Digital Exhibitionism: The Age of Exposure

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Abstract

Web 2.0 has expanded the possibilities of digital creative production by individuals and enabled the digitalisation of private life experiences. This study analyses how social media contributes to the making of personal biographies and discusses the shift towards a culture of digital exposure. This study uses netnography and a constructive approach to examine online communities and social networks. The findings illustrate that these new technological platforms are mediating in the construction of late modern biographies, which are expanding the complexity of today's socio-technical systems. The paper discusses the power of these technologies as agents of socio-cultural change and suggests that, besides providing individual realisation and mediated pleasure, these technologies encourage exhibitionistic and voyeuristic behaviour, elude reflexivity, and display authoritative tendencies and new possibilities for social control.

Keywords: Social media, cultural change, online communities, social control

Introduction

From the outset of modernity individuals have traditionally kept records of their lives. From diaries, to paintings, to photographs or music, men and women of all ages have created cultural texts portraying their experiences, emotions and opinions. In most cases, this private creative content was circulated among a limited social sphere consisting of family, friends or colleagues. The cost of producing these texts meant that people needed to be selective about the kinds of special occasions, such as weddings or travels, they wanted to record. This feature of modernity has been radically transformed thanks to the expansion of information technologies (IT) and the World Wide Web. Social media now provide digital platforms that support and enhance self-expression. The new phenomenon popularly known as Web 2.0, for example, has further expanded the possibilities for individuals to produce creative texts digitally. Web 2.0 allows for the digital creation, storage, publication and sharing of people's private lives. This technology does not only enable individuals to portray their lives in new ways, it also provides the necessary tools for them to create instantaneous and real-time self-biographies on the Web. This in turn has transformed the Web into an exhibition of do-it-yourself biographies (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). The conversion from an analogue to a digital culture of private experiences has profound consequences for the ways in which we portray ourselves and shape our identities. It also offers new insights on how technology supplements and re-mediates our social activities.

The main transformation from analogue to digital texts has been possible due to developments in IT, such as enhanced capacities for collaboration and sharing of information (Cooke & Buckley 2008), and by factors such as more powerful and affordable hardware and software, a faster network edge, the enhancement of easy-to-use tools, a higher e-literacy among the population of the world, and the increase in portable and wireless platforms (Parameswaran & Whinston 2007). All of these elements have led to a change in the locus of control in the creation process of the online content: from a Web content controlled by organizations and corporations to a Web which, to a large extent, is the expression of the interaction and participation of end-users.

The main attributes of popular social network sites are the content generated by the users and the tools that allow the user interactivity. Although the phenomenon is quite new, there is already a myriad of personalised social information available to cyber-users around the world. Social media allow for the digitalisation of creative texts (visual, narrative or audio) that were previously produced and consumed using other technological tools with a lower diffusion capacity. This provides a new scene for the self-making of personal biographies. The new interactive Web is a vehicle for the digital exposure of personal lives, which float in cyberspace on different types of social network sites.

A popular viewpoint among analysts of the Web 2.0 is that the increased possibility of interaction between the users and the Internet opens a new era of participation and democratisation (Qualman 2009). This development is explained as the beginning of a new digital revolution that is shifting from a technology based on "command and control" to a technology based on engaging and empowering individuals through their online identities (Shih 2009). However, other more critical perspectives question the value of the user-created content or pose ethical questions to the use of social media. There are emerging studies problematizing the optimistic view that Web 2.0 empowers users through their collaboration and shared information. Authors have pointed to the poor security of content and identity theft by the media (Poster 2006), the possible misuse of increased transparency to achieve greater centralised control (Hand 2008; Miller 2010), or issues relating to the ownership of displayed content (Aspan 2008; Tierney 2010). Keen (2007) in his provocative essay challenges those who praise the wisdom of the crowds and the quality and value of the millions of amateur contributions. According to Keen, instead of creating masterpieces, social media users produce an "endless digital forest of mediocrity" (2007: 3). Positive as well as critical accounts of this phenomenon agree that the digitalisation of user generated content offer new understandings of social and cultural participation. This study examines how social media contribute to the construction of personal biographies, discusses the turn towards a culture of digital exposure, and critically examines the challenges of the digitalisation of personal life.

