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## Sociology of the Internet

# Exhibited in the Global Digital Cage

## On the Functions and Consequences of Social Network Sites in Complex Societies

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## 1. Introduction

While most media technologies are originally conceived as devices for transporting information, they tend to turn increasingly into tools of reciprocal communication.

Thus, the telephone was first designed for delivering operas and other acoustical events to private homes, before it became exclusively dedicated to (mostly bilateral) verbal discourse (White 2003). Similarly, the French Minitel was introduced in 1981 as a technology for making available phone numbers and other institutionally produced information, before hackers turned it into a tool of decentralized interindividual exchanges in 1988. Since decades, radio stations have taken leave from strictly monological emissions by reaching out to their listeners by phone; and TV channels have activated their formally passive viewers by drawing them into interviews, talk shows, or casting productions.

In an analogous fashion, the early Web 1.0 was primarily used as a one-to many broadcasting device paralleling the conventional channels of Radio/TV emissions and the press: a ready instrument of governmental and commercial organizations for distributing their messages with more speed and much less variable costs. In these early years, interactive Net usages have been banned into Email and Usenet applications based on rather low-level bandwidth and software that provided only spartan possibilities of purely text-based exchanges.

However, empirical studies soon showed that despite the fascinating Multimedia features of the WWW, most users were primarily attracted by these rather inconspicuous interactive functions. When so many people are now habituated of spending about an hour or more every day on the Internet, they don't do this because of mere subjective appetite for WWW surfing or for retrieving any kind of information. Instead, such behavioral regularities are stemming from the constant need to check and answer incoming Email messages: a need highly stabilized by social norms and interpersonal expectations (Kraut et. al. 1998).

In today's emerging Web 2.0, decentralized interactivity and interaction have shifted to the very center of the Net: e. g. in the "*Blogospheres*" which occupy an increasingly central place in the whole of public discourse and deliberation; in the file *sharing exchanges* where the conventional Client-Server model is increasingly substituted by decentralized Peer-to-Peer transmissions in which every user plays the role of provider and recipient at the same time; in the huge *play worlds* and "*Metaverses*" like "World of Warcraft" and "Second Life" where subscribers are invited to adopt avatars for participating in almost any imaginable social activities and transactions; and finally in the boosting "*Social Network Sites*" (SNS) where all users can easily become active Net-co-producers by feeding in their personal profiles and biographical accounts, and by cultivating their networks of acquaintances and friends. Especially for younger age cohorts, the Net has become an almost universally accepted and indispensable dimension of social life: a polyvalent tool for initiating and cultivating bilateral relationships as well as wider networks, groups and communities which provide individual comfort and identity acknowledgement as well as potentially unlimited capacities for instrumental social exchange and cooperation.

The current boosting of Social Network Sites contrasts conspicuously with the decline in human offline sociality and the erosion of social capital as it is often postulated by theoretical arguments and also readily found in many empirical studies.

1) On the most intimate level, there seems to be a shrinkage of very close social networks within most segments of the population. According to a nationwide study based on the U. S. General Social Survey covering the period between 1985 and 2004, there was a dramatic increase in the number of people who had no confidant to talk to, and a spectacular shrinkage in the overall size of such intimate networks (from 2.94 to 2.08; McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Brashears 2006). Even more spectacular is the regularity that the most pronounced decline has occurred in the sphere of non-kin confidants: so that the most intimate relationships are more than ever focused on spouses and other family members.

2) In the wider realms of everyday social life, modern technologies have evidently made it possible for all of us to survive and to do almost all daily activities without entering into social interactions. Thus, many people live a lonesome life disconnected from almost everybody living nearby, because they have no instrumental need for interpersonal contacts: neither for getting and preparing food nor for participation in cultural activities or getting relevant information. In addition, interaction with kin is reduced because relatives live far away.

*“Building a shelter is no longer a communal effort requiring an extensive network of close personal ties, but rather a commercial one requiring only a good relationship with a bank. Acquiring information about current events or how to do something no longer requires maintaining social ties and engaging in conversation, but instead simply watching the news or typing a query. Markets and commercial services have in many ways replaced cultivating connections. It is perhaps ironic that at the point in history when people have the greatest ability to stay in touch with each other, they are the least dependent on personal relationships for daily survival.” (Donath 2007).*

3) On the most encompassing levels of public encounters and interaction, the recent loss of safe public space makes adolescents look around for virtual spheres for "hanging around".

*“Teens have increasingly less access to public space. Classic 1950s hang out locations like the roller rink and burger joint are disappearing while malls and 7/11s are banning teens unaccompanied by parents. Hanging out around the neighborhood or in the woods has been deemed unsafe for fear of predators, drug dealers and abductors.” (boyd 2006a).*

In addition, today's teens are more and more involved in highly institutionalized settings. Instead of playing or just lingering in public places, they visit fitness centers, take Judo lessons, or stay in public localities densely controlled by video cameras, body guards, bay watchers and the like.

*“Additionally, structured activities in controlled spaces are on the rise. After school activities, sports, and jobs are typical across all socio-economic classes and many teens are in controlled spaces from dawn till dusk. They are running ragged without any time to simply chill amongst friends.” (boyd 2006a).*

This increasing scope of formalized institutions may create a need for a new radicalized informality and highly non-committing interactions as they are opened up by new unobtrusive digital media like Email; Chats, Instant Messaging or SMS which

*“..allow teens to participate in unregulated publics while located in adult-regulated physical spaces such as homes and schools.” (boyd 2007).*

In particular, digital communication channels provide an exit option even when staying physically in densely controlled settings: e. g. in the case of adolescents tightly tied to class attendance and still living at their parents' home.

In a functionalist perspective, SNS may be thus be interpreted as a compensation for losses of conventional forms of sociality as they are particularly experienced by younger age cohorts subject to the manifold simultaneous challenges of exploring their personal identity, building their personal social network, leaving home and migrating between educational institutions.

## 2. The shift from location-based to actor-based networks

The emerging Web 2.0 (a term coined by O'Reilly in 2005) has given rise to many different types of dynamic web platforms designed to attract user-created content.

*First*, we find platforms dedicated to a *topic or cause*. In Discussion Fora or Blogs, for instance, individuals may sign in with their Real Name, but the focus lies not on their personal characteristics, but only on the arguments they provide.

*Secondly*, we find *conversational structures* where there is certain equilibrium between topical and personal concerns. In chat rooms, play worlds or "metaverses" (like "Second Life"), participants are typically driven by the dual motivation to engage in goal-directed collective cooperation on the one hand and to generate mutual relationships on the other.

*Third*, there are platforms centering exclusively on *individual personalities*. Their main rationale is to provide tools for everybody to express his or her personal identity and to inform others about his or her subjective preferences, individual activities and social affiliations. Communication within such networks is heavily shaped by these personal characteristics that determine who contacts whom at what time for what reason. Disclosed information and posted messages are not primarily coded as contributions to a topical issue, but as expressive cues that convey information about the originators.

As subtypes of this third category, we may discern

- *Partner Matching sites*, where participants are usually hiding behind pseudonyms and aim to establish bilateral relationships to a sexual partner;
- *Social Network Sites*, where users usually sign in under their real name and are open to less committing (bi- and multilateral) "friendship" relations.

The emergence of social network sites highlights a second Megatrend in the evolution of Worldwide Web: *the change from location-based to personality based forms of virtual association* as it was prophetically anticipated in the seminal work of Wellman (1988).

"As researchers at the Pew project have noted, the proto-social networking sites of a decade ago used metaphors of place to organize their members: people were linked through virtual cities, communities, and homepages. In 1997, GeoCities boasted thirty virtual 'neighborhoods' in which 'homesteaders' or 'GeoCitizens' could gather—'Heartlan' for family and parenting tips, 'SouthBeach for socializing, ?Vienna' for classical music aficionados, 'Broadway' for theater buffs, and so on" By contrast, today's social networking sites organize themselves around metaphors of the person, with in-

*dividual profiles that list hobbies and interests. As a result, one's entrée into this world generally isn't through a virtual neighborhood or community but through the revelation of personal information." (Rosen 2007)*

Taking leave from such spatial metaphors means that virtual collectivities become more unlike those found in the offline world for four reasons:

- 1) While the environment of spatial groups is exogenously given, the environment of personal networks is *endogenously produced by the members themselves*. Every participant has the power to define part of the environmental conditions to which all the other members adapt their own behavior (Donath & boyd 2004: 72).
- 2) A basic element of communality among participants is lacking, as no overarching situational frame is existing within which social interactions are embedded. As a consequence, monocentric transpersonal social communities are transformed into interpersonal networks which are radically polycentric because each participant is located in the center of His Own Personal Net. Thus, collective structures permanently change in tight accordance with personal preferences, and when A defines B and C as his close friend, there is no certainty that B and C reciprocate such preferences, or that A, B and C are in anyway members of a suprapersonal entity like a "group" or voluntary association.
- 3) A central function of spatial metaphors is to define clear boundaries between different collectivities, so that their particular identity can unfold and stabilize because its reach is coinciding with a neatly circumscribed territory. Non-spatial networks defined by personalities are no longer social entities that could be identified as bounded objects (e. g. in terms of "systems" discontinuously separated from an "environment"). Instead, they are all part of an unlimited total network in the same way all Websites are part of a single Mega-Hypertext integrated by hyperlinks. Of course, this implies severe methodological problems because there is no way to sample "networks" as we sample social groups, communities or organizations. Instead, empirical studies have to deal with a single netted tapestry that can be analyzed in terms of continuous parameters of sociometric densities and dilutions (Wassermann & Faust 1994).
- 4) While participation in cyberspatial domains (like virtual cities, chat rooms etc.) was usually restricted to physically existing human persons (represented by nicknames, avatars and the like), nodes in aspatial networks can be filled by any other (real or virtual) actors: fictitious personalities, informal groupings, music bands, corporations or voluntary associations. In addition, human personalities themselves have more freedom to present themselves according to their subjective preferences, because there are no restrictions caused by virtual walls or scarcities of space resulting from the presence of other actors.

While SNS have not added anything fundamentally new to software applications, they have at least automated certain procedures that existed before: e. g. - by enabling users to forward any content items with a mouse click to an unlimited number of recipients.

*"Indeed, the Email forwarding culture on the "bored office worker network" (BOWN) ..had already been present prior to SNS. However SNS both capitalized on and encourages members of the BOWN to create or copy, content, often humorous, and distribute around a users network, using single click mass publishing. Therefore SNS success has not been based on new applications, with the exception of making it user friendly for users to automatically one click publish within their network, digital data, thus creat-*

*ing dynamic new content for users and facilitating vast amounts of information sharing." (Kent 2008).*

In the past, individual net activities were fragmented because different software applications and protocols had to be used for asynchronous and synchronous communication or for text-based messages, images, videos and sounds. A major function of SNS is that they empower individuals to enact all their Net activities from a single site: providing them with a polyvalent multimedia platform for displaying their personal identity in a permanent and encompassing way.

*"Social networking sites support an individual's construction of their persistent digital identity. In addition, they provide single point access to various communication tools, enabling an intuitive and effective management of digital communication across time, space, and platform shifts." (Dwyer, Hiltz & Widener 2008).*

In short: the personal website functions as an equivalent of the physical body by anchoring individuals in the world of stable physical artifacts: existing continuously and being permanently visible for potential interaction partners. This makes them extremely different from discussion fora where individuals are only represented by their posting activities: so that they become invisible at the moment their communicative activities end. Thus, individuals are primary entities by constituting antecedent stable nodes around which variable secondary social interactions, relationships and group structures may evolve (Dalsgaard 2008).

This merging of hitherto dispersed functions is also a great help in social interaction because all components of my friend's net identity and net activities are accessible from his SNS site:

*"It is so much more convenient to have all the information I want to share with friends in a centralized, organized information system. Compared to everyone having their own webpage, email/forum for talking, etc." ... "It is like having an online address book that automatically updates itself." (student commentary in Dwyer, Hiltz & Widmeyer 2008).*

As most exchange of images or videos takes nowadays place along the lines of person-based networks, media-specific platforms like YouTube or Flickr tend to be reduced to mere storage servers (Kent 2008). This functional synthesis is well exemplified by the platform "MySpace Music" established in fall 2008. By competing with iTunes and other global suppliers of online audio files, MySpace offers not only a basis of 100 million users, but in addition: rich networks among them that can be used and further developed for amplifying interest in music and dispositions to buy songs: by promoting diffusion of information, discussion, collective procedures of evaluation and ranking, the establishments of fan clubs and groups that organize events etc. Thus, MySpace can function as a "one-stop" platform for music users: empowering them to concentrate all music-related activities on a single website: getting information, select performers, bands and songs by listening in, forming opinions and preferences by discussion with other participants, having a gateway for getting into contact with music stars, influence future productions by articulating criticism and new suggestions, participating in fan clubs and support communities, and engaging in the promotion of newly emerging performers and styles.

Being instrumental in exchanging various information and discussing a broad range of topics (on private matters like movie tastes as well as public issues like presidential elections),

*"SNS transform the Internet into a platform that can occupy a central place in individual life and everyday activities, by catalyzing the four I's of engagement: Involvement, Interaction, Intimacy and Influence" (Spellman 2008).*

Thus, they have a full range of positive effects on various dimensions of "social capital": increasing life satisfaction and felt interpersonal trust on the one hand and civic involvement and political activation at the other. (Valenzuela et. al. 2008).

