

Ryan, F., Cruickshank, P., Hall, H. & Lawson, A. (2018 in press). Blurred reputations: managing professional and private information online. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*.

Blurred reputations: Managing professional and private information online

Frances VC Ryan, Peter Cruickshank, Hazel Hall, and Alistair Lawson

Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK

Abstract

Results are reported from a study that investigated patterns of information behaviour and use as related to personal reputation building and management in online environments. An everyday life information seeking (ELIS) perspective was adopted. Data were collected by diary and interview from forty-five social media users who hold professional and managerial work roles, and who are users of Twitter, Facebook, and/or LinkedIn. These data were first transcribed, then coded with NVivo10 according to themes identified from a preliminary literature review, with further codes added as they emerged from the content of the participant diaries and interviews. The main findings reveal that the portrayal of different personas online contribute to the presentation (but not the creation) of identity, that information sharing practices for reputation building and management vary according to social media platform, and that the management of online connections and censorship are important to the protection of reputation. The maintenance of professional reputation is more important than private reputation to these users. They are aware of the 'blur' between professional and private lives in online contexts, and the influence that it bears on efforts to manage an environment where LinkedIn is most the useful of the three sites considered, and Facebook the most risky. With its novel focus on the 'whole self', this work extends understandings of the impact of information on the building and management of reputation from an Information Science perspective.

Keywords

everyday life information seeking, information behaviour and use, identity, information sharing, personas, reputation building, reputation management, social media

Introduction

The research presented in this article is concerned with information sharing practices on social media platforms. The focus falls on the means by which professionals and managers build and manage their personal reputations through the disclosure of information that reflects aspects of their professional and/or private lives. The findings derive from a large qualitative study of patterns of information behaviour and use undertaken from an everyday life information seeking (ELIS) perspective (Savolainen, 1995). Three widely-used social media platforms are referenced: (1) Twitter, (2) Facebook, and (3) LinkedIn. The data analysed were gathered from forty-five study participants, all of whom work in, or have recently retired from, professional or managerial roles.

The discussion of the empirical work is prefaced by a literature review on the role that information sharing online plays in personal reputation building and management at the intersection between private and professional life. The findings which follow consider everyday life information behaviours and use in respect of: (1) the portrayal of different personas online; (2) information sharing practices according to social media platform; (3) the management of online connections; and (4) censorship. The analysis reveals that the protection of professional reputation is a priority for those who hold professional and managerial work roles, and that the main techniques for achieving this relate to managing online connections and practising censorship. These activities contribute to the presentation of identity (but not its creation). An awareness of the 'blur' between professional and private lives in online contexts influences efforts to manage an environment where LinkedIn is most the useful of the three sites considered, and Facebook the most risky.

This study adds to prior work in Information Science on the role of information in the building and management of personal reputations (as summarised by Ryan, Cruickshank, Hall and Lawson, 2016a). Its contribution is novel in two respects. First, whereas earlier work on this theme in Information Science focuses on academics, here a wide range of professionals is included. Second, 'whole self' reputations are considered in this study. Thus the sharing of both professional and private information is taken into account. This in contrast with much of the prior work in Information Science with its narrow focus on *work-related* information as indicators of *professional* reputation only.

In the context of this research the following definitions are used:

- **Identity:** *representations of self/selves that individuals create for or about themselves.* This definition follows Goffman (1959), Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013), Rodogno (2011), Uski and Lampinen (2014), and Van Dijck (2013).
- **Persona:** *an aspect (or aspects) of an individual's identity that is generally used to showcase, or represent, his/her overall identity.* This definition is consistent with the study participants' use of the term.

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- **Information:** *any 'object' that can be accessed and viewed online.* This definition is in line with the concept of 'information-as-thing' (Buckland, 1991, pp. 351-360).
- **Reputation:** *personal opinions and character judgements one individual has for another,* as also applied by Casare and Sichman, (2005), Morris (1999), and Origi (2012).

Literature review

A body of literature exists within the domain of Information Science on the role that offline and online information sharing plays in the building and management of personal reputations. Here the main focus falls on *academic* reputations and their building and management through citation information (Cronin, 1985; White, 2001). Discussion of reputation building and management and information use is also found in the literatures of a range of other subject domains (as summarised in Ryan, Cruickshank, Hall & Lawson, 2016a and Ryan, Cruickshank, Hall & Lawson, 2016b). This second set of published work is broader in its coverage than that on citation practices in Information Science. This is because it considers personal reputations in general, rather than one specific type of reputation.

These two bodies of work – in Information Science, and in a range of other subject domains - have developed independently of one another. Prior to the implementation of the study discussed here, the relationship between elements of citation practice that relate to reputation building and management and 'equivalent' information behaviours on popular online platforms (including social media) had not been examined in depth. (For an overview of analogous practice see Table 1 in Ryan, Cruickshank, Hall & Lawson, 2016a.) Further, the earlier work fails to discriminate between the two distinct activities of reputation building and reputation management through the use of information online. That said, there are aspects of this body of literature that can be used to set the context for the empirical study discussed in this article. These cover representations of identity as constructed with online information, and techniques deployed to negotiate the boundary between professional and private selves online (including the management of connections), as summarised below.

The findings of prior studies have established that individuals use information in different ways to showcase aspects of their identity (which, in turn, has a bearing on their reputation). Their practices depend on perceptions of audience, the technology platforms in question, and the anticipated impact of any information shared (see, for example, boyd and Heer, 2006; Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013; Lingel and boyd, 2013; Lund, 2012; Wessels, 2012). This extant literature often recalls the earlier work of Goffman (1959) and his explorations of 'front of house' and 'back of house' presentations of the self in offline environments, prompting debate around the question of individual online authenticity. For example, Uski and Lampinen (2014) argue that although social norms vary from platform to platform, greater efforts are made online to use information to present an authentic version of the self than is the case in face-to-face interactions. However, others note experimentation with pseudonyms and anonymous accounts (which may be, but are not always, linked back

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to real names later) (Vaast, 2007; Van Dijck, 2013), and the deliberate obscuring or omission of information in profile settings to make it difficult for undesired connections to find accounts (Labrecque, Markos and Milne, 2011; Qian and Scott, 2007; Uski and Lampinen, 2014). In addition, the deployment of professional personas to showcase specific aspects of an individual's identity is not uncommon (Fieseler, Meckel and Ranzini, 2014).

Of particular interest to the study reported here is the concept of 'boundary management', as introduced by Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard and Berg (2013). Boundary management is practised by individuals when they make choices to integrate or segment information related to their private and professional identities. This results in the creation of a notional hybrid boundary between the two. Attention is drawn to such information practices in a work environment: 'Being able to create and maintain appropriate boundaries and to negotiate one's identities online are quickly becoming critical skills that most employees now need to master' (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard and Berg, 2013, p. 664).

Various techniques have been identified as important to the management of the information that contributes to the presentation of self (as discussed, for example, by Carmagnola, Osborne and Torre, 2013; Das and Sahoo, 2011; Greidanus and Everall, 2010; Lingel and boyd, 2013; Lupton, 2014; Mesch and Beker, 2010; Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard and Berg, 2013). Some of these address the question of boundary management. They include: using particular platforms for the sharing of specific types of information (boyd and Heer, 2006; Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013; Lingel and boyd, 2013; Lund, 2012; Wessels, 2012); restricting the access of certain groups of contacts to entire platforms (Lupton, 2014; Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard and Berg, 2013); careful management of privacy settings to limit the availability of information to others on a platform (Carmagnola, Osborne and Torre, 2013; Das and Sahoo, 2011); and censorship, particularly in respect of sensitive topics (for example Greidanus and Everall (2010) cite mental health, and Lingel and boyd (2013) refer to extreme body modification).

The determination and handling of online connections is also discussed in this literature on personal reputation building and management in respect of the influence that existing connections exert on decisions to share (or not share) information (boyd and Heer, 2006). Here the question of boundary management becomes all the more tricky when a close relationship is considered the main criterion for connecting online (Erickson, 2011). First there may be the social awkwardness of negotiating the request to connect, for example when a close professional colleague wants to make friends on a personal account (boyd and Heer, 2006; Uski and Lampinen, 2014). Then come practical hurdles associated with the mixing of professional and private contacts in the same space, where it is the information behaviours of individuals' connections (rather than account owners) that may impact personal reputation. In some cases it is easier to keep different groups of contacts away from each other (boyd and Heer, 2006).

These findings from the literature review on information sharing practice according to platform, audience, and anticipated impact, were used to inform the empirical work discussed in this article. The focus of this element of the research was to explore the

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means by which those in professional and managerial work roles build and manage their personal reputations through the sharing of professional and private information with a diversity of contacts. Therefore techniques of boundary management (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard and Berg, 2013), including the determination of online connections, was of particular interest to the study. A suitable research approach from ELIS was designed and implemented to investigate these issues, as elaborated below.

Methods

In line with other work in ELIS, qualitative research methods were adopted in this study. Gathering empirical data from participant diaries and in-depth, semi-structured interviews was identified as the most practical and ethical approach (Ryan, Cruickshank, Hall & Lawson, 2016a; Ryan, Cruickshank, Hall & Lawson, 2016b).

Forty-five UK-based social media users took part in the study between October 2015 and January 2016, as summarised in the appendix. The majority (43) were recruited through social networking channels including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, and the other two referred to the study by word-of-mouth. Efforts were made to ensure that there was a balanced spread of participants, both in terms of gender and age. This was to make possible comparative evaluations of the findings by participant demographics at later date.

