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Selling Your Self in the United States

In the contemporary U.S. workplace, corporate personhood is increasingly becoming the metaphor structuring how job seekers are supposed to present themselves as employable. If one takes oneself to be a business, one should also take oneself to be an entity that requires a brand. Some ethnographic questions arise when job seekers try to embody corporate personhood. How does one transform oneself into a brand? What are the obstacles that a person encounters adopting a form of corporate personhood? How does one foster relationships or networks that will lead to a job, not just a circulation of one's brand identity? Based on research in Indiana and northern California, this article explores the conundrums of marketing oneself as a desirable employee on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, email, and so on. I address the reasons why the increased use of social media contributes to popularizing a notion of self-branding. I also discuss the quandaries people face when using social media to create this self-brand. In sum, this article investigates the obstacles people face when they try to embody a form of corporate personhood across media, a form of self putatively based on the individual, but one that has been transformed into a corporate form that people can not easily inhabit. [branding; corporate personhood; social media; neoliberalism; hiring; job search; employment]

Ken¹ became worried about his Facebook profile when he was a senior at Indiana University. He had been told over and over again that potential employers look at applicants' Facebook profiles when they are deciding to hire someone. He monitored his privacy settings carefully and only allowed friends to see his profile, but he thought this might not be enough. Ken decided to change the name on his profile because he did not want to be found easily through an Internet search. This was not his only change. He told his friends he was looking for a job and that they needed to be careful about what they posted on his profile. He wanted to be a television news reporter, so he also stopped posting anything at all about politics. He had been avidly posting comments on his friends' Facebook walls about his political opinions; his interest in politics was, after all, one of the reasons he wanted to be a reporter in the first place. But to get this type of job, he knew that he had to seem objective, whatever that might mean, in all of his potentially public presentations of self. Other aspiring journalists told me the same thing when I interviewed them—to be hired to present the news to the public, one should seem apolitical on Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and all other accessible mediated social sites.² Yet when Ken got his job, he was immediately encouraged to Tweet

about the news he was covering, to create a public Facebook profile for viewers, and, if he were so inclined, to blog. All the reporters where he worked were encouraged to supplement their television reporting with an online presence. Ken, in short, was caught in a moment of transition. Only a few years ago, career counselors at Indiana University were warning students to be careful about how they presented themselves on Facebook and in blogs, and that deactivating their Facebook accounts might be preferable. Yet these same counselors are now encouraging graduating students to create a brand for themselves, to represent themselves as professional and employable in all their web-based practices. In general, people looking for a job these days in the United States are faced with a dilemma: What is the best way to use new social media to aid in their search while preventing social media from damaging their search?

This is not the only dilemma people face when using new social media in a job hunt. As Ken found out, many in the United States are now expected to transform themselves into a brand so as to be (and remain) hireable as flexible agents in pursuit of other jobs. To brand oneself as a corporate person these days entails new media practices—orchestrating a single self-presentation across a personal website, Facebook profile, Twitter feed, blog, and so on—which ideally demonstrates that one is a recognizable, consistent, and employable self. To be employable these days is to appear coherent across media platforms, efforts that in practice are undercut for two reasons. First, in one's daily life one might use different platforms for divergent social purposes. People often have to change their regular media practices when they start looking for a job (and will frequently revert back to earlier practices once they have found a job). Second, on many of these social media sites, the person putatively in control of the profile is not the only one who can contribute content to the profile, requiring the person supposedly in charge to monitor the account and delete potentially inappropriate statements and photos. These practices of branding using new media and of fashioning a hireable identity bring with them their own challenges when the object one is selling is oneself. In this article, I discuss what can be learned about the tensions involved in embodying a corporate personhood in a single body by studying people's social media practices in the United States when searching for a job.

