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## Constructing and enforcing “authentic” identity online: Facebook, real names, and non-normative identities by Oliver L. Haimson and Anna Lauren Hoffmann

### Abstract

Despite the participatory and democratic promises of Web 2.0, many marginalized individuals with fluid or non-normative identities continue to struggle to represent themselves online. Facebook users, in particular, are told to use “authentic identities,” an idea reinforced throughout the site’s documentation, “real name” and other policies, and in public statements by company representatives. Facebook’s conception of authenticity and real names, however, has created problems for certain users, as demonstrated by the systematic deactivation of many accounts belonging to transgender and gender variant users, drag queens, Native Americans, abuse survivors, and others. In view of the struggles of marginalized users, Facebook policy appears paradoxical: the site simultaneously demands authenticity yet proscribes certain people from authentic self-presentation. In this work, we examine Facebook’s construction of “authenticity” and show how it excludes multifaceted, fluid, or non-normative identities. Using content analysis and close reading, we analyze site documentation and data from *The Zuckerberg Files* (an online archive of Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s public remarks) to understand the platform’s mechanisms for enforcing authenticity. We find that Facebook positions itself as a type of administrative identity registrar, raising vital questions regarding the ethics and consequences of identity enforcement online today.

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### Introduction

As the dominant social network site (SNS) in the U.S. and elsewhere [1], Facebook is an important platform for representing one’s identity online. Moreover, Facebook actively positions itself as a kind of online identity registrar [2] — a “core social infrastructure” for the Web where users express their authentic “real selves” (Idea to Product Latin America, 2009). In line with this positioning, Facebook has sought (in different ways and at different times) to enforce a “real name” policy, requiring people to use “the name they use in real life” [3], verified by reference to acceptable identity documents [4]. Justifications for this policy vary, but often include social reasons (*i.e.*, safety and accountability) as well as financial ones (*i.e.*, increased engagement and advertising impressions). Regardless of motivation, the policy strives to maintain consistency between users’ Facebook and physical world identities.

But just what constitutes an “authentic” or “real” identity — both online and off — is a point of contention. For some, a Facebook identity is more “real” than certain off-line identities as it “[allows] someone to be more true than was ever possible prior to Facebook” [5]. Experimentation with representing one’s identity online can also allow people to embody potential future selves, which can be indispensable to developing one’s identity broadly (*e.g.*, Haimson, *et al.*, 2015a). Others argue that Facebook profiles represent idealized

rather than authentic versions of the self (Hogan, 2010); the platform is not one of real identity but, rather, a “medium for displaying the self that one wishes one was” [6]. Further, SNSs present unique challenges for identity expression (whether authentic or idealized), as they are often sites where groups or audiences from different social contexts combine (boyd, 2008). For users, this sort of “context collapse” (boyd, 2008; Marwick and boyd, 2010) foregrounds issues of identity and presentation: how we present our identity in a particular context (say, around family) may be radically different from how we present our identity in another (for example, around close friends). Moreover, both presentations may be “authentic,” though contextually contingent.

Challenges surrounding identity, authenticity, and context online are perhaps most sharply felt by those who express or carry certain marginalized or non-normative identities — especially those that may be socially or culturally stigmatized. Though it can be argued that everyone has certain aspects of their identities that are stigmatized, some stigmatized identities can be concealed while others cannot [7]. Transgender [8] people, for example, may seek to present an identity on Facebook that conflicts with or is different from the identity that appears on state-issued or other administrative documents. Being forced to use a name with which one does not identify (and was, moreover, coercively assigned at birth) can trigger experiences of dysphoria, humiliation, and — in some cases — harassment and other forms of violence. Similarly, abuse survivors are often subject to particular risks online. Though they may want to use their real names online, pseudonymous or anonymous profiles are often necessary for mitigating the risks of monitoring, harassment, impersonation, and stalking afforded by SNSs (Dimond, *et al.*, 2011; National Network to End Domestic Violence, 2014), as well as for seeking support without associating oneself publicly with a stigmatized abuse history (Andalibi, *et al.*, 2016). In other cases, users with real names that do not conform neatly to Western, European standards — in particular, Native American users — may find themselves subject to further marginalization when told by Facebook that their name is somehow not “real” or legitimate.

We seek to better understand these challenges by exploring how Facebook’s construction of “authenticity” works to exclude marginalized groups and non-normative identities. In this sense, we view these cases — in particular, trans users and abuse survivors — not as edge or exceptional cases, but as an unavoidable consequence of users with multifaceted, changing, or non-normative identities engaging a system that enforces an administrative and largely inflexible notion of “real names.” We approach Facebook’s conception and enforcement of authenticity in two ways: 1) a content analysis using data from *The Zuckerberg Files*, an online archive of all of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s public remarks from 2004–2014 and 2) a close reading of site “walkthroughs” (Burgess, *et al.*, 2015) coupled with a review of Facebook’s real name policy. The first approach allows us to articulate the ways Facebook’s founder and CEO has discussed issues of authenticity and realness as they relate to user identities; the second affords an analysis of the platform’s mechanisms for enforcing authenticity through site policy and design. Ultimately, this combination allows for a critical discussion of how Facebook’s construction of authenticity works to exclude certain people — including, trans people and abuse survivors — and opens up vital questions regarding the ethics and consequences of online identity enforcement.

## Online identity, authenticity, and Facebook’s real name problem

### *Online identity*

Debates surrounding the “realness” of online lives and personae have been present since the earliest days of the World Wide Web. Early work in this area explored the ways people used online platforms like chat rooms, message boards, Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), and virtual worlds to experiment with new identities (Bruckman, 1993; Stone, 1995; Donath, 1998; Turkle, 1999). These early platforms afforded user identities that were simultaneously multiple and coherent — identities that offered users, in the words of Sherry Turkle (1995), “a sense of self without being *one self*” [9]. In some ways, these early online identities seemed to resist easy categorization as either “real” or fraudulent; ; as one early MUD user described, “MUDs make me more what I really am. Off the MUD, I am not as much me” [10].

As Web services evolved from these early, often simple text-based platforms to richer, so-called “Web 2.0” applications (O’Reilly, 2005), however, fluidity and experimentation with identity eventually gave way to an expectation that people should represent an established, rather than experimental, identity (Marwick, 2013) [11]. Consequently, sharper distinctions emerged between “real” or authentic identities and “fake” or fraudulent ones. Both users and developers of early SNSs — emblematic of the new breed of Web 2.0 platforms — began distinguishing between “authentic” profiles and joke or ironic profiles, as with “Fakester” profiles on Friendster (boyd, 2004; Marwick, 2005). Despite claims that Web 2.0 platforms and principles empowered users and democratized content production, emerging social and technical demarcations of real versus fake identities generated new normative constraints for people trying to express themselves online.

For example, Mark Zuckerberg revealed in 2005 (when Facebook was barely a year old) that the company was beginning to automate the process of detecting and banning fake or fraudulent profiles: “one of the things that we do, we actually compute ... a percentage of realness that a person is — and if they fall below a threshold then they’re gone” (Stanford Center for Professional Development, 2012). Writing in the same year, Alice Marwick (2005) asserted that on SNSs, “the awkwardness and difficulty inherent in representing oneself in fixed codified ways will need to be addressed” [12].

Of course, SNSs and other Web 2.0-associated platforms have since become more flexible and sophisticated regarding user expression. For example, people are no longer restricted to expressing themselves through relatively static profile pages and can now post things like free-form status updates at any time. Users are also often offered more options for self-identification and categorization, as through Facebook’s custom gender options or through the ability to manipulate and edit (to some degree) the categories assigned to them for advertising purposes by sites like Facebook and Google. Nonetheless, the standards imposed and enforced by platforms like Facebook still generate problems for certain users, especially those with non-normative or marginalized identities. Despite advances, these sites still — often implicitly — privilege certain identities at the expense of others. For example, Hoffmann, *et al.* (under review) have argued that the features considered by Facebook to be typical of “a ‘real identity’ mirror those elements typical of the college directories that served as the site’s original inspiration, including a picture, a ‘real’ name, and contact information” (n.p.). Consequently, Facebook profiles often “reflect a normative life trajectory typical of certain kinds of individuals in affluent liberal societies” (Hoffmann, *et al.*, under review). These sorts of normative constraints are emblematic of the ways in which technologies impose certain values on their users — values that may conflict with users’ conceptions of their own identities and self-presentations (Manders-Huits, 2010).

### *Authenticity*

The emergence and enforcement of online boundaries between the “authentic” and the “fake” urges a reconsideration of the idea of authenticity more generally. As a term, it often carries positive connotations — “authentic” can be defined as “conforming to an original so as to reproduce essential features” or “not false or imitation” (Merriam-Webster, 2014). When applied to identity, it evokes definitions of being “true to one’s own personality, spirit, or character,” (Merriam-Webster, 2014). For others, authenticity can be understood as something that is socially constructed rather than inherent (Peterson, 2005). For example, wine from a particular region may be considered authentic not only because it is produced within specific geographical boundaries, but also because of the social attitudes, cultural history, and performance of taste associated with that geographical region (Peterson, 2005). In this section, we focus on the performative dimensions of authenticity and identity — that is, the ways in which the idea of authenticity is informed by discourse, social norms, and cultural standards and practices.

Conceptions of authenticity often imply — seemingly by definition — a dichotomy with fakeness (or inauthenticity). When applied to identity, this sort of strict dichotomy evokes modernist accounts that presume the existence of a real, true internal self (*e.g.*, Riesman, *et al.*, 1950) Though a “true” self may be difficult to identify and embrace, not acting from such a place may be seen as deceitful (Donath, 1998; Gergen, 2000) But isolating a singular or static original (or “true”) identity to serve as a standard of authenticity is a challenging — and perhaps impossible — task. Identities necessarily change as a person ages, learns, and moves around in the world. As postmodern theorists of identity argue, such a true self may not only be difficult to identify, it may not actually exist in the first place (Gergen, 2000). Instead, identity should be understood as socially constructed, multiple, and liminal (Butler, 1991; Stone, 1995; Gergen, 2000). On this view, then, authenticity is revealed to be not a natural but an artificial category — a performance that comes off “as natural and effortless” but is ultimately just an “idealized representation of reality” [13]. Thus, a person is authentic if she 1) is what we expect her to be; 2) meets the standards for the culture and circumstances from which she comes; and, 3) puts on a creative and sincere performance of identity (Peterson, 2005).

The performative nature of authenticity is central to discussions of gender, sexuality, and identity. As Judith Butler (1991) famously argued, “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original.” All gender is socially constructed; consequently, there is no “true,” original notion of male or female for people to conform to, only other performances of masculinity or femininity that people can imitate (Butler, 1991). Regarding authenticity and sexuality, Mary Gray (2009) found that rural lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth often find queer “authenticity” explicitly in online spaces, illustrating the ways in which authenticity is manufactured and performed, not internal and then realized. Further, the often-invoked metaphor of “the closet” implies that one has not realized their true or authentic identity until one “comes out.” However, this simplistic metaphor ignores the social context and interactions that are vital to identity formation (Gray, 2009). Ultimately, identity and queer scholarship reinforces the notion that authenticity depends greatly on context and that any static or absolute conception of authenticity should be resisted.

