

Digital and Physical Barriers to Changing Identities

Social media sites often erect barriers to changing identities online, which can be similar to physical world barriers faced by marginalized groups. How can social media be designed to enable rather than constrain life changes?

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People with changing and marginalized identities often have a difficult time moving around in the world. While my focus here is on transgender people, a marginalized group that has been especially visible recently, many of these ideas can be generalized to other marginalized populations. Transgender (or trans) is a term to describe “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” [1]). As an everyday and tangible example of the sorts of physical barriers trans people face, several states in the U.S. recently passed or considered legislation requiring people to use public restrooms that correspond to the gender listed on their birth certificate.

Of course, public spaces do not literally have “bathroom police” designating who can and cannot enter; and even if they did, such gatekeepers would find it difficult to accurately determine someone’s birth sex. However, such laws promote dangerous behaviors, giving legal justification for people to harass

and remove trans people from public restrooms.

Setting up legal and social barriers against using public restrooms does not sort people into categories in a simple, biological way. Instead, it creates a world where trans people cannot exist in public spaces. Imagine if the only bathroom

you were allowed to use was at your home. This would mean you could not be on campus for longer than an hour or two; you could not go to a museum or a concert; you could not get a job. The recent biographical film “Hidden Figures,” set in the 1960s, includes several scenes where the main character,



"Rest area" © David Fulme (daveynin; Flickr)

an African-American mathematician, is forced to run half a mile back and forth from her workplace to the nearest bathroom she was allowed to use. While many people viewed this scene as an outdated historical artifact, it is all too familiar to trans and non-binary people who have identified and frequented the unisex restroom nearest to their workplace or campus building, which, in most cases, is neither nearby nor convenient. Restroom discrimination is a clear example of a physical barrier that makes it difficult for a marginalized group to exist in the physical world.

FROM PHYSICAL WORLD TO DIGITAL WORLD

The online world is often posited as an antidote to such barriers. For ex-

ample, Sherry Turkle discussed the internet as a social laboratory, where people took refuge to experiment with their identities in ways that were much more difficult in the physical world [2]. On some online platforms, experimenting with one's name, gender, and appearance is relatively easy. This is one reason that large communities of trans people use sites like Tumblr and Reddit—where you can be anonymous, pseudonymous, or private by obscurity; that is, it is unlikely one's parents would know Tumblr exists, think to search for you, and be able to find your Tumblr account. Online spaces are important means for people to find support and information, ask questions and get answers, and see what it is like to

communicate and interact with others as a new gender.

However, much as physical spaces, like bathrooms, hinder people from living their lives, online spaces often erect similar types of barriers. As an example, think of the last time you filled out an online survey or form. Though many survey authors are getting better at using inclusive gender options, it is often the case that a survey asks a person to choose either male or female, without any other options. Maybe it's a market research survey for a car insurance company, in which case people for whom those categories don't fit likely accept it as a microaggression and move on. Yet in other cases, limited gender options feel harmful for some because

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it signals that other people do not acknowledge their identity in the way they prefer.

Inadequate gender options on forms may seem like a small inconvenience, but considering the frequency with which one is expected to fill out demographic questionnaires, it can be a substantial source of stress, particularly in professional or healthcare contexts. The examples I describe involve surveys that do not give enough options. However in other cases, surveys or forms ask for too much information and require uncomfortable levels of disclosure, even when gender information is irrelevant to the context. For an excellent article examining the nuances and complexities of trans-inclusive survey design, see Bauer et al. [3].

As another barrier to technological inclusion for trans people and others embarking on life transitions, many technological systems are not set up to handle identity change well. Lars MacKenzie's recent article uncovered the ways credit agencies' data systems (mis)handle the financial records of people changing gender [4]. Such systems, which use technology to impose financial decisions with real consequences (such as being denied housing, loans, and credit), have difficulty handling a person who used to have one name and now has another. In many cases, these systems and companies "out" people as trans to potential employers and landlords, make people's credit histories inaccessible to them, and even flag people as fraudulent when they attempt to access their own finances. Such systems have clearly adapted to adequately handle someone who changes their surname after marriage; yet changing one's

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first name remains an outlier condition with no technological solution in place. Financial identity management is a case in which technology that fails to handle identity change can have devastating real-world consequences.