There is a paradoxical and recursive process at play when individuals try to inhabit *corporate personhood*. In using this term, I am referring to the complex and widely deployed metaphor of corporate personhood, the origin of which lies in legal cases such as *Santa Clara Co. v. Southern Pacific Railroad Co.*³ This idea over time has come to exceed its legal definition. It is now “an effort to embed social or personal accountabilities within an otherwise diffuse organization or assemblage of persons and things” (Kirsch 2014: 207–217) That is, corporate personhood as a concept refers to corporations' attempts to represent complex social organizations as a single unity fashioned along the lines of a historically specific legal Euro-American vision of an individual. It is thus a recursive movement across scale that occurs as *personhood* is transformed by the practices of a corporation into *corporate personhood*, and then turned into an aspirational project for individual job seekers. This is not a simple or straightforward endeavor. In this article I discuss three of the central problems

people face when they seek to become hireable subjects by modeling themselves after corporate “persons.” First, as mentioned earlier, job seekers wrestle with trying to create a brand while still signaling that they are flexible workers, that is, with being simultaneously recognizable and yet changeable. Second, they struggle with producing a coherent self across a range of media platforms that often do not allow people to be the sole author of their profiles. In addition, being coherent has become a new challenge in those moments of job hunting when one experiences the Internet as a database that compiles contexts (Manovich 2002). Third, they struggle with the practicalities of this recursive and metaphorical conflation of scale: How does one act like a corporate person when one is limited by being able to animate only the labor potential of a single body?

New Media and Hiring

My ethnographic material comes from interviews conducted between 2012–2014 with students and career development counselors at Indiana University, as well as interviews with hiring managers, career coaches, and job-seekers in the Bay area about how new media is affecting people’s job searches—152 interviews in total. I also attended 45 workshops geared toward helping job seekers master how to present themselves as employable. I began interviews by asking a series of questions about new media practices, which resulted in many discussions about corporate personhood. This is fairly typical of contemporary accounts of attempts to produce corporate personhood more generally. It is no accident that so many self-help books on becoming employable focus on new social media practices (see, for example, *Get Hired: Using Social Media to Land a Job* [Alexander 2012] or *Cracking the New Job Market* [Holland 2011]); or that Robert Moore’s 2003 elegant anthropological analysis of the semiotics of branding is based on his work experience developing an online presence for already established offline brands (336). To explain why there is such a strong connection between corporate personhood and new media, let me turn to what those I interviewed were analyzing when discussing hiring and new media with me. I asked them to reflect on how the new media they use changes how authorship is evinced and how public any speech act in that medium will be understood to be. By asking people to discuss the role of new media in their job searches, I pointedly requested that interviewees be reflexive about how they were negotiating the changes in participant structures that these new media present.

One of the ways that people experience the “newness” of every introduced communicative technology is that every technology reconfigures the participant structure of conversational interactions. That is, every new medium affects who and how many people can be the author of a statement as well as who is likely to be considered the author. In the case of a Facebook or LinkedIn profile, the author of the profile is widely regarded as the offline person with an offline name and appearance that resembles the profile’s name and photographic appearance. Yet, as I mentioned, anyone in one’s network might contribute to the presentation of self on the profile, thus a profile is a compilation of the utterances of many people packaged as the profile of one person. With Facebook, the profile is quite literally a hodge-podge of many

people's contributions. In addition, the medium also helps determine who can even participate in the first place, and what the value of their participation is, as well as how the public of an exchange is called forth by the ways a technology structures the addressivity of a message. New technologies also encourage users and nonusers alike to reflect upon what is public speech and what is private speech. The technologies may also undermine users' ideas of appropriate addressivity through how that medium circulates messages. For example, in 2014 a person might wonder when posting a status update on Facebook if it is, in fact, being read by only those one intends to address.

New technologies' material structures offer new possibilities for participating in conversational exchanges, as well as for limiting conversational exchanges, and thus, these technologies inevitably entail new participant structures.⁴ When Erving Goffman first introduced participant framework in *Frame Analysis* (1974:517–523), his analysis centered on decomposing the varied roles implicit in a speaker's connection to an utterance. He pointed out that the author (the one who chooses both the order of the words and the specific words used in an utterance) is not the same as the animator (the one who voices the words). And the principal, the one who is responsible for the social import of the words, may not be either the animator or the author. As Judith Irvine (1996) subsequently pointed out, there are in fact far more roles one can have in relation to an utterance, including “the person quoted against his or her will; the absent party named in an accusation (the ‘Fingeree?’); the role in a stage play, as opposed to the actor playing it; the person a child is named after, who may (if living) then have certain specified responsibilities towards the child” (134; see also Levinson 1988). All of these relationships are, as Irvine points out, culturally specific possibilities that contribute to how communicative interactions sometimes become a stable identity formation (or sometimes unstable and ambiguous). In short, one of the ways people experience these media as “new” is in how these technologies' interfaces often transform the microinteractions which, experienced repeatedly across many contexts, can congeal into a perceived identity (Wortham 2003). This link between communication, participant frameworks, and identity is crucial in understanding why new media and corporate personhood are so often intertwined. To illustrate this link, I turn to Susan Philip's revision of Goffman's participant framework, her 1972 description of participant structure.

