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ZIZI PAPACHARISSI

A Networked Self

Interview and illustration by Roy Christopher

April 17, 2011

Zizi Papacharissi is an academic powerhouse. Whatever you've been doing for the last fifteen years, she probably makes you look lazy. She holds a PhD in Journalism from my own University of Texas at Austin, an MA in Communication Studies from Kent State University, and a BA in Economics and Media Studies from Mount Holyoke College. Since getting those, she's been busy: she is a professor in, and the head of, the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois, Chicago, the author or editor of three books, most recently *A Private Sphere* (Polity, 2010) and *A Networked Self* (Routledge, 2010), and countless articles and book chapters, and a frequent speaker and lecturer on issues of connectivity and community, as well as public and private concerns.

ROY CHRISTOPHER: *If you had to sum it up for the uninitiated, what would you say your work is about? What are your major areas of concern?*

ZIZI PAPACHARISSI: I am interested in social and political things people do online and offline. I see little value in draw-

ing a distinction between offline and online that treats the two as separate worlds and thus claims some of these interactions as real and others as virtual. To me, that is like suggesting that a phone conversation with someone is less real because it becomes possible through the use of a medium. And many media historians have of course talked about how early reactions to the telephone prompted similar conversations about the complexion and reality of mediated conversations.

I do think it is meaningful, however, to think of offline and online spaces and understand then how people traverse through these spaces in their everyday routines. People adjust and adopt their behaviors as they move from one space to another, so as to handle their interactions in a way that permits them to attain an optimal balance = happiness. Spaces draw out different aspects of our personalities and inspire us to do different things—or might leave us completely uninspired. We also frequently design or reorganize spaces so as to suit our personalities. There are particular types of behaviors that work better or facilitate communication in certain spaces (for example, speaking loudly in crowded bars), but are utterly discouraged via the organizational logic of other spaces (for example, yelling in a yoga class). I am very interested in how individuals develop behaviors that allow them to traverse through offline and online spaces fluently.

I do not find the term “social media” particularly useful. All media are social, in their own unique ways. To claim that some media are social implies that there are other media that are a-social, or anti-social. It also suggests social media are more social than other media not qualified by that label. I do not find that to be the case. The phrase also ascribes a certain neutrality to the term medium, and I do not believe in that either—media are neither good, nor bad, nor are they neutral, à la Melvin Kranzberg. I prefer to think of technology as architecture, in case that was not abundantly clear already.

RC: *danah boyd's equation for privacy entails context and control.*

With the convergence of technology and its blurring of boundaries you discuss in A Private Sphere (Polity, 2010) — especially those that define space and time, public and private, active and passive, producer and consumer — how are we to maintain control of these shifting contexts?

ZP: I agree with danah and find that this is a tremendously meaningful way of explaining privacy to the public and to policy-making communities. I have a slight preference for the term autonomy over that of control. Perhaps it is because I am Greek. In *A Private Sphere* I use Deleuze's work to explain how control is ultimately not about discipline. So, control, from the perspective of the individual or from the perspective of society or institutions, is about offering a number of possibilities so that people can choose "freely," while not being restricted yet still perfectly guided by a defined set of possibilities. Autonomy is about having the right to determine what those possibilities will be, to choose from them, or to refuse them altogether. Autonomy also is suggestive of self-reliance, independence, self-governance, and reflexivity of the self, or individuation.

I suppose I find that ultimately, life is about philosophizing your way out of the concept of control to a state of autonomy, and that might be why I am partial to the latter word. But in the end, you know, it is just a word. A definition.

RC: *The web and mobile devices have changed the ways we connect with each other, but has social media really changed the nature of those connections?*

ZP: The youth has always redefined things, and I hope they never stop. It is what they do best! Otherwise, what is the point of being young?

On the topic of "friendship," the literature shows that people handle their friendships in different ways across different spaces, and that has always been the case. We have always had friends from a number of social spheres (for example, work, college, childhood, through mutual/spousal/familial acquaint-

ances), sometimes these spheres overlap and sometimes they do not, and we socialize with friends on a number of spaces, including spaces facilitated by internet platforms. Friendship means different things to different people. We also adjust and evolve our perspective on friendships as we mature through the different cycles of our lives. So everything that “the youth” is doing on Facebook needs to be understood in this context.

So, if anything, we might say that the word is being redefined, not the actual meaning of friendship, or its closeness. It is a matter of language evolving so as to reflect our practices. Weak ties can be actually be very strong, but is that really a term to be used to describe anyone? Who wants to be told, “I do not consider you a friend, but you sure are a meaningful weak tie to me,” or “btw, I also consider you an important acquaintance.” So, as a society, we must come up with words that value and provide social context for these connections that may now be maintained and activated in more convenient ways.

Friendship is an abstraction, a word invented to refer to and measure other emotions that are also aggregates and temporally sensitive. But friendship, or whatever it might be called in the future, is not going anywhere. It has always been a survival strategy for social beings and will always be.

RC: Along the same lines, I've been thinking a lot about the way that the adoption, or lack thereof, of communication technology in general changes the idea of communication — what I've been calling the “tyranny of adoption.” For instance, the diffusion of the cellphone has made it a personal assumption, a requirement in many cases, and one can see this with social networking sites and livestreaming media as well. How do we temper the spread of technology with our personal needs and desires?

ZP: I think we need to find a place for technology in our lives. In that sense, we blend technology with our own humanity and resist or challenge the tyranny of adoption. In our everyday lives, we routinely make decisions about what works or what does

not. So, we do not choose to buy and use just any car, we buy the car that will fit our needs, our budget, our personality. We also choose to not buy a car and rely on public transport. We choose clothing, houses, appliances that are compatible with our lifestyles and enhance our lives. We may not always make successful or optimal choices, but we are driven by the need to select. At the same time, our choices are shaped by the options we have at hand. And our socio-cultural context may present some of these options as more appealing or popular than others.

I am not sure that we will ever be able to fully escape the tyranny of the popular, or of adoption. After all, the capitalist backbone of our economic system rewards the popular. But I think of it less as a tyranny and more of as a habitus. Ultimately, they may both be understood as systems of control, but I suppose a habitus also embeds the notion of reflexivity, socio-cultural context, taste—it is a richer way to think about this. So, in a sense, we might think of not the tyranny of, let's say, Facebook adoption but rather, the Facebook habitus, as a way of socializing us into and remediating schemata, tastes, and habits about friendship.

RC: *Are you working on anything, have anything coming up, or just a topic I missed that you'd like to mention here?*

ZP: A lot of people these days are interested in the notion of affect, or jouissance, and affective networks. I think there is a lot of potential in thinking about affect, as it permits us to understand content creation as both play and work; to look at the internet, in Trebor Scholz's terms, as both playground and factory. Lately I have been very interested in the performative aspect of play online, specifically as it applies to performances of the self in everyday life. So I have been reading a lot of performance theory and working with the "as-if" aspect of play to understand how people imagine, perform, then redact and remix identities online.