Method of Study

This paper explores the Web as a social construct and a context that facilitates the examination of the creation and evolution of social structures, such as relationships and communities. Markham (2004) defines this methodological perspective as the constructive approach. The specific methodology used in this study is netnography. Social scientists typically use netnography to conduct Web research (O'Reilly et al. 2007). Kozinets (2002, 2008) describes this methodology as an online evolution of ethnography and defines it as an application of methods of cultural anthropology to on-line cyber culture. Netnography consists of the participative observation and examination of one or several online communities, as compared to ethnography, which is the study of cultural and social forms through observation of events as they unfold. Ethnography is a method that requires co-presence with the people observed during the study (Haldrup & Larsen 2010). Netnography applies this presence to the virtual world. The researcher acts as an active member of the community and studies the processes of interactivity, the specific settings, the architecture of the sites and the main characteristics of the content available. However, the digitalisation of the object of the study means that this method can only trace a very specific type of cultural and social communica-

tion, which is recorded and uploaded digital content. This type of communication differs greatly from other types of social behaviour. In this case, there are no "natural settings" in which the social acts takes place; the setting is a virtual platform of communication, which is another type of social construct based on specific technological cultures.

Another important difference between netnography and ethnographic methods is that the researcher conducting a netnographic study can return to the original form of communication studied, because it is recorded, stored and displayed on the virtual platforms. Nevertheless, the nature of the Web poses several challenges to the netnographic method. Websites and other forms of digitised documentation, which lay the foundation for netnographic analyses, develop and change at a high speed. Additionally, the rapid change in the patterns of use, and the fragmentation and massive amount of data associated to the object of analysis, represents an additional challenge to the study of the Web, but it does not make Web studies any less relevant. Netnography is a multi-method approach whereby the researcher can apply historical analysis, semiotic analysis, and other observation methods, to their netnographic study. This study uses content analysis and observation methods.

In order to analyse the role that virtual communities play in the development of virtual identities, two main data sets were established. Firstly, a purposive sample of online communities was developed and a sample of personal profiles of a web community examined. A total of three different social network sites and one wiki site (an interactive website that focuses on the content and not the users) were selected: Facebook, TripAdvisor, Twitter and Wikipedia. These websites represent different types of online communities, which have different aims and purposes, and at the same time a large scalability and a very large number of users (see table 1). Secondly, the development of ten different personal profiles in Facebook was studied. The social network of Facebook is characterised by a password-protected and membership only use. Its content has a limited circulation and it is not accessible to the broader public. This raises specific ethical issues for the researcher who wants to study the content of this site. It was therefore essential to obtain informed consent from Facebook members and to present de-identified text and multimedia representations of these people in this article. Half of the profiles correspond to men and half to women, whose ages range from 15 to 45 years old. The group consists of four different European nationalities. The examination of sites and profiles took place during the months of November 2009 to February 2010, with frequent visits to the different communities.

Online community	Characteristics
Facebook	Social network with a focus on personal interaction among members; non themed; membership required.
Twitter	Community based on microblogging; non themed; membership required.
TripAdvisor	Community with a focus on reviews; themed community dedicated to tourism and travel; open to all users; registration required for uploading content.
Wikipedia	Community with a focus on the creation of an online encyclopedia; based on wiki technology; open to all users; personal account required for uploading or modifying content.

Table 1: Features of Different Online Communities

User Generated Content and Online Communities

There are many different perspectives on the Internet and the Web as factors of social change. These perspectives relate to globalisation processes and cultural change (Hand 2008); focus on the digital divide, diversity and power relations (Kirkpatrick 2008; Kleinman 2005); assess the construction of personal identities (Poster 2006); examine changes in space-time constraints and cultural perceptions of body (Basu et al. 2007; Schwanen & Kwan 2008; Shaw 2008) and view the Internet from a historical and sociological standpoint (Castells 1996, 1997, 2001). Recent books have examined the impact of social media and web communities, such as Facebook, Youtube or Twitter, on both society and on the market place (Li & Bernoff 2008; Qualman 2009; Weinberg 2009; Brogan & Smith 2009; Weber 2009).