Philip needed to transform Goffman's concept a bit in her ethnography of Native American children's experiences in predominantly white schools in order to analyze how people arrange communicative interactions into an apparently consistent identity (Philip 1972). In no sense was Philip concerned with corporate personhood and its challenges to individual identity, but her work illustrates how participant structure and people's efforts to inhabit a specific identity are fundamentally intertwined. Philip was interested in how social inequalities emerged when Anglo-American teachers imposed culturally inappropriate participant structures on Native American students. She wanted to explain how inequalities became systematic over time as a consequence of how participants in a specific context adopted certain speaking roles, left them, invited others to taken on certain roles, or prevented them from doing so

over the course of many speech events. Her ethnography shows how different ways of managing these speaking roles can become a basis for the identity roles that people inhabit: teacher, student, white, Native American, masculine, or feminine. One of her examples of an inappropriate participant structure is how Anglo-American teachers often require all students to seek permission to talk. For Native American students, however, this is an inappropriate expectation. In the Native American communities she studied, only the speaker determines when conversation turn-taking should begin. However, in Anglo-American classrooms, during formal contexts, the teacher is supposed to control who speaks and when they speak. In informal social contexts, the current speaker often determines when the next speaker can begin by ending their turn. When they end their turn, they also mark the ending of their conversational turn through inflection and word choice. Participants will share the tacit expectation that when the speaker stops, one of the listeners will then begin to speak. As Native American students grew older, they increasingly stopped participating in classrooms, alienated by the Anglo-American teachers' expectations that a single authority figure controlled how and when communication should take place in a classroom. Philips's account points to the ways that microinteractions within communication contribute to the social organization performed in a given context, and thus to the construction of identities such as Native American student or Anglo-American teacher.

Both Goffman and Philips analyzed preestablished participant frameworks or structures and explored how people might use them as resources to accomplish any number of social tasks, including performing identity. Scholars of new media are often faced with a different type of scenario, moments in which people often express their situated analyses of the "newness" of new media by focusing on how new communicative technologies undercut identities previously thought to be relatively stable. These technologies in general encourage people on the ground to reassess when utterances presuppose stable or unstable relations. The "newness" of these technologies create a second-order dilemma for participants, as it is no longer stability or instability that is at issue, but the grounds for establishing general agreement about what is stable or unstable. In general, people are often concerned it will not be possible to maintain carefully established participant structures that had previously enforced certain identities, ambiguities, boundaries, and distinctions. After all, these new technologies shift how participant structure is organized. For example, people may worry that an online persona with whom they interact does not have a comparable offline body; perhaps a virtual woman online is in reality a man offline, and so on (for an example from the early days of the Internet, see Stone 1995). Anxieties about participant structures also crop up when a job seeker tries to ensure that his or her Facebook profile will pass an employer's scrutiny—since anyone in that person's network can post something on their wall, posts which may then be associated with the job seeker's profile. These shifting participant structures become a particular type of dilemma when people try to present themselves as coherent, employable selves across a range of media, especially when what counts as putatively appropriate uses are still in flux.

Taken together, the new media's participant structures pose a number of problems for people as they try to present themselves as a coherent employable self. For example, when individuals attempt to inhabit corporate personhood, their labor is one of animating an identity, while they are often being judged as though they were performing an identity. What do I mean by this distinction between animating and performing an identity? As I mentioned, several of the media platforms allow others within an individual's various social circles to contribute to the represented self, which means that the labor of creating a Facebook or LinkedIn profile is similar to the labor of creating an animated figure, with many people participating in the representation of one putatively unified persona (Silvio 2010). Yet a successful self-brand is meant to be read as a different kind of accomplishment, in which someone is performing his or her persona as a single actor inhabiting a character, often framed by personal branding experts as the best version of oneself that one can be. In short, a participant structure of many contributors animating one profile is taken as one contributor animating one profile, with the putative owner of the profile often responsible for utterances and images appearing on the profile.