Following Comscore statistics, we may conclude that at this moment (Summer 2008), a spectacular expansion of Social Network Sites is still in sway, particularly outside the (already quite saturated) North American countries. Figuring among the most mind-boggling Web 2.0 entities hitherto found on the WWW, MySpace and Facebook had each more than 115 Mio active monthly users in Spring 2008.<sup>1</sup>

**Total number of SNS users in 000 (age 15+)**

Source: ComScore World Metrix (August 2008).<sup>2</sup>

	June 2007	June 2008	% Change
Europe	122 527	165 256	35%
Asia-Pacific	162 738	200 555	23%
North America	120 848	131 255	9%
Latin America	40 098	53 248	33%
Middle-East Africa	18 226	30 197	66%
Worldwide	464 437	580 510	25%

MySpace alone maintained about 10 billion friendship relations and processed about 50 Mio Emails per day (more than Yahoo, Hotmail or Gmail by Google). Within a single month, about 300 000 new users have signed in and up to 8 Mio new images were uploaded every single day (Owyang 2008). At this moment, Facebook shows currently more dynamism (especially outside North America): having increased its number of unique visitors by 153% between June 2007 and June 2008, while MySpace has practically stagnated (3%).

All networks expand "virally" by self-interested initiatives of the users who are motivated to increase their own network as well as the reach of the whole platform, because platform utility increases exponentially with the number of users (Reeds law). This implies that network owners see no need to invest money in advertising. However, they have to make efforts for keeping their users, because mass migration to other competing platforms is a constant threat.

It has to be kept in mind that these extremely large user numbers are generated by a considerably lower sum total of individuals who participate in two or more platforms simultaneously.<sup>3</sup> Currently, SNS usage is most ubiquitous in Canada where 53% of all Internet Users

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.techcrunch.com/2008/06/12/facebook-no-longer-the-second-largest-social-network/>

<sup>2</sup> Comscore Press Release August 12 2008 <http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=2396>

<sup>3</sup> [http://business.rapleaf.com/company\\_press\\_2008\\_06\\_18.html](http://business.rapleaf.com/company_press_2008_06_18.html)

participate, followed by Great Britain (39%), U.S. (34%) and Japan (32%). In continental Europe, involvement varies between 22% in Italy, 17% in France and 12% in Germany.<sup>4</sup>

As the *Fox Interactive Media Study* of 2007 (involving about 3000 young American Internet users) has demonstrated, about 70% of all respondents in the 15-35 year age group are active Social Network Site users who upload texts, pictures, videos or sound files on the WWW. Generally, SNS activities go along with an increased overall online time per week (11 instead of 8.7 hours) as well as with a heightened usage of interactional media like Email, mobile phones or IM, while the consumption of conventional unidirectional media (like TV) is significantly diminished (Fox Interactive Media 2007: 11). As Cassidy has found, two thirds of all Facebook users log in at least once a day and spend there about 20 minutes of their time. (Cassidy, 2006), and according to a survey including 2400 Danish youngsters between 12 and 18, about 60% of all users between the age of 12 and 18 spend more than one hour a day on SNS (Larsen 2008). Even most nonparticipants have a strong opinion on SNS: being "conscientious objectors" who take distance for ideological reasons or family-related concerns (boyd 2007).

Many studies show that in general platforms like Facebook and MySpace, women are more prone than males to subscribe<sup>5</sup>, to upload personal photos and videos<sup>6</sup> and to aggregate large numbers of friends. On the other hand, professional sites like Xing or LinkedIn are dominated by males.

Like search engines, Social network Sites tend toward extremely skewed distributions of size. Thus, MySpace and Facebook generate almost 90% of all SNS traffic in the US, while no other platform reached more than 1.5%.<sup>7</sup> This trend toward concentration may be again a reflection of Reed's law which states that the value of any network grows in proportion to the number of different-sized groups ( $2^n$ ) that can be formed among all participants (Reed 1999).<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand: no global monopoly is in sight because all SNS seem to remain anchored in particular regions or cultures. Thus, *Facebook* and *MySpace* - while getting ever more international - also seem to retain their identity by specializing on different social strata and educational layers of the population (Hargittai 2007). The recent spectacular spread of Facebook on all continent has not ended the strong position of *Bebo* in Great Britain and the predominance of *StudiVZ* among German-speaking students; *Orkut* is an American creation, but has subsequently been "kidnapped" by Brazil: encompassing now about 30 Mio users and unfolding as a universe of Portuguese language and Latin American culture; *Cyworld* has become a national South Korean Institution, integrating about 22 of its 50 Mio inhabitants (=more than 40% of the population).<sup>9</sup> In Japan, *Mixi* dominates the Social Network Domain

<sup>4</sup> "BRITAIN HIGH IN WEB NETWORKING LEAGUE." SKY NEWS WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 12, 2007

<sup>5</sup> [http://business.rapleaf.com/company\\_press\\_2008\\_06\\_18.html](http://business.rapleaf.com/company_press_2008_06_18.html)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.netsmartz.org/safety/statistics.htm#escaping>

<sup>7</sup> Hitwise, March 2008

<http://www.hitwise.com/press-center/hitwiseHS2004/social-networking-visits-april.php>

<sup>8</sup> This contrasts with Metcalfe's law which predicts that net utility will only rise in proportion to the square of the number of users (because only the logical umber of bilateral relations is considered). In fact, Reed's law is highly relevant for SNS because members are highly prone to form multilateral group relations of any different size.

<sup>9</sup> Since early 2008, however, there are clear signs of saturation or even decline in interest (Jin-Seo 2008).

with about 12 Mio active subscribers, and in China, *Tencent QQ* has developed as a gigantic interactive universe (including a widely accepted online currency) with about 160 Mio users. On the whole, these East Asian platforms may be better fitted for longer-term survival than their Western counterparts, because in contrast to the latter, they have developed business models that generate sound profits (by marketing goods rather than by advertising).<sup>10</sup>

On the whole, there is little evidence that Social Network sites promote social interaction between hitherto separated groups. Even if they span different nations or continents, they just create an umbrella under which pre-existing collectivities - intensifying their internal interactions - remain mutually segregated.

*"Cyworld has completely separate domains that segregate the Koreans from the Chinese. On Orkut, they share the site but the Indians and Brazilians barely interact with one another. Furthermore, the Indian participants have segmented themselves within the system along caste lines. Even on MySpace where there is a strong American culture, there is an intense division along race and age lines." (boyd 2007).*

Overall, Social Network Sites are the most generalized and inclusive platforms on the WWW: in terms of membership composition as well as in terms of their user's motivations, values and goals. As their purposes are left undefined, there is also no secure basis for measuring their effects and their degree of success (Holder 2006).

However, network platforms differ in the degree they use these new liberties for taking distance to offline reality.

Reflective platforms are characterized by users who tend to display truly their real offline identity. The website is primarily a medium for facilitating the communication among individual and groups with pre-existent identities that are just mirrored, but not changed when they define their profiles and enter into communication. *Facebook* is mainly running on these principles, despite the fact that the initial precondition for membership (possessing an "edu"-Email granted by a formal educational institution) has been eliminated. (Atal 2007).

On projective platforms, users tend to display additional, partially fictitious identities that are not anchored in the Real World. They use the site for acting out fantasies that have no place in their offline existence (e. g. by gender swapping or by pretending skills, character traits and preferences not in line with their everyday existence). *MySpace* facilitates such free-wheeling fantasies, because membership does not require any adherence to offline institutions.

*"If Facebook users are displaying their real-world relationships, MySpace users are self-promoters, concerned with making new connections through exaggerated, even fictionalized, personas." (Atal 2007)*

Consequently, using *MySpace* is more seen as an entertainment going along with intrinsic gratification, while *Facebook* usage is more guided by instrumental purposes.

*"Where Facebook operates based on grounding in reality, MySpace offers a more abstracted social networking experience. MySpace is more used and perceived as a form of entertainment, or a stage for performance; whereas Facebook serves as a communication tool best (Croft 2007).*

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<sup>10</sup> NZZ BetaBlog Oct. 21 2008

[http://www.nzz.ch/blogs/nzz\\_blogs/betablog/warum\\_das\\_netz\\_eben\\_doch\\_nicht\\_grenzenlos\\_ist\\_1.1146888.html](http://www.nzz.ch/blogs/nzz_blogs/betablog/warum_das_netz_eben_doch_nicht_grenzenlos_ist_1.1146888.html)

..

While *reflective platforms* rely on social integration resulting from previous acquaintance and shared institutional affiliations, relationships that emerge on *projective platforms* are completely based on personal affinities and converging interests displayed in the virtual profiles.

*"Relationships that are formed on MySpace which do not have real-life grounding are those which exist purely for their own sake and are based on representation and interpretation of the self alone. The MySpace platform appears to have more cultural value than social networking value. It is a means of staying connected to, and the creation of, user-created culture; music, visual arts and writing in the form of blogs." (Croft 2007).*

As personal identities are less anchored in the real world, they remain more abstract and more subject to volatile negotiation. Being highly dependent on psychological factors, they seem less committing and to have less consequences for the participant's life (Croft 2007).

### 3. SNS as polyvalent tools of multilateral association

#### 3.1 Reinforcing existing offline relations

In the tradition of community-based BBS, the "digidale stad" (Amsterdam) or the "Toronto neighborhood", some Social Network Sites have been mainly designed for the purpose of complementing and reinforcing already existing relationships between individuals who live at the same geographical location. Thus, Facebook and StudiVZ invite all subscribers to indicate the college or university where they are currently studying, and available studies show that far more contacting occurs among people already acquainted to each other than among complete strangers (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006).<sup>11</sup>

Such location-based platforms exemplify the high instrumentality of "offline to online" websites for enhancing the social capital that can be extracted from location-based collectivities and physical neighbourhoods (Hampton & Wellman 2003).<sup>12</sup>

*"Facebook organized students by class schedule for the first time, making it possible to learn more about that classmate you might have a crush on. Although I am highlighting one particular use case, initial Face book usage was indeed driven by dating type activity – checking people out, learning more about crushes, light stalking type of activity, etc. The larger picture here is that Facebook created a high utility online service for enabling pre-existing social behaviors within an offline community. This makes for an interesting lesson learned: it's easier to piggyback off a pre-existing community with offline behaviors that drive online service usage." (Gabbay 2006).*

This makes Facebook a very efficient channel for distributing ads when they are directed to a local college population: because 90% of all local students can be expected to consult the site

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<sup>11</sup> In Facebook, most messaging occurs along the lines of established friendship ties (about 905), and about 50% between residents at the same school (Golder, Wilkinson & Huberman 2007).

<sup>12</sup> According to Facebook founder, Alain Zuckerberg, "the idea for the website was motivated by a social need at harvard to be able to identify people in other residential houses." (Ellison et. al. 2007)

at least once per week (Gabbay 2006). Particularly classified ads of all sorts can become an important source of income for such localized sites: giving them an edge over transspatial sites which are highly inefficient for all ads directed at local populations (cars, jobs, apartments etc.). A study including 1500 German StudiVZ users has demonstrated that the platform is predominantly used for cultivating pre-existing relationships, while only a minority instrumentalizes it for expanding their social network considerably. Paradoxically, the very rapid expansion of this network was mainly conditioned by mouth-to-mouth propaganda, while information spread within the Internet itself played a negligible role (Lütkemeier 2008).

SNS evidently fulfill an important function for newly entering freshmen: providing them with basic information about their new social environment and all the other people available for contacting or for gathering useful information. By facilitating access to informal contacts with colleagues, they may well lessen the need for formal contacts and information sources (e. g. websites, offices or institutions offered by the university administration, participation in formal events, or formal membership in voluntary associations).

Consequently, they may significantly contribute to shorten the initial time period needed for getting fully integrated into informal social networks and communities; and of course: they may facilitate the spread of informal knowledge and rumors about the institution and its staff (especially the teachers).

*"The Facebook is truly a killer app for incoming freshmen. As they prepare to start a new life in a new place, surrounded by a new social network, the Facebook presents a highly interactive way to explore this new space. For those of us who sent snail-mail letters to our freshman year roommates, Facebook is everything we could have dreamed of and then some - not only can students know everything about their new roommates, but they can learn everything about their suite, their floor, and their dorm. This is information students need to know, and it helps them get situated in their new social networks."* (Stutzman 2006).

In addition, communication through Social Networks seems to have a considerable substitutive function, as the frequency of messages rises dramatically in the month of school vacation where no face-to-face meetings can take place (Golder, Wilkinson & Huberman 2007). By intensifying social relationships and multilateral networks between peer students at the same school, sites like Facebook can increase the degree to which students feel connected to their institution. While high graders possibly feel highly connected to campus due to their personal successes, low graders seem to need Facebook activities as an alternative way of overcoming their marginality (Vanden Boogart 2004).

### **3.2 Conserving and revitalizing older relationships**

In the past, migrating individuals had no choice than to anchor themselves quickly at their new locations, because the means of translocal communication were scarce, slow or nonexistent. Today, such migrations are much more "cushioned" because so many cheap channels are available for keeping antecedent relationships alive.

For instance, Cummings, Lee, and Kraut (2006) have found that services like Email and Instant Messaging help college students to overcome periods of "friendsickness" by keeping

close contacts with their high school friends after they have left their home town for going to college.

Social Network Sites may have a similar conservative function like mobile phones – which are also used by many for intensifying contacts with familiar kin and friends, not for establishing additional “weak ties” (Geser 2004). In particular, they help to preserve face-to-face relationships that have grown in the past but are difficult to continue at present: e.g. because of school- or work-related geographical migration.

