

“POETS OF THEIR OWN AFFAIRS”: REINVENTING SELVES AND COMMUNITIES ON FACEBOOK

Dennis Paul P. Guevarra
Trinity University of Asia

Introduction

It is widely believed that we have gradually advanced to the point of a more mature acquaintance with online social networking sites (SNSs) which form, inform, and shape altogether the architectural backdrop of our everyday communication routines. What remains of this intimate acquaintance with SNSs is a series of images, sounds, digital texts, optical indexes of digitized meditations and exchanges; their power draws on registers of visual and psychic experience than those organized around embodied sensory experience. SNSs are changing the forms, dynamics, scope, scale of agency and social relationships, thus challenging the most significant ‘container’ of meaning that modern philosophy has ever invented—the conscious human self. Within this increasing complexity of contemporary social life brought about by information multiplicity and virtuality, I intend to rearticulate the imperiled concepts of ‘self’ and ‘community’. This paper is acutely conscious of the irrevocability, broad dispersion, and centrality of SNSs (like Facebook) as they have now become the organizing principle of our contemporary social existence. Danah Boyd, a prolific scholar in the geography of technology, defines SNSs as

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (Boyd and Ellison 2007)

Although this definition provides us a general framework for understanding the lifeworld of SNSs, it remains simplistic and wanting when evaluated against the analytical construct offered by both modern and postmodern social theory. The purpose of this paper is to generate some modest philosophical and sociological insights by conveying the agency (i.e. how users negotiate presentations of self in relation to their social sphere) and collective yearnings of Facebook ‘users’ or *Facebooktivists*.

The search for a philosophical-sociological paradigm that will provide a breakthrough in understanding virtual agency and socialization is an elusive, problems-racked enterprise. In a broad sense, this is an enterprise of man as he goes on with his business of evolution, of moving from one history to another. Yet the need to come to grips with the problems related to the virtual—i.e. social life as it takes place on screen and how computer-mediated-interactive-communication had worked its way through the contemporary society—is as persistent as ever.

This paper is an attempt to construct a philosophical-sociological paradigm by inquiring into the social character of the Facebook lifeworld as a *nomos*-building instrumentality, i.e., of Facebook as a new social arrangement that creates for the individual the sort of order and *habitus* in which he can experience his life as making sense. Moreover, this paper also posits that the full gamut of Facebook’s rhetorical powers contributes to what Giddens (1991) has termed ‘ontological security’, a sense of trust and reliance upon the continuity of things and people in everyday life.

The paper takes on the form of a reflection, with the reflection ultimately oriented toward one burning question: How is the Facebook, which is a model of virtual socialization, understood as a resource for meaning-making in the context of a new public sphere not embodied by physical forms of people but by signs and representations? The foregoing question, as a matter of course, presupposes a lot. Such presuppositions, however, will be clarified in the course of the discussion.

Facebook is obviously only one of the many SNSs that provide individuals a platform for virtual engagement and digital socialization. It is, therefore, necessary to look first in more general terms at the

character of this particular SNS. In doing so the paper draws on heavily from three theoretical perspectives—Manuel Castells' (2000) perspective on the 'network society' as a network of meanings, Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) perspective on 'liquid identity' as a postmodern social phenomenon, and Pierre Bourdieu's perspective on social connectivity as the enrichment of an individual's 'social capital'.

Living in a Facebook-Mediated Planet

The magical and addictive world of Facebook operates within the logic of an ever-growing and expanding globalized planet that reflects the needs, desires, concerns, fears and interests of virtual communities and cultures. In the Facebook paradigm, Facebook users become the 'poets of their own affairs' and 'trailblazers in the jungles of functionalist rationality' (de Certeau 1984, 34).

Facebook, Inc., now the current flagship of SNSs, was founded in 2004 by a Harvard sophomore, and by early 2007, it was adding on average of 250,000 new members on a single day (Melber 2008). Part of the explosive growth can be explained by the fact that users can join this SNS for free.

Manuel Castells (2000), a social theorist, speaks of a 'network society'—a society where informational interactions become more intense in the globalized media context and "opening up the sense that now the world is a single place with increased, even unavoidable, contact" (56). For Castells, "the network society represents a qualitative change in the human experience"(58)—an experience that is more flexible, open-ended, less hierarchical and more adaptive.

One enters the Facebook lifeworld simply by creating a personal profile, by filling out a form that collects personal information. Once a profile has been created, one can choose to 'friend' or 'unfriend' other users by linking to their profiles or by removing existing links. Users can also become members of various groups on the same network that share similar interests or map currently existing networks and/or new networks of people who were previously unconnected but who are brought together by a common interest and social cause (see Boyd and Ellison 2008). Facebook also enables its users to present themselves in an online profile through the use of

semiotic resources (i.e. text, images, videos, sounds) and then accumulate 'friends' who can post comments on each other's pages, and view each other's profiles. Facebook has now become an online public space that serves as a venue where individuals could either discuss in groups or be the audience of public discussions. Instantaneity, interactivity, and perpetual connectivity are the chief characteristic features of the Facebook lifeworld. Contemporary life is mostly experienced as mediated and Facebook provides a channel for this mediation for it creates an open platform for world-building, an accessible arena for deliberative discussion, a means to reach across space to forge new relationships and rekindle old ones or form a multitude of new alliances across geographic and socio-cultural borders. Facebook has spawned a culture of participation that enables us to showcase our individuated creations/productions while at the same time adding both nuance and weight to the social construction of reality.

The Social Construction of Facebook Reality

The process that interests me here is the one that constructs and maintains the Facebook platform into a new model for organizing contemporary society and for reshaping social cohesion. The Facebook model is often regarded by many as viable, effective, entertaining, and even meaningful. This tends to be the case because Facebook manifests some democratic potential for it facilitates the formation of virtual publics where individuals have increased opportunities for self-expression and can contribute immediate reactions to public discourse with unprecedented effectiveness.

The social construction of the Facebook lifeworld, in a broad sense, is already given in the language that forms the symbolic base of this network society. This social construction is achieved through the validating function of individual users—who are all engaged in the 'business of looking' and self-creation, perpetually 'deploying their imaginations in the practice of their everyday lives' (Appadurai 1997), oriented around seeking, collecting, and sharing information relevant to daily life, forming connections to people or groups (transnational and trans-age connectivity), creating a bricolage of 'friends' and images from different online communities, creating one's own world,

participating in communities that cater to their taste; their world no longer confined in one location in space—all of these frame the making and shaping of the Facebook lifeworld. These interactions dialogically produce a shared social reality through the distribution and interpretation of semiotic resources (text, images, sounds, videos). In other words, the meanings produced on the profiles are not the accomplishment of individual performances, but instead are an effect of cultural and personal exchanges and negotiations that take place within the Facebook lifeworld.

The socially constructed Facebook lifeworld must be continually mediated to and actualized by each individual member, so that it can become and remain *his* world as well. The individual member is given by his Facebook community certain decisive cornerstones for his everyday experience and conduct. Most importantly, the individual is supplied with a rhetorical apparatus, typifications, and criteria of relevance to help construct public and private places of sociality, play and cultural expression, predefined for him by the community and made available to him for the ordering of his everyday life.

This digital infrastructure upon which the immaterial nature of information flows is an ordering or nomic apparatus that is biographically cumulative. It begins to be formed in the early stages of Facebook socialization, then keeps on being enlarged, enhanced, modified, revitalized and made durable by himself throughout his biography. While there are individual biographical differences made possible by 'privacy settings' in the constitution of the Facebook apparatus which affords a personal sphere of greater autonomy and fantasy of control, there exists in the Facebook community an overall consensus on the range of differences deemed tolerable that sometimes tend to make the individual compliant and docile.

As Van Dijk (2005) observes, SNSs as networked digital landscapes simultaneously generate a scale expansion and a scale reduction which result in a dual processuality that seems to produce contradictory effects. Van Dijk (2005) identifies five contradictory effects. First, while user freedom seems to expand on the one hand, corporate determinism (the corporation deciding which new features to implement, which members to expel or whether the network will exist tomorrow or not) negates that freedom. Second, the increased

opportunities and tools for content production are countered by the transfer of property rights to the corporation (the corporation acquires the intellectual rights to whatever users create or upload). Third, the proliferation of user-generated content is juxtaposed to the commodification of collaboration (as when the content created by one user is presented to another with advertisements from which the corporation profits). Fourth, the diversity of voices (no limits to the creation of communities of interest) is negated by the homogenization of platforms (all communities must use one set of tools and abide by one set of rules: the corporation's). Fifth, the creation of a level playing field (where voices have the same chance of being heard) is countered by the reproduction of social inequalities (inequality resides in access to certain positions within the network, not just access to the network). Despite the much-vaunted claims of radical equality, the Facebook lifeworld is given shape by race, gender and class.