Another dilemma is that, in many instances, people on the ground take the building blocks for these identities to be natural and inherent to what constitutes a person. People may understand that what it means to be an employable woman, for example, is always a construct, but they will see gender and the other elements being combined as naturalized identity categories.⁵ Yet new technologies reveal that these are such constructs that the identities could be expressed differently with only microshifts in a participant structure. This occasionally encourages people to reflect on the various dilemmas of, and alternatives to, having certain identities in the first place. Asking about the role of new media in hiring in the United States these days is not only asking about how a person fashions a hireable identity across a range of media, but also about what it means to fashion an identity using media that are not accompanied by widespread agreement about media etiquette.⁶ It is no wonder that new media, with the contemporary challenges they pose in producing an identity, inspire discussion about creating a hireable (corporate) identity.

Genre, Standardization, and Hiring

In my interviews, the job search emerged as a phase in which people, often understandably anxious, sought techniques for accomplishing a particular task: getting hired. In these moments, they were willing to adopt neoliberal styles of communication (see Duchêne and Heller 2012; Urciuoli 2008) because this is what they are constantly being told will work. Job seeking is a moment where vulnerable people are actively encouraged to adopt neoliberal strategies, and often will. In self-help books, workshops for job seekers, and sessions with career counselors, they are urged to market themselves as though their personal characteristics can be repackaged as a brand (Banet-Weiser 2012; Hearn 2008). People are told that to be hireable they must use the concept of brand as a metasemiotic ideology that can provide the communicative strategies to regiment a self into a legible employable persona. At the same time, they are advised on similar standardizing conversational techniques for their interactions

in anticipated face-to-face encounters within career fairs, chance encounters, and job interviews. These techniques involve preparing regimented and legible performances of distinctiveness, collegiality, and expertise (depending on the job).

Job applications and job interviews are genres of speech events in which the applicant is supposed to indicate their competent use of the genres, at the same time as distinguishing him- or herself as a unique and suitable individual for the job position. This relies on a form of standardization that is not neoliberal but rather has its origins in earlier historical efforts to create expedient webs of differentiation. In "An American Tragedy," Walter Benn Michaels (1989) locates this understanding of individualism as a difference that began to exist historically only within a broader system from the 1860s to the 1880s, in the wake of the Civil War. At that time people began to understand themselves as "individuals individualized by their place within the system" (73). With this phrase, Michaels points to a particular dynamic, one in which individuality emerges as a process of forming a constructed singularity through contrasts and comparisons strikingly similar to Saussure's 1916 account of how a sign gains value. The tokens deployed to make individuality recognizable and visible, however, are already predetermined by various institutions that rely heavily on certain forms of standardized technologies. Armies and factories show up frequently in Michaels's account. Indeed, one of his more captivating examples of how this individuality manifested itself is in his discussion of Civil War uniforms. He argued that clothing sizes did not exist until the Civil War, when, for the first time, armies required mass-produced uniforms (and the technology was available for mass manufacturing uniforms). This was the moment that clothing sizes, such as small, medium, or large, became widely available, and at the same time one learned the ways in which one's body shape could not so easily fit into these standard categories. A person's arms or chest became distinctive inasmuch as it did not match the rest of the body's conformity to a medium or a large size. In this way, uniqueness or individuality came to exist as the particular pattern by which one assembled or combined expressions of standardized formulations within an already established system. Thus, this particular way of being an individual went hand-in-hand with increasing mechanization and standardization that, when widespread, underpinned Fordist capitalism. As this example illustrates, there are many forms of standardization that coalesce to make versions of a hireable self; not every aspect of the standardized genres for employment have their *raison d'être* in Fordist or neoliberal logics.

Turning oneself into a hireable subject nowadays involves embodying older and well-established forms of individuality but with a twist: as a managed self with a brand. A job seeker has to be distinctive in the ways that he or she manipulates the forms through which one is supposed to entice potential employers—through a web presence, resumé, and performance during job interviews. And yet one still needs to be recognizable to potential employers, engaging with standardized genres such as resumes and LinkedIn profiles enough to be legible as a desirable choice. While aspects of this specific tension between distinctiveness and standardization existed for job seekers in previous decades, neoliberal philosophies and practices have altered some

key aspects of the hiring process, including introducing the widespread view that a person might have to be a brand.