CHANGING IDENTITIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media sites similarly often have difficulty managing identity changes, in ways that affect people socially rather than financially. In contrast to the identity exploration and information seeking that happens on sites like Tumblr and Reddit for people exploring marginalized identities, Facebook stands in contrast. It is a site inhabited by people's "real life" connections, where they are required to use their physical world name and identity, and where multiple accounts are prohibited. This can cause substantial difficulty for people during identity changes.

The difficulty of identity changes is compounded by the network of people who remain on one's Facebook network over time, even after those people are no longer meaningful in one's life. The algorithmically curated news feed seems to slowly fade people away over time if one does not interact with them frequently, but these old friends and acquaintances remain on one's friends list. When disclosing life events and changes, one's status update may pop up in old friends' feeds if certain words are used ("I'm excited to announce...") or if enough people respond saying "Congratulations!" [5].

Disclosing a new identity, particularly one that is stigmatized and places one in a marginalized group, can be especially difficult given the wide range of connections from the past who remain on one's friends list: people from high school, former coworkers, and people whom one barely even remembers. Going through one's friends list and unfriending based on anticipated reactions to, for instance, a gender transition, is a common practice but emotionally exhausting. Many people appreciate the ability to make mass disclosures, and disclose a life event to everyone at once rather than through a series of one-on-one conversations. How-

ever, the presence of a sticky social network is often draining, and may hinder change rather than support the ever-changing nature of life.

Additionally, Facebook's "real name" policy has disproportionately targeted trans people and other marginalized users, shutting down accounts of people whose names do not match their legal documents [6]. Though Facebook has made improvements to this policy, and seems to enforce it somewhat less than in previous years, in many online trans communities people still frequently discuss frustrating experiences with Facebook's "real name" policy. By enforcing this policy, Facebook imposes a literal barrier between trans people being able to exist within their online social networks.

Technological systems that impose barriers on people's social media activity are ultimately not entirely different from the bathroom legislation some states attempt to impose on trans people. Both attempt to police who does, and does not, have access to public spaces—one physical, one digital. The difference is intention. Facebook does intend to treat trans people fairly, and has a track record of supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) rights. Yet intention is not enough; technology must be built to support changing identities, and identities in which the present and the past may be in conflict. This is not easy.

RETHINKING BARRIERS AND BOUNDARIES

Everyone faces transitions throughout their lives, from teenager to adult, single to married, college student to professional, or employed to retired. Many may also experience other intersecting exciting, tragic, or confusing life events and identity changes. As people cross through boundaries between life stages, technological systems must move barriers out of the way. Barriers include things like one-account-per-person rules, or difficulty dealing with past content (for example, having to un-tag every old photo manually). It may be one profile cannot represent a person throughout their lifespan; the one-profile-per-person model that

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Facebook uses may be antiquated.

Designing for life transitions means designing for life. How can social media keep up? We can look at the social media sites that are popular among young people to understand how people may want to use social media in the future. Snapchat, for instance, does an excellent job of letting contacts drift away over time. Those people whom one has not sent a Snap to recently no longer appear in the list of people to send one's next Snap to. The default is to send a snap to no one—a person must deliberately think of whom they want to communicate with. As people fade out of one's life, they are no longer thought of and thus not included in one's audience for personal snaps. Yet Snapchat also allows people to share content using "Stories," a way to share content with people in one's broader network. Snapchat is one successful example of a social medium that enables different levels of sharing without mandating that one's network stick around over time.

Design decisions that enable and sometimes encourage content to be shared with fewer people do not align with many social media sites' goals, which tend to involve users sharing more content with more people. Users have diverse goals when using social media: Many of them wish to share more content with more people, while others prefer to share content with limited audiences. Often the same person has each of these goals in different contexts and with different content. It is not easy to design

systems when some users' goals may conflict with a company's goals.

To understand how future social media sites should be designed, it is important to study how people's behaviors' and networks change across the lifespan, through multiple and intersecting life changes. Each person faces many transitions as they grow, age, and change. As people move from one life stage to another, technological systems must move with them. Life transitions rarely occur in isolation; instead, people often face multiple life changes simultaneously. For instance, gender transitions often involve relationship breakups, and relationship breakups often involve moving. In each of these circumstances, unique and complex challenges occur around disclosure and presentation on social media. By studying technology use around overlapping life transitions over time, and how people's social media behaviors and networks change across the lifespan, we can identify how social media can best support users over time as they transition through different identities, networks, and profiles.

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Biography

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