer or Internet technology. However, only two of them were also connected to a discourse of the Internet culture or Web 2.0. These two articles can be separated from the other two by date of publication: the two articles that reference technology without explicitly referencing the Internet were published in 2003 and 2006, while both of the articles that draw on discourses of Web 2.0 were published in early

2009. The earliest article attributes oversharing to misuse of email's CC line, deagentializing the process by blaming "e-mail overload" in the workplace and a lack of corporate guidelines for email use (Zaslow, 2003). As a result, the technology (email) is more explicitly connected to discourses of the workplace than it is to discourses of the Internet. The second early instance does not reference the Internet at all, occurring instead in relation to Microsoft PowerPoint (see Sandberg, 2006, as cited in the previous chapter). In contrast, both of the later instances directly attach *overshare* to the Internet, as in "today's over-sharing Internet culture of blogs, Twitter, and social-networking sites" (Alter, 2009, ¶ 2) and "the latest form of oversharing online—the equivalent of posting your every move on Twitter or Facebook" (Gamerman, 2009, ¶ 3).

For the most part, oversharing is framed as a general violation of some context—the workplace or a job interview, for instance—or as a general attribute of Web 2.0 culture. One instance does, however, explicitly attach a social action to *overshare*. The article "Bad Parents and Proud of It: Moms and Dad Confess" covers a series of books published by parents (represented by multiple mothers and one father) chronicling their parenting missteps. These books, the article says, have grown out of online communities of such parents sharing their stories with one another, which "critics say," is "the latest form of oversharing online" (Gamerman, 2009, ¶ 3).

Discussion

I understand that the available discourses I have chosen to focus on in this chapter are constructed in a particular way, and that my chosen groupings (sex and romance, relationships, parenthood and reproduction, etc.) frame the subsequent social actions in a particular manner. I have done so, however, to illuminate an important thread that appears to run across all three publications: wherever social actions can be clearly identified in relation to *overshare*, they tend to (particularly in *The Huffington Post* and *The New York Times*, and at least once in *The Wall Street Journal*) be connected to a certain discourse of the private, that is, discourses of the home, domesticity, reproduction, or intimacy. Further, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, whenever social actors can be isolated they tend to be women, and on the handful of occasions when they are men they tend to be connected, again, to discourses of reproduction or intimacy. I will return to this reading of the data in a moment. First, however, I must outline the concept of a discourse of the private as I hope to use it here.

In a critical exploration of the relationship between gender and privacy, Beate Rössler provides a useful description of the dichotomous nature of life in modern liberal societies:

> Heart and mind, feeling and intellect, women and men, private and public life: the parallels drawn between these pairs of opposites, with all their connotations, form a standard element in the self-conception and self-description of modern liberal societies. To the realm of the private belong feelings, home and hearth, sympathetic care of the men as well as the rearing of the children; while on the other side the (male) public realm comprises mind or intelligence ("brain") and professional life. (Rössler, 2004, p. 53)

As discourses are comprised of the language used to represent certain social practices, the discourse of the private is coded within references to those things which Rössler identifies as belonging to the realm of the private: feelings, home and hearth, care of men, and the rearing of children. I further add to this realm the practices of sex and romance, as well as intimacy (which includes intimate relationships, such as romantic and domestic partnerships). Rössler (2004) also notes that, within liberal societies, there is a "sort of evaluation, a negative one that unambiguously associates the private sphere with 'women' and the public sphere with 'men'" (p. 53). While it is not my goal to provide a direct feminist critique of the discursive formations of the private realm, it is helpful—within the scope of this study—to consider the division between the private and public spheres along gendered lines.

Of the 29 articles sampled, 19 cited social actions from the realm of the private as overshares. Within the remaining 10 articles, four cite oversharing as detrimental to professional life, which (according to Rössler's definition) belongs to the public realm. Implicit in each of these articles is the assumption that the offending overshares contain information from ones non-public (i.e., private) life. In this sense, it is reasonable to say that a full 23 of the 29 articles attribute "overshared" social actions as belonging to the realm of the private. Further, the social actors identified in relation to oversharing were, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, primarily women. As oversharing is overwhelmingly evaluated as a negative social practice, it supports Rössler's (2004) assertion that the private sphere is, in some ways, negatively evaluated and categorically associated with women.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Like the church, like a cop, like a mother, you want me to be truthful /
Sometimes you turn it on me like a weapon though, and I need your approval.