Prior to joining the study the participants were screened to ensure they understood its scope, including the estimated time commitment for both the diary exercise and the interview. They were then asked to complete a short background survey related to their education, employment, and Internet use, including social media platforms deployed and frequency of use.

At the time of this study, all 45 participants were employed in professional or managerial roles, or were recently retired from positions of this nature. As a group they held higher than average education levels: almost 90 percent (40 of 45) had earned a bachelor's degree or higher qualification, as compared with a UK average of 34 per cent for those aged 25-64 (OECD, 2016, p. 43). These factors were important to the study because of its focus on professional (as well as private) information in the building and management of personal reputations.

For a week the participants kept diaries in which they logged any information sharing practices on social media (primarily Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn) that they regarded as having an impact on personal reputations. For example, they were asked to record their information sharing activities, and their motivations for information sharing (or for refraining from doing so). The three sites were highlighted for consideration because they feature prominently in the UK's top ten sites and apps identified in Ofcom's 2016 *Adults' media use and attitudes report* (Ofcom, 2016, p. 84). In the event, all three were referenced frequently by the project participants in the diary and interview data analysed for the study.

Forty-one participants completed their diaries electronically and then supplied these as text documents via email. This electronic diary content was formatted for

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consistency and anonymised prior to data analysis. The remaining four participants completed diary entries in paper notebooks that were supplied and returned by post. The content of the hand-written diaries was transcribed in Word, then formatted and anonymised in the same fashion as that of the electronic diaries.

After completing the diary exercise, participants took part in semi-structured interviews of about one hour in length. The interview questions were based on themes developed from an initial literature review (Ryan, Cruickshank, Hall & Lawson, 2015), with diary entries used as additional prompts where appropriate. Eleven of the interviews were conducted in person and the rest (34) over Skype. All 45 interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. The data were then prepared for analysis.

All data collected were coded with NVivo10 using a coding structure initially based on the themes identified from the literature review. Further codes were added as they emerged from the participant data. It should be emphasised that the analysis focused on reports of behaviours related to sharing information online, and not the content of the information shared per se.

An overview of the implementation of the methods for this study is presented in Figure 1 below.

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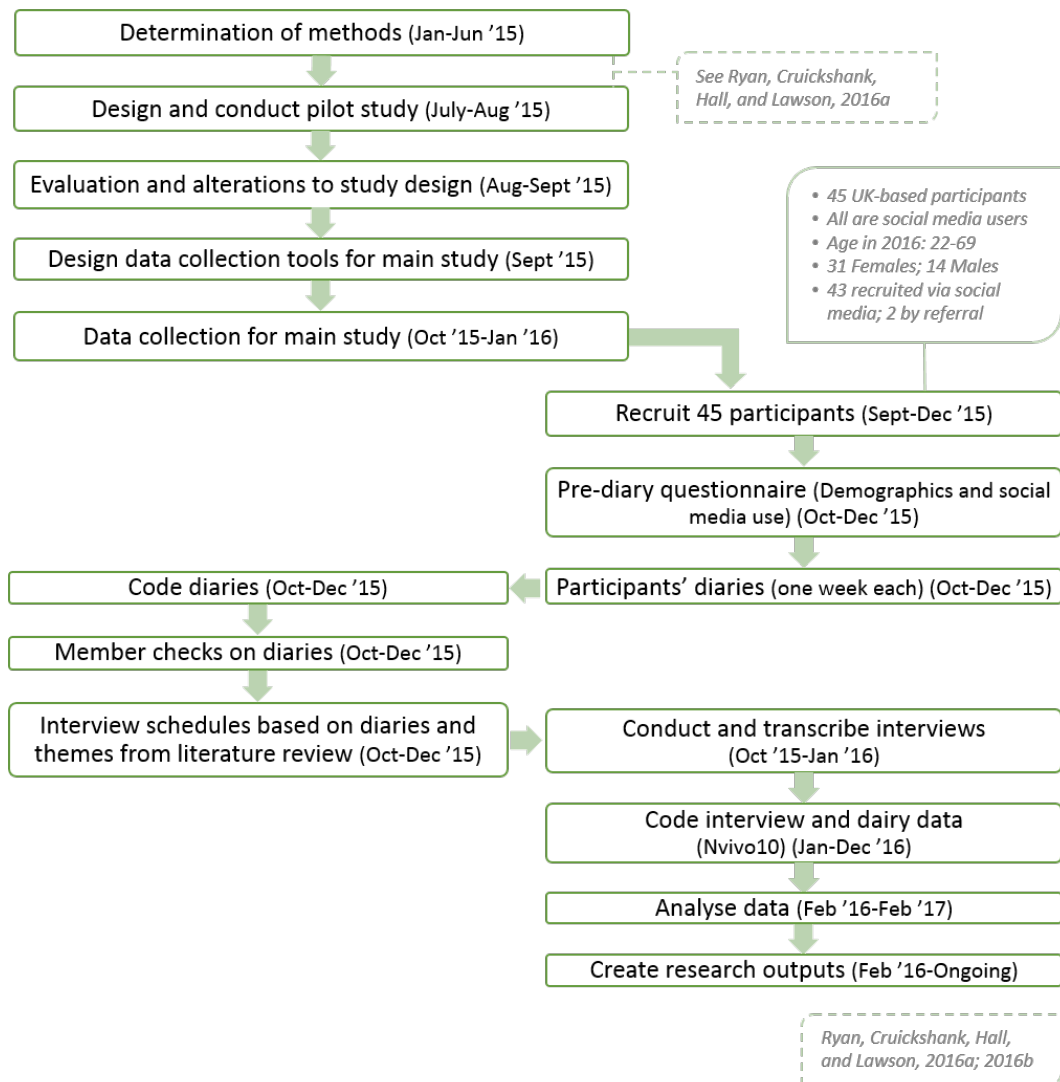


Figure 1. Overview of the implementation of the study

Findings

Information to portray personas and identity

Thirty-seven of the participants reported the portrayal of *aspects* of their identity that represent their *overall* identity, i.e. different personas (as defined above), when sharing information on social media. The majority of these (27) claimed not to do this intentionally, even though others might perceive that they were engaging in such practice. Rather, they claimed, the presentation of different personas relates to showing an appropriate front. Two participants in this group pointed out that a possible outcome of this practice is that sets of contacts across a range of platforms may regard the same account holder differently. However, this does not imply that the account holder is nurturing more than one identity (nor, by association, building more than one reputation).

In contrast, the other ten participants (of the 37) *deliberately* showcase different personas when using social media. Seven (of these 10) adopt this practice to delineate between their professional and private lives: these seven spoke in their interviews about different information behaviours according to different accounts, including instances of maintaining more than one account on the same platform. For example, Sharon elaborated on her attempts to maintain separate personas for professional and private social media use due to her work role as a communications expert. However, she mentioned her awareness that ‘people are seeing both’, regardless of such efforts. The remaining three (of these 10) deliberately showcase different personas to present different private representations of themselves. These include Fraser (one of just four study participants who use pseudonyms to mask their identity) who admitted that he uses one pseudonymous persona to conceal another. (He does this by maintaining two accounts the same platform. He uses the first, which is easily identified as belonging to him, to allow contacts to feel connected to him. On the second account, which is pseudonymous, he is more forthright in his opinions. Those to whom he connects on the second account know about the first, but those to whom he connects on the first do not know about the second.) While this group of ten participants stated that sharing information in this way contributes to the building of their reputations, as is the case for the rest of the study participants, such practice is not undertaken with the purpose of identity creation.

The remaining eight participants (of the full set of 45) claimed that they present themselves consistently across all social media platforms (and offline), regardless of audience, and all but one of the eight stated that their information sharing practices were very open. Two participants elaborated on the importance of not creating different ‘versions’ of themselves. For example Craig explained:

I believe in always being the same person and not presenting a different version of yourself to different people. So I guess [my identity] all kind of rolled up into one thing. I do always consider that they might see me in a different way—they might see me as Craig or they might see me as an

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employee of X Company. But it is generally me, whether it's a work or non-work me.

In these cases, where the information shared reflects a singular self, it is identity (rather than personas) that is presented. For this group of participants, boundary management is less of an issue than it is for others who need to consider the persona to project depending on circumstances.

Taken into account the analysis of data from the two sets of participants (i.e. the thirty-seven who use personas, and the eight who do not) these findings show that identity, or aspects of it, is *presented* through the sharing of information online, identity *creation* is not a deliberate goal of such activity.

Perceived platform purpose and information sharing behaviours

It has been shown above that, in the main, technology platform has an influence on information use in terms of the presentation of personas and identity. It is therefore worthwhile examining in greater detail participant perceptions of the three main platforms considered in this study, and their impact on information sharing more generally.

The participants found it easy to categorise two of the three sites under scrutiny: LinkedIn was viewed strictly as a platform for sharing professional information, and Facebook predominantly (albeit not exclusively) for the 'private'. Perceptions of Twitter, however, were mixed. The majority of Twitter users in the sample (29 of 41) maintain one Twitter account for both professional and private purposes. For example, Kevin's use of Twitter is largely for professional purposes, although he occasionally shares private information on the site (sometimes using mild profanity when he feels it appropriate). Of the remaining twelve, seven use the platform for professional information sharing only, and five participants maintain two accounts: one for professional use and the other for private.

Thirty-eight participants use more than one platform on at least a weekly basis. All but one of these thirty-eight have always managed the information shared primarily according to perceptions of platform primary purpose, i.e. for professional or private networking, or a mix of both. The exception is Wendy, who initially used Twitter for professional purposes only, and kept Facebook as a private platform. At first when professional contacts tried to connect with Wendy on Facebook, she ignored their requests. However, after noticing other people in her field were using Facebook for professional use, Wendy eventually began to connect with people from her professional network on Facebook.