This ordering apparatus of Facebook, by which the individual user comes to perceive and define his world, is thus not chosen by him exclusively, except perhaps for some small modifications. Rather, it is discovered by the individual user as an external datum, a ready-made world that is simply *there* for him to inhabit and explore, though he modifies it in the process of living in it. Nevertheless, this world is always in need of validation to be undertaken by the individual which at the same time requires the individual's ongoing interaction through the circulation and exchange of comments and ideas with other Facebook users and friends who coinhabit this socially constructed virtual sphere. In a broad sense, all the individual users of the Facebook lifeworld serve a validating function. An individual member's constant mediated interaction with regular and potential friends within the context of information-seeking activities like checking the news, events, blogs, comments about each other's daily activities (for example, what they ate and what they did during the day) or their feelings (for example, happiness, loneliness, boredom, even thoughts on suicide) as provided is a ritual that becomes a natural part of his daily rhythm and something that contributes meaningfully to the creation of his everyday life. Thus Facebook becomes entirely embedded in his everyday life and

contributes to what Anthony Giddens has termed 'ontological security', a sense of trust and reliance on the continuity of things and people in everyday life. The individual gains ontological security not only from his acquisition of knowledge of the world but also from the reliability that his daily ritual provides. In this sense, all of his Facebook friends' reactions and responses and including their virtual presence in his Facebook-mediated world validate the widest coordinates of his world, including crucially the validation of his identity and place in his world.

'All that is Solid Melts into Air': Facebook and the Liquid Life

Bauman calls upon the mechanics of fluidity to provide the necessary metaphor through which to grasp the complex nature of our current dispensation. He speaks of the coming of liquid society, a society he describes in his book entitled *Liquid Life* (2005) as "the kind of life commonly lived in our contemporary, liquid modern society. Liquid life cannot stay on course because liquid modern society cannot keep its shape for long. It is a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty. The most acute and stubborn worries that haunt this liquid life are the fears of being caught napping, of failing to catch up with fast moving events, of overlooking the use by dates and being saddled with worthless possessions, of missing the moment calling for a change of tack and being left behind." As 'inhabitants' of the Facebook lifeworld, we are all aware that things are changing and shifting rapidly—profile pictures, shoutouts, interests, likes, social causes, links—a lifeworld where everything is ephemeral and where nothing seems to be necessary or universal. Facebook embodies Bauman's sociology of liquid modernity for it catches up the effects of the "new lightness and fluidity of the increasingly mobile, slippery, shifty, evasive and fugitive contemporary human existence" (Bauman 2000, 14). Bauman correctly notes that at the beginning of the 21st century the structure of the social emerges through constant mediated interaction via SNSs and mobile phones in non-spatial localities. SNSs (like Facebook) allow young people to disembed from their immediate spatial locations to connect with their friends beyond time-space. Under the spell of Facebook, the concept of community

today is no longer confined to one's location in space for an individual's community can truly encompass the world. Public issues and intimate histories which include the concepts of home, intimacy and privacy constantly traverse the public-private divide as they are technologically articulated today in SNSs. Facebook not only enables private spheres of potential domesticity to be established in public (like P-noy's lovelife, Tiger Woods' infidelity issues), but also further privatize, in the commercial sense, activities of a personal and intimate nature. The seemingly accidental juxtaposition of conflicting elements now appears irrevocable under the condition of the liquid life that characterizes our Facebook-mediated existence.

In a recent study on the transformative capacities of digitized technology, Raul Pertierra (2007), a sociologist of cyberspace, has poignantly noted how the new communication technologies facilitate new forms of association. Pertierra (2007) takes as his unit of analysis the 'mobile community' and thoroughly outlines the new forms of sociality and subjectivity that may be expected to arise. For example:

- 1) If in past epochs, physical co-presence (face-to-face oral communication) was an initial condition for most relationships, at present, "most relationships do not require contiguity", that is, relationships now thrive on an absent presence based on "a sense of simultaneous present", thus giving rise to a "cosmopolitan sociality". Facebook as a SNS has made virtual cosmopolitanism possible and the "experience of a global simultaneous present banal."
- 2) In this 'postcorporeal' age—i.e., the replacement of the human by the posthuman, the idea of a network (through the flows of messages and images between networks) rather than a centralized structure to understand the multiple strands linking society's members (Pertierra 2007, 18) bursts on the scene.
- 3) This fluid epoch generates its own singularities. First, "society has been transformed into a technoformation where culture has been reduced to data" (Pertierra 2007, 18). We now approach an age oriented around the principle of operability where

flows do not mean, instead, they simply work or are operational. Paul Virilio (1982) calls our age “one of extreme contingency and an age of the accidental.” Pertierra adds, “The social as collective is replaced by the intercalation of diverse elements combined in the individual” (2007, 19). Second, this rupture between the social and culture creates problems for identity. Networked identity performance on Facebook redefines the concept of identity. Pertierra argues that “freed from the constraints of spatial location”, Facebook creates “new identities and transcorporeal subjectivities” that “allow perpetual interaction with absent interlocutors” (2007, 20-21). In this view, a Facebook profile becomes a user’s ‘digital body’ which is collectively ‘written into being.’ This digital body provides the social text for interactions that lacks a physical infrastructure and a visible audience.

As a consequence of these massive changes generated by SNSs like Facebook, identities and societies are in a condition of dynamic fluidity. In this liquid existence of ours, Marx’s prediction—all that is solid melts into air—has taken on a new meaning. Facebook brings into view the immanent field that people, in all their ambiguity, invent and live by, thereby invoking neglected human potentials and expands the limits of understanding and imagination—a people yet to come, ever-unfinished, moving in the direction of the incomplete.

The Ties that Bind: Facebook and Social Capital

No observer of the contemporary communication scene can fail to have noticed the phenomenal rapid growth of SNSs which have expanded to a global network with millions of users—the theoretical framework for this part of my inquiry is drawn from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. No one studying the impact on socialization of communication technologies can afford to ignore the provocative and illuminating insights of this social thinker, who in a series of brilliant sociological studies, has developed a theory of social capital that focuses attention on the modes of consciousness and forms of communality/social ties enabled and maintained by communication

technologies and practices. I hope to demonstrate that Facebook socialization is oriented around the accumulation of social capital. Bourdieu (1984) speaks of social capital as a form of value associated with social acquaintances and networks governed by core values and discourses articulated by a particular social field (e.g. Facebook) as its fundamental principles and which tend to be viewed as inherently true and necessary.

Facebook socialization capitalizes on our desire for nearness and our need to close social gaps. It is not that Facebook socialization impoverishes face-to-face corporeal socialization or devalues the near, but that it constructs a social reality in which users can see other users, and the more users they are connected to, the greater the chance of overcoming social impoverishment, that is, the scarcity of social connections brought about by one's inability to forge ties and links that connect one to exchange resources, ideas or messages. Facebook links us not only to individuals but to a vast collective. In essence, the concept of social capital sheds light onto the mystery of how and why virtual communities are formed and maintained on Facebook. What we end up with is an increasingly commodified and surveilled public space where the 'public display of connection' is not necessarily taboo.

Facing Up to Facebook's Future: Recollecting, Rethinking, Reshaping

The Facebook lifeworld is as historically and culturally determined as any other lifeworld. Despite its much-vaunted claims of radical agency and venue for self-expression, self-creation, self-assertion, and self-enhancement, it is undeniably a socially constructed reality. Moreover, Facebook challenges us with its possibilities—the emergence of a liquid life that necessarily redefines what it means to be a human self and a human community within the context of our rapidly superficial, evasive, mobile and slippery techno-culture and existence. I also demonstrated in this study how the 'public display of connection' on Facebook can increase an individual's social capital, and eventually bring to consciousness the importance of the idea of 'interconnectedness'. But how real is the quality and nature of this interconnectedness? How enduring? Or, dare we even ask, do we really want to be connected? Obviously,

many have already embraced the Facebook lifeworld—students, administrators, artists, NGOs, churches, religions, terrorists, and Lolit Solis and Kuya Germs—not because it is here to stay, but because it signifies an entirely new way of being-in-the-world. Indeed, the Facebook lifeworld envisions a world where cyber-concepts and technologies and the constant flow of messages and information that constitute the basic thread of our contemporary life challenge conventional notions about the human condition.

It is well to end my reflection by quoting Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, authors of the famed book *Empire* (2000), a work regarded by many as the communist manifesto of the 21st century. In their work, they discern the continuing appeal of the social despite the onslaught of aggressive me-orientation in postmodern society:

Resistances are no longer marginal but active in center of a society that opens up in networks; the individual points are singularized in a thousand plateaus. (43)

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