- Joni Mitchell (as cited in "Emily Gould Responds to Readers," 2008)

In the course of this analysis, three major trends have emerged. First, oversharing is conceptualized as a negative social practice. Second, use of the term *overshare* is unequivocally tied to a gendered discourse of the private. Third, there has been a recent shift, reflected by the print publications, towards a general deagentialization of *overshare*, declaring a trend or "culture" of oversharing that is no longer explicitly associated with human agency, but rather with technology. To conclude, I would like to briefly address each of these trends—one building on top of the next—in relation to Web 2.0 and context, as introduced in chapter two. In doing so, I will attempt to answer the fourth research question I posed in Chapter 3: what do the discursive constructions of legitimation (or, inversely, delegitimation) relative to the term *overshare* reveal about emerging normative practices for personal information sharing online?

Oversharing as Negative Social Practice

It is not surprising that oversharing was constructed as a negative social practice in all of the sampled texts. As noted earlier, the word contains its own moral evaluation, and analysis shows that it has commonly been employed to delegitimate various social actors and actions through a process of moral evaluation. Moral evaluations, as van Leeuwen (2008) notes, work by linking up with specific discourses of moral value. "They trigger a moral concept, but are detached from the system of interpretation from which they derive, at least on a conscious level" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 110). This detachment is what Stanley Fish refers to when he speaks of "some institutions or forms of life [that] are so widely lived...it takes special effort to see that they are the products of circumstances" (p. 527). It is also akin to what Pierre Bourdieu means by the "unconscious," which "is never anything other than the forgetting of history which history itself produces by incorporating the objective structures it produces..." (1977, p. 78-79). As a result, it is not easy to identify the moral discourses connected to moral evaluations constructed within a text. "The usefulness of linguistic discourse analysis stops at this point.... Only the social and cultural historian can explain the moral status of these expressions, by tracing them back to the moral discourses that underlie them..." (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 110). What, then, are the discourses that underlie oversharing?

The easiest answer to this question lies in one interpretation of context. Hall (1976) points out that context (the sum total of what we perceive and what we ignore in a given situation) helps to provide "a screen" between man and nature. It is "a screening function [that] provides structure for the world and protects the nervous system from 'information overload'" (p. 85). This would seem to be the literal problem behind *TMI*—too much information. Oversharing, then, would be considered a negative social action because it breaks down the structures that shape the world in a quantitative sense: we can only handle so much information.

If this were true, it should follow that an analysis of the term *overshare* would reveal a discourse based on quantities (or amounts) of information and not on qualities (or attributes) of information. This, however, was not the case, as analysis revealed the act of oversharing to be exclusively linked to the attributes of the overshared information.

The discourses that underlie oversharing, then, are to be found in the qualities of the social actors and the social actions represented by information connected to the term *overshare* in the sampled texts. I believe it is in the connection between oversharing and the discourse of the private that we find the clues necessary begin to undo Bourdieu's "forgetting" and start to identify the objective processes which underlie use of the term *overshare*.

Oversharing and the Discourse of the Private

Twenty-four of the 30 sampled articles connected the term *overshare* either explicitly or implicitly to a discourse of the private, that is, of the home, intimacy, sex and reproduction. Of these 24 articles, 13 of them link a woman or a group of women to the term, while only five link *overshare* to a man (the remaining 6 articles either link the term to both sexes or none specifically). *Overshare*, then, reflects a gendered division between the (negative) private and the (positive) public, a division that, according to Beate Rössler, is rooted as far back as Aristotle. "[In] Aristotle's conception, and in modern conceptions indebted to him, the private realm is one of necessity, limitation, restriction, and subjection under the (unpleasant) laws of nature and reproduction," compared to an Aristotelian conception of the public realm as "the realm of (political) freedom" (Rössler, 2004, p. 57).

This, however, is only one of two competing discourses of the private available in modern liberal societies. Rössler reminds us that the private is also given a positive connotation, as a place that is "esteemed and approved of as the realm that is shielded from the demands of the hostile outside world..., and which offers a refuge from the harsh laws of the economy and the inexorable order of politics" (Rössler, 2004, p. 53). The private realm, in *this* sense, represents freedom from the demands of public life, as well as a freedom to live as one wants to live. In turn, liberal societies struggle with the inherent conflict of a private realm that is at once positive *and* negative.

The most widely accepted conceptions of Web 2.0 philosophy, as introduced in the literature review, seem to mirror the positive construction of the private realm. They contain a libertarian ethos that promotes "freedom of choice and empowerment of individuals" (Allen, 2008, p. 2), much like the lauded private freedoms to live as one wishes to live or to escape the "harsh laws" of the economy. However, as indicated by the data, the rise of Web 2.0 and its attendant philosophy were soon followed by a rise in use of the term *overshare*, which is bound to an Aristotelian, negative construction of the private realm associated with the home and with women. It would appear, in light of my analysis, that Web 2.0 has inherited the liberal society's conflicting conceptions of the private realm.