Online, authenticity’s performative nature is reflected in the choices users must make regarding personal or

informational disclosure. When filling out online profiles or engaging with others online, users must make choices about disclosing or allowing access to (sometimes intimate) details of one's life. These choices represent a kind of "personal branding" that may come across as more or less authentic depending on the context of the disclosures and the norms and affordances of a given site (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Of course, self-presentation is often harder for those whose identities or subjective preferences are socially and culturally marginalized (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Trans women, for example, often have a difficult time using platforms like the dating site Tinder that do not allow for a filtering of profiles more fine grained than a "man/woman" binary. As a result, Tinder users sometimes flag trans women's profiles as fraudulent when their profile pictures do not fit a stereotypical notion of feminine presentation (Villarreal, 2015).

Further, information stored online tends to persist over time, presenting an additional temporal challenge to the idea of authenticity. Schoenebeck, *et al.* (2016) found that for many young adults, authenticity required not editing content from the past — the more they curated past content, the more inauthentic they described feeling. However, past SNS content may present unique challenges or discomfort for some individuals as their lives progress. For those undergoing life transitions like gender transition, for example, past content can be particularly triggering and even hinder one's ability to move forward with a changing identity (Haimson, *et al.*, 2016). Finally, cultivating authenticity online also requires a negotiation between the affordances and possible audiences present on a given platform. For example, Marwick and boyd (2010) showed how on Twitter, people often balance their personal sense of authenticity with their audience's expectations — thus, one's identity is collaboratively constructed by a person along with their online audience.

### *Facebook's real name problem*

Facebook's real name policy requires that users display "authentic identities" by using "the name they use in real life" [14]. Though even as recently as 2010 Facebook did not actively enforce its real name policy, allowing people to easily create profiles without identity validation (Light and McGrath, 2010), in recent years it has been invoked regularly to deactivate accounts deemed "fake" (Lingel and Golub, 2015). The policy is offered as a way to keep the site safe and secure: if people use their "real names," then "you always know who you're connecting with. This helps keep our community safe" [15]. In clarifying the policy, Zuckerberg has stated that Facebook does not mean to enforce legal names, only "real names:" "Your real name is whatever you go by and what your friends call you" (Zuckerberg in Kantrowitz, 2015b). Nonetheless, there are other constraints imposed by the site — non-proper nouns, "unusual capitalization, repeating characters or punctuation," [16] or "too many words" [17] are not permitted during sign-up or when changing one's name on Facebook. These formatting restrictions present hurdles to, for example, Native American users like Lance Brown Eyes, who (after providing proof of identity) saw Facebook change his name to "Lance Brown" upon reinstatement of his account (Lone Hill, n.d.). As mentioned earlier, Facebook also uses algorithms to detect fake or fraudulent profiles generally. While it cannot be verified whether or not the site currently enforces names specifically algorithmically, the site may have employed such methods in the past (*e.g.*, Hill, 2012). Automating such a process could prove problematic as it is likely to produce false positives, flagging profiles where names include non-proper nouns or especially long strings of characters — as with some Native American or non-Western names — as "fake" [18]. Regardless of whether humans or algorithms or a combination of the two identify profiles with "fake" names, as Crawford and Gillespie (2016) have argued, when humans moderate content they act as and enact algorithms, and thus likely also disproportionately deactivate marginalized users' profiles.

Beyond formatting restrictions and automated detection, the real name policy is also enforced and policed by users themselves, as any user can report another for failing to use a "real name" [19]. This creates opportunities for those with biases against certain groups to use the flagging process systematically to remove profiles (Crawford and Gillespie, 2016), as happened to drag queens in 2014 (MacAulay and Moldes, 2016). After a profile is flagged, Facebook reviews the case and if the profile is determined by Facebook to be in violation of the real name policy, the accused user is given seven days to provide proof of identity from a list of sanctioned documents [20]. If, after seven days, such documentation has not been provided, the account is suspended. Ultimately, the onus is on those registering or those accused of using a fake name to prove the "realness" of their identity. Whether or not a name is permitted after being flagged as fake depends on the accused's ability to provide proof of identity according to one of Facebook's approved procedures [21]. Types of required documentation include birth certificates, driver's licenses, bank statements, and medical records. While these procedures attempt to accommodate cases where official documentation in one's chosen name may not be available, they ultimately read as confusing, opaque, and limiting. In December 2015, Facebook revised its name policies to address some of the issues mentioned above. New features require those reporting "fake" accounts to provide additional explanation, which will likely reduce the amount of unfounded, discriminatory reports, and shifts some of the onus of verification onto the accuser (Brandom, 2015). The new policies also explicitly allow additional explanation of name choices and possible exceptions for LGBTQ people, abuse survivors, and ethnic minorities. Additionally, a new "Name Verification Step" allows users to see and approve how Facebook will display their name on the site after a dispute (Brandom, 2015). The revised features are in testing at the time of this paper's writing,

but will be eventually incorporated into the site (Osofsky and Gage, 2015).

While these steps are improvements over previous iterations of enforcement, however, the process can still be confusing, frustrating, or insufficient for some kinds of users — especially those with changing, faceted, or pseudonymous identities. Even with the policy changes, Facebook still clings to the underlying “authentic identity” philosophy, “holding fast to the underlying premise that they need us to use Facebook as our one and only public self” [22]. Consequently, groups like trans people and abuse survivors remain vulnerable to exposure and harm as a result of the policy. For trans people, acquiring or changing identification from state and federal agencies is often problematic and discriminatory, especially for those who may fall between categorical lines (Spade, 2008). Survivors of abuse, on the other hand, may only adopt a pseudonymous identity online to evade former abusers, so the acquisition of alternative forms of identity outside of Facebook may be impractical or undesired. As boyd has noted, “what victims need — more than anything — is not to be able to be found, online or off-line” (boyd in Golijan, 2013). For abuse survivors, not being found on Facebook is particularly important because Facebook tends to respond to reports of harassment or abuse much more slowly than it does when one user flags another as “fake” (MacAulay and Moldes, 2016).

Further, reinstating one’s account has been described as a “process hell” (Kantrowitz, 2015a). Being locked out of one’s account and unable to connect with one’s social network can have emotional consequences. In a particularly poignant example, journalist and sex educator Violet Blue’s (2015) blog post titled “Why I’m sitting at home crying on a Saturday afternoon” detailed her frustrating experiences trying to regain access to her Facebook account. Moreover, the “rabbit hole of Facebook bureaucracy” (Kantrowitz, 2015a) has created situations where not only are people locked out of their accounts, but are locked out under names that expose a prior identity to their network. In situations like these where Facebook’s name policies have caused unwanted disclosures to people’s networks, people often wish to “contact Facebook support urgently” [23] (see [Figure 1](#)), which is essentially not possible, especially in a case like this where Facebook has deemed the problem resolved. Because Facebook has no identity registration office, direct contact with a human Facebook representative about a real name issue is not possible. The company has a customer support phone number, but it is fully automated.

Instead of direct or voice contact with a human representative, Facebook allows users a range of “report” mechanisms, like “Report Something on Facebook,” “Reporting a Violation or Infringement of Your Rights,” or “Give Us Feedback About a Facebook Feature.” Typing into these Web forms generates either an e-mail or an item in the user’s Support Inbox on Facebook. E-mail messages include language like: “We will look into your matter shortly” and “We’ll review the information you provided and get back to you soon.” These types of inquiries are common (a search on Facebook’s help pages for “name change” reveals many frustrated users unable to use the names they would like to on their Facebook profiles) and often left unresolved, as we see in [Figure 1](#) which has been posted “over a year ago,” received 79 “votes” and 914 views, yet has received no response.

## Facebook changed my name to my unknown birth name, not my current legal name...

[Ask a Question](#)
[My Account](#) [Timeline \(Profile\)](#)

I provided Facebook with my original birth certificate and my name change certificate - instead they changed my name to my birth name which I have hidden for the past years.... and I SPECIFICALLY DID NOT WANT people to know. When I try reply in my email I get an automatic reply saying "Your problem is resolved, please visit the help center for additional help". My problem has not been resolved and there doesn't seem to be anywhere in there to contact them.

I was already extremely upset before.... Now even more so.. My facebook was also deactivated a few hours after I announced tickets to my nightclub event - which made both those and my event page unavailable for the past 2 days. Is there any way to pursue this in small claims court? I will be getting legal advice, but can not hurt to ask here.

tl;dr - How do I contact facebook support urgently?

Asked over a year ago by [REDACTED]

79 Votes · 2 Followers · Seen by 914

✕

▲ Good Question
▼

[Follow this Question](#) · [Share](#)

**Figure 1:** User post to Facebook's Help Center.

Ultimately, Facebook users with a real name issue have no recourse but to file a report and wait. In our sample walkthroughs for this paper (discussed in detail below), for example, we never received follow-up communication on the reports that we filed, and they remained unanswered for over six months as of this paper's publication.

### Examining Facebook's concept of authenticity: Discourse and design

Extant discussions of Facebook's real name policy often use the stories of affected users and those who have rallied around them to articulate the negative consequences of the policy's enforcement. However, we argue that the site and its representatives also work to shape normative exceptions around real names and identity through discourse and user experience design in ways that may be insidious and as-yet-unaddressed. To support this claim, we take a two-fold approach. First, we use content analysis methods (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) to analyze data from *The Zuckerberg Files*, an online archive of all of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's public remarks from 2004–2014, to understand how Facebook publicly envisages authenticity and how this contributes to the dominant discourse around "authentic identity" on the site generally. Second, we use close readings of Facebook policy documents, along with site texts and materials gathered through technical walkthroughs (Burgess, *et al.*, 2015) to analyze the platform's mechanisms for enforcing authenticity. As Lingel and Gillespie (2014) rightly point out, choices made by Facebook "privilege the practices of some, and render others more difficult or impossible" [24]. Accordingly, our aim is to contribute to a critical and ongoing discussion of Facebook and its impact on those that might be excluded by the site's notion of authenticity. In addition, we offer our analysis as an extension of broader critical discussions of the supposed participatory and democratic potential of Web 2.0 and SNSs begun a decade ago (*e.g.*, Zimmer, 2008).

### *Authenticity and the "real" in Mark Zuckerberg's technological discourse*

Broadly, discourse refers to language use as it relates to social, political, and cultural structures. It both informs and is informed by social orders [25]. When discourse revolves around a particular technology — whether it is being imagined, described, managed, or grappled with through language — we can refer to it as "technological discourse" [26]. With regard to technological discourse, individual and institutional actors — like corporations or CEOs — are particularly well positioned to influence or shape discussions of technology, especially through conventional media outlets (van Dijk, 1996; Cukier, *et al.*, 2009). For Facebook, no individual has been more visible — and inextricably linked to the site — than founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg.