The Neoliberal Self

Many aspects of employment have changed in the United States in the past hundred years or so, including how one understands the contractual conditions of employment. For the purposes of this article, I rely on a heuristic account of what it means to be a neoliberal self as opposed to a classic liberal self, an account that I have described at greater length elsewhere (Gershon 2011). There, I argued that the core metaphors of what it means to have a self, to own oneself, have shifted under neoliberal capitalism. Under earlier forms of capitalism, according to MacPherson's 1962 account of possessive individualism, one understood one's relationship to oneself in terms of landed property—one owned one's self as though one's body and capacities could be treated metaphorically as property to be rented (in practice) as labor for certain amounts of time. As a consequence, the contract between employer and worker involved metaphorically leasing the body and its capacities for a certain period of time each day. By contrast, under neoliberal capitalism, one owns oneself as though one is a business, a collection of skills, assets, and alliances that must be continually maintained and enhanced (for a discussion of a neoliberal conception of alliances, see Foster 2014). This has an impact on the nature of the relationship between the employer and the worker, and thus tacitly the hiring process. The employer and the worker are both corporate entities, businesses that are entering into an alliance with each other through the employment process. Both have an obligation to manage their business practices so as to have an equitable distribution of risk and responsibility. For example, both employer and worker have an obligation to tend to their self-representations in such a way that they are mutually compatible and reinforcing. Businesses now expect their employees to avoid maligning the company or customers in their online presences, regardless of whether this occurs during their off-work hours. Hiring, as a consequence of these changes, has become a matter of choosing potential employees who signal that they are managing themselves correctly, replete with expandable skills, useful alliances, and appropriate branding strategies.

As more and more people deploy a mix of anthropomorphized Saussurean logic and neoliberal logic to present themselves as employable, branding becomes a metasemiotic form that people find good to think with, both ubiquitous and separable from its limiting origins of trademark (Manning 2010:41, 46). Yet when brand moves from being anchored in objects to anchored in people, certain dilemmas emerge for those trying to fashion a brand of "me." Those branding a self face a similar recursive dilemma to those inhabiting corporate personhood. Moore (2003) demonstrates vividly that a brand is supposed to encapsulate a persona based on American assumptions on how people project personal attributes as addressers in communicative interactions in his analysis of how branding strategies are taught.⁷ This then is transformed into what an object's personality might be, so that the object is frequently branded through exercises that require those developing a brand to imagine the brand

as a person (342). As Celia Lury (2004) points out, a branded object's personality is a context-free collection of traits. She argues: "[T]he personality that sustains the iconic logo need not necessarily be embodied in an individual, fictional or real, alive or dead, but is instead an abstract amalgam of qualities. It is a signification of the indeterminate composite of values that are commonly associated with individuals in the abstract" (75). Brand personality, while it has a metaphorical relationship to a person's personality, is actually a fairly limited collage of generic characteristics. Thus brands are uneasily anchored in the materiality of certain objects using the socially locatable individual with a vivid but abstract set of personal qualities as the framing metaphor.

As Moore (2003:336) points out, this anchoring is always uneasy because brands are semiotically vulnerable when they are confronted with the contingencies of their materialization. For example, objects that are subsumed by other commodities are semiotically vulnerable when branded; Nutrasweet is subsumed by, and its delivery is dependent on, Diet Pepsi (347), making it hard for those branding Nutrasweet to disentangle the brand from the encompassing product. Similarly, Intel struggles to distinguish its components from the computers that contain its products. In the case of ingredient branding, the material forms of all objects involved present a challenge to the semiotic labor of creating a brand. The branding literature has not yet addressed the parallel case when people are involved, that is, the ways in which people (and their self-brands) are hired by companies with brands; this relationship represents a similar challenge for those individuals who want to maintain their own brand without being subsumed by a company's brand.⁸ Self-branding is a parallel (but not identical) process to ingredient branding—in the United States, people are not comparable to ingredients. Indeed, in the United States currently, people, for the most part, are not objects.⁹ When brands are no longer tethered to an object but instead to a person, brands become semiotically vulnerable in new ways.

What are some of these new ways? By linking a brand's semiotic vulnerabilities to its material incarnations, Moore built on Webb Keane's insistence that scholars take the materiality of the sign seriously (Moore 2003:334; Keane 2003). Moore suggests that brands attempt to address a certain dilemma that companies have when selling products: How does a company convince potential consumers that, for example, two Starbuck lattes taste the same, especially if they are made by baristas in different stores? Trademarks are semiotic forms designed to suggest that designated objects and events (for example, ClubMed vacations) are experientially interchangeable.¹⁰ Some of a brand's vulnerability emerges when the material object resists the techniques for presenting similarities, such as when a college experience is hard to reduce to comparability (Foster 2007; Urciuoli 2014).