The more interactive Web has been popularised with the term Web 2.0. Web 2.0 describes a Web which is "increasingly influenced by intelligent Web services that enable users to contribute to developing, rating, collaborating and distributing Internet content and customizing Internet applications" (Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent 2007: 9). It reflects a mix of different types of ICT tools, including wikis, podcasts, messaging applications or blogs (Stillman & McGrath 2008). The main characteristic of the new Web is that it enhances the collaboration and sharing of information online, and is built around social software which makes it possible for

individuals to communicate and form communities using their computers (Cooke & Buckley 2008).

Discourses on information technologies and the Web have long focused upon the technological contribution to economic and social development. However, the Web 2.0 turn has expanded the "techspressive" (Kozinets 2008: 870) perspective of our socio-technical environment. This ideological perspective considers technology a provider of individual realisation, mediated pleasure and escape. This perspective is historically the most recent element of technology's ideological field (Kozinets 2008). The techspressive discourse has developed following an increase in the importance of video games and it is now being expanded thanks to the popularity of social media and Web 2.0. Much of the literature on online communities is embedded in the techspressive discourse of technology use combined with a linear progressive understanding of the technological influence on economic development (Brogan and Smith 2009; Qualman 2009). The techspressive focus on pleasure and individuality is further enhanced thanks to the possibilities of user generated content (UGC).

UGC is the aggregation and publication of users' contributions on the web. User created digital content is very diverse and includes narrative text, such as reviews or diaries; contact details; photos; video and audio files; and goods and services for sale. Some of these contributions have a strong creative element, for example, photo reportages of personal experiences, while others are more passive contributions, for example, the sharing of the processing capacity of computers to achieve free Internet telephony (e.g. Skype). Several definitions and classifications of this content exist (Deshpande & Jadad 2006; Lenhart & Fox 2006; Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent 2007; Wellman 2007; Cook 2008; Cooke & Buckley 2008; Stillmn & McGrath 2008). Cook (2008) defines UGC as part of the broader user contribution systems. User contribution systems "aggregate and leverage various types of user input in ways that are valuable to others" (Cook 2008: 62). Additionally, Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent's (2007) analysis of the participative Web highlights a difference between UGC and user created content and focuses on the creative element of the content generation. Their analysis demands a more extensive use of creative skills by the user, for example when reviewing a restaurant or making a photographical reportage of a destination.

Online communities, or virtual communities, are one of the main elements of Web 2.0 and its broader contribution systems. Communities can be defined as networks of interpersonal ties. Online communities are websites where user relationships develop, and their main assets are a combination of user generated content and easy-to-use tools and applications. They are technological platforms with relationship tools that allow users to communicate with their network in new ways, changing the cost of interaction and maintenance of a relationship, and increasing people's network capacity (Shih 2009). The Web displays a very large

diversity of online communities which represents different social characteristics of the users.

The large number of different communities that exist on the Web vary according to their size, their conditions of use, the variety of their activities, and whether they are open or require membership. Virtual communities can be strongly influenced by the amount of users they have; too many people may create too much confusion, while too few will not provide any dynamism and the value of participation may be too low (Preece 2000). Online communities can provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity (Wellman et al. 2002). Some of the main types of communities are media-sharing sites, such as Youtube; virtual worlds, such as Second Life; blogging sites, such as Travelblog; social bookmarking and voting sites, such as Digg; review sites, such as TripAdvisor; or social network sites, such as Facebook or LinkedIn. These communities are extensive environments with many different types of tools and components allowing for different forms of interactions and activities. They differ from other interactive platforms in the Web, such as wikis, blogs and message boards, in that they enhance relationship building among their users (Buss & Strauss 2009).

The distinctive norms used in these communities have also resulted in differing degrees of public access, participant norms and expectations (McKee & Porter 2009). However, according to Castells (2001), these communities share two important characteristics. The first is their support of free and non-hierarchical communication. Although there are varying degrees of protection of content uploaded on-line, the assumption that these platforms should be based on the free exchange of ideas remains paramount (Lash 2002). The second is the self-directed connectivity, which allows any person to connect to the web and publish his or her own information. Self-directed connectivity is a tool for social organization, collective action and meaning (Castells 2001). Furthermore, it allows individuals to express their identities and to create and maