Abstract

Social media, understood as a set of communicative tools and practices built upon Web 2.0, have become almost synonymous with the concept of sharing. Thus, it may seem counterintuitive at first to study them in light of secrecy. Yet, doing so has two main affordances: first, it allows for an interrogation of secrecy as a unique form of sharing, particularly when considered on the mass, mediated scale made possible through social media platforms. Second, by exploring how ‘mass secrecy’ functions within the boundaries of sharing it becomes apparent that the two concepts are mutually constructive and perhaps, not so disparate; not least because the balance between them is fundamental for a healthily functioning society or, what the 2014 ICA conference may refer to as ‘the good life’.

In order to explore what is currently a blind spot in the academic literature on sharing, this paper examines the engineering of a mass secret through the case of the Twitter hashtag #savethesurprise. This hashtag was deployed during the dress rehearsals of the London 2012 Olympics opening ceremony, to encourage a live audience of over 100,000 total spectators to keep the details of the rehearsal a secret – some 25,000 people in sum complied and used the hashtag, making it a trending topic on Twitter (Miah, 2012). By asking the question how did the London Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games (LOCOG) use social media to engineer a mass secret? it becomes possible to outline the infrastructure of a mass secret within the social media environment and then to tease out some broader implications for the social significance of this practice.