In an empirical study, 30% of Facebook users indicated that their main reason for signing up to the site was to get back into contact with old friends, (compared to only 8% of MySpace users), and even 77% agreed with the statement “If it wasn’t for Facebook I probably wouldn’t interact with old friends” (Croft 2007).

Thus, we may speculate that these new media may well have a regressive impact on some users’ social environment: by enabling them to keep their contacts within the narrow confines of family members and childhood friends, instead of opening up to new relationships at their new places.

*“While some BYU students tend to have significant social networks within their ward, others spend a substantial time maintaining long distance relationships. Distance may be a culprit behind decreasing confidants, with a theory that assumes the survival of long-distance connections may actually reduce the formation of new relationships. A move to college may reduce some students’ desires to seek out friends in their new environment, when they have so many ways to sustain strong bonds with home.” (Lizon 2006).*

### ***3.3 Efficient use of social capital and management of many "weak ties"***

While weak ties prove to be highly important for advice seeking, job search and other important matters, it was hitherto very difficult to maintain such networks, because individuals are not capable of keeping large numbers of lose acquaintances in their memory, and conventional technologies - even computer software programs like MS Outlook - offer very little help in keeping such lists updated:

*“...due to time restrictions traditional networking allows individuals only to stay in touch with a limited number of people. It requires simply too much effort to update permanently all contact data in a traditional address book or an Excel-sheet, since contacts do not regularly inform the individual about changes in their contact data such as address, telephone number, job position, or e-mail address. Hence, contact data is not always up-to-date and the individual might lose track of these people, even if he or she would, in theory, be willing to retain the contact. Relationships thus expire over time due to a lack of interaction. (Enders 2008)*

Social Media Sites eliminate such deficiencies by enabling everybody to build up a self-actualizing address book and by making such ties enduring, so that efforts have to be made for *ending* them, not for keeping them alive. As “awareness tools” (Donath & boyd 2004: 80), such sites may have similar personal functions as conventional booklets with telephone

numbers or post addresses - or "buddy lists" as they accumulate in the course of chat or instant messaging activities.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to my brain-based memory, however, such lists present all contacts on the same plane: without different shadowings and blurrings caused by time and occasion when I have met them or by the history of mutual interaction. Thus, I can easily overview all the people that could be potentially be asked to give me advice in solving a tricky problem, to provide material support in cases of need or to accept an invitation to my birthday party.

While individuals are certainly continuing to cultivate rather restricted circles of intimate relationships, they are more likely now to maintain a "long tail" of looser acquaintances. As a consequence, they have a richer pool of "social capital" at their disposal, and they will tend to turn to different "friends" at different occasions. In comparison with conventional polyvalent and multiplex acquaintances which tend to be addressed in a large variety of circumstances, such online "friends" are more likely to play highly specialized roles, in closer accordance with their own preferences, experiences and skills and social connections.

In the course of professional life, such accumulated contact lists may well become a valuable resource: e. g. for the self-employed looking for customers or clients:

*"As a former employee, I'm feeling pretty empowered, because on the day I launched my new company, about 800 key contacts in my network were immediately notified when I updated my profile. It was better than a press release, because the people who really mattered were the ones that were first informed."*<sup>14</sup>

Displaying publicly my lists of my friends (in whatever format) has many additional subtle consequences that may easily escape my conscious reflection:

- 1) Such explications make my relationships more "real" than they were before, because I express more commitment to my relationships when I stand by them in full public. *"In choosing friends, teens write their community into being."* (boyd 2007).
- 2) I have to make sharp dichotomous choices whether somebody shall be included in my friendship circle or not.
- 3) Whenever I inspect the list, I'm invited to read it with a critical distance as I practice it toward other written documents (whether written by me or anybody else). This facilitates reflection on whether the list still mirrors my current relationships, or whether additions or cancellations should be made.
- 4) Such lists facilitate comparisons with other people by simply counting the number of names. Thus, I may become motivated to enlarge it in order to equalize or even surpass specific others I choose as my reference.
- 5) Written lists are permanently in danger of reflecting the past, because they are not so frequently updated to keep pace with changing social relations. These problems become amplified to the degree that interest in site maintenance dissipates - as it

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<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, such automated tools may be a disincentive to keep social relationships alive by occasional "ritualistic" calls or meetings: thus leading to a thinning out and degeneration of interactional social life (Enders 2008).

<sup>14</sup> posted by John McArthur as a commentary to Davenport 2008.

could be observed in the case of Friendster after 2003 (boyd & Heer 2006). In other words: trusting a specific site implies high confidence that it is currently maintained regularly by its author.

The stunning popularity of Social Network Sites may also be explained by their function to *automate interpersonal interactions*: so that regularized communication can occur which is based on an absolute minimum (or total absence) of conscious attention.

*"Each Facebook.com user is required to provide their precise date of birth. With this data, Facebook.com displays a list of "Upcoming Birthdays" on the bottom of the user's homepage listing the upcoming birthdays of the user's friends. Therefore, the user is reminded of friends' birthdays without having to input them into some other type of system (be it a Palm Pilot, the person's mind, or, more traditionally, a calendar)." (Holder 2006).*

Evidently, devices of routinization are badly needed for managing large friendship networks as they tend to emerge in SNS. Thus, such platforms may well increase the frequency and regularity with which birthday congratulations are exchanged (even between rather distant "friends"). On the other hand, such symbolic exchanges lose expressive significance by the fact that they are the product of blind (semi-) automated software procedures, not the outcome of conscious remembering and sincere mutual care. Similar to SMS (which also involve very low effort, particularly when already existing texts are just forwarded), such online greetings contrast sharply with phone calls or mailed letters which express much more affection because they involve some costs in personal discipline and sacrificed free time.

As we know from the sociology of organization, bureaucratic structures relying on written records can only be functional as long as they invest heavy regular activities in the storage and permanent actualization of all these documents (whose number and length tend to increase over time). As yet, we have little historical experience with highly informal collectivities that rely on such externalized storage media: groupings that have neither the money to employ regular maintenance workers nor the power to enforce norms of regular active participation. For instance, we might expect these sites to be filled more and more with "frozen performances" stemming from former authors who have died or moved away in the meantime. Given the very low storage costs, there may be little motivation to clean such ghostly "digital graveyards" in order to provide more space for living active performers (boyd/Heer 2006).

### **3.4 Extended reach of highly trusted weak ties**

The evolution of human civilization seems critically dependent on establishing reliable relationships to people we don't know: foreigners with whom we are not related by family, friendship and long-term acquaintance (Luhmann 1973; Offe 1999). Such "trusted weak ties" are indispensable for trade relations (and other economic transactions) as well as for relying on information from mass media, or for having confidence in professional experts without being able to verify their knowledge and skills.

*"Trust opens for the truster a margin of options and activities beyond what can be directly enforced, purchased, or known for sure. To be trusted equals to be worthy of*

*credit. This credit can be used to cover up minor mistakes, to relieve anxiety, and to open up ‘a wide margin for nonconformity, innovation, originality’ covered by the credit of trust.” (Offe 1999: 55).*

As long as trust is based on the primordial processes of interpersonal acquaintance and familiarisation, it cannot easily be extended to wider circles because costs for acquiring information and empathy about many different persons become unreasonably high (Hardin 1993). Therefore, successful expansion to larger social settings has usually only become possible because trust in persons was substituted by trust in social institutions. For instance, I expect my economic partner to behave correctly because he fears legal sanctions, and I suppose my doctor is highly skilled because he can display a certificate from a reputable medical school (Luhmann 1973; Offe 1999).

The Internet provides many new possibilities to create extended interpersonal trust among unacquainted partners without relying on such institutional backings, but simply on informal social controls exerted horizontally among the many participants. Thus, transactions in eBay are based on trust created as an emergent outcome of a very large number of individual evaluations: I send money to the seller in advance because many earlier users testify that this seller has always reliably delivered (Kasikci et. al. 2004).

Consider a doctor or a lawyer publishing a list of all his patients or clients. Such a behavior would set him under extreme pressure to conform well presently and in the future, because dissatisfied customers would easily be able to spread compromising information and to collectivize their protest by contacting each other.

*“....since the display makes one’s connections and the means of contacting them public, it should ensure co-operative behaviour by putting one’s reputation on the line with all transactions, for an unhappy date or client, etc, can easily contact the connections.” (Donath/boyd 2004: 73).*

Similarly, I trust the information people convey about themselves in MySpace or Facebook insofar as such information is embedded in a social network of friends who act as validators.

*“One of the most valuable contributions of SNS’s is their potential to add trust to weak ties. Trusted weak ties are very useful sources of information, combining the heterogeneity that such ties generally have with the believability that comes with trust. Furthermore, SNS’s can actually increase trustworthiness, by placing people within a context that can enforce social mores. SNS’s make people aware that their friends and colleagues are looking at their self-presentation.” (Donath 2007).*

Under face-to-face conditions, people have much leeway in self impression strategies because their claims are – at least for the moment – rather difficult to verify (Goffman 1963). In Social Network sites, self-expressions are more reliable insofar the network of friends displayed on my page is a very potent validator of my personal identity: demonstrating not only that I’m existing under the name given, but that I really possess the features indicated in my profile and that I have really experienced the events indicated in my biographical accounts. Whenever somebody would lie about his age, educational degree, social memberships or biographical details, at least some of his friends would potentially notice such discrepancies, inform each other about them and ask for a correction (Donath 2007).

While personality profiles are intrinsically unreliable because they are easy to manipulate, friendship networks are far more valid indicators of reality because in order to fabricate them artificially, individuals would have to invent a full list of imaginary “friends” (and maintain their respective pages) who pretend to “reciprocate” his choices.

The larger and the more heterogeneous my friendship network, the less chances I will have that any unwarranted claim of my side (e. g. the false pretension that I have won a specific award or that I’m acquainted with a specific VIP) will go unnoticed for longer periods of time. Thus, the mere fact that I post information about me on a public site is taken as an indicator that such information is likely to be true:

*“A public display of connections can be viewed as a signal of the reliability of one’s identity claims. If I write a description of myself for strangers to read, it is easy to prevaricate. Yet if I take that description and ask a number of people who know me to link to it and implicitly vet it, this should increase the reliability of the description. The use of one’s real name and the network both imply that if one were to prevaricate extensively in one’s profile, real acquaintances would see this and presumably, make some rebuke — or at least, one would be embarrassed to be seen exaggerating accomplishments in front of one’s friends” (Donath/boyd 2004: 73).*

Under current conditions, self presentations in Facebook are more reliable than in MySpace because users are densely netted and likely to meet offline as they visit the same educational institutions. Thus, untrue information (e-. g. about bodily characteristics) is very easily ascertained (Donath/boyd 2004).

In more general terms, we may say that trust in personal online information can be extremely high in cases of densely knit online communities where people are widely known by each other. The platforms may themselves contribute to increase reliability: insofar as they facilitate denser interrelationships among their participants.

Thus, SNS sites can significantly contribute to a more predictable, peaceful social environment in which trustful interaction is possible worldwide even between complete strangers and across divergent cultures, because irrespective of their internalized values and subjective preferences, all partners are under constant social control to play their roles conformingly and to fulfil mutual expectations. For instance, I may be confident to get my lent money back, because any borrower would evade the risk of being criticized or ostracized by his publicly visible friends.

In fact, SNS lead to a resurrection of traditional community pressures thought to have gone away with increasing mobility and individualization - and to implement such structures on a much wider transspatial scale. It is the inescapable discipline stemming from dense social networks where “everybody knows everybody else” or at least: where anybody is technically able to know and to contact anybody else.

### **3.5 Empowerment of informal network relations vis-à-vis formal institutional structures**

By embedding myself in social online networks, I may get access to many resources without using formal professional or bureaucratic channels. For instance, I may save expenses for doctors or lawyers because I find sufficient informal expertise among my friends (or their

respective friends). And I will find more useful advice about which films are thrilling, which art expositions are worthwhile to visit and which new novels I should read, so that I have to rely less on the judgment of “official experts” e. g. reputable media pundits and other cultural elites.

*“By increasing the number of weak ties one can maintain, social supernets have the potential to expand their users' range of information sources. People can use their beliefs about another person's knowledge and credibility to assess new ideas that come from that source. They may care more that people they know recommend a book than about how it is generally received.” (Donath 2007)*

In a study conducted by Cogent (in April 2008), nearly two-thirds of high investors (with assets higher than 100 000 \$) have indicated that peer-generated content about personal investing and finance has an influence over their financial purchasing behaviors and decisions. More than half of them also said that such online opinions have lead them to question information they got from professional advisers (Cogent Research 2008).

The egalitarian informalism of SNS relationships is subverting formal status relationships: e. g. between managers and employees, doctors and patients or students and teachers. Within formal institutions and organizations, social networking promotes the formation of many self-recruited informal subgroups that may behave rather exclusively on the basis of personalized bonds - similar to high-school cliques. In enterprises, for example, there is a rise of “inner circles” centering around the CEO or a specific middle-level manager: thus marginalizing other staff members who do not participate (or may not even know that such favoritist cliques are existing).

Such segregative and fragmenting tendencies are in contradiction to the widespread efforts to promote inclusiveness by giving everybody the same chances to speak and to be heard.

*“Social networking appears to be a migration of high school and college practices into the workplace.... I am not sure that we have the legal structures to guarantee fairness and lack of discriminatory and exclusionary practices.” (prao@.... 2008)*

Colleges and universities that take care to keep up a good public reputation feel threatened by SNS postings where their students display themselves in unfavorable ways. In particular, religious schools don't like that they come to be known as places where alcoholic or sexual excesses take place. Evidently, the reputation of institutions becomes heavily influenced by public information that is not under their control (Mitrano 2006; Lipka 2008).

While some teachers embrace the opportunity to extend their pedagogical activities beyond school hours, many are highly ambiguous because they are always on the brink of committing informalities that may damage their personal authority and a professional reputation (Carter, Foulger, Ewbank & Dutton 2008).

SNS increase the degree to which official school culture is pervaded by the informal peer culture reigning among its students. This is illustrated in a study conducted by The Pew Internet and American Life Project where it was found that teens who keep Blogs or use social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace have a greater tendency to insert highly informal, nonstandard writing elements into their schoolworks.

*“Despite their best intentions, teens in our survey do admit to using conventions from their electronic communications in their school writing. Half (50%) of teens say they*

*sometimes use informal writing styles in the writing they perform in school, 38% have used shortcuts from instant messaging or email, and 25% have used emoticons in their school writing. Overall, nearly two-thirds of teens (64%) incorporate some informal styles from their text-based communications into their writing at school." (Lenhart et. al. 2008).*

Many SNS seem to accentuate intergenerational divergences because they are used primarily by adolescents for horizontal peer group interaction. Thus, they

*"play a key role in youth culture because they give youth a space to hang out amongst friends and peers, share cultural artifacts (like links to funny Web sites, comments about TV shows), and work out an image of how they see themselves." (Jenkins & Boyd 2006)*

Young people behave as if the sites would only be visited by their peers, ignoring that the information posted is fully visible to everybody: so that they give up all control over who is taking cognizance (Barnes 2006). The main ambition is to be accepted according to the values and norms of this peer subculture, not according to the institutionalized values reigning in schools, at workplaces or within other societal institutions.

*"Participants also discussed how efforts to create a good impression affected their use of profiles: 'You can't just completely be yourself, you have to play the game, and have some sort of cool factor [so that] people are interested in speaking to you. It's just like high school, you know, you have to be all pretty and proper and that's how you build your social network.'" (Dwyer 2007: 5).*

As a consequence, the content posted on these sites reflects very much the cultural standards, life styles and values reigning within these subcultures: thus making highly visible how these standards deviate from those maintained within schools, work settings, law enforcement agencies and other societal institutions.

Conformity pressures within these groups have the consequence that even individuals who do not agree with these values present themselves as if they would conform: thus demonstrating larger deviances from mainstream adult culture than would actually be warranted:

*"Increasingly, many teenagers feel pressured to show themselves doing more risky things, even if they are not actually doing them. For instance, girls have "blogged about weekends of drinking and debauchery", while in reality they were coloring with their younger siblings or watching old movies with Grandma." (Bahmampour/Aratani 2006).*

On the one hand, the Internet seems to enhance individual freedom by providing users with an action space rather free from legal regulations. But on the other hand, this freedom is again reduced or even eliminated by growing informal influences and social controls originating in the horizontal interaction networks between users: peer pressures as they are manifested in frequent slandering and mobbing:

*"We're seeing the impacts of this amplification when it comes to bullying, cheating, privacy, file sharing, and the speed at which society, but youth culture in particular, continues to change. Bullying for example is a phenomenon that has been transformed by the power of amplification from being a nuisance that is considered a part of childhood to a genuine threat that can snowball to devastate an individual's life, regardless*

*of their age. The speed by which virtual lynch mobs can form online lends itself to the ability of the bully to be part of a larger group, a contrast to the traditional image of the lone bully terrorizing the school yard." (Hirsh 2008).*

Likewise, group pressures are built up to circumvent copyright laws by downloading music and videos from illegal file sharing sites, and by engaging in illicit cooperation when institutional norms demand independent individual performances (e. g. in educational works).

*"For example in a much cited dispute at Ryerson University, a student was charged with hosting a Facebook group that allowed students to collaborate on homework that was supposed to be completed independently. While the rules of the university said one thing, the students involved believed another, in their case the peer pressure taking precedence over the school regulations." (Hirsh 2008).*

From the perspective of commercial enterprises as well as public institutions of any kind, these new horizontal networks constitute a new resource of Customer-to-customer (COCA) communication channels that can be tapped very cheaply for spreading information and amplifying persuasion. For corporations, Social Network Sites provide an immense potential for harnessing such informal persuasions much more forcefully to their purposes than anywhere in the past. In the first comprehensive study examining the marketing power of SNS, Fox Interactive Media (FILM), a division of News Corporation concluded that

*"...brands such as Adidas and Electronic Arts attributed more than 70% of their marketing return on investment to the "Momentum Effect." The "Momentum Effect," a new metric coined by Marketing Evolution, quantifies the impact of a brand within a social network beyond traditional advertising impressions to encompass the "pass along" power of consumer-to-consumer communication." (Fox Interactive Media 2007: 38)*

According to the same study, more than 40% of all social networkers said they use Social Networking Sites to learn more about brands or products that they like, and 28% said at some point a friend has recommended a brand or product to them.

*"Marketing Evolution claims Adidas directly influenced 1.2 million people to purchase its product and, after those people talked to their friends, influenced 4.2 million more people. Similarly, Electronic Arts directly influenced 1.8 million consumers and indirectly influenced 4.5 million consumers to say they intended to purchase its products." (Fox Interactive Media 2007)*

A major reason for the spectacular rise of SNS may be the fact that on the Internet, non-directed public advertising is not a viable option, because such messages are either ignored (when they appear on websites) or shrugged off as spam (when they arrive as unsolicited mail). In order to be effective, advertising has to be kept within more specific channels: being sent to members of virtual networks or communities who can be expected to give attention because they have shown a certain interest or commitment in advance. For instance, when a music band wants to spread information about an impending stage performance, it does well to send such announcements to all members of the fan club they have established on MySpace before. Such an action is likely to be extremely cheap and effective at the same time (Borderline 2007). In addition, members may be motivated to spread recommenda-

tions to their friends: inducing them to buy the same product because they trust the senders.

SNS also provide easy ways for finding "sociometric stars" or "mavens" who occupy a central position in huge networks, so that they are supposedly able to exert "opinion leadership" on many others. Firms can exploit these informal leadership potentials by "co-opting" such individuals: e. g. by offering them high rewards when they cooperate to take part in marketing campaigns (Enders 2008).

The conventional vertical channels propagating persuasive information from the firm to the customer are losing weight in favor of horizontal channels that propagate information and persuasive effects between consumers. This "momentum effect" works when individuals load product advertising on their own homepage, from which is then passed along through informal networks channels by mere user activity – without any need of the firm to intervene (Fox Interactive Media 2007: 42) Of course, this horizontal propagation makes it extremely difficult to stop ongoing advertising campaigns (e. g. in cases a product proves to be faulty), because at the moment the firm has released its advertisements, their propagation occurs without the firm's supervision and control.

Regardless of their way of origin, most SNS are now in possession and under control of very large commercial organizations. Thus, MySpace is part of Murdoch News Corporation, Cyworld is owned by South Korean RTelecom, Orkut is a Google enterprise and StudiVZ belongs to the German Holtzbrinck Verlag (2008). Such commitments indicate that big corporations see high profit potentials in allying with social collectivities that could not be further away from their own bureaucratic structures: volatile and uncontrollable decentralized networks where each user has complete control over entry end exit and all patterns of individual and social behaviour. Evidently, these investing enterprises believe in a future of marketing and advertising that relies very much on harnessing such fluid informal networks to the purposes of centralized organization: despite the fact that firms will never be able to exert overt control. Such perspectives seem highly speculative however, because up to the present, commercial acquisitions have not been followed by much strategic changes, and revenues have remained rather disappointing (Kafka 2008).

### ***3.6 Lowering the threshold for contact initiation and group formation***

SNS sites evidently widen the field of social interaction, because they provide ready means for collecting information about the existence and the traits of many other individuals, for filtering out those who most neatly respond to my preferences, and for contacting anybody swiftly without efforts and risks. An extremely easy and noncommittal way to initiate contacts is to send "pokes": smallest digital nudges just signaling that "*I think about you*" (Rosen 2007). Like sending out inviting glances at a party, emitting pokes is a way to create a very large number of initial contacts in order to maximize chances that at least some of them evoke a response. Such strategies are rational under conditions when very high insecurity on mutual attraction exists: so that more committing steps (like invitations for lunch or dinner) would be too risky.

Therefore, individuals ranking high on shyness and insecurity and low on self-esteem profit particularly from such sites, especially in the realm of "bridging social capital", i. e. in the

diversification of social networks by accumulation of heterogeneous weak ties". Thus, Ellison et al. have found that

*"Students reporting low satisfaction and low self-esteem appeared to gain in bridging social capital if they used Facebook more intensely, suggesting that the affordances of the SNS might be especially helpful for these students." (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007)*

While users are confronted with a much larger pool of potential interaction partners, their overall capacity for initiating and maintaining different relationships (especially of a closer nature) may well remain unchanged (Gross & Acquisti 2005). Consequently, more powerful filter tools are needed in order to reduce the larger pool of alternatives to manageable levels.

In the offline world, my social network is limited by many physical factors: e.g. by the low population density of my neighbourhood, or by the very few really attractive people I meet in my school and work environment. Under online conditions, no such exogenous constraints are working, so that I have to do this reduction myself: e.g. by applying my own criteria of systematic exclusion.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the size as well as the composition of my social environment is more fully a product of my own action and a mirror of my own values and preferences, not an outcome of uncontrollable "circumstances". Therefore, I'm also morally more responsible for my social environment within which I live. For instance, when a friend of mine turns out to be a criminal, others may ask me why I haven't been careful enough to exclude him timely from my network - or even: whether I eventually stick in the same matter myself.

Many SNS provide procedures for forming groups without any personal efforts and skills: just by declaring that the group shall exist and that it is kept open for voluntary membership (either by everybody or just by affiliates of a specific institution).<sup>16</sup> In fact, even very shy and politically hitherto completely inactive users can easily initiate new groups, events and campaign activities without leaving their desk at home (Bennet 2003).

Given this easiness, it is evident that group formation is done by people who would never think of founding an association in the offline world, and that most groups are not the product of long-term planning and intensive efforts, but just the reflection of trivial everyday activities and experiences or the result of momentaneous idiosyncratic whims. Thus, two women originated an "anti-knife march" in London for commemorating young murder victims that received a video message from Prime Minister Gordon Brown. (Davies 2008). In Zürich, a 17 year old apprentice has successfully initiated the first "botellón" in German-speaking Switzerland: a mass meeting of young people on a public lawn dedicated to collective alcohol consumption.

The problem with such collective actions is that they take place in a completely spontaneous, informal and unorganized manner: without any leader (or leading board) able and willing to determine its course, to observe legal rules, to represent the participants before the

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<sup>15</sup> Similar problems arise in partner matching platforms; see Geser 2007.

<sup>16</sup> In February 2008, an application called Ultimatums was launched on Facebook that allows groups to create an action that's contingent upon gaining a certain level of consensus among the group. When the level of consensus is reached, the action is automatically set in motion.

political and administrative bodies, to pay compensation for cleaning costs and to carry responsibility in cases of rioting or other delinquent excesses. (In the "botellón" case mentioned above, the initiator didn't even have enough authority to call the meeting off when he saw that it evoked very negative public reactions (Gyr 2008)). Therefore, such events are seen as an incalculable threat by the municipal police and administration because no possibility exists to know from where they originate, to make appointments with organizers or to predict its magnitude and progression.

### **3.7 New tools for political grassroot mobilization and campaigning**

Similar to many voluntary associations which have originally been created for satisfying socio-emotional and expressive needs or for facilitating microsocial interpersonal exchanges, Social Network Sites have also the capacity to enact political activities on the bases of large-scale collective mobilization.

In a Pew study conducted between April 8 to May 11, 2008 including 2,251 adults), it was found that no less than 40% of all Facebook and MySpace subscribers have used these websites for engaging in politically oriented activities: mainly by participating in political discussions or by exploring the political preferences and affiliations of one's friends. (Smith & Rainie 2008).

Evidently SNS channels are most effective for mobilizing additional (e. g. younger) voters that are less likely to be mobilized by more traditional media. And they seem to be most empowering for rather weakly organized (or completely unorganized) social collectivities, because SNS provide a platform for easily accessible campaigning without any costs and overheads of social organization.

It is not surprising that these new channels are most strongly used in highly competitive races, and by candidates who have to overcome shortcomings on traditional mass media channels. This is convincingly shown in an empirical study of the U.S 2006 elections that focused on the Facebook activities of senate and house candidates. In this survey, Williams and Gulati have found that

*"Challengers, better-financed candidates, and candidates running in competitive races were the most likely to update their Facebook profile. This would suggest that the candidates who are the most likely to embrace social networking sites are those that see this new communication medium as an additional tool for winning votes. Challengers must find a way to overcome the advantages of incumbency, which allows members of Congress to draw upon an established network of supporters and contacts. Moreover, since over three-fourths of incumbents already have to maintain both an office and campaign web site, there is even less of a need to dedicate staff time to a third presence online. When the race is more competitive, however, all candidates regardless of incumbency status may try to exploit every available technological resource to help them expand their electoral base and maximize turnout among their supporters." (Williams & Gulati 2007: 12).*

While a large Facebook followership testifies to the enthusiasm evoked by a candidate, its impact on election results is sometimes far from clear because it is mostly composed of people who are not very likely to vote (Williams & Gulati 2007: 18).