In the following, we examine Mark Zuckerberg's discussions of authenticity, identity, and "realness" as captured in *The Zuckerberg Files*, a digital archive of all publicly available utterances of Zuckerberg regarding Facebook from 2004 to 2014, compiled and maintained by Michael Zimmer (2013). The archive includes more than 114,000 words from 125 full-text transcripts of video content, interviews in print media, and posts to the official Facebook blog. Text documents were imported into qualitative data analysis software NVivo to facilitate the application of a two-phase coding schema. First, a descriptive coding scheme was applied to capture references to the following: Facebook's business/commercial side; privacy issues; definitions of Facebook and its evolution; users; technical/technological features of the site; and, broad controversies or issues (*e.g.*, the introduction of the NewsFeed feature). These initial codes — though not driven by any rigid or overarching social or other theory — can be considered deductive as they were loosely informed by previous work on Facebook and Zuckerberg's discourse (Hoffmann, 2014; Zimmer, 2014; Zimmer and Hoffmann, 2014). Next, second- and third-level codes were applied to achieve greater granularity of understanding. This second level of coding was inductive; these second-level codes sought to account for interesting or notable themes, keywords, or ideas that were not contained in the first-level coding scheme but emerged during the coding process. In short, the initial codes were conceived prior to beginning coding while subsequent codes emerged and were informed by a close analysis of the archive itself (*e.g.*, "directed" analysis [Hsieh and Shannon, 2005]) [27]. Though this coding process was broader and more comprehensive, the present analysis focuses explicitly on Zuckerberg's references to authenticity and related terms — for example, realness, integrity, and user identity. Ultimately, this particular subset of the corpus contained more than 10,000 words (roughly nine percent of the entire archive).

The notion of a "real" identity is, according to Zuckerberg, "a very foundational element of what makes Facebook Facebook" (E-G8 Forum, 2011). The earliest iterations of the site deliberately mimicked the printed student directories (also known as "face books") available to Zuckerberg and his classmates at Harvard University, as he wanted to build "an online directory for colleges" (Bosker, 2011). Indeed, the ability to make this sort of directory was a point of pride for Zuckerberg at the time: "I think it's kind of silly that it would take the University a couple of years to get around to it. I can do it better than they can, and I can do it in a week" (Tabak, 2004). Though these early discussions do not use the language of "realness" or "authenticity," the types of information Zuckerberg had in mind included names, photos, and some contact information — the same kinds of information categories found in administrative systems like university directories.

This administrative vision was supported by the early requirement that only those with college- or university-issued ".edu" e-mail addresses were able to register with the site, with one unique address corresponding to one individual student.

So, one of the things that people don't think about that often today is early on we wanted to establish this culture of real identity on the service ... . And one of the ways that we, uh, kind of determined that someone was really who they said they were and their credentials were real were everyone had school e-mail addresses ... . *Because people typically only have one school account.* So being able to bootstrap off of that was this really nice early thing that, that helped us establish this culture of real identity. (Y Combinator, 2013, emphasis added)

Here, Zuckerberg makes explicit the idea that a "real identity" corresponds with an administrative identity — that is, identities are real when they are sanctioned and supported by established institutional structures like universities or, later, the state. Relatedly, Zuckerberg resisted calling Facebook a "social network," insisting that the site was "an online directory" that individuals "use in their daily lives to look people up and find information about people" (Stanford Center for Professional Development, 2012).

Though Facebook's design has undergone significant changes since its inception, this administrative conception of identity remains foundational, often reinforced in discussions of Facebook profiles. For Zuckerberg, "the profile is at the center" of every major evolution of the platform (f8, 2011). Discussing the first profiles on the site, Zuckerberg noted that

there wasn't even a wall, but people loved this product. It was revolutionary because it was the first place that most people had on the Internet where they felt safe expressing their real self. (f8, 2011)

While other features of Facebook's origin story have fallen away over time, the connection between early profiles and real names has remained. Tellingly, this idea of the profile's "real self" is specifically set in contrast to later features designed to allow more self-expression: "... but people wanted more ways to express themselves, so we started adding things like status updates and photos and groups and apps and quickly this profile reached the limit of what it could express" (f8, 2011). Here, features like free-form status updates or photo albums are about self-expression, while the profile remains something akin to factual information — "it's just the basics" (f8, 2011). This contrast between identity and self-expression is reiterated in Zuckerberg's discussions of Twitter: "they don't do real names ... . It's a lot more around self expression than real identity" (Smith, 2010). These sorts of distinctions serve to reinforce a notion of "real names" or authentic identities as something given or factual, like an entry in a database, rather than something that is constructed or performed in context.

Beyond being foundational to Facebook's design, Zuckerberg also attributes much of the site's success to its "focus on real identity and the connections between people" (Y Combinator, 2013) [28].

"The idea at the time [of Facebook's founding] was that *it was pretty scary to put your, your name, um, and real identity online* without the right privacy controls and without kind of the right community infrastructure. So I think *that's a lot of what we built, was a framework where people would be comfortable sharing in that way.*" (Y Combinator, 2013, emphasis added)

Here, we see "real names" associated with feelings of comfort and safety, a recurring theme for Zuckerberg. As he reiterates elsewhere, Facebook "made it easy for people to feel comfortable sharing things about their real lives" (Stone and Frier, 2014).

One of the attributes of Facebook that we've talked about a bit today is this real identity culture, right, real identity and real relationships. And one of the attributes of that is that when someone says something, their name is attached to what they said, right. So on the Internet and in other anonymous places, you know, anyone can sign up and create a blog somewhere and say whatever they want and not attach their name to it, but *with real identity comes real accountability, too, right.* (E-G8 Forum, 2011, emphasis added)

At the same time, real and authentic identities are tied to findability, echoing Zuckerberg's earlier characterizations of the site as an online directory: "The advantage on the real identity side is that you know who your friends are. You can look them up very easily, because they have their real names in the system" (E-G8 Forum, 2011).

Importantly, safety and findability are not exclusive concepts for Zuckerberg; they are intimately intertwined in an ideological commitment to the notion that "more transparency should make for a more tolerant society in which people eventually accept that everybody sometimes does bad or embarrassing things" [29]. In practice, Facebook is explicitly designed to facilitate this sort of radical transparency:

... how this kind of increased transparency would play out and what would happen when there is more information available, and how people would negotiate building their own identity, managing their reputation, managing their privacy. *And that's actually a lot of what Facebook was grown to address.* (Idea to Product Latin America, 2009, emphasis added)

For Zuckerberg, then, both safety and findability converge in their dependence on a transparent "real identity" model. Discursively speaking, this characterization leaves little room for alternative conceptions of safety that may hinge on obscurity or invisibility — strategies that are often employed by those with marginalized or non-normative identities (like trans people) or those managing risks of physical and emotional danger if found (like abuse survivors). Zuckerberg's discourse reveals how the tensions and problems caused by Facebook's real name policy are not accidental or fluke oversights, but a natural extension of a site rooted in an administrative conception of identity and that equates a kind of visibility (findability) and a simple, singular, fact-based presentation with safety.

*Constructing and enforcing authenticity on Facebook*

To understand how Facebook constructs and conceives of the idea of “authenticity” through the site itself, we analyze Facebook’s policy documentation and other text encountered during walkthroughs of the site, capturing how and when “authenticity” is used (both explicitly as a word and implicitly as a construct). Our analysis relied heavily on data collected using recorded technical walkthroughs (Burgess, *et al.*, 2015). Using a Safari browser with cleared browser history and cookies, a U.S. IP address, and a screen recording software (Snagit), we captured video and audio recording and screenshots of visits to Facebook and other linked sites while acting as a user aiming to perform a series of tasks related to identity presentation on Facebook (see [Table 1](#)). We performed walkthroughs from two different subject positions: (1) a person attempting to represent a non-normative identity on Facebook and navigating the site after being reported as “fake,” and (2) a person reporting another for using a “fake” account. Tasks were chosen to simulate user experiences of people encountering Facebook’s construction and enforcement of “authentic” name or identity. These walkthroughs resulted in 67 minutes of video footage and 76 screenshots of Facebook and its policy documentation, help pages, Community Standards pages, and linked sites, which we analyzed using close reading. Although we do not have space here to describe the walkthroughs in detail (as in Light and McGrath, 2010), readers may contact the first author for more details on each task’s path and results.

**Subject position 1: a person attempting to represent a non-normative identity on Facebook and navigating the site after being reported as “fake”**

- 1 Determine which names are accepted on Facebook.
- 2 Find out if multiple profiles are allowed on Facebook.
- 3 Change name on Facebook.
- 4 Create a new account as a user with a “fake” name.
- 5 Get locked out of account for using a “fake” name and be asked to upload identity documents.
- 6 Try to contact Facebook support.

**Subject position 2: a person reporting another for using a “fake” account**

- 7 Report an account as “fake.”

**Table 1:** Tasks performed as walkthroughs on Facebook.

The importance Facebook places on authenticity is made clear by the sheer number of times the word “authentic” occurs on many pages. Three pages in particular use the word “authentic” four to five times in brief succession: “What names are allowed on Facebook”, the Community Standards section on “Using Your Authentic Identity”, and “Changing Your Language-Specific Name” (see [Table 2](#)). Additionally, the ways that these pages describe authentic name practices, and the practices considered fake in contrast, reveal many Western and white assumptions about what is and is not authentic, as detailed below. In what follows, we perform a close reading of each of these pages.

First, the page titled “What names are allowed on Facebook,” where users are directed from many different places on the site (*e.g.*, when choosing a name at sign up, or when attempting to recover an account flagged as being “fake”) uses “authentic” four times in 196 words, making it the third most prevalent word on this page, outranked by only “name” and “use.” This help page explains Facebook’s requirement of authentic names as follows: “Facebook is a community where people use their authentic identities. We require people to provide the name they use in real life; that way, you always know who you’re connecting with. This helps keep our community safe.” After stating several requirements for names on Facebook, such as not using characters from multiple languages or “unusual capitalization, repeating characters or

punctuation,” the site states “The name you use should be your authentic identity; as your friends call you in real life and as our acceptable identification forms would show.” Finally, at the end of the page, Facebook urges users to change their name if “your authentic name isn’t listed on your account.” This text reveals biases around which names are acceptable on Facebook, and may systematically marginalize particular groups of people. What is considered an appropriate name in one culture can be very different than what is considered appropriate in another, depending on features like “unusual capitalization, repeating characters or punctuation,” name length, and use of adjectives and nouns. As mentioned earlier, Native Americans, many of whose names include words that Facebook’s policies could deem “fake,” have been a recent target for account deletion (Holpuch, 2015).

Next, Facebook’s Community Standards page includes a section on “Keeping your account and personal information secure,” with a sub-section about “Using Your Authentic Identity.” Here, “authentic” is used three times out of 113 total words, the most frequent word after “Facebook” and “profile.” Additionally, “authentic” appears in bold text in the section’s title, further highlighting its importance. The page states that “Facebook’s real name requirement creates a safer environment,” and echoes the explanation from the “What names are allowed on Facebook” page with slightly revised language: “People connect on Facebook using their authentic identities.” Here, people using names that Facebook may not consider authentic are posited as not only fake but also as unsafe and violating the privacy and community standards of the broader Facebook community. Thus, real name policies and enforcement of Facebook’s notion of authenticity goes further than marginalizing certain users, and further characterizes them as a security threat. As MacAulay and Moldes (2016) argued, Facebook uses people’s fear of anonymity to contextualize real name enforcement as a safety issue.

Finally, “Changing Your Language-Specific Name,” a page allowing users to enter a name on Facebook “as it appears in another language” that may use different characters than English, such as Korean or Russian, included the most references to authenticity of the pages we analyzed. Here, “authentic” comprises five out of 131 total words — almost four percent of all words on the page. In fact, “authentic” is used more than the word “the,” which has only three instances in the document. “Name” and “ID” are the only words used more frequently than “authentic.” The sentences discussing authenticity mirror those above, stating “Facebook is a community where people connect and share using their authentic identities.” The emphasis on authentic name and identity on this page (that is targeted mainly at non-Western users) is alarming, for two reasons. First, it may be indicative of an assumption that non-Westerners are more likely to try to represent inauthentic names or identities on Facebook. Second, it assumes that “authentic” means the same thing in all cultures and languages.

| page  | "What names are allowed on Facebook" | Community Standards, section on "Using Your Authentic Identity" | "Changing Your Language-Specific Name" |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>total words</b>                                  | 196                                  | 113   | 131                                    |
| <b>percentage of "authentic" out of total words</b> | 2.04 percent                         | 2.65 percent  | 3.82 percent                           |
| <b>"authentic" in title or bold font</b>            | no                                   | in title and bold   | no                                     |
| <b>most frequent word (count)</b>                   | name (11)                            | Facebook (4)  | name (10)                              |
| <b>second most frequent word (count)</b>            | use (5)                              | profile (4)   | ID (6)                                 |
| <b>third most frequent word (count)</b>             | authentic (4)                        | authentic (3)   | authentic (5)                          |

**Table 2:** "Authenticity" on user-facing pages.

In addition to its emphasis on the idea of "authenticity," Facebook manages identity in other ways that can pose problems for users with fluid or changing identities, such as allowing exactly one account per person and not allowing joint accounts or multiple accounts [30]. Previous research found that almost 15 percent of trans Facebook users maintain multiple accounts during gender transition (Haimson, *et al.*, 2015b), a natural response to a situation where disclosure to different facets of one's online social network can be difficult and stressful [31]. Thus, while many users employ workarounds to the one-account-per-person rule, Facebook's insistence on one account per user privileges static or relatively stable identity representations and markers.

### **The disconnect between discourse, design, and authentic presentation**

Facebook has made some positive changes to address many of the concerns that trans people, ethnic minorities, and victims of abuse may face on Facebook, as we described above. Still, Facebook remains one of the most dominant platforms for identity registration globally, and if anything, these new policies solidify Facebook's place as an online identity registrar that offers individuals little agency. Facebook will likely continue to improve upon its policies and features, and will become a more welcoming space for trans people and abuse survivors as these changes are introduced. However, the company — and especially Zuckerberg's — insistence on mandating and enforcing "authentic selves" is unlikely to change, given its foundational role in Facebook's conception and design.

Building on the problems with Facebook's "real name" policy identified by journalists, activists, and other scholars, we offer the above analysis as further evidence of the ways in which Facebook's discourse and design privileges the needs and identities of some users over others. First, Mark Zuckerberg's discussions show how the conflicts generated by the site's policies are not an accident, but the natural result of a site that ties authenticity to visibility and safety in precarious ways. By relying on an underlying administrative conception of authentic identities (one that positions identity as akin to an entry in a database rather than

something that is performed in context), Facebook privileges users whose names, for whatever reason, remain relatively stable or static over time. This generates problems for those whose identities may need to change over time, as with a trans person undergoing gender transition or an abuse survivor trying to keep safe. Second, three key pieces of Facebook's Help documentation revealed during our walkthrough analysis show how Facebook's use of the term "authenticity" on their site is biased in favor of certain users. Troublingly, these distinctions often occur on cultural lines, positing, for instance, some white, Western, and/or cisgender users as authentic, and some non-white, non-American, and/or trans users as fake.

If we accept authenticity and identity as something that is constructed or performed in context, and if some constructions or performances cannot be reconciled with Facebook's "real name" policies, then we begin to see the ways that Facebook simultaneously demands and forestalls authentic presentation for some. This paradox places certain users in a bind, in which Facebook's discourse and design advances certain expectations of authenticity, but displaying an authentic self is difficult, unsafe, or even impossible. This conflict is reminiscent of the "double bind" faced by many trans people when seeking healthcare: to access appropriate healthcare, trans people may need to have already achieved gender reclassification (a process which often requires medical procedures such as surgery), yet to acquire surgery and other medical aspects of transition, one must have access to healthcare (Spade, 2008).

