Chapter 6

Work-Based Self-Portrayals: Signaling Reciprocity on Social Media to Reassure Distant Work-Based Project Collaborators

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ABSTRACT

One degree out from an image “selfie” are text-based self-generated user profiles (self-portrayals) on social media platforms; these are self-depictions of the individual as he or she represents to the world. This work-based self-representation must be sufficiently convincing of professionalism and ethics to encourage other professionals to collaborate on shared work projects through co-creation, support, attention, or other work. While project-based track records may carry the force of fact, there are often more subtle messages that have high impact on distant collaborations. One such important dimension is “indirect reciprocity,” or whether the target individual treats collaborators with respect and care and returns altruistic acts with their own acts of altruism. This work describes some analyses of professional profiles on social media platforms (email, social networking, and microblogging) for indicators of indirect reciprocity.

INTRODUCTION

The propositions from strangers usually come in a few basic ways. One modality would be emails in which the inviter will suggest that it would be a good idea to spend hundreds of hours working on a project for minimal return (say, a PDF copy

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of that article). In many cases, the invitations are clearly created for broad-scale consumption. In other cases, there is a light merge-sort, in which a ‘bot-captured title is melded with one’s name, and then the proposal goes on as pre-written (often without any tie between the published work or the project for which work is being elicited). The cold-ask, without any prior relationship, requires a certain finesse so as not to offend. The objective is to capture the invitee’s attention and interest and to motivate them to cooperate. There could be polite blandishments and promises of moneys, professional growth, reputational enhancements, friendship, or any number of rewards. Some are requests based on the goodness of the respondent: Would you share a site license key to enable a student in a developing country to analyze his or her qualitative data? Would you work with the individual to create a fraud detection tool for use with a third-party vertical? Would you share protected and sensitive data from an instructional design project with a private security company’s agent? The mix has to be right because for any one individual, what may be considered attractive may actually be aversive. If initial communications are started, individuals may self-disclose information to lower uncertainty about themselves and increase their sense of likeability to others (Kashian, Jang, Shin, Dai, & Walther, 2017, p. 281), and often based on the “prospect of future interaction” (PFI) (Shaffer, Ogden, & Wu, 1987, p. 95). In most cases, the cold-ask goes unanswered, the invitee indifferent, and the electronic elicitations dumped in the spam folder. After all, the stranger generally is not in a position to ask, and there are many who are known quantities and who are in a position to ask for collaboration and whose requests will require work and focus.

In some cases, the inviter already has a light relationship with the invitee, and in these cases, there are friendly overtures and professions of friendship and polite language. The tradeoffs are usually the same, without much on offer, but that is the state of publishing today and the state of electronic hypersociality. Social media platforms and the cultural practices that come with them have pushed out the limits of the Dunbar number (the 150 people that individuals are said to be able to manage socially in established relationship), and individuals who head projects can gain partners on projects through hustle, social introductions, and mere talk. Such connections would not have been common in an earlier age when potential project partners usually had to be formally included in a funded project and people socialized in a more traditional way, say, face-to-face. Here, the “contact, proximity and neighboring” promote “the reciprocal exchange of services” (Plickert, Côté, & Wellman, 2007, p. 410). Certainly, people connect F2F even now, but it is not uncommon to collaborate on projects with people one has never met physically. These include constructive long-term and co-beneficial professional associations.
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