This type of semiotic vulnerability transforms into a different dilemma when the brand is no longer a consumer product but a hireable person. In the United States, people and objects are understood to pose different types of problems to the already established branding techniques for presenting similarities. This is largely because under a US cultural framework, what is considered stable and the same, or unstable and different, about objects is distinct from how people are considered the

same or different across a range of contexts. In addition, while branding objects involves making different objects seem the same across contexts; branding people involves navigating a tension between the supposed stability of a brand and the longed-for flexibility of a neoliberal self.

I suggest that branding a person produces different tensions between brand stability and personal flexibility than branding an object. Americans have long lived with an Enlightenment view of a coherent individual with an identifiable personality. While this notion still inflects the practices of branding an individual in the United States, this concept creates challenges for the actual practice of branding a person. After all, what should be used as the basis for a person's brand? How does one transform one's personality into the abstracted keyword list of animating qualities that resembles objects' brand personalities (Lury 2004; Manning 2012; Moore 2003)? This is a practical dilemma for those seeking to create a personal brand. It is a version of the recursive dilemma discussed earlier, people are trying to use forms based putatively on a concept of personhood that have been altered in specific ways to accommodate corporations or commodities. In this instance, creating a brand-personality is based on a specific form of linguistic distillation in which one produces a readily circulated list of semiotic markers, a distillation that job seekers can find challenging to do for their own personalities.

As an example of the difficulty of framing oneself in terms of circulable tokens, a career development teacher explained to me that he had a particular class exercise for teaching students how to fashion their own brand. He would ask each class member to write three words or phrases that describes his or her individual essence. These words have to be specific enough that they mark distinctiveness yet still well within an appropriate rubric. When I asked him what types of words did not work and why, he explained that "diva" or "liking the outdoors" were not good choices because diva is, in a sense, too distinctive while liking the outdoors is not distinctive enough (field notes, February 28, 2012).

What words do work? One master's student I interviewed explained how he carefully choose the words "simplicity" and "elegance" to be the markers of his professional persona, uniting all aspects of his web presence. He specifically designed his website to be monochromatic with subtle accents of color, with limited navigation options, and all text formatted only in lowercase. For him, lowercase helped to signal simplicity. When I interviewed him, this certainly seemed to be a relatively successful strategy. He had already been approached by potential employers who contacted him based largely on his website design (field notes, February 4, 2012).

Both of these interviewees described strategies for fashioning oneself as a brand-personality that is flexible enough to appeal to employers, but stable and distinctive enough to be recognizable and coherent. This in itself, however, can be a dilemma. The neoliberal self is meant to be constantly enhancing one's skills, alliances, and assets—a self constantly in the process of transforming into a better version. How, in this process, does this self remain stable enough to be recognizable and yet flexible enough to be hireable?

As an additional problem in branding the self, people often have trouble crafting their individual web presence across various platforms when fashioning a coherent branded self. As people engage with their Facebook profiles, they often produce with the rest of their Facebook networks profiles that serve as complex maps of who they are. These Facebook-specific maps can be different from their LinkedIn profiles, their Twitter feeds, their Pinterest profiles, or their blogs. Yet when people try to brand themselves on new media when applying for jobs, they often feel compelled to align all their different new media presences. They struggle to seem like a coherent self across multiple platforms, despite the complexities of audiences for the different interfaces they use.

In fact, animating oneself as a coherent self is precisely the challenge of using new media in the hiring process these days. An applicant strives to create a coherent self across a range of different media, hoping to give potential employers a sense that their internet search has turned up a reliably authentic self. And this sense, according to the people I interviewed, is produced by consistency: by making sure that they behave in a uniform fashion on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.¹¹ This is also what promoters of self-branding recommend. Susan Chritton (2013), a personal branding strategist, delineates in a *Huffington Post* article how to fashion a personal brand with the following advice: “From business cards to your website, you want to create a consistent visual image for your brand that makes the right impression on your target audience. You want to select images, colors and fonts that create the visual effect that expresses your personal brand.” Yet, at the same time as one is creating a consistent brand impression across all forms of communication through, say, black and white images, one is also supposed to be a flexible self who can constantly enhance his or her collection of skills.