*Barack Obamas* presidential campaign stands out as the hitherto most ambitious and effective effort to harness the horizontal network structures and the bottom-up communication

capacities of Social Network Sites to the central goal of winning a national election. While his initial decision to run for nomination was heavily influenced by a MySpace support site gathering 160 000 subscribers, he later succeeded to gain 2.7 Mio registered supporters (on Facebook and MySpace), among whom about 750 000 volunteered to create about 8000 local "affinity groups" and 30 000 "events" (until Midsummer 2008; Norquay 2008). Many others made use of the opportunity to procure local voter address lists for doing door-to-door canvassing or for reaching out by phone to problematic "swing voters", or to contribute a small sum to the total of 600 Mio donations.

All this helped Obama to short-circuit the traditional mass media as information providers, to become independent from the organizational capacities and personnel resources of party structures and formal associations (e.g. unions); and to collect immense sums of money without becoming vulnerable to the pressures of wealthy donors (as about half of all donations consisted of very many small contributions of less than \$ 200).

In comparison with traditional campaigning, a shift away from highly elaborated bureaucratic and professional structures toward informal social movement processes was occurring: resulting in a melting of roles that have hitherto been neatly separated:

*"In one startling step, these capabilities merged the formerly separate campaign activities of fundraising and contributing. With campaign finance reform having ruled out the traditional large corporate donations and the various 'soft money' dodges, the only way to fundraise was through individual donors. The genius of the Obama approach was that it enabled thousands of individuals to contribute one moment and then become a campaign fundraiser the next." (Norquay 2008).*

Similarly, the supervision of media activities was decentralized to the extreme: as every follower was invited to use the website "fight the smears" for reporting about untruthful and defamatory allegations accidentally detected in newspapers, radio or TV.

In a general sense, the Obama campaign exemplifies the trend that top down campaign structures as they have flourished since the early 20th century become replaced by "polymorphic" structures that make use of the Net's capacity to support communication flows in all directions (Geser 2001):

*"But those organizations were 20th century in their design. Campaigns worked with leaders at the top whose commands would trickle down through committee heads and precinct captains to voters at the bottom. The 21st century networks are less hierarchical, with ideas and energy traveling up, down and sideways among the campaign, activists, bloggers, friends and family members." (Stannard 2008).*

## 4. Quantity fights quality: simplifying and leveling effects on inter-personal relations

### 4.1 Inflationary proliferation and stereotyping of "friendship" relations

In everyday life, we have different friends in different role settings and for different purposes: e. g. friends for playing chess or tennis, for spending vacation, for sharing our happy hours or for calling when we are depressed. Thus, the question who is ("absolutely") my best or my second-best friend will never arise because there is no (need for a) common measure rod for comparing friendship intensity on a single dimension.

While children are often not hesitant to name somebody "my closest friend" (and to circumscribe their closer circle rigorously in the invitation list to their birthday party), adults are usually less inclined to see friendship in such diffuse, generalized and absolute terms. Instead, they maintain specialized friendship relations to business companions, school mates, leisure time colleagues and private acquaintances – without seeing a need or purpose to rank all of them on a single comparative scale or to draw neat boundary lines between "real friends" and "mere colleagues".

By contrast, Social Network Sites usually force me to create absolute rank orders: e. g. in MySpace where I'm told to indicate my "top eight friends". This implies that friendship can be defined beyond all special fields of interaction: in terms of a "psychological nearness" that refers to the personality as a whole, not to any special activities or situation where this nearness may be experienced (or not). Thus SNS tend to reinforce a diffuse, undifferentiated notion of friendship which is not in line with the more specialized relationships characteristic for our complex patterns of social life. Most SNS do not encourage interindividual communication beyond the articulation of "friendship" in simple binary terms: obliging users to make dichotomous choices about whether someone belongs to the friendship network or not. In most cases, even girlfriends or boyfriends are listed among all the others without any distinction (Gross & Acquisti 2005; Donath 2007).

When I communicate such choices, viewers acquainted with me may react negatively for various reasons. My very best friends may ask why they don't get a special status within the long list that may encompass dozens or hundred of persons; and others will be disappointed to find themselves missing at all. Dramatic frustrations and conflicts are especially likely when interaction intensity is so high that the quality and intimacy of different relationships change on a daily basis (Fono & Raynes-Goldie 2006)

Generally, the term "friend" and the status of "friendship" have little meaning when the creation of friendship links is so easy that no costs are involved in adding somebody to the list. Under conventional offline conditions, "to become friends" is usually a complex bilateral process of ongoing mutual disclosure and harmonization: supported by the rich flows of cues and the intensive feedback that occurs whenever the partners meet face to face. On Social Networks Sites, "befriending" has become the product of two unilateral actions: A requesting B to become his friend, and B's affirmative response to such an endeavor. While most sites demand at least mutual acknowledgements, some others allow unilateral friend-

ships not reciprocated by the addressee, so that no differences between real and just imagined relationships can be defined<sup>17</sup>

In a large scale American Facebook study that included 364 Mio messages, it was found that the median number of friends (ca 150) corresponds neatly to the theoretical maximum of psychologically sustainable relationships asserted by Dunbar (1998) on the basis of socio-biological considerations. However, it was also found that in 85% of all friendship pairs, not a single message was exchanged in the two year period between Febr. 2004 and March 2006, and that almost 50% of all sent messages remained unreciprocated (Golder, Wilkinson & Huberman 2007). The consequences of such "noninteractional friendships" are even more dramatic when the reverse process of "defriending" is considered. Under face-to-face conditions, defriending does usually not take place in an orderly, predictable and planned way, because both partners may fear that negative emotions and conflicts may arise whenever one of them proposes explicitly to end their relation. Instead, there may just be a silently increasing "estrangement" that may become manifest not on the level of explicit verbalization, but in the intensity of factual interaction (e. g. as a slow thinning out of interaction). On Social Network Sites, by contrast, friending and defriending are symmetrical processes that can be enacted in consciously planned ways, because both of them involve just simple, one-sided decisions.

Of course, explicit defriending is an act that may engender much negative emotions, because it implies a sudden and complete elimination of a person from the list: Whenever I do it, I have to be ready to answer the question: why have you chosen *me* (instead of C,D or E) for removal, and why *precisely at this time?*

A major shortcoming of Social Network Sites arises from the fact that no norms for various forms of misbehavior exist, or that such norms remain ineffective because they cannot be enforced.

*"For example, what do you do with a "friend" who posts inappropriate comments on your Wall? What happens when a friend breaks up with someone—do you defriend the ex? If someone 'friends' you and you don't accept the overture, how serious a rejection is it? Some of these scenarios can be resolved with split-second snap judgments; others can provoke days of agonizing." (Rosen 2007)*

## **4.2 Lack of metacommunicative clarifications**

When conventional interpersonal relationships evolve, they usually go along with metacommunications about the type and intensity of the current (and intended) relation. In most cases, the partners have no problems to agree on a common definition of their mutual contact, because such convergences are facilitated by the common social setting (work, family, sports, cocktail party etc.) where their interaction take place. If the setting allows alternative interpretations, the rich multichannel communications and intensive feedbacks

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<sup>17</sup> The extreme easiness of creating unilateral friendship bonds was demonstrated by a Facebook user who contacted 250,000 users by using an automatic script and asked to be added as their friend. No less than 75,000 users accepted this offer - demonstrating that about 30% of all users are ready to accept a complete stranger on their list: allowing him to look at the whole profile and all private information (Gross/Acquisti 2005)

of face-to-face encounters (involving glances, mimics and bodily gestures) provide enough cues for ascertaining and adjusting any discrepancies that may exist.

Under online conditions, it is much more likely that quite divergent conceptions about the evolving relationship are maintained: because there is no common contextual setting and no intensive behavioral communication on which such an agreement could be based. Instead, agreement would have to be reached by explicit verbal communication: e. g. by stating that there is a preference for keeping mutual relations within narrow boundaries of information exchange or instrumental cooperation, a need to meet someone for undertaking offline leisure activities, or an urgent wish to enter into intimate sexual relations.

The risks for misunderstandings are increased by the fact that Social Network Sites give rise to a broad spectrum of relationship qualities that have not existed before. New types of relationships are emerging within them, such as "friendsters," i.e., people known only in the context of an SNS (boyd, 2006a).

Such online friendship bonds can have the function of facilitating offline relationships and providing access to extremely specialized information or services, or they serve just the purpose of communicating publicly that one has a very impressive network of friends.

*"Certain meanings of friendship on LiveJournal have no relationship to the meaning of friendship in offline life. Instead, "friend" sometimes signifies constructions exclusive to LiveJournal. For instance, users who think that a friend is ,someone you like to read', are thinking of friendship as something that depends on the existence of a friends page."* (Fono & Raynes-Goldie 2007).

Therefore, a fundamental imprecision is intentionally maintained: a diffuseness which may be functional when the quality of relationships is subject to volatile changes (e. g. in the case of high sexual promiscuity), because otherwise, very burdensome updating would be necessary to keep the list in pace with current conditions. Blurring the quality of relationships may also be highly useful for preventing tensions and conflicts among the different "friends": e. g. discords generated by jealousy or rivalrous competition (Fono & Raynes-Goldie 2007).

### **4.3 Fuzzy relations with the "friends of my friends"**

Social Network sites encourage users to enlarge their social capital by making use of second (or even third) degree relationships; by contacting the friends of their friends (e. g. for getting access to highly valued experts or highly influential persons).

While we all know that clientelistic networks (Boissevain 1974), Mafia organizations as well as some gay communities are relying heavily on such transitive social relations, very little hypotheses and research findings are hitherto available to answer this simple question: *When A asks B to ask C to do him (A) a favor: under what conditions will B and C fulfil their expected roles?* Some empirical studies show that when I have trust in somebody, I'm also disposed to trust his or her friends (Burt 2002). However, conventional systems of morality do not state any clear norms related to such indirect acquaintances, and I find myself rather hesitant to ask for such favors because I'm unsure whether I will be successful and because I run the risk to embarrass my immediate friend.

To venture a few steps of tentative theorizing, we may hypothesize *first* that indirect helping will occur least when friendship lists are long and mutual relationships rather weak: so that addresses are likely to become "saturated" with more demands than they can realistically answer. When A has a lot of friends, B will ask: why does A direct the request at me instead of anybody else? When B has many friends, A may be hesitant to ask because he thinks that B will be bombarded with many other petitions: and when C has a long friendship list, A may assume that B will be reluctant to forward his request because he thinks C will have no free time and resources available.

*Secondly*, an effective transitive link connecting A to C is more likely when A and B as well as B and C maintain very close and highly generalized bonds. For instance, I may well ask my spouse to ask her brother to repair something in my house, because both relationships are so intimate and multiplex that they implicate a very broad, undefined range of possible supportive actions. However, I will not ask work colleagues or school buddies to activate their family connections on my behalf, because the range of mutual obligations is too narrowly defined - and because too many other persons could ask the same. Thus, the more I aim to tap indirect interpersonal relationships as a source of social capital, the more there will be a pressure to keep friendship lists short – or to sort out those few very intimate persons toward whom such mediated contacts may be successfully activated.

*Third*, it might be argued that mediated requests are most successful when C possesses a highly rare and specific resource or expertise, so that

- C is well disposed to help, because not many other requesters will turn to him beside A;
- C feels a high obligation to help, because A has no other alternatives beside C.

We may expect that the very existence of Social Network Sites will catalyze the emergence of unprecedented new norms, rules and habits related to second order or third order helping: regulations that are not of much use in most conventional social settings, but are badly needed for structuring transitive interpersonal relationships in wider digital networks.

#### **4.4 Ignoring the darker side of social relations**

As we know from Georg Simmel, foes are often maintaining more intensive mutual emotions, thoughts and interactions than friends, and their exchanges are often much more interesting and therefore more prone to attract the attention of third parties. However, Social Network Sites are consistently reluctant to draw profit from these potentials of conflictive interpersonal communications.

Instead, they are genuine concomitants of a simplified "well-feeling culture" in which interpersonal relationships just vary between friendship and indifference, while relations based on hate and enmity are not considered. In fact, individual networks seem to be free not only from enemies, but also from mere adversaries or competitors, and it appears as if only complimentary testimonials are exchanged between the users, because derogatory or even insulting comments are likely to be cancelled by the receiver.

This conforms to a widely popular trend to ease social life by preferring "exit" options over "voice": e. g. by divorcing the current spouse or leave the current employer instead of engaging in difficult controversies and struggle. Such behavior may well be seen as a spill-over from economic market behavior where any unsatisfactory product will just be avoided, because there are so many alternative products ready at hand.

The neglect of the darker sides of social life is so pervasive that the establishment of a countervailing site named “enemybook.info” is disdained as a mere joke:

*“Enemybook is an anti-social utility that disconnects you to the so-called friends around you. Enemybook remedies the one-sided perspective of Facebook, by allowing you to manage enemies as well as friends. With Enemybook you can add people as Facebook enemies, specify why they are your enemies, notify your enemies, see who lists you as an enemy, and even become friends with the enemies of your enemies.”<sup>18</sup>*

It is highly telling that this site is not functioning as a platform for (dis-)connecting users, but as a "safety valve site" where aggression is directed to very distant figures (like G.W. Bush or Bin Laden) with whom the “detractors” will never have any interaction.

The conspicuous refrain from inimical relationships is not hard to understand when the highly destructive potentials of “cybermobbing” and “cyberbullying” activities are considered. In conventional offline settings, It may not be too dangerous to have enemies insofar I have good chances to evade them by taking spatial distance or hiding so that they cannot pursue me further. Only in densely knit communities, enemies are hard to tolerate because I will always run into them, and because they have many indirect ways to do harm: e. g. by spreading slander among my kin and friends.

Social Networking can have the effect of recreating a densely knit virtual community from which I can never escape because it is potentially covering the whole globe. Regardless of my location, any ill-minded detractor will have little difficulty of creating hell by attacking me publicly and by destroying my reputation. To the degree that such information even becomes transferable between Network Sites, I will have to retreat to a truncated offline existence because I will no longer find any safe hiding place on the Net.

Insofar as SNS are anchored in localities (like Facebook is in educational institutions), there is a risk that enmities originating in offline settings are amplified and made intractable by being projected into the wider (and more public) online sphere. Thus, changing from college A to college B may become risky because when I arrive there, I may well find that my old enemies have already succeeded well in poisoning my reputation.

## 5. The new chances and risks of uncontrolled public visibility

### 5.1 *The more intense and more universal race for public reputation*

In the past, only a few prominent stars were able to acquire a public reputation: e. g. by building up a fan base or by inciting Paparazzis to shoot and publish snapshot fotos from their private life. Following Reality TV trends that have come up in the 1990ies, Social Network Sites offer to everybody at least a theoretical chance to draw much public attention to his own person and to become a kind of “celebrity” in at least a highly modest and inconsiderable way.

*“Reality TV has introduced a new idea into celebrity culture; namely, that the interactions of everyday people are worthy of the attention of broad audiences, and that anyone can become a public celebrity – special talents, looks, skills, or wealth not required. Further, the development of powerful, accessible tools for self-expression – the*

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.enemybook.info/>

*platforms of Web 2.0 – now make it possible for individuals to —mediate themselves, and reach audiences on the same scale as movie stars and fashion models." (Stefanon, Lackaff & Rosen 2008).*

In a highly trivialized way, then,

*"every young person in America has become, in the literal sense, a public figure. And so they have adopted the skills that celebrities learn in order not to go crazy: enjoying the attention instead of fighting it-and doing their own publicity before somebody does it for them" (Nussbaum 2007).*

While this perspective may by completely absent in most users, many song writers, poets or film makers may be motivated by at least a vague hope of gathering public reputation at least during some limited time.

*"...the sites also allow everyone to become someone. For people who naturally long for their 15 minutes of fame, that chance to become a public figure is appealing -- especially in an exponentially growing community..." (Studinsky 2006).*

Thus, more than 8 million artists and music bands on MySpace maintain at least some tiny hopes to gain public prominence and shares on the competitive cultural markets.<sup>19</sup>

In the past, the competition for popularity was somewhat hampered by the fact that no objective measures of popularity existed which could be compared with the quantifiable performance measures in sports or formally attributed awards. Assertions like "she is very popular" or "A is more popular than B" or "C's popularity has recently much declined" were intuitive judgments easily subject of controversy or open denial because they could not be based on permanently updated empirical indicators. A major function of most SNS is to eliminate this fuzziness by offering consensually accepted ratio scale measures for popularity: e. g. the size of the friendship network or the number and volume of received comments (Hodgkinson 2008; Croft 2007). As a consequence, the gain of popularity may become a highly efficient self-reinforcing activity because current popularity can be displayed in a way to attract additional friends and verbal supports. On the other hand, lack of popularity may be equally self-reinforcing because nobody feels attracted to somebody to whom nobody seems to feel attracted.

## **5.2 The meltdown of back stages and partialized roles**

Individual freedom in modern societies depends heavily on mutually segregated fields of action and the partialization of roles. Only by carefully segregating various contexts of role performance, we are able to live a multifaceted social life where we keep our ability to show different face to different people, and to play highly divergent, even contradictory roles in various social settings.

*"In the physical world, we use time and space to keep incompatible contexts of our lives separate. We may choose not to introduce some acquaintances to each other and may carefully orchestrate our activities to prevent overlap. Of course, some chance encounters we would have preferred to avoid inevitably occur - you are running around a*

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<sup>19</sup> <http://techradar1.wordpress.com/tag/traffic/>

*park playing silly games with your children, and run right into a colleague you have been trying to impress with your steely coolness." (Donath& boyd 2004: 78)*

This implies a rather high structural separation between different groups, organizations and institutions as well as between public and private spheres: in contrast to traditional communities where all my actions take place in a unitary setting from which I can never escape. For instance, very serious and highest performing students may lead a hidden leisure life characterized by sexual promiscuity, drug taking habits and excessive parties.

When I reveal all my social connections to everybody all the time, such "natural walls" between different settings melt down, and I'm no longer capable of implementing different strategies of impression management toward changing publics, because every member of my network is able to view all aspects of my personal life. Especially the *separation of privacy* is undermined by the fact that private spheres are so heavily penetrated by digital technologies: cameras and audio- and video recording devices whose products can easily be uploaded to the public Net. Thus, *the line separating private misbehavior from public exhibitionism has become very thin*: and increased levels of personal trust in my private companions are necessary for being sure that it will not be transgressed. In fact, a new sphere of "public privacy" is created in which these two usually segregated spheres become mixed up so that they cannot be disentangled. For instance, testimonials (or "wall messages") are parts of an ambiguous new form of "public private conversation". While they are explicitly addressed at a single recipient, they are in fact designed as "oblique communications": with at least half an eye directed toward a wider public of uninvited lurkers who may also read the entries.

*"Testimonials provide a logical site for ongoing performative conversations. While the Testimonial is technically between the author and the receiver, it is equally intended for third parties. Crafting a Testimonial is inherently performative and given their public nature, authors worked diligently to craft witty inscriptions." (boyd & Heer 2006)*

In other words: Social Network Sites are powerful "conventionalizers of the private sphere": giving rise to pseudo-private communications which in fact are depersonalized by conforming to consensual collective norms and cultural standards. As we know from everyday life, we will dress and behave more conventionally when appearing in public than at home or when visiting close friends. By analogy, we should expect that entries on Social Network Sites are subject to most rigid norms when they are expected to meet a most heterogeneous and unpredictable audience. There is anecdotal evidence that highly committed users design their daily life more and more under the perspective that their appearances and activities will be documented on SNS. For instance, they are eager to take a camera everywhere in order to bring home pictures that can be uploaded; they may dress and tune up their hair more carefully when they anticipate such uploadings, or they may be eager to join parties where certain celebrities are present so that they have a chance of appearing together with them on the same pictures (Adler 2008).

Thus, private life becomes deeply permeated by normative pressures stemming from "public front stage" considerations, as everybody may become eager to optimize his or her public appearance by strictly observing reigning rules of style and fashion. Such conformity pressures may not only shape the various "preferences" (for music, films, books etc.), but

also the personal looks and behavior which may become manifest in uploaded video files or snapshot pictures.

When I anticipate that photos from a party I visit will be posted afterwards, I may reconsider my clothing, my mimics as well as my behavior in the light of such subsequent publications (see Nussbaum 2007). I may even decide not to participate in a certain event when I know that I will risk meeting people with whom wouldn't like to be on the same picture. On the other hand, the perspective of being pictured may become a potent motivator for visiting certain (e. g. prestigious) events:

*"To me, or to a lot of people, it's like, why go to a party if you're not going to get your picture taken?"<sup>20</sup>*

As so much of previous backstage behavior is suddenly transferred to the front stage, the most fruitful reaction may be to redefine the front stage as a place where a much wider variety of performances is allowed to take place.

As we all know, it is surprisingly common that individuals display private talk and behavior in public places. They engage in private conversations while riding on a train or eating in a restaurant, and they oil their bodies and caress each other on public beaches. Especially the lower strata have often no other choice, because they lack private villas or beaches where they are protected from foreign eyes. Under traditional low tech conditions, no risks are involved in mixing up private and public spheres in such ways, because there is no possibility to collect and store information about such private behavior, to transmit such information to any third actors, or to make it available to the public.

All this changes completely with the advent of new communication media. Thus, public video cameras make private behavior visible and recordable, so that it may potentially be viewed afterwards by unwelcome, unverifiable observers. The Internet represents an even more perfect panopticon, because it makes possible a

*"constant view of individuals through parasocietal mechanisms that influence behavior simply because of the possibility of being observed." (Katz & Rice 2002).*

Whoever hopes (or fears) to get into the focus of mass media one day (e. g. by winning a sports contest, running for a political office or by being wanted by the police) does well to control carefully all information available about him or her on the Net.

Whenever a hitherto unknown person gains suddenly such a public reputation, journalists will first search the Net for information, and the personality image they construct and promote will be heavily shaped by all the pictures, facts and allegations they can find (Spencer 2007).

Being totally unknown at the moment, I may be easily able to manipulate my digital profiles, because nobody else is interested in collecting and posting such information about me. In the case of sudden public prominence, however, I may lose control insofar as the "Net Paparazzi" may easily find out my nearest friends, relatives, teachers or supervisors, and they may ask them about traits and habits I'm not ready to disclose myself (McDonald 2007).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Citation from Nussbaum 2007.

<sup>21</sup> As Wayne Chiang, a Student at Virginia Tech, had to learn, it may be dangerous to confess a deep personal liking for guns, because for this reason, he was suspected of being the amok runner at a school in Cologne in November 2006 (Patalong et. al. 2008).

As Erving Goffman has noted, people appearing in public expect not be approached intimately or starred at by any others, but to be treated with a generalized indifference, even in cases of highly profiled people who offer a highly eye-catching appearance. There is a widespread norm of "civic inattention" that is easily enforced because violations are swiftly noticed and sanctioned by the "victim" as well as by any bystanders (Goffman 1963:89). Evidently, this norm is strained to the extreme these days when people expect that their very audible public mobile phone conversations are systematically ignored.

When I display my personality on a website, no analogous "looking away norms" are in existence, and their emergence is hardly imaginable because: how could they ever be enforced? Nevertheless, many people posting intimate self-related pictures and information seem to count on certain discretion by "outsiders": because they react angrily when such information intended for peers is retrieved by recipients they didn't have in mind.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, highest degrees of factual inattention are secured by the mere fact that most people lack time and interest to inspect most other people's sites; but those eager to do so will never be prevented from taking intimate cognizance and from drawing their respective conclusions. On the other hand, lurking is extremely popular. A study on German StudiVZ-users has recently found out that about 80% of all users preferred settings that allowed them to visit other people's pages without being noticed (Ritz 2008; Lütkemeier 2008). By allowing unnoticed watching, lurking is an extremely efficient mechanism of social surveillance and control: for instance for parents who want to keep track with their adolescent kids.

It is a common fact that adolescents tend to develop their own private life which they try to keep rather secret from their parents. They tend to close themselves into their private room, to close up the drawers where they store their private things, to answer parental questions only monosyllabically, and to discontinue their participation in various family activities (like common getaway trips or vacations). While this thinning out of face-to-face communication leaves parents more and more ignorant about the thoughts, behavior and social network of their kids, they are quite disposed to turn to their kids SNS sites in order to remain updated.

Of course, these new options for collecting information without interaction are readily embraced by pedagogues who see no other possibility of access:

*"If parents are able to observe their adolescents' peer communications, they may be able to embrace a more realistic perspective of their attitudes, values, and motivations and be able to adapt their parenting styles appropriately. In other words, parents will be able to know their children better. Instead of perceiving online content as a form of personal diary that adolescents are entitled to keep private, parents should view the medium as an invaluable tool for helping them understand their teenagers better--their hopes, challenges, opinions, communication styles, activities, and social networks." (Williams 2006).*

Evidently, all this can give rise to much mistrust and suspicions. For instance, the new boyfriend of A has to tolerate that many of A's friends are eager to gather all available information about him - but when meeting them for the first time, he will be highly uncertain about who knows what details about his life, his preferences, his friendship circle, and the

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<sup>22</sup> Inattention norms could only be enforced when mere "lurking" would be ruled out by software systems that would register the identities and activities of all visitors - and make this information available to all subsequent users.

like (Lütkemeier 2008). In more general terms: SNS increase the insecurity about how personal knowledge is distributed among interacting partners (and their respective friends).

### **5.3 The iron cage of crystalline biographical records**

Typically, personal Social Network pages are constantly enriched with additional pictures, blog entries, wall messages and other correlates of ongoing individual life, so that they become detailed repositories of personal biography. By means of such objectified documentations, the authors themselves as well as their partners, kin and friends get direct access to highly specific details of their former stages of their life: enabling them to construct biographical accounts unbiased by selective recollection and retrospective blurrings or extenuations (Nussbaum 2007). Evidently, the richness and heterogeneity of many sites mirror the high complexity and volatility of modern individual personalities. Thus, many pictures may be necessary to present an active author in all its essential (private, public and professional) roles, and a long buddy list reflects the large number of locations and social settings where he or she has lived in various periods of life.

An old saying warns us that "*Whenever you meet someone new, you have only one chance to make a first impression.*" In these current times of public social networking, not even this one chance may have been left, because all my new acquaintances may well be influenced from the onset by all the stuff they read and see about me on the Web, so that I have no longer have any opportunity of making a "first" fresh impression at all. From the onset, new relationships are likely to be "contaminated" by the fact that I already possess plenty of Net information about my new partner *ex ante* - and the well-founded suspicion that my partner has done the same about me. There is empirical evidence that Social network Sites are heavily used for gaining *ex ante* knowledge about new acquaintances in order to get a fuller picture of his or her personality, or in order to decide whether it was worthwhile to initiate or continue the interaction. Thus, a study covering 1500 German StudiVZ participants has found that about 80% of all users engaged in such a behavior, and that about 34% were never ready to admit it even in later stages of their relationships (Lütkemeier 2008).

