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## **Innovative Issues and Approaches in Social Sciences**

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| 2

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## **WHAT'S UP? NOT SO MUCH. NETWORKING AND COMMUNICATION VIA SOCIAL NETWORK SITES**

Tadej Praprotnik<sup>1</sup>

| 5

### **Abstract**

The article presents the phenomena of social network sites as a modern and important framework for communication and establishing relationships. The article therefore presents some global trends characteristic for modern society. One of the major driving forces within social network sites is so-called networked individualism. Our society is network society, so networking is one of the basic organizational principles. The article problematizes communication practices within social network sites and presents some explanations. The article presents comparison between early text based (anonymous) on-line communication (chat-rooms and discussion forums), which were more topic-oriented and current networking and communication via social network sites, which are more personal-oriented (Me-Centered Society). The major shift is from communication toward networking. Networking presupposes lots of networked and connected people. This has influence toward communication practices; because it is difficult to maintain deep and content rich communication with lots of individuals, the phatic function of communication is prevailing. Within social network sites different types of information are exchanged. The motivation to be nice and conflict-avoidant influence upon what kind of information and what kind of communication we are looking for. The prevalence of "light" information is just one characteristic. As a consequence the article also stresses the potential danger in case individuals build their knowledge mostly or solely upon information recommended by their Facebook friends.

**Key words:** social network sites, communication, networked individualism, Facebook, phatic communion

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## **Introduction: Me-centered society**

Nowadays we are living in a world full of networks. Networks became important source for establishing connections, to explore new lifestyles, to develop skills needed for successful life planning. Networking is our main organizational principle. We are constantly connected to each other. Manuels Castells briefly summarizes the basic frames of modern society in a following manner:

“Our society is a network society; that is, a society constructed around personal and organizational networks powered by digital networks and communicated by the Internet. And because networks are global and know no boundaries, the network society is a global network society. This historically specific social structure resulted from the interaction between the emerging technological paradigm based on the digital revolution and some major socio-cultural changes. A primary dimension of these changes is what has been labeled the rise of the Me-centered society, or, in sociological terms, the process of individuation, the decline of community understood in terms of space, work, family, and ascription in general. This is not the end of community, and not the end of place-based interaction, but there is a shift toward the reconstruction of social relationships, including strong cultural and personal ties that could be considered a form of community, on the basis of individual interests, values, and projects.” (Castells, 2014: 136-137).

In line with these considerations goes another important starting point which will be discussed in detail in the article. Namely, we are witnessing a kind of transformation from early text based computer-mediated communication with the focus on communication (and identity experimentation) toward networking of already known individuals. Nowadays we search for new interesting people in a quite smaller proportion; we do not use internet to find like-minded individuals to form community. We do not form communities on the basis of common interest or topic (topic based communities). Today we mainly communicate and try to establish networks with already known people within our already established (physical) network. So at the beginning we would like to articulate our main objective and present basic questions outlining the article: What is fascinating about social network sites?<sup>2</sup> What is intriguing moment manifested on these sites? What

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<sup>2</sup>There are different words describing or referring to the same thing. A social networking service (also social networking site, SNS or social media) is a [web application](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_networking_service) that people use to build [social networks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_networking_service) or [social relations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_networking_service) with other people who share similar personal or career interests, activities, backgrounds or real-life connections. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_networking\\_service](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_networking_service))

types of motivations are put to the front within social network sites? What do people actually do within these sites? What types of communication acts are typical for social network sites? Do we enlarge our networks since we have an effective tool to go beyond our well known social territory? Do we explore ourselves by using these networks? Have we broadened our symbolic and real world?

### **Social network sites as extensions of everyday life?**

When considering the impact of digitalization and social media upon individual we have to rethink what are basic motivations to participate within social media? Are social media completely “new world” enabling individuals to explore themselves? Are they effective means for more successful circulation of ideas? For widening the possibilities for critical thinking? What type of progress we have in mind when we celebrate social media? What is their basic revolutionary drive? Do we have too optimistic projections upon social media? Or, is it just a tool which we have to accept and live with it? For sure, each technology has certain kind of influence upon society but the extent of its influence is a result of values and motivations of society. Media effects are some kind of reflection of a society. We refer here to Raymond Williams’ conception of technology and its effects toward society:

“Because he focuses on the issue of intention, he recognizes that whatever the original intention to develop a technology might be, subsequently other social groups, with different interests or needs, adapt, modify or subvert the uses to which any particular technology is put. [...] For Williams, the route between need, invention, development, and final use or ‘effect’ is not straightforward. He also points out that technologies have uses and effects which were unforeseen by their conceivers and developers.” (Lister et al, 2009: 86).