Web 2.0 philosophy has also emerged to reflect the positive construction of the Aristotelian public (political) realm, as illustrated by its insistence on the notion of equality. "Web 2.0, it is claimed, positions users of the Internet, both large and small, as relatively equal and equally engaged participants" (Allen, 2008, p. 3). At the same time, certain social actors and actions are increasingly associated with the negative concept of oversharing, suggesting that certain participants and types of participation are valued less than others. Indeed, 10 of the 11 articles sampled from *The Huffington Post*—an online-only publication built on the back of Web 2.0—directly connected the term *overshare* to a negative construction of the private realm. This conflict is the essence of the modern liberal society's distinction between the (positive) public realm and the (negative) private realm, and the resultant inequalities are "the effect of precisely this problematic separation between the two spheres" (Rössler, 2004, p. 57).

"The Culture of Oversharing"

In one sense, a "culture of oversharing" should not exist; if the act of oversharing becomes so common in a society as to represent a "culture," it would seem that the larger society had contextualized it, making it contextually viable and no longer contextually excessive or inappropriate, in which case it would no longer be an overshare. It is still possible for a "culture of oversharing" to exist, of course, as long as oversharing, in this sense, no longer refers to an action, but rather a representation of an action, i.e., a discourse. This brings us to the third trend: the deagentialization of the term *overshare*.

The shift from oversharing-as-action to oversharing-as-discourse is increasingly evident in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal,* which demonstrated a recent of trend of deagentialization relative to *overshare*, presenting the term as an existential or descriptivized quality of today's culture, as in "the latest form of oversharing online," "the current vogue for mass overshare," or simply "the culture of oversharing." Given the negative connotation of the term *overshare*, this deagentialization has the effect of creating a devalued subclass of information sharing online. This subclass is marked largely by the sharing of information associated with the discourse of the private: sex and romance, intimate relationships, parenthood and reproduction, and so on. This interpretation of the private reflects the Aristotelian realm of "necessity, limitation, restriction, and subjection under the (unpleasant) laws of nature and reproduction"

(Rössler, 2004, p. 57). In turn, discourses of the Aristotelian public—of political and professional life—when present in the sampled texts, are normatively favored, portrayed as compromised or inappropriately infringed upon by information connected to the unpleasant and necessitous realm of the private.

It would appear that the normative information sharing practices surrounding the Internet, as represented by the mainstream media, are emerging to reflect the modern liberal society's problematic dichotomy between private and public. In regards to context, then, it would seem that, popularly speaking, the term *overshare* is not used to indicate highly specific violations of particular contexts. Rather, it is used to generally label those social actors and actions that are tied to the negative realm of the private in order to separate them from the positive realm of the public. As a result, expressions that are considered normatively appropriate are that come from traditional liberal discourses of the public, while those that are tied to a discourse of the private are, ultimately, deemed inappropriate.

Future Research

As stated in the first chapter, exploring the ways in which the term *overshare* is being used to cultivate normative expectations of information sharing online will help us to better understand the values embedded in the developing culture of the Internet. This heightened understanding of normative practices is crucial to future thinking and policy development. As information scholars and policy makers, we must be tuned into the values emerging out of popular online culture in order to help shape those values in ways that encourage a fair and open Internet welcome to all people. Future research into usage of the term *overshare* (as well as the practice of oversharing itself) should seek to further explore the gendered reading that emerged in the course of this study. In particular, a close examination of usage of the term in social spaces online (such as commenting spaces or message boards) would serve as an effective point of comparison, as this study was concerned with usage of term in mainstream media outlets. Do informal discussions in Web 2.0 spaces construct oversharing along similarly gendered lines? What effect might the issue of media convergence (as addressed in Chapter Three) have on the discursive construction of *overshare* across various texts? Additional questions may consider the issue on a global scale; for example, what impact does cultural difference have on usage of the term? Finally, in accordance with the practical relevance demanded by CDA, how should Web culture and communication (in light of this study) be reflected in subsequent public policy decisions?

As this study has shown, usage of the term *overshare* in the sampled publications is ideologically charged. It is coded in a rigid private/public dichotomy which scholars in communication, privacy, and law have demonstrated as problematic (Nissenbaum, 2004; Rössler, 2004; Solove, 2008). The increasingly popular usage of the term in conjunction with the rise of widely adopted Web 2.0 applications and philosophies is similarly problematic, and—in light of this study—should serve as a point of reflection for researchers and policy makers. Using the term is an ideological act—an effort to separate online expressions that are tied to a negative conception of the private and to women from those that are connected to a positive construction of the public and to men. Such a dichotomy is antithetical to a free and open Internet, and future research and policy decisions should work to discourage this problematic division.

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APPENDIX

List of Citations for Articles Included in the Dataset

The Huffington Post

And the bloggers say “oy.” (2008, July 10). Message posted to http:/www.thehuffingtonpost.com

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