In these cases on mixed platform use, information to be shared that might impact professional reputation is given greater consideration prior to posting than does information related to private reputation. For example, Hannah explained that she does not think much about information to be shared before posting to Facebook,

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however she is more cautious on Twitter. This is partly because she is connected with current and former colleagues (including managers) on the latter:

[What I post depends on] the type of platform I'm using and the type of audience that I'm engaging with and [my ulterior motives] ... It is important to remember about your reputation and what people think of you from both a personal perspective [and] a professional point of view ... [in a professional context] it is important to me to show and demonstrate that I have a knowledge and understanding about [these things]—whether it's in a personal or a professional capacity.

The degree to which professional and private lives and interests overlap also has an impact on decisions to share information. When the professional is regarded as an important part of someone's 'whole self' identity, for example, information sharing for professional or private reasons is difficult to distinguish. For instance Gillian reported that there is a considerable overlap in the information that she shares as relevant to her professional and private 'lives', and that she often finds it hard to distinguish between the two.

At the other extreme, Fraser who keeps his work and private lives very separate (and also partitions off different aspects of parts of his private life), prefers the overlap between professional and private information sharing to be at an absolute minimum. Even in such cases, however, it was recognised by the study participants that it is possible for information shared on a private platform to ultimately find its way into a professional arena. This is both a consequence of maintaining contact with professional colleagues on private platforms, and because secondary connections (friends-of-friends) bridge professional and private connections (as discussed in greater detail below). Further, privacy settings are not absolute so sometimes private information is unintentionally shared with wider audiences than anticipated. For example, Callum pointed out that Facebook and Twitter are more open and visible than people may realise, and for this reason he uses caution when sharing anything that might impact his career or relationships.

These findings related to perceptions of platform held by participants in this study show that, in the main, information is shared according to the type of networking that each platform supports. This does not apply, however, to users who have difficulties in classifying the information to be shared as professional or private. Regardless of platform deployed, more care is taken with the posting of information that may have an impact on professional (as opposed to private) reputations. There is also an awareness amongst these social media users that information disseminated in any online forum has the potential to leak out beyond the initial intended audience.

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The management of connections to protect personal reputations at the boundary of professional and private

As well as platform choice and distinctions between the professional and the private, the analysis of data for this study indicates that the management of connections plays a vital role in the sharing (or not) of information online. In some cases the agreement (or refusal) to connect with another is made with the express purpose of reputation building and management. These findings on the management of connections are elaborated below.

The level of complexity involved in determining connections varies across the three platforms included in the study. The least complicated is Twitter. The participants acknowledged that unless a Twitter account is set to private, they have no control over Twitter followers, other than to actively block certain individuals from accessing their content. In the case of private Twitter accounts, the approval process for professional contacts or colleagues depends on perceived levels of friendship. For example, Joanne has both a public and private Twitter account. She is 'a lot freer' when sharing information on the latter, and for this reason takes care over accepting new followers.

As might be expected, opinion expressed by the participants about connections on LinkedIn was closely tied to career development. Here they share information for the purposes of displaying their professional interests, and to show that they have an on-going interest in their careers. They also learn from their LinkedIn connections. A third of the LinkedIn users (12 of 36) also admitted to alignments on LinkedIn for strategic purposes, such as professional advancement, reputational gain, and job seeking. The latter was noted in particular by those on temporary work contracts. Connecting with others in management or leadership positions on LinkedIn was viewed as both a form of networking and of self-promotion and marketing. Kevin, for example, characterised LinkedIn as an 'on-going, live CV', and his connections on the site as possible future employers. Two participants spoke about selective connecting on LinkedIn (reputation building), and of the importance of maintaining relationships that are likely to provide a career advantage (a form of reputation management). For example, Yvonne explained:

If I meet them at a conference, I [will] decide [to connect] ... if they do something interesting [that is] relevant to me ... if they have an expertise that's complementary to mine ... [if] we might [collaborate] together ... [then] I like to connect with them, because it's a lot easier to keep in touch.

While participants in this study are generally happy to connect with personal contacts (such as with family and friends) on LinkedIn, there is asymmetry in practice in respect of Facebook. Comments on the question of whether or not to connect with professional contacts, especially work colleagues, on this private platform showed diversity in practice, some of which is motivated purely by social obligation.

Most participants in this study connect with some professional contacts on Facebook (32 of the 43 Facebook users). Of those who do so without obligation (25), the

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decision is mainly made on the basis of friendship level. For example, for Amanda the main criterion for whether or not to befriend someone from work on Facebook is to ask herself if she would enjoy spending social time with the person concerned. Gillian follows the same practice, relegating those work colleagues with whom that she would not normally 'hang out' to Twitter and/or LinkedIn. Kevin's practice adds a further criterion here: he does not believe it appropriate that he connect with anyone 'who [he is] in a position of authority over, or if they're in a position of authority over [him]'. Thus he will connect on Facebook with work colleagues who are 'friends in real life' *and* are at the same level as he in the workplace.