This constant enhancement is produced by the kind of reflexivity that neoliberalism encourages: the self as reflexive manager. And this reflexive distance in which a person takes oneself as a business to be managed is precisely what one’s personal brand makes visible. When someone decides his or her essence is reducible to words, such as simplicity and elegance, what that person is outlining is the ways in which his or her own collection of skills, experiences, assets, and alliances are to be managed. A person is both signaling the set of choices he or she is making and the logic or style with which these choices are made. In general, as I mentioned earlier, the personal brand is supposed to be a standardized genre that intertwines flexibility and coherence. By making visible the putatively fundamental characteristics of the reflexive manager, the personal brand reveals precisely what could appear to be a contradiction. How can someone always be willing and able to transform and yet remain a cohesive self? Personal branding allows people to represent themselves as both flexible and coherent and able to move fluidly and effectively through multiple contexts, yet with a managing impulse that makes them appear predictable to potential employers.

Finally, there is the obstacle people face when trying to embody a form of corporate personhood across media, a form of self putatively based on the individual, yet one

that is transformed in its corporate manifestations into a form people can not easily inhabit. This can be a daunting endeavor, as one job seeker explained to me:

One of the reasons I wanted to mention the books being about small companies and start-ups, the suggestions in them are overwhelming for an individual. It's asking you to maintain social media constantly, answering blog posts regularly, and so on. It's too much for a single person, so I'm trying to find ways to make the workload manageable. In the future this is going to grow more and more, so people out there are already trying to get an edge. [Field notes, February 8, 2012.]

This interviewee pointed out that corporate personhood conceals many people's labor in its production of unity. One person is simply too limited by the single body's material constraints to create the required online presence of corporate personhood.

In short, people are using brands and other standardized semiotic forms to get hired, in the process taking capitalist forms from earlier historical moments and reappropriating them for neoliberal uses. Yet the obstacles they encounter in doing so reveal the practical difficulties of creating a legible and employable flexible coherent self. For instance, people struggle to find the three words that reveal their true reflexive managerial self, and their struggles reveal that a corporate personhood is not an easy achievement in one medium, let alone multiple media. Yet a self-brand is expected to be coherent across a range of media, which requires more and more time, labor, and expertise. Job seekers are faced with three dilemmas: how to balance the need for a brand with the presentation of flexibility; how to fashion a coherent self across platforms that have different audience demands and multiple "authors" contributing; and how to animate a self that can evince corporate personhood when one does not have the person-hours or labor that a corporation can draw upon.

Notes

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1. All names in this article are pseudonyms.
2. When I tell this to my colleagues in Indiana University's School of Journalism, they are not happy to hear this, and wonder where their undergraduate students learn this.
3. In *Santa Clara Co. v. Southern Pacific Railroad Co.* (118 U.S. 394 (1886)), the Supreme Court ruled that the equal protection clause in the Fourteenth Amendment granted constitutional protections to corporations, not just individuals.

4. I chose Susan Philip's term (1972) *participant structure* rather than Erving Goffman's (1974; 1981) *participant framework* because participant structure encourages a focus on social organization.
5. See Banet-Weiser 2012 for a discussion of why authenticity of identity as a category becomes a dilemma in the process of self-branding but the legitimacy of gender as a category does not.
6. Given the many contemporary legal cases surrounding wrongful dismissals of retail workers (pink-collar workers) for their social media use, I do not think that this is only a white-collar problem. However, all the examples in this article involve white-collar jobs.
7. As an example, Moore (2003) describes how one woman, in teaching branding to her coworkers, explained that brands function like a beautiful person at a party. The beautiful person does not announce her beauty verbally but instead projects this beauty to everyone at the party and, if successful, is associated with this attribute (340).
8. See Foster 2014 for a discussion of how companies subsume NGOs under the company's brand in a way similar to ingredient branding. See also Hearn 2008 for a discussion of how contemporary popular promoters of self-branding deny this might lead to a practical tension in people's work lives.
9. Kopytoff 1988 argues that this distinction requires significant social labor at contextually-specific crucial moments for Euro-Americans.
10. This is similar to Patrick Eisenlohr's argument (2010) that Mauritian Muslims often face the problem of guaranteeing that certain speech acts such as prayers are the same and thus have the same effect despite being said in different contexts or being spoken by and for different people. Eisenlohr describes how genres and media ideologies are often used to help fashion similarities.
11. For the most part, this is not their objective when they use social media but are not looking for a job.

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