So technological opportunities are – theoretically spoken – quite huge, but we have to focus our attention toward existing practices within social media. Researchers Boyd and Ellisen stress the following conclusions:

“What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks. This can result in connections between individuals that would not otherwise be made, but that is often not the goal, and these meetings are frequently between ‘latent ties’ who share some offline connection. On many of the large

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SNSs, participants are not necessarily 'networking' or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network" (Boyd, Ellison, 2008: 211).

### **Social network sites are not topic centric; what are possible consequences?**

The distinctive feature of SNSs is that they are "ego centric" not "topic centric". We would like to add: individuals use social networks as "ego-centric" communities. Twenty years ago situation was different. Topic was the main motivating force in the early days of the internet. Individuals in on-line forums and chat-groups usually started online conversations with strangers around some common topic or interest. Topic was a starting point for building relationship and community. Common interests were one of the key argument why individuals felt they found their "own" community, often much more "authentic" than real communities. They found communities which perfectly fit to their lifestyle thinking. Consequently discussions within such on-line forums were very vibrant. Additionally, in the early days of text based on-line communication we were faced with different communication setting, which enables individuals to completely "refashion" themselves. The well-known message of that time was: "All they see are your words". So our on-line electronic discourse was the major channel through which we were presenting ourselves. Text-based anonymity and the usage of nicknames enable masking of identities and transformations of our presentations within minute. We would like to stress the character of our text based on-line identities: "Internet discourse constitutes the subject as the subject fashions him or herself" (Poster, 1997: 222). Text based communication enables individuals to present them whatever they want. The discourse was the only identity marker which enables masquerade, identity switching, pointing to the relevant aspect of individual. Anonymous computer-mediated environment was a kind of playground for our own exploration.

In line with these practices the central question that emerged from this position was: "Who are we when we are online?" It was argued by, for instance, Allucquere Roseanne Stone (Stone, 1995: 18-20 in Lister et al, 2009: 210) that in previous ages identity was in part guaranteed through embodiment, the body and identity were coterminous (Lister et al, 2009: 210). "These constructions of the self in CMC all had a common post-structuralist history. Within this theoretical framework, identity is seen as anything but essential or fixed, on the contrary identity is understood as a fluid process in which 'self' and environment are constantly interacting.

This idea rests upon the proposition that identity is constructed through discourse” (Lister, 2009: 210).

But, as we have already seen, that type of identity experimentations are a past. Text based and consequently anonymous communication is nowadays not popular anymore. The development of new on-line platforms, such as social network sites (Facebook) has brought to us another frame: transparency of the individuals. People understand their Facebook profile as their own brand. On social network sites “the focus is not on anonymity but on its opposite – self publication. An SNS affords its users the opportunity not only to publish themselves but also, and crucially, to publish their network” (Lister, 2009: 209).

“The rise of SNSs indicates a shift in the organization of online communities. While websites dedicated to communities of interest still exist and prosper, SNSs are primarily organized around people, not interests. Early public online communities such as Usenet and public discussion forums were structured by topics or according to topical hierarchies, but social network sites are structured as personal (or ‘egocentric’) networks, with the individual at the center of their own community” (Boyd, Ellison, 2008: 219).

Because social networks are structured as personal networks, they are structured around people. These reconsiderations have had impact upon our identity presentations within social networks. Our Facebook identity is not some kind of a masquerade, our Facebook identity is sincere, real, and transparent. We can say, that our communicative intention within Facebook to our FB friends is as follows: “Look, this is my real me, this is important for me, therefore I am sharing such information with you”. Our social networks are constituted by real offline friends. Fakers are not welcomed. This is the main reason for our attitude toward our Facebook identity. We cannot fake our Facebook identity, our identity has to be consistent. But consistency of our on-line presentations is nevertheless problematic. Namely, we would like to question the basic foundations of FB identity and problematizes the unquestionable status of our FB identity. We would like to paraphrase the already cited question often put in the early days of the internet, in the period of anonymous e-communication. The title of the next chapter of the article is as follows.

### **Who we are when we are on Facebook?**

At the first sight social network sites (social media) are quite different settings than early computer based communication. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the main goal was to hide, to mask, to disguise ourselves.



“Disembodiment<sup>3</sup> (especially anonymity) was – as already mentioned – the main attraction. Nowadays we are faced with so-called collaborative culture based upon Web 2.0. Accordingly to this new climate we are faced with different kind of activities performed by on-line individuals: to share, to collaborate, to link, to like (as it is in the case of Facebook<sup>4</sup>)” (Praprotnik, 2014: 138-139). We can say that within social media we turn our bodies back to the scene. We usually publish pictures of us, our holiday images and so on. For sure, our publications go hand in hand with our already established off-line and on-line presentations of ourselves. Our image of us, our Facebook identity has constraints again. Our communicative acts within Facebook profile must be consistent with previous actions and our previous thoughts published on our Facebook wall. Why is that so? We have to be aware that in transparent settings where we have connections with known people, we have to act and communicate in a way that is consistent with our previous actions in order to stay “serious” person. Our Facebook visual and verbal presentations count as index of our already established Facebook persona. The word “count as” turns us to another important process of identity formation: indexicality of identity. As Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall put: “the concept of indexicality involves the creation of semiotic links between linguistic forms and social meanings. In identity formation, indexicality relies heavily on ideological structures, for associations between language and identity are rooted in cultural beliefs and values – that is, ideologies – about the sorts of speakers who (can or should) produce particular sorts of language”. (Bucholtz, Hall, 2005: 593-594).

So the question is to what extent are our Facebook presentations a kind of playful interventions to our already constituted identities. When talking about identity we have to bear in mind our audience. “As Goffman originally argued, individuals construct their identities in reaction to their cohorts. To use the language of Web 2.0, individuals construct identities relative to their networks” (Pearson, 2009). We are certain that our Facebook performances have to be serious and consistent in order to count as visual and verbal evidences of our Facebook persona. As we have already stressed: to be a faker is not welcomed. But the very fact that we have to perform consistent identity presentations turns us back to the questions whether our FB identity is a kind of masquerade since we have to present our already established FB image. Is there any

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<sup>3</sup> “Disembodiment signifies that a person's online identity is apparently separate from their physical presence, a condition associated with two features: textuality and anonymity” (Slater, 2003: 536).

<sup>4</sup> The role of popularity in social networking sites such as Facebook is discussed in detail in: Scott, Graham G., More Than Friends: Popularity on Facebook and its Role in Impression Formation, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19, 2014, p.358-372.

space for presentation of other aspects of ourselves? Are we “sincere” and “spontaneous” in our FB performances? Or do we just have to confirm our already established FB persona? By putting these questions we would like to stress that we do not have a lot of space for different self-presentation and for self-reflection. From this point of view FB profile is a little bit conservative environment limiting the scope of different identity manifestations.

In line with these considerations we would like to put the following question: what does it mean to be “a faker”? Does it mean any kind of masquerade, does it mean identity switching? What about playfulness? Playfulness is a precondition for self-reflection, isn't it? We think that certain level of playfulness encourage individuals to rethink their already established identities. We are living in an era of self-reflection, in a period which calls for constant exploration of self.

From the post modernistic perspective, identity should be getting more and more unstable, fragmented, and dispersed. Within this situation postmodern discourses make the idea of identity problematic and also points out that this is a myth or an illusion. One of the solutions lies in the increased level of reflexivity. Some people talk about this project of reflexivity which includes the preservation of coherent but constantly revised biographical narration, which is produced in the context of multiple choices (Kellner, 1992: 142-143; Kellner, 1995: 336; Giddens, 1991: 5). In the early ages of the internet there were predictions that virtual environment will engage individuals toward alternative thinking about themselves. Internet is offering itself as a counter-balance to the a-priori determinations of an individual. Mark Poster says that virtual reality makes the types of subjective experiences possible and that those experiences could “interrupt” or stop modern types of domination. The potential of virtual reality lies in the process itself, which is typical for virtual reality and through which the individuals could learn that they themselves are also constructed and that they can, in a certain environment, reconstruct themselves and the world. So virtual reality then functions this way, or to say differently, its functioning (the changing of identities) can work towards denaturalization of assumptions about “natural” given identities (Cooper, 1997: 103-104). As far as individuals, for example on the Internet Relay Chat<sup>5</sup>, freely change their identities when they play different discursive identity games, they can soon find

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<sup>5</sup> Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is an [application layer](#) protocol that facilitates communication in the form of text. After its golden era during the 1990s and early 2000s IRC has seen a significant decline, with users moving to more modern [social media](#) platforms. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet\\_Relay\\_Chat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_Relay_Chat)

out that identity is a construction that was framed to them by others in the “real” world. In the world of virtual reality they can construct it by themselves, contrary to what happens in the “real” world (Praprotnik, 2014: 139-140). Sherry Turkle in her well-known book “Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the internet” saw computer-mediated communication as emancipator because it allowed people to explore their identity in a socially and physically “safe” simulated reality (Turkle, 1995 in Holmes, 2011: 107).

Textuality as a precondition for identity switching, for masking identities and as a kind of a “safe” playground for reinventing our own identities is well documented in early researches about on-line identities. Slavoj Žižek put some interesting remarks concerning the status of identity in anonymous communication. Namely, in anonymous internet communication “we are and we are not” at the same time and this ambiguousness is one of the attractions of this environment. That is why this ambiguousness determines our attitude towards our screen images. On one hand we keep the attitude of outer distance so to say a game with false images in the sense “I know I am not like this (brave, seductive,) but it is nice to forget our real image every now and then and to put on a more satisfying mask. This way you can get relaxed better and get rid of the burden to be the way that you are and to have to live with this and to be responsible for it”. On the other hand we also “are” on the internet what we are not or we not dare to be in real life. The internet person that people create can be “more me” than my “real life” person (my “official” image) as far as it makes those aspects of myself visible that I would never have dared admitting in real life. The fact itself that we perceive our virtual image purely as a game enables us to get rid of the usual obstacles that prevent us from realizing our “dark part” in “real” world and to freely show all our libidinous potentials. The charm of anonymity is also and above all in the following: We can carry out the “masquerade” in virtual world without actually doing it and this way we avoid the feeling of anxiety connected with the action in the real world. We can do it because we know that we are actually not doing it for real. Obstacles and shame are this way pushed aside. We can articulate hidden truth about our drives at the exact time when we realize that we are only playing a game on the screen. We accept our fantasies as far as we “know that they are only a game in virtual reality” (Žižek, 1996: 115-116).

The question is of course, whether in that case, what we perform in cyberspace dreaming is in a way “more real than reality”, i.e. closer to the gist of our own personality than the role we play in relationships with real partners (Žižek, 2000). We can be more “genuine” and “authentic”

on the internet games contacting with a co-player than in real life. Because we know that virtual reality is “only a game” we can dare to play whatever we do not dare admit in “real” mutual contacts.

What about Facebook identity? Is it serious? Or is it only a well-crafted performance of carefully collected photographs which show our best version of us. Isn't that kind of identity even more virtual? When labeling our Facebook identity as virtual we are pointing to the fact that it is highly intentional and in that sense very crafted. Given the fact that Facebook information is to a great extent carefully selected we can say that every Facebook profile is also a kind of masquerade, a fake. But we would like to add that every type of our performances is a masquerade, deliberately crafted for the audience. Even our “spontaneous” performances are to a great extent masquerades, because through socialization we have learnt scenarios how to behave properly. Do we have any free space or time when we are not on the stage? We think that our certain use of digital media and constant availability (always on) weakens any space for different self-reflection. But the choice is, of course, ours.

### **Social network sites are “serious”; what does it mean for our relationships and communication?**

What kind of communication is typical and welcomed within social media? In line with that question we can put another one: what kind of identities we are presenting and do we have any space for experimentation? Are social network sites friendly and encouraging environment for self-reflection? Is networking as an organizational principle successful for the development of more complexes, reflective and all-encompassing relationships? What are our main communicative intentions when communicating through social media? Do we use social media to develop interpersonal relationships? As questions indicate, we are approaching to questions already addressed to many types of on-line communication: are social network sites more tasks – oriented, topic-oriented or more personal/relationship oriented or something else? What kind of relationships are we establishing through social network sites?

Social network sites have quite strong off-line foundation. Our social media networks reflect our already established relationships. Off-line and on-line world are not separated any more. That's the reason why the “game” we are playing via social networks became so serious. For sure, we have to be serious, interesting, sincere, transparent, when we communicate via Facebook. We have to put another question too: do we really want to be always serious, interesting, sincere, and transparent? Or to put the problem in another way: is it better to be “nice” and “good”

or is it better to be “whole”. What would you prefer? In order to investigate these questions we have to look a little bit closer to our on-line practices and to investigate networking as a dominant mechanism which to a certain extent frames our self-presentation and our interpersonal relationships.

### **Networking as a magic word; does networking really produce different kind of networks?**

We are connecting to each other all the time. And precisely that established frame of permanent connectivity is a part of a problem which we would like to present in the forthcoming pages of the article. Our permanent connectivity results in certain kind of connections: we have connections with lots of people within social network site, but are we really connected to people? Quite the contrary; maybe we have even smaller amount of deep relationships than ever before and we would like to present some explanations.

Social network sites attract millions of users. Many people, especially younger generations have integrated these sites into their daily routine. Younger generations do not distinguish on-line and off-line anymore, because on-line environment is their “natural” environment. Their social network sites structure their everyday life in a sense that their social life within social network sites dictates their everyday interactions and daily mundane activities. We think it is useful to stress the distinction between network and networking. Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison made in their article a very clear distinction:

“Networking emphasizes relationship initiation, often between strangers. While networking is possible on these sites, it is not the primary practice on many of them, nor is it what differentiates them from other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC)” (Boyd, Ellison, 2008: 211). As Boyd and Ellison stress: “While their key technological features are fairly consistent, the cultures that emerge around SNSs are varied. Most sites support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks, but others help strangers connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities.” (Boyd, Ellison, 2008: 210). So network of already known people is the main goal of interaction. Why we are pointing to that information? Is there anything wrong with that kind of activity? Not at all. With social network sites we got very useful technology which enables us to be in touch with our friends, classmates, family members. But what about beyond that already known network? What are the possible problems when we build our everyday life within the same “old” network? We have to mention that those networks have their history; our social network profile and our uploaded information are there to stay. Our consistency is kind of guarantee for our successful life within social network sites. Our Facebook profile, our personal “brand” has to be

coherent. When we mention “successful life” we are referring to another important question: socialization. Is social networks just new realm for training ourselves how to be well-accepted, nice, interactive individuals perfectly equipped with culturally constructed values? What kind of persona we have to present within social network sites? Or to put the problem in another way: given the fact that the most beloved reply in Facebook profile is “I like” what kind of activities we are presenting to other people? If people want to get back a reply “I like” they will surely modify their initial presentation in a way to ensure they will get a preferred reply, preferred second part.<sup>6</sup> So in network society a focus is put on individual and his/her building of network around himself. That’s why we are talking about me-centered society.

In the early days of the internet the whole idea around the internet was focused around communities and identity formation of the “liberated” individuals. “Popular understandings of group identities in CMC ranged from the idea of the online community as an antidote to the social fragmentation of contemporary life ...[ ] to an idea of online groups as the heart of a newly revived public sphere” (for example classical work *Virtual Community* by Howard Rheingold 1993; Lister, 2009: 213). Academic inquiry focused around attempting to define the new kinds of belonging brought about by online communities (Lister, 2009: 213). This type of critical inquiries was driven in part as a reaction to the visionary speculations about community and belonging that sprang from particular claims arising from the online practices. It was more or less clear that on-line life is to a great extent just an extension of off-line life.

Several researches have proven that virtual communities are quite focused to the established off-line contexts, rather than as a kind of radical opposition to them. Nancy K. Baym for example stated that “many participants in online community seek ways of integrating their online and offline experiences. The research I have reviewed and the model I have proposed suggest that online groups are often woven into the fabric of off-line life rather than set in opposition to it. The evidence includes the pervasiveness of off-line contexts in online interaction and the movement of online relationships off line” (Baym, 1998: 63 in Lister, 2009: 194). Helen Kennedy has made quite the same conclusion upon women from the East End of London involved in her study: “More importantly, it was found that the students showed no sign of wanting to hide their gender and ethnicity and so ‘benefit’ from the possibility of anonymity that cyberspace offered them. Rather, they made explicit and implicit references to their gender and ethnicity in their homepages. Many of the Her@students made their ethnicity central to their

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<sup>6</sup><https://glossary.sil.org/term/preferred-second-part>

A preferred second part is a second part of an [adjacency pair](#).

homepages, just as it is central to their identity” (Kennedy 2006 in Lister, 2009: 215).

In the early ages of the Internet one of the greatest motivations why study and research life online was the specific set of new environment parameters, such as virtuality, different status of spatiality, disembodiment. Anonymity produces different communication setting, enables experimentation. “The dominant definition of online communication was radical information freedom, in which participants were emancipated from institutional, domestic and other corporeal contexts” (Holmes, 2011: 107).

These days of experimentation are a past since the communicative intentions why participate in social networks are different. Kate Hopkins states that “this type of almost constant communication between users has never been available to society in another way, and if anything intensifies the requirement for relationship building – we are now in each other’s spaces all the time” (Hopkins, 2014: 4). “Social media provide outlets for individuals who already have connections external to these media. They become users of this media to continue physical assemblies in an online environment, but in ways that seek to maximize attention. Where offline relationships simply migrate to social media, recent studies show that the primary forms of use and gratifications are maintaining a connection and an online presence, rather than exchanging information that is of any kind of educational, political or economic value” (Holmes, 2011: 105-106).

### **Maintaining a connection: a phatic communion?**

In the Web 2.0 period of social networks we are approaching towards “narcissistic identity performance, away from the exchange of information and towards the practice of ‘phatic communion’.” (Holmes, 2011: 105). Vincent Miller similarly summarizes key notions about social media as follows: “The point of the social networking profile is blatantly to establish (and demonstrate) linkages and connections, rather than dialogic communications. Thus, what is seen here is a shift in emphasis from blogging technology which encouraged the creation of substantive text along with networking, to social networking profiles which emphasize networking over substantive text and dialogue of the blog further into a realm of new media culture which I refer to as the phatic” (Miller, 2008: 393). The term phatic was firstly used by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski to describe a communicative gesture that does not inform or exchange any meaningful information or facts about the world. Its purpose is a social one, to express sociability and maintain connections or bonds. By phatic communication we are keeping

connections “open”. We can see the phatic nature of communication in popular sentence which is often said when we say “good bye”: we’ll be in touch. So what is the basic characteristic of phatic communion? Malinowsky put it as follows:

“There can be no doubt that we have here a new type of linguistic use – phatic communion. I am tempted to call it, actuated by the demon of terminological invention – a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words. Let us look at it from the special point of view with which we are here concerned; let us ask what light it borrows on the function or nature of language. Are words in phatic communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not! They fulfill a social function and that is their principal aim, but they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener. Once again we may say that language does not function here as a means of transmission of thought” (Malinowski, 1999: 303-304).