Some participants (7) spoke about unwillingly admitting work contacts as Facebook friends. For example, Linda reported having connected in the past with work colleagues out of obligation, then breaking contact with all those with whom she did not have shared interests or a personal connection as soon as she changed jobs. Alison's practice is similar in that she connects with work colleagues on Facebook because this is the convention at her workplace, but drops contact with anyone who leaves the organisation.

Two participants, however, enforce strict rules in respect of connecting with colleagues on their private Facebook networks. First, Fraser has two Facebook accounts. His personal account is under a pseudonym so that it cannot be found by others. His 'colleagues must never know' that this is his account, even those to whom he feels close. Second, Scott never connects with colleagues on Facebook. He feels it inappropriate for him to know 'the ins and outs' of his employees' lives, and observed at interview that allowing his employees to witness the 'ridiculous things' that he shares online would damage the level of professionalism that he wishes to portray as a manager. By segmenting their contacts Fraser and Scott can share information more freely on Facebook than those who count colleagues amongst their Facebook friends, whether willingly or not.

It can be seen from these findings on the management of connections at the boundary of the professional and private that deliberate actions, some of which are quasi-political, can have an impact on reputation building and management. This is most obvious in strategic connecting on LinkedIn. The management of connections on Facebook can be fraught for those who feel obliged to allow work contacts into this nominally private space. To avoid this some participants in this study have adopted strategies that allow them to segment their contacts according to platform, notably by maintaining their Facebook profiles exclusively for private connections.

Censorship to protect personal reputations at the boundary of professional and private

The management of connections across social media platforms as described above contributes to the maintenance of personal reputations by offering a degree of protection against harmful information being seen by the 'wrong' audiences. The majority of participants in this study (34 of the 45) also consciously practise

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censorship in efforts to build and manage their personal reputations. This censorship takes various forms, including not disseminating some types of information, restricting the dissemination of information (according to platform and with the aid of privacy settings), and moderating interactions with social media posts made by others. These are discussed in detail below.

The most obvious form of censorship is to completely refrain from communicating certain types of information online, such as controversial views. Ten participants practice this form of complete censorship. For example, Emma refrains from sharing her strong views about dying with dignity in acknowledgement of the controversy around this topic. Associated with this is partial restraint through controlled sharing, for example with a subset of friends in a privately on social media sites. For example, Lynn referred to posting photographs to a private Facebook group. This strategy is particularly useful for anyone in a job that requires the professional use of social media, such as a media or communications officer. For example, Sharon (highlighted above in terms of persona use) feared that apparent unprofessional use of such media would reflect especially badly on her given her work role as an information and communications expert.

Censorship by platform is a common technique that is mainly practised to protect professional (rather than private) reputations. For some, straightforward personal 'rules' mean that it is relatively simple to exercise censorship in this way. For example, Donna only shares professional information on professional platforms. Michelle and Fraser use similar tactics as they believe that some information should remain private. More careful censoring of content occurs in online environments where contacts comprise a mix of professional and private (Facebook for 32 participants in this study), and/or where professional contacts are able to access information posted due to mutual connections or open privacy settings. For example, Kerry, who sees her professional and private interests as strongly linked together (like Gillian cited above), is more discriminatory when posting online, especially on platforms that her employer can access. Even Andrew, whose privacy settings prevent those from his professional life seeing his private information online, does not share anything on his private platforms that he would not want his employer to see.

The risk that private information might leak into professional online space inhabited by the study participants and their colleagues is of greater concern than vice versa. For example, Fraser (who does not connect with colleagues on Facebook, as noted above) explained that it is more important for him to keep his private information out of his professional life than professional information out of his private life. However, there is evidence from this study that some individuals (6) also hesitate to share professional content on private platforms. For example, Joanne adopts this strategy because she believes that her family and friends would not be interested in her professional life, and Yvonne believes that her Facebook account is not an appropriate platform for building her professional reputation.

Censorship is also deployed in respect of the information shared by others online, for example through interactions such as liking and favouriting. The issue here is external judgements on any interactions observed. For example, Andrew is aware that the

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connections to his Twitter account from his professional and private life ‘have different tones’, and he cannot be certain of the way that his interactions with content produced by others will be interpreted. To ‘avoid the conflict’ he refrains from favouriting tweets. Equally, Amanda limits her interactions for the purposes of protecting her reputation. She explained that she desists from liking photos shared by a particular friend on Facebook. This is because some mutual contacts shared with this friend are also known to Amanda through work. Amanda’s information practice in this case is based on her desire not to ‘bring those circles into a link’, first because it would be ‘weird’, and secondly because it would generate an uncertain reputational impact through the intersection of the two ‘circles’ on social media.