On Facebook users are asked to present themselves authentically, but for some this requires modifying their "authentic self" to fit the demands of Facebook's real name policies and restrictions. Users in this situation must either lie or distort information about themselves to meet Facebook's standards of authenticity, or refrain from using the site at all (an increasingly difficult proposition). This, of course, seems to fly in the face of what it means to be authentic; as Trepte and Reinecke (2011) argued, "for authentic persons it might be more satisfying if they do not live up to the standard set in a certain environment rather than sacrifice their authenticity for the sake of social norms and expectations" [32]. Thus, in the case of a person whose authentic name does not comply with Facebook's policies, it would be more authentic to defy Facebook's real name policy than to present an online self that is in accordance with Facebook's policies. However, Facebook's policies and enforcement mechanisms render such a pushback against the system increasingly impossible.



## Conclusion

Several months after their real name policy was challenged by a Bay Area community of drag queens in 2014, Facebook publicly apologized while still defending their policy in practice [33]. In the apology, Facebook's Chief Product Officer Chris Cox (2014) stated: "Our policy has never been to require everyone on Facebook to use their legal name. The spirit of our policy is that everyone on Facebook uses the authentic name they use in real life." While the "spirit" of Facebook's policy may hypothetically allow people to use authentic but non-legal names on their Facebook profiles, the letter of the policy does not. Further, as the preceding discussion and analysis has shown, issues with Facebook's "real name" policy go deeper than issues with legal documentation; instead, they raise thornier questions around authenticity and the complexities of online identity more generally.

Given its size and influence online, Facebook has worked to impose an administrative notion of authenticity on a large portion of the world's population. This administrative conception of identity is captured in Zuckerberg's discourse surrounding authenticity, identity, and the directory-oriented nature of Facebook's foundations. Facebook's view of authenticity is also reflected in its mechanisms for enforcing "authentic identity" through site policy and design, as demonstrated in our analysis of site walkthroughs. Ultimately, the combination of discourse and design generates conditions that exclude or make online life disproportionately difficult for certain groups, including trans people, abuse survivors, and Native Americans. By defining and challenging Facebook's construction and enforcement of authenticity, we encourage considerations of how discourse and design could be approached differently, to allow all users to be as authentic or inauthentic as they choose, no matter how fluid, contextual, and socially constructed that identity may be. 

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## Notes

1. [http://www.alex.com/topsites/category/Computers/Internet/On\\_the\\_Web/Online\\_Communities/Social\\_Networking](http://www.alex.com/topsites/category/Computers/Internet/On_the_Web/Online_Communities/Social_Networking).
2. We are grateful to Violet Blue (2015) for the characterization of Facebook as an identity registrar.
3. <https://www.facebook.com/help/112146705538576>.
4. <https://www.facebook.com/help/159096464162185>.
5. Miller, 2011, p. 50.
6. Gershon, 2010, p. 87.
7. For example, Goffman (1963) argued that everyone is both stigmatized and normal based on certain of their personal characteristics.
8. Transgender is a term that refers to “people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender” (Stryker, 2008, p. 1). Following (Haimson, *et al.*, 2015b), we use “trans” for the remainder of this paper to refer to the broad transgender population.
9. Turkle, 1995, p. 258, emphasis added.
10. Turkle, 1995, p. 240.
11. We note that online experimentation and representation of fluid identities is still possible and common in some online spaces (*e.g.*, Tumblr, Reddit, virtual worlds).
12. Marwick, 2005, p. 24.
13. Grazian, 2003, pp. 10–11.
14. <https://www.facebook.com/help/112146705538576>.
15. <https://www.facebook.com/help/112146705538576>.
16. <https://www.facebook.com/help/112146705538576>.
17. <https://www.facebook.com/help/community/question/?id=10207327210402680>.
18. Far from hypothetical, Zuckerberg has jokingly discussed the imperfection of automated methods for assessing authenticity before: “Yeah. So I mean, so one of the things that we do, we actually compute how,

like a percentage of realness that a person is, and if they fall below a threshold then they're gone. Right? So I mean, like, so it's actually pretty funny. This is something that my friends and I like to do. We just go through and like see how real certain people are who we know are actually real people. We're like, you're only 75 percent real. Um ..." (Stanford Center for Professional Development, 2012).

19. <https://www.facebook.com/help/206559146047897>.

20. <https://www.facebook.com/help/159096464162185>.

21. <https://www.facebook.com/help/159096464162185>.

22. Lingel and Gillespie, 2014, paragraph 10.

23. [https://www.facebook.com/help/community/question/?\\_rdr=p&id=10204701697172621](https://www.facebook.com/help/community/question/?_rdr=p&id=10204701697172621).

24. Lingel and Gillespie, 2014, paragraph 12.

25. Jaworski and Coupland, 1999, p. 3; van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 5.

26. Bazerman, 1998, pp. 385–386; Proferes, 2015, pp. 24–30.

27. A copy of the full coding schema can be accessed at <http://zuckerbergfiles.org/docs/> (Situating Facebook — Appendix A — Codebook.pdf).

28. This sentiment was echoed by others. As a former Facebook employee described, "Facebook wants you to be your authentic self because they believe that authenticity is what makes the site appealing" (Zip, 2015).

29. Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 211.

30. <https://www.facebook.com/help/345121355559712/>.

31. In another context, Lingel and Golub (2015) found that drag queens often maintained multiple Facebook accounts to manage complex facets of their identities.

32. Trepte and Reinecke, 2011, p. 66.

33. For a more in-depth account of drag queens' 2014 challenges to Facebook's real name policy and Facebook's response, see Lingel and Golub (2015) and MacAulay and Moldes (2016).

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