To the degree that emerging friendships and partnerships are "poisoned" from the beginning by mutual information retrieved from the Net, partners may never get a chance to decide freely how to present themselves, and to free themselves from past identities by switching to new, unprecedented strategies of self presentation. Given that the most active users are adolescents, the most densely documented biographical stages may well be those from which later adults may be most eager to dissociate themselves, because they don't want to be identified forever with their immature, debauched or even delinquent years.

While it may prove difficult to assess without doubt what somebody has said orally or how somebody has behaved in a specific situation, such insecurities do not exist when somebody posts a racist remark on a website or when his aggressive behavior has been captured by a video. Given the explicitness of these materials (and the full responsibility of the users for all their posting), they can easily be taken as legal evidence and fed into processes of formal probes and prosecution.

*"Students have been suspended or expelled from respective universities for threats of crime and for racially insensitive remarks posted on Facebook. Other students have*

*been reported or disciplined for alcohol/drug violations that were discovered through Facebook postings. Facebook has been used in investigations of campus brawls and for identifying students who illegally stormed a football field.<sup>25</sup> Students have been expelled from class, called before the dean of students, lost positions on the school newspaper staff, and even investigated by the Secret Service." (Cain 2008).*

As Mazur has noted already in 2005, Social networking sites are rich "*mines of adolescent data.*" (Mazur 2005). In fact, social scientists can easily profit from the visibility of Net communications for gaining valuable new insights into youth subcultures, thinking patterns and behavioral styles.

*"Adolescent blogs are full of information about their daily lives documenting whatever they choose to disclose about themselves. This situation is ideal for social scientists as it allows unobtrusive observations of authentic human behaviors and interactions with no "real" contact or interference." (Williams 2008).*

Many SNS users think they can effectively hide their personal data from unwanted audiences by making them available only to their "friends". However, such restrictions turn out to be very pot-holed because give the large numbers of "friends" it is highly probable that at least some few of them make the information available to their own acquaintances.

In addition, former students may retain access to profiles and friendship networks even after finishing education - what may be a considerable risk in cases they have become personnel managers who look out for new employees (Brandenburg 2008).

*"Hiring companies can access potential hires' social networking profiles in a variety of ways. Not long ago, some of the employees now involved in making hiring decisions for their companies were students with their own profiles. Graduates can keep their profiles and maintain connections to their colleges' social networks, thereby maintaining connections to the college students who make up the next wave of employment hopefuls." (Brandenburg 2008).*

Up to the present, U. S. courts do not give clear protection to plaintiffs who claim any privacy rights on materials uploaded on social sites (Brandenburg 2008).

On a general level, SNS increase the degree to which average individuals occupy themselves with problems of their public appearance and reputation. On the one hand, the positive potentials of favorable self-presentations have to be exploited, on the other side, the damages stemming from compromising Web information (e. g. on school applications or career opportunities) have to be mitigated. As a consequence, there is a growing need for new types of professionals and agencies who provide counseling or engage in "cleaning" the Web from negative information (e. g. online services like MyOn-ID, iKarma or FindMeOn) (Gaul 2008).

#### **5.4 From narrational to informational disclosures**

Under offline conditions, acquiring information informally about other persons was not possible without engaging in social interaction: either with the focused person itself or with "third partners" who knew more about him or her because they themselves maintained such interaction.

This tight connection of information seeking with interaction has the following important functions:

- B himself (or his rather close acquaintances) knows that A is seeking information about him;
- mere information-seeking is automatically triggering a process of reciprocal exchanges that contributes to the social relationship between A and B (or between A and his informants about B).

As learning about each other is a relational thing, EGO and ALTER will tailor their self-disclosures according to the nature and phase of their particular relationship, and they may well produce self-images and self-characterizations that are specific for each particular relation: e. g. for the strategic reason of getting a job or for being accepted as an attractive partner.

Of course, some individual characteristics are objective in the sense that they cannot be manipulated for different observers: bodily characteristics as well as status attributes like organizational memberships or educational degrees. But there is a large additional sphere of informal and disembodied characteristics which are diffuse enough to be hidden or displayed differently in different relationships and under various situational conditions: character traits, subjective attitudes, values and goals as well as informal social affiliations and identifications.

Such fuzzy traits provide the basis for complex “disclosure managements” that provide unlimited opportunities to signal very subtle nuances in intimacy, to express fine-shaded differences of distance and nearness, and to communicate readily when steps toward more intimate bonding (or toward taking more distance) are imminent (or have just occurred; Donath 2007).

*“People are concerned about whether to release this piece of information to that person at this time, and they have very complex understandings of people's views of themselves, the current situation, and the effects of disclosure.” (Dwyer 2007: 2).*

Even when performing in public, social actors engaging in face-to-face contacts are in a rather comfortable cognitive position, because they of course know about the precise time and place of their performance, they can see who is present and absent and they tend to receive immediate feedback they can use for behavioral adjustments. When performing on mass media channels (like press, radio or TV), they may of course have a much larger public, but they pay for this enlargement by a loss of knowledge about who is watching where and under what situational conditions; and given the spread of storage media (like video recorders), they are also increasingly ignorant about the time when and the place where their messages are received. However, they may still be pretty sure that most of the audience will be synchronous and will include only specific population segments (e. g. subscribers of a newspaper or viewers able to receive a particular regional TV station).

By contrast, performers in public network media are in a most helpless position, because their emissions can be retrieved by anybody anytime anywhere on the globe (boyd 2007). Cognition and control has shifted completely to the receivers who now are able to search actively on the Net, to store everything they have found on their hard disks, and to transmit everything at anytime to anybody else.

When I initiate contact with a new acquaintance, I usually go a long way to find “common ground” in order to create a secure basis for conversation, achieving consensus or engaging in common endeavours. For instance, I may explore whether we share certain leisure time

activities and travel experiences, or whether we once have lived in the same city where we might even have met the same people or been affiliated with the same voluntary associations. Especially common acquaintances are highly favoured anchoring points for mutual exchanges and personal disclosures (Donath & boyd 2004: 76).

It is exactly this (often time-consuming and cumbersome) small-talk which is curtailed by Social Network Sites because they provide explicit information about exactly these interface areas between mutually unacquainted partners. Thus, new contacts can already start with the mutual acknowledgement that these or those commonalities factually exist. As these overlappings can be objectively ascertained by merely inspecting the web pages, they cannot be concealed or played down vis-à-vis particular partners.

As friends can easily remain constantly "updated" about each other in phases of separation, they can just continue conversation without introductory ritualisms when they meet again face-to-face.

*"Summer friendships, for example, have been transformed. The ritual of meeting again at the beach after a long winter was once marked by hours of catching up. Not today. Networked people who haven't seen each other in forever already know about the new boyfriend, and what happened to the old one -- in very great detail. They also know about the old school and the new job. They have known, every day, no matter where in the world they roamed, the instant that emotional change occurred. Now, after the initial squeals and swaying hugs, conversations pick up in mid-sentence. It's a mind-meld uncanny to watch." (Garreau 2008).*

Just by making my preferences and activities visible online, I take into account that I communicate them to others: without being able to know and to select who these others will be. Thus, all self-related contents posted have also to be seen as an indirect, passive form of communication (which may well substitute direct communications vis-à-vis specific others).

*".... actions within a social networking site are transparent. This creates a kind of indirect or "passive" form of communication and sharing. In opposition to discussion forums, people do not necessarily send messages or documents in order to communicate or share. Instead, they update their profile, add pictures or texts, etc. to their own page." (Dalsgaard 2008)*

In other words: Social Network Sites have the effect of enlarging the sphere of human attributes that are completely objectified on the sense they are not presented in interpersonal exchanges proceeding through time, but explicated simultaneously in a "profile" that is perceived and decoded by everybody in the same way.

*"In person, people tend to adapt their behavior to the situation -- talking to a co-worker requires different language and attitude than what's comfortable with a college friend. On social networks, everyone's in on the same conversation." (Hart 2008).*

As SNS enable everybody to keep track of other people's life without having to interact with them, we can assume a purely receptive cognitive attitude toward other individuals, as we adopt it when we inform us in newspapers about current activities of politicians, enterprises or voluntary associations. Thus, MySpace or Facebook users present themselves like commercial commodities in a store or a mail order catalogue: e.g. as somebody combining a preference for hip hop music with a taste for vodka cocktails, an interest for brain science and a liking for brunette women. Everything displayed in such profiles becomes an intrinsic

attribute of the person that persists through all contacts: so that it can no longer be manipulated and modified within specific relationships and interaction sequences.

In the offline world, a relationship is defined as "intimate" when participants are ready to maintain a particularly high degree of mutual disclosure (Gerstein 1984). It is this lead of information exchange that makes it different from all other, more "superficial" relations. In online setting, this very core of intimacy is destroyed, insofar as it is not possible to reveal private information selectively to different partners (Gross & Acquisti 2005). When information-seeking is totally segregated from social interaction, very potent motives for engaging into social interaction are eliminated. When I have no cognitive reasons for getting into contact, I may dismiss contact altogether unless I have enough noncognitive (e. g. emotional) reasons. For instance, what reason do I have to phone my sick friend in order to know about his latest state of health, when he reports his condition on a Real-time basis on his SNS pages?

There is much impressionistic evidence that most people have not yet adapted their behavior to these conditions. As a rule, most communications presented in Social Network Sites are designed for rather specific audiences (e. g. peer groups as they are currently in the mind of the creator), while future publics may include many people who are not welcomed because they may have completely different standards of evaluation (like bosses, parents, or teachers and other unwelcome lurking "guests") (boyd & Heer 2006; McDonald 2007).

*"Because people are not accustomed to socializing when they do not know the audience or the context, interactions in networked publics are often peculiar to newcomers who get frustrated when what they intended is not what is interpreted." (boyd 2007).*

Designing my profile is a new demanding "impression management" activity. While everything conveyed may be factually true, it is of course selective in a way to optimize my outward appearance, so that I have best chances of being accepted by the collectivity and being chosen as a group member as well as a personal "friend". Considering that I play some violin – shall I present myself as an enthusiastic musician (or convince myself that I am?). Given that I have recently won a swim contest in college – does this define me sufficiently as a "sports type" – and does it pay out to mention or even to emphasize this element in my profile? To define my profile on an important platform may well be an act of self-commitment: by believing myself that my profile coincides with what I am – or at least with what I aim to be in the future (Ellison/Heino/Gibbs 2006).

## **5.5 Social connections as defining factors of individual identity**

When initiating face-to-face contacts, individuals tend to meet each other as "stand alone entities" that have no choice than to focus their attention on their visible and audible intrinsic qualities: their bodily appearance as well as their gestures and speech and their inner feelings and thoughts. Only in the course of time-consuming further steps, they may disclose to each other the much less obtrusive *social* parts of their identity: e. g. their work conditions, friendship circles, family relations or political and religious affiliations. As a consequence, the initial phases of social interaction and relationship formation take place without knowledge of such invisible aspects of social life: and also in later phases, such information may become available only scantily: in accordance with the partner's readiness for

voluntary mutual disclosure. Such revelations of social relationships, adherences and identifications are a powerful tool for impression management and for furthering any personal goals.

*"In the physical world, people display their connections in many ways. They have parties in which they introduce friends who they think would like - or impress - each other. They drop the names of high status acquaintances casually in their conversation. Simply appearing in public with one's acquaintances is a display of connection. The high status name-dropping may be a deliberate ploy to impress the listener of the speaker's importance or ability to effect some action. The introductions may be done as a favour, as a way of gaining social capital, or as a way of uniting compatible but disconnected circles." (Donath & boyd 2004: 72).*

In their Network profiles, by contrast, users present themselves from the onset not only as personalities with intrinsic qualities, but as adherents of organizations, members of various groupings and as nodes within social networks: thus suggesting that their identity (as well as their thinking and behavior) is predominantly shaped- or even constituted - by these social configurations. As a consequence, these social characteristics can become decisive for initiating contacts and the way interpersonal relationships evolve in their first phases. For instance, I may resolve not to contact somebody who has already many friends similar to myself, because I may anticipate that I have little chance of offering him something valuable or getting major attention. On the other hand, I may preferably contact individuals whose social circles overlap considerably with my own: because this provides attractive options for future multilateral interaction.<sup>23</sup>

By becoming aware that social networks are so decisive, individuals will begin to use (and manipulate) them for purposes of impression management in the same way they use clothing, hairdressing and make-up when they meet face to face. In fact, "public displays of connection" serve as important identity signals that help people navigate the networked social world, in that an extended network may serve to validate identity information presented in profiles. (Donath & Boyd 2004).

Thus, they will try shape their social networks and social membership profiles in ways to optimize positive judgments within those settings where they want to improve their own status and reputation. Of course, such efforts will depend heavily on the forms in which social networks are depicted: e. g. in graphical representations like "comment flows" which give insight into the quality and intensity of social relationships as well as into the sociometric position of the respective user (Offenhuber & Donath 2007; Donath 2007).

*"Since your network of friends is a public component of your profile, then how many friends you have and who they are is a visible and easily captured status metric. This provides incentive for members to expand their network (and appear more popular), and customize their profile (to catch the attention of potential new friends)." (Dwyer, Hiltz & Widmeyer 2008)*

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<sup>23</sup> Evidently, the composition of the friendship networks conveys important information, especially by corroborating claims made in the personal profile. As is well known from socio-psychological studies, one expects people to be similar to their acquaintances (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001).