Other examples from the two sets of data analysed for this study refer explicitly to commenting on the social media content of others. For example, in her diary Jacqueline reflected on the ‘hard choice’ as to whether or not to respond to her manager’s posts on Facebook, taking into consideration her manager’s ‘position in the community ... in [the] organisation ... [their] friendship ... and [Jacqueline’s] own position in relation to all of the above’. Another participant’s hesitation to comment is based on a lack of certainty over the extent of her network and the nature of the connections within it (primary or secondary). Thus, to avoid exposing herself to ‘a lot of criticism’ and ‘repercussions’, Laura censors her comments.

It can be seen from these findings that censorship across the three social media platforms under consideration takes a number of different forms. It may be full (i.e. not expressing views at all), or partial (for example, not expressing views fully, or taking care to express views in a certain way for certain audiences, whether on one’s own social media presences or those of others). The need to censor is strongly related to the maintenance of professional (as opposed to private) reputations, especially in environments where views expressed may be witnessed by a mix of professional and private contacts. This is particularly important to participants in this study whose careers are in information and communication.

Discussion

The findings from this study show some clear alignments with prior research on the role of online information in the building and managing personal reputations. For example, in the main, the participants are keen to project genuine versions of themselves online through the presentation of the different personas that comprise their (single) identity as individuals. This supports the earlier findings of Uski and Lampinen (2014) and Fieseler, Meckel and Ranzini (2014) on authenticity in the presentation of the self online. An important distinction that emerges from this study is that identities are *presented*, rather than *created*, through the use of online information.

The participants made reference in their diaries and interviews to various techniques for managing information that contribute to the presentation of self. These tie with findings of previous studies, as summarised in the extant literature. In terms of platform use, for example, in the main the participants reported discriminating between the three platforms when sharing different types of information (as noted, for

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example, by boyd and Heer, 2006; Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013; Lingel and boyd, 2013; Lund, 2012; Wessels, 2012). The participants also actively manage their online connections (boyd and Heer, 2006). Of particular importance to this study is that some admitted doing so for the express purposes of reputation building and management.

It has also been shown that censorship (as reported, for example, by Greidanus and Everall, 2010, and Lingel and boyd, 2013) is exercised by the participants in this study. For example, they restrict access to certain groups to certain information on certain platforms (as noted by Luton, 2014; Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard and Berg, 2013) either wholesale, or through the use of privacy settings (as noted by Carmagnola, Osborne and Torre, 2013; Das and Sahoo, 2011). They also consider carefully whether or not to express their views openly, be this on their own social media presences, or those of others in terms of commenting, favouriting and liking.

In one important respect, however, the information practices of the participants in this study do not match with findings of previous work: pseudonyms and anonymous accounts are barely used by this sample. Just four users in total admitted to such practice to hide their identity. (A further 17 use pseudonyms as user names or 'handles'. However, this is not to mask their identity. For example, in some cases this is because real names were already taken when they signed up to the sites in question.) While it is not possible to be certain of the reason for this, it may be accounted for in the composition of the sample. Everyone who took part either works in a professional or managerial role (or had recently retired from one at the time of participation), and the majority is highly educated. It is suggested that individuals who enjoy these demographics may not feel so great a need to obscure their identity online as others in less-advantaged groups.

That the study participants are highly-educated professionals may also account for the strong message from the findings that they regarded it a far greater priority to protect their professional reputations using online information than they did their private reputations. This message comes across strongly through the analysis of data on strategies deployed to handle both professional and private contacts on social media platforms (especially Facebook), for example through the segmentation of contacts.

Some participants expressed difficulties on occasion in determining whether the information that they post online should be considered 'professional' or 'private' due to the blur between these elements of their daily life. As a consequence the discussion of two these types of reputation in such cases was rendered somewhat redundant. This issue applies especially to individuals who view their own identity predominantly through their professional roles. Again, this may be an artefact of sample selection.

The findings presented here also raise some questions that merit greater attention. First is the question of the social obligation to maintain particular contacts on social media platforms. In this case, for example, there was evident resentment amongst some study participants that they are expected to befriend work colleagues on Facebook simply because this is the convention for all in the organisation in which they work. When a (nominally) private space is occupied by professional contacts,

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their presence increases the burden of boundary management for the purposes of reputation building and management. The account owner is obliged to deploy the techniques highlighted above for the protection of professional reputation (or, otherwise put a professional reputation at risk).

Conclusion

The research presented in this article furthers understandings of human information behaviours and use in an everyday life context. In particular, the findings extend extant knowledge in on the role of online information in the building and management of personal reputations amongst those who hold professional and managerial work roles. The novelty of the contribution to Information Science research resides in the exploration of the information sharing practices of a range of professionals in the context of ‘whole self’ reputations. This builds on the extant body of work in Information Science that exhibits a narrow focus on work-related information as indicators of professional reputation only with reference to citation practices (as summarised in Ryan, Cruickshank, Hall and Lawson, 2016a).

