Sawchuk, Kim, Concordia University, Canada

Privacy, Depression and Facebook Photos as Visual Evidence: Gendering the Public Diagnosis of Natalie Blanchard

In November, 2009, the Canadian media reported the story of Natalie Blanchard a Québec woman who lost her health insurance benefits because of photos that had appeared on her Facebook page. Blanchard had been diagnosed with depression by a psychologist and put on long-term disability for eighteen months. According to the company, photos posted on Blanchard's Facebook page showed her smiling with friends at a bar, in a bikini on a beach, and "even a male strip club" while she was supposedly receiving benefits. While Blanchard maintains that the photos were posted long after she stopped receiving health benefits, the insurance company contended that the photos were posted while she was and that they constituted visual evidence that she was never really depressed. Commentaries posted online after the reports were, for the most part, supportive of the decision taken by the company and offered a 'public diagnosis' of Blanchard as an irresponsible party-girl and cheat. This paper examines the voluminous and largely vitriolic public outpouring of comments directed against Blanchard to Canadian news websites (CBC; CTV) for the month that the Blanchard story was considered newsworthy. A discourse analysis of the responses reveals the complicated, convoluted and very gendered understandings of depression, the use of Facebook photos as visual evidence, the slippery borders between the public and private in the era of what Mia Christenson terms "complicit surveillance", and what seems to be a growing acceptance, culturally, that social networking sites are a legitimate means for employers to monitor wayward employees. In so doing, the paper will examine the Blanchard case in light of the recent legal challenges to Facebook and policy debates on the issue of privacy in Canada.