Social network sites are tools to extend our already established social networks. As David Holmes states in his article “What is ‘social’ about social media?”: “social media are entirely modeled on the analogue of face-to-face communication, and the microsociology of everyday life. [ ] ... social media is overwhelmingly used to extend offline relationships rather than establish new ones” (Holmes, 2011: 108). “Thus the most attractive forms of online connectivity are based on avoiding accidental contact with strangers, and social bonding based upon the electronic maintenance of a closed system of personal networks. [ ]...such bonding is very low in content and information and consists in an electronic version of what might otherwise be called ‘small talk.’” (Holmes, 2011: 105). Vincent Miller describes such type of communication in a quite the same manner: “One can see this type of communicative practice as largely motivated less by having something in particular to say (i.e. communicating some kind of information), as it is by the obligation or encouragement to say ‘something’ to maintain connections or audiences, to let one’s network know that one is still ‘there.’” (Miller, 2010: 393). Frank Vetere, Steve Howard and Martin R. Gibbs even introduce the concept of phatic technologies: “Thus phatic technologies are those specifically designed to sustain social interactions, rather than convey information. Phatic technologies are not concerned with the utility of the interaction, the usefulness of the information nor the ease-of-use of the device – though each of these may contribute to the end user experience. Phatic technologies are measured by the degree to which they contribute to a feeling of ongoing connectedness” (Vetere, Howard, Gibbs, 2005: 1). For sure, these technologies ensure



connections and give opportunity to build or maintain relationships, but nevertheless these technologies are just technologies. Their capacity to be phatic technologies is more or less the consequence of our communication practices and a result of our motivations and intentions what kind of communication we are looking for.

### **What we are referring to, when we mention “content”?**

Do self-constructed SNS profiles also mean more reflections upon self-construction? Are social networking sites with their opportunities of permanent connectedness a new encouraging environment for self-reflection? Do we construct our Facebook profile in a creative ways? As we stated, users of social network sites are primarily concerned with connection, not with information (content), so self-reflection and interaction about who am I and how do You see Me (and so on...) are not question and topics much discussed on Facebook profile. The same is true for texting via mobile phones. Most modern devices are used in a quite the same manner: to connect, just to “say” I am still there. It is obvious that what fascinates users of social network sites and users of mobile phones (smartphones) is the very act of connecting, being connected. But that kind of communication is hard to be about self-reflection and exploration of me and you and our relationship. For example, younger generations prefer sending SMS instead of telephone conversation. Typing a message (texting) is not so stressful than conversation, so they prefer sending great amount of messages every day.

Conversation is different from texting; there are different kinds of norms governing conversation. There are also different sets of expectations between interlocutors, different sets of rules on how to manage conversation. When is it proper to introduce a new topic in conversation, how to signal to your interlocutor that there's nothing else to talk about, how to transform conversation into closing section with closing adjacency pair of “goodbyes”. This has been much discussed within ethnomethodology and discursive studies (Schegloff, E.A., Sacks, H., 1999: 263-274). Conversation is not a predictable practice; we are confronted with people and with different sets of expectations, with different sets of norms about what kinds of conversation we are looking for, etc. We are often confronted with intercultural communication, since our cultural background influences our attitudes toward conversation: how to express involvement, how to show that we are listening to our interlocutor, etc.

These kinds of conversation skills are formed within conversation and they are a must for successfully conducting and managing our

relationships, which are formed within communication. What about texting a message: “When we communicate on our digital devices, we learn different habits. As we ramp up the volume and velocity of online connections, we start to expect faster answers. To get these, we ask one another simpler questions; we dumb down our communications, even on the most important matters. [...] And we use conversation with others to learn to converse with ourselves. So our flight from conversation can mean diminished chances to learn skills of self-reflection. These days, social media continually asks us what’s ‘on our mind’, but we have little motivation to say something truly self-reflective. Self-reflection in conversation requires trust. It’s hard to do anything with 3,000 Facebook friends except connect”. (Turkle, 2012). As Sherry Turkle says in her article: “We expect more from technology and less from one another and seem increasingly drawn to technologies that provide the illusion of companionship without the demands of relationship. Always-on/always-on-you devices provide three powerful fantasies: that we will always be heard; that we can put our attention wherever we want it to be; and that we never have to be alone. Indeed our new devices have turned being alone into a problem that can be solved. When people are alone, even for a few moments, they fidget and reach for a device. Here connection works like a symptom, not a cure, and our constant, reflexive impulse to connect shapes a new way of being. Think of it as ‘I share, therefore I am.’ We use technology to define ourselves by sharing our thoughts and feelings as we’re having them. We used to think, ‘I have a feeling; I want to make a call.’ Now our impulse is, ‘I want to have a feeling; I need to send a text.’ So, in order to feel more, and to feel more like ourselves, we connect. But in our rush to connect, we flee from solitude, our ability to be separate and gather ourselves. Lacking the capacity for solitude, we turn to other people but don’t experience them as they are. It is as though we use them; need them as spare parts to support our increasingly fragile selves. We think constant connection will make us feel less lonely. The opposite is true. If we are unable to be alone, we are far more likely to be lonely. If we don’t teach our children to be alone, they will know only how to be lonely” (Turkle, 2012).

### **The tyranny of Facebook profile**

We would like to present additional dimension of profiles of social network sites: its permanency. Owner of the profile has to be aware that all information will be visible and readable. In that sense Facebook profile does not allow their owner to experiment with their identity as previous online communities allow (for example Internet Relay Chat). Our Facebook profile is our identity so usually users are well aware of the risks being too “spontaneous”, without a mask and so on. For sure,

we are not saying that Facebook identity is totally fabricated, we just want to stress that identity being presented on Facebook is usually quite one-dimensional. Facebook identity is constructed and is based upon previous information, so our Facebook history to a great extent dictate our current choices what kind of information we are going to publish on Facebook. In that sense Facebook identity is not very “nomadic” and free-floating, it is not a subject of experimentation as in early days of computer-mediated communication. “Their participants generally assumed that people seek to show the best or idealized versions of themselves to their peers, at least on public platforms” (Schroeder, 2016: 5631).

For sure, we are creators of our Facebook profile, like writer writes a book. But our further Facebook presentation must have evidences in previous information. We have to stress that Facebook identity has to be stable, “real”, not oscillating. Is Facebook profile kind of identity which stimulate individual to experimentation, to self-reflection. Or, is it a burden? We would like to cite some highlights from interview with Sherry Turkle (2012), author of well-known book *Alone Together* (2011):

“[Teens] felt that on Facebook their life story followed them through their lives in a way that their older brothers and sisters were allowed to start fresh when they moved from elementary school to junior high, from junior high to high school, and then crucially from high school to college. And one said to me, ‘my god, it used to be you that when you went to college, you got a chance to start fresh, to be a new person. I bet that was great.’ And I think that this sense of the Facebook identity as something that follows you all your life is something that many adolescents feel is a burden.“ [...]

“And I think there's another thing about the Facebook identity and adolescence, which is that many adolescents used to play with identity, play with multiple identities in adolescence, and that used to kind of be their fun, and now there's one identity that counts — it's the Facebook identity. And I think many adolescents are also feeling the pressure of that. So there are many things about the new technology that's changing the nature of adolescence, and I think that the complaints of adolescents about the new technology are — it's a long list, even as they're working with it” (Turkle, 2012).

Since their introduction, social network sites (SNSs) such as MySpace, Facebook, Cyworld<sup>7</sup>, and Bebo<sup>8</sup> have attracted millions of users, many

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<sup>7</sup>Cyworld is a [South Korean social network service](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyworld): <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyworld>

<sup>8</sup>Bebo was a [social networking](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bebo) website launched in 2005:  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bebo>

of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices. Nevertheless, we can state that social media reaffirms or intensifies already established cultural frames and cultural expectations how to be a “real” men or women, how to become an interesting person, what kind of actions count as interesting. Ralph Schroeder states that the growing uses of social media do not erase cultural differences. It is true that various uses of social media represent different social norms in different countries: men posing with beer and women with wine in England and so on. There is a lot of cultural diversity among different countries (Schroeder, 2016: 5638). But what is important is the “monotony” or lack of variety within specific cultural milieu. We would like to quote just one example: “What is equally remarkable among different countries is how much homogeneity there is in this diversity. Social media present an idealized self and an idealized or desired lifestyle everywhere. Urban youth in India and China, for example, perhaps at the other extreme of the American tech entrepreneurs and Sweden's powerful elite discussed above, express their aspirations on social media just as much as others do, although these aspirations may take a different form” (Miller et al, 2016 in Schroeder, 2016: 5638). We can say that cultural expectations are reinforced here, because social media –among other things – enable community (or network) building on the basis of the quite the same “taste”. Social media are effective tools for prolongation of imagined communities<sup>9</sup> and a place for gathering and circulation of the individuals with the same political or cultural motivation.

Even Unesco prepared International Symposium on “Representation and experiences of living together: an overview”, and within symposium a special workshop was organized on the topic “Diversity, tolerance and intolerance in social media”. As it is stressed on its web site “the purpose of this workshop is to reflect on the ethical, social and political issues related to the use of social media and digital platforms, including the role they can play in promoting tolerance and diversity.”

The main three questions of a workshop were:

- 1) How do we, and particularly young women and men, engage in social networks?
- 2) Do social media produce homogeneity or diversity?
- 3) Is the debate through social networks a source of conflict or tolerance?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Imagined communities is the title of a well-known book of Benedict Anderson (1983). It is also his concept to analyze nationalism. Anderson understood a nation as a socially constructed community. The term imagined means that community is imagined by the people who perceive (imagine) themselves as part of that group.

<sup>10</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/events/diversity-tolerance-and-intolerance-social-media>

At the end we would like to stress another important issue closely related to social networks and their phatic function: the potential of social media to strengthen well-informed citizen. Do social media enable an environment for better information exchange; do social media encourage dissemination of information about important political, ecological, educational problems? Again, we must stress that technology is not able to change us; technology is not able to save us – from ourselves. Networking could be an ideal organizational principle for networking of information and ideas; instead we are faced with networking of individuals. The reason for networking of individuals lies in so-called networked individualism where an individual is in the center. That's why some label our society as me-centered society, where connections with other individuals are major driving force. Connections and networks became major “capital” of the individual. So he/she has to develop and maintain his own connections in order to preserve “visibility”. Channels of communication have to be open all the time. We have to be connected all the time. And we have to be nice, trying to avoid conflicts and “bad feelings”.

“Communicative dynamics established with the web 2.0 paradigm shift and the development of micro blogging culture and the usage of social media and SNS using mobile communication, encouraged users to practice in everyday life what we can call here: a phatic display of connected presence” (Radovanović, Ragnedda, 2012: 12). Radovanović and Ragnedda state that within phatic function we can add a new function particularly present on the social networks: conflict avoiding. “Therefore, by using phatic function, such as keeping in touch or performing light conversations, we are avoiding contrast and conflict, and the social and communication tensions are weakening, excluding those who would disturb the structure of the social network” (Radovanović, Ragnedda, 2012: 12). Social media are – so to speak – nice, comfortable, stress –avoiding environment. Such characteristic plays an important function when considering what kind of information will count as proper and nice. What we are trying to stress? If our social networks are “nice” networks, if one of the main principles is to be nice and to avoid conflicts, this principle will to a large extent determine the type of information we are exchanging within social networks. If networks are nice consequently people within networks have to be nice too? That means that individuals have to carefully select information in order not to “disturb” and “annoy” other people. As a consequence we have an impression that the majority of users distribute “light” and not too “stressful” information in order to reinforce the impression of nice individuals. Their main motivation is to be “in touch” with others and to confirm their image of nice people. Within social media everyone is very

nice. Therefore we stated that every Facebook profile is also a kind of masquerade, carefully crafted upon images and words.

What are the consequences of such communication behavior for everyday life? Everyday life is sometimes difficult and annoying, everyday pictures of the so-called real life can be very stressful. Domestic and international news are not always nice, but it is important to be informed with all different kind of information in order to get a picture of the world and to become competent and well-informed citizens. But the problem is much more complex. Namely, lots of people believe that social media platforms will deliver them all information needed to be a well – informed citizen. Jane Buckingham, the founder of the Intelligence Group, a market research company, said that “social media generation” was comfortable being in constant communication with others, so recommendations from friends or text messages from a campaign — information that is shared, but not sought — were perceived as natural” (Stelter, 2008). Namely, it is quite common that people assume something as follows: “If the news is that important it will find me”.<sup>11</sup> Is that assumption correct? We strongly disagree. In a period of traditional media corporations we were “forced” to consume news that was selected by media corporation. Nowadays lots of people believe they will get important news by their Facebook friends. Zúñiga, Weeks and Ardèvol-Abreu stress that news finds me perception “captures people's perceptions that news will simply ‘find’ them without seeking it. Importantly, the news-finds-me perception does not reflect ambivalence toward using news to stay informed—it is not that those who hold this perception are necessarily uninterested in what is happening in the world—but rather believe that they do not need to actively seek news because their other media behaviors and social network provide all the news they require to stay informed” (Zúñiga, Weeks and Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017: 107).

Our media environment is for sure very diverse. We are well equipped with smartphones and other devices which constantly deliver to us information. But for fully competent citizen it is important that we know what kind of information is relevant for us.

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<sup>11</sup> Jane Buckingham recalled conducting a focus group where one of her subjects, a college student, said, “If the news is that important, it will find me.” (Stelter, Brian, 2008) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/27/us/politics/27voters.html>).

“Citizens today arguably have more opportunities to encounter news and political information than ever before. At first glance, the widespread availability of news might be considered ideal for producing better-informed citizens, especially given that both the volume and breadth of news in the media environment promote learning about politics. While the abundance of media options may provide citizens more opportunities to learn from the news, some scholars argue that this high-choice media environment may instead have negative democratic consequences by enhancing political knowledge gaps based on content preferences, interest, and usage patterns” (Zúñiga, Weeks and Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017: 107).

If we will simply believe that our Facebook friends will deliver to us relevant information we are in a dangerous position to become very pure informed and incompetent citizens. The tragedy is even bigger because we will think we are well-informed and fully equipped with information. The responsibility of the individual for well-being is nowadays not smaller. The responsibility is bigger. We are living in a period of individualism so our life planning is to a great extent our own project. In the era of social media we have to be watch dog by ourselves. But firstly we have to be aware what we are watching at!

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