This analysis has made it possible to distinguish between the linked concepts of persona, identity and reputation in online environments. It shows that information shared on social media platforms *presents* identity (often taking into account that individual identity comprises multiple personas), and contributes to the *building* and *management* of reputation. Social media users build and manage their reputations online by taking into account general understandings of the functionality of the main platforms, managing their online connections, and practising censorship. The protection of *professional* reputation is of greater concern to those who hold these professional and managerial work roles than is *private* reputation. LinkedIn is the favoured platform for developing professional reputations; Facebook presents the greatest risks to professional reputation management due to the porosity of connections that can be made on the site. Social media users in professional and managerial work roles effectively practise ‘boundary management’ (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard and Berg, 2013) in efforts to protect their reputations online. However, they do not deploy this term when considering the blur between their professional and private lives in online contexts.

The findings presented here derive from a larger doctoral investigation on the broader impact of online information on personal reputation building and management in everyday life contexts. The themes discussed in the article will be elaborated upon in the larger study, which is due to be completed later in 2018.

There are also opportunities in further work to explore issues related to the extent to which pseudonyms and anonymous accounts are deployed by social media users across different user groups, and to investigate more deeply the issue of undesired social obligation of co-workers to connect online systems, and the impact of this.

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Appendix: Participant details and social media levels and platform use

Pseudonym (Gender)	Age	SNS use levels	Platforms used		
			Facebook	Twitter	LinkedIn
Adrian (M)	59	Moderate	Daily	Monthly	Monthly
Alan (M)	61	Moderate	Daily	Weekly	Monthly
Alison (F)	53	Moderate	Daily	Monthly	-
Amanda (F)	45	Moderate	Daily	Daily	-
Andrew (M)	22	Heavy	Daily	Daily	Daily
Callum (M)	23	Moderate	Monthly	Monthly	Weekly
Colin (M)	63	Heavy	Daily	Daily	Daily
Craig (M)	27	Heavy	Weekly	Daily	Daily
David (M)	55	Heavy	Daily	Daily	Weekly
Diane (F)	56	Heavy	-	Daily	Weekly
Donna (F)	33	Moderate	Daily	Weekly	Weekly
Emma (F)	28	Heavy	Daily	Daily	Monthly
Fiona (F)	61	Heavy	Daily	Weekly	Monthly
Fraser (M)	34	Moderate	Daily	Daily	Weekly
Gillian (F)	38	Heavy	Daily	Daily	Daily
Hannah (F)	30	Moderate	Daily	Daily	Weekly
Hazel (F)	60	Light	Monthly	Weekly	-
Heather (F)	28	Heavy	Daily	Daily	Monthly
Helen (F)	50	Moderate	Daily	-	-
Jacqueline (F)	49	Moderate	Daily	Monthly	Weekly
James (M)	44	Moderate	Daily	Daily	-
Jennifer (F)	31	Heavy	Daily	Daily	Monthly
Joanne (F)	44	Heavy	Daily	Daily	Weekly
Karen (F)	40	Moderate	Daily	-	Monthly
Kelly (F)	35	Moderate	Daily	Weekly	-
Kerry (F)	27	Heavy	Daily	Daily	Monthly

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Pseudonym (Gender)	Age	SNS use levels	Platforms used		
			Facebook	Twitter	LinkedIn
Kevin (M)	35	Heavy	Daily	Daily	Monthly
Laura (F)	35	Moderate	Daily	Weekly	Daily
Liam (M)	27	Moderate	Daily	Daily	Weekly
Linda (F)	54	Moderate	Daily	Daily	Weekly
Lynn (F)	37	Moderate	Daily	Monthly	Weekly
Michelle (F)	37	Moderate	Daily	Daily	-
Natalie (F)	26	Heavy	Daily	Daily	Daily
Nicola (F)	41	Heavy	Daily	Monthly	Monthly
Rachel (F)	57	Moderate	-	Daily	-
Rebecca (F)	33	Heavy	Daily	Daily	Weekly
Roger (M)	69	Moderate	Monthly	Daily	Weekly
Rosemary (F)	53	Light	Daily	Daily	Weekly
Scott (M)	26	Light	Daily	Weekly	Weekly
Sharon (F)	45	Moderate	Daily	Daily	Monthly
Stephen (M)	61	Heavy	Daily	Daily	Weekly
Susan (F)	51	Heavy	Daily	Daily	Weekly
Wendy (F)	51	Moderate	Daily	Daily	Monthly
Yvonne (F)	38	Moderate	Monthly	-	Daily
Zoe (F)	34	Light	Daily	-	-

Table A: Participant details including social media levels and platform use