As Erving Goffman has argued, whoever appears in public with companions and friends makes himself vulnerable insofar as his own status and character may be judged according the traits and behavior of these companions. Instead, people appearing alone emit fewer cues about their personality and behavior because no conclusions about their social affiliations and interpersonal preferences can be drawn (Goffman 1971).

*"Seeing someone within the context of their connections provides the viewer with information about them. Social status, political beliefs, musical taste, etc, may be inferred from the company one keeps." (Donath & boyd 2004:72)*

Participation on Social Network Sites implies that an individual is ready to forgo such cautions: by demonstrating his or her companions *in toto* to everybody all the time.

When my Net reputation is dependent on the list of friends I have collected on my profile site, I may well feel damaged if one of these friends suddenly joins an extremist left-wing party, associates himself with people I hate, utters a conviction that contradicts all my beliefs, or uploads a picture which shows me in an awkward situation. I must have considerable personal *trust* in my listed buddies in order to be confident that they don't engage in such damaging misbehavior, because whenever they do, there are no ready means of correction.

*"Without leaving them, an individual cannot escape the effect their Friends have on their performance. In negotiating unknown audiences, people must be prepared to explain both their performance and that of their Friends." (boyd & Heer 2006).*

In a fundamental way, *Social Network Sites are media of individual disempowerment* because users give up control over an important sphere of personal knowledge that is a precious asset for gaining status, winning favors and exerting influence in interpersonal relations:

*"Publicly articulated social networks also disempower the person performing. As the hub of one's social network, power exists in the structural holes that one maintains. By controlling what information flows between different connections, one is able to maintain a significant role in transactions that occur, and thereby control information flow. This is the value of a headhunter or a businesswoman's Rolodex. Even at the simplest levels, people are often uncomfortable with certain groups of friends to be able to reach out and connect with others, or for work colleagues to connect with personal friends. By asking users to articulate and collapse their network in a public way, Friendster is also asking them to give up their status as a social connector, or bridge." (boyd 2004).*

## **5.6 Homophily as a major determinant of relationship formation**

Under conventional offline conditions, many social relationships are conditioned by ascriptive (e. g. family or class) membership or factors of spatial proximity and emotional liking (Geser 1996). This implies that there is not much room for homophily, because it may be improbable to find very similar souls in near distance or among our own kin. While some platforms (e. g. Facebook) tend to reinforce already existing relationships generated by local proximity or common social background (e. g. by studying at the same school), they at the same time open up additional contact options no longer restrained by such physical or socio-structural factors, but primarily determined by indi-

vidual self-selection on the basis of similarities in values, interests, activities or goals.<sup>24</sup> Of course, some choices may also be motivated by more subjective cues transmitted through snapshot pictures, idiosyncratic language or the impression management resulting from the entire profile. But such personality characteristics may not have the same weight as under face-to-face conditions where people may fall in love "at first sight" or develop other emotional reactions based on spontaneous, uncontrolled synthetic sensory perception including face, gazes, body shape, language intonations or gestural habits. There is little or no space for such interpersonal attractions to occur without any objective knowledge about each other. All relationships generated may be determined from the onset by such conscious filter criteria: like on partner matching platforms where only partners who satisfy specific *ex ante* criteria may be filtered out (Geser 2007). Consequently, it is of highest importance what kind of selective criteria are upheld and factually implemented by the different users.

SNS inquiries can also be relevant for selecting partners with whom offline relationships are sought or avoided. For instance, college room mating assortment has become heavily determined by such considerations (Miller 2008):

*"Another concern for institutional administrators arises when the age-old anxiety about new roommates meets twenty-first-century social networking technologies. Residence hall staff are spending a considerably larger amount of time rearranging incoming freshmen than they did the year before. Not surprisingly, at least one institution does not allow incoming freshmen to use the site, thus avoiding the administrative burden of negotiating the requests for roommate changes. Other schools have placed a moratorium on roommate change requests, largely inspired by first Facebook impressions, until after a required period of time spent living together." (Mitrano 2006).*

By facilitating similarity-based associations, SNS tend to generate masses of collectivities homogeneous in only one single explicit aspect. Never will I find a generalized friend who will accompany me in a manifold of new situations and activities, but only "friends" to whom I feel somewhat "familiar" because they share my specific preferences on political ideology, holiday destinations, poetry, musicians or pieces of art. Evidently, such relationships tend to have a more retrospective than prospective connotation because they are founded on similarities that have arisen in the past, not on mutualities subsequently produced in the course of interaction.

As some preliminary studies suggest, all kind of interpersonal similarities can induce friendship relations (Adamic et. al. 2003). Unsurprisingly, such effects are weakest in the case of very general traits shared by almost everybody, but most pronounced in the case of rare personal interests whose incumbents badly need large online network for finding at least one other kindred soul (Adamic et. al. 2003). In the case of sport activities, for instance, it was found that

*"....niche or extreme sports such as freestyle biking, skateboarding, freestyle frisbee, ultimate frisbee, and sky diving are more predictive than sports that have wider appeal*

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<sup>24</sup> Strong evidence for such homotropic trends of digital association are presented in McPherson et. al. 2001 and in boyd/Heer 2006).

*such as backpacking, weightlifting, aerobics, jogging, hiking, snow skiing, martial arts, or bicycling.” (Adamic et. al. 2003).*

This implies that members of various social minorities (e. g. homosexuals) have particularly high incentives to go on Social Network Sites, because they have more to gain in terms of social contacts than “normal” people who have less problems of finding like-minded buddies in their local Real-World setting.

From a methodological social science perspective, a major function of Social Network Sites is to make informal social relations explicit in a way that they can be objectified and quantified to the same degree as formalized relations. Hitherto, studying social networks has been a tedious task because many telephone or live interviews had to be conducted in order to detect such informal structures (Adamic et. al. 2003). This basic intransparency was a major characteristic of social informality: setting it apart from formal relations (e. g. organizational memberships) that were far better accessible for empirical research because they were manifest in authoritative written documents with legal status.

Evidently, social science is also one of these societal institutions that can draw advantage of the fact that individual values and preferences and interindividual relationships become publicly visible, so that they can be surveyed in a similar way as human settlement structures, rioting activities or street traffic patterns. As the access to these data is ubiquitous and incredibly cheap, we may see masses of future social scientists to use such material for social studies: giving rise to a new positivistic empiricism which will tend to identify “social reality” with the objective data patterns on the public Net. Such notions may be at least partially justified by the fact that this new explicitness does not only affect the role of social researchers, but the thinkings, activities and roles of the social actors themselves. Thus, there may be an increased tendency of everybody to define “friendship” less in subjective terms of inner emotions and mutual understanding, but more in objective terms of buddy lists, comment board postings, overlapping lists of subjective preferences, and the like.

## 6. Conclusions

Evidently, the spectacular rise of Social Network Sites is rooted in their capacity to provide social integration under highly complex conditions of contemporary culture, society and individual life.

In traditional communalistic settings, interpersonal relationships are catalyzed and stabilized by the secure knowledge participants have about each other as a mere consequence of their continued coexistence at the same place. Everybody can be sure that others share the same ethnic culture and religious beliefs, are acquainted with common kin, friends and neighbors, read the same books or newspapers, respect the same political leaders and are members of the same voluntary associations.

This all changes with the increasing “crossing of social circles” (Simmel 1908) emerging as a correlate of increased societal complexity. Under these new conditions, every individual is special by realizing his or her unique combination of identities, formal memberships, private experiences and social network relations. Thus, catholic church membership may go along

with being of South Korean origin, belonging to a leftist party, participating in a weight watchers association, liking the Philosophy of Nietzsche and being connected to a Lesbian partner.

As a major consequence of such developments, social interaction and social association become more difficult because whenever two individuals meet, they typically have no or only very incomplete knowledge about each other's likings, belongings and identifications. Usually, these patterns are mutually disclosed only very partially and within long periods of time: often with the result that interaction is discontinued because too few commonalities (or too many dissociative elements) are found.

Under modern conditions of university study, for instance, interactions between students is hampered by the wide divergences of topics, literature, data sources, methods and study modes caused by the increasing richness of culture and the increasing variety of didactic proceedings.

Social Network Sites offer the opportunity to find partners who are interested in the same topic at the same time, and who are well disposed for cooperation because they are trying to answer the same questions and to solve similar problems with identical methods.

*"At universities it can be difficult for students to follow the work of other students; often, they are engaged in their own assignments. However, students can make use of each other's resources. Often, students are unaware of what other students are doing, and they do not necessarily make use of each other, although their work is relevant to each other. The problem is only extended within online education, where students do not meet face-to-face." (Dalsgaard 2008)*

Of course, such associations may subvert local classes because students are likely to find their most fitting partners in other institutions or nations - thus contributing to worldwide collaboration on the microlevel of ongoing study processes (while in the past, such wider contacts have been reserved for exchanging results (e. g. term papers or books)).

Evidently, to acquire knowledge about my partner's social context (and to keep track with it during time) is of crucial importance for building up mutual trust and for defining the areas of promising mutual understanding and cooperation (Bacharach & Gambetti 2001; Good 2000). Seen in this perspective, Social Network Sites fulfill a very indispensable function: by allowing individuals to communicate comprehensive and reliable information about all their cultural preferences as well as their social adherences and identifications. Whenever two people initiate an interaction, they can start with a whole gamut of *ex ante* knowledge about their social and cultural environment: so that they can ascertain from the beginning to what degree they share the same social networks and same organizational memberships or the same preferences or dislikings for specific music styles, literature, ideologies and political leaders.

And whenever these affiliations change, such modifications can readily be communicated by just updating the personal profile. While conventional social relationships are often built on factors of the past (e. g. common ethnic origin or religious membership), online relations can be more exclusively based on current conditions: e. g. on recently created social networks, fashions or political campaigns.

*„Wenn die vorgeschrittene Kultur den sozialen Kreis, dem wir mit unserer ganzen Persönlichkeit angehören, mehr und mehr erweitert, dafür aber das Individuum in höherem Maße auf sich selbst stellt und es mancher Stützen und Vorteile des enggeschloss-*

*senen Kreises beraubt: so liegt in jener Herstellung von Kreisen und Genossenschaften, in denen sich beliebig viele, für den gleichen Zweck interessierte Menschen zusammenfinden können, eine Ausgleichung jener Vereinsamung der Persönlichkeit, die aus dem Bruch mit der engen Umschränktheit früherer Zustände hervorgeht.“ (Simmel 1908: 326).*

From a macrosociological point of view, Social Networking increases the interfaces between different societal subsystems and social collectivities: by allowing people occupying the same intersection points to become acquainted and to engage in regular goal-directed interaction. While many Internet activities (e. g. chatting or online discussions) result in the formation of “weak ties”, only Social Network Sites help to realize fully the potentials and resources residing in such wider connections. Thus, I may found out that one of my friend is a medical specialist who could well advise me in important health problems, or that one of them could well function as a bridge for getting me into contact with an admired artist or scientist who belongs to his social circles.

Whenever an association is created among individuals using the same platform (e. g. Facebook in the case of college students), much more transparency exists about the characteristics of its members. For instance, one can easily verify how many members maintain leftist or conservative views, share specific goals and lifestyle patterns, are studying in specific fields, show inclination for leadership or are belonging to any specific associations. Likewise, voluntary associations or political parties may find out that they have overlapping portions of membership which could become the basis for cooperation or even fusion.

*“Our student organizers have noted that by using and joining groups, they not only identify allies to recruit for other groups or causes, but also learn to recognize the multiple identities those allies have as individuals. These multiple identities can become apparent through functions such as the "related groups" sidebar, which lists other groups that share multiple members with the group in question. Upon examining other groups, students are sometimes surprised to discover allies in unanticipated places.” (Fischer 2007).*

As *horizontal interactions* among members are boosted, the formation of informal subgroups is facilitated that may make themselves heard at the association’s assemblies. And the *vertical relationships* between members and leadership can be more effective, because leaders know more about their members, so that they may be more responsive to their needs and better able to exploit their motivations and resources.

Generally: SNS facilitate a self-empowerment of horizontally constituted informal groups, communities and networks vis-à-vis vertically structured formal bureaucracies and institutions. This is vividly seen in the realm of advertising where the role of vertical persuasion channels shrinks in favor of horizontal diffusion, and influence processes taking place voluntarily among internatted individual users.

To summarize: **Social Network Sites represent a paradigm for collective participation in the digital age.** Traditional institutions and associations plagued by declining membership and voluntary activity have to look to these platforms in order to learn how todays's youth can

be motivated for collective action or even be mobilized for various forms of civic and political participation (Valenzuela et. al. 2008).

On the downside, however, these far-reaching gains in creating bonds and exploiting social resources have to be paid with considerable sacrifices in three respects:

- 1) SNS contribute to a *leveling of social life* by obliterating more subtle nuances between different types and qualities of human relationships (e. g. by propagating undifferentiated notions of "friendship"), by encouraging the revival and conservation of older (even "primordial") relationships (instead of opening up to new acquaintances) and by excluding negative and conflictive aspects of interpersonal relations.
- 2) They integrate individuals into settings of *increased supervision and social controls* (caused by losses of privacy, enlarged "front stages" and the desegregation of roles).
- 3) They *reduce personal autonomy in self presentation* by propagating publicly visible personal profiles and biographical records.

Thus, the future of Social networking may be critically dependent on the implementation of software schemes that allow everybody to define his or her personal equilibrium between privacy and public accessibility, and between individual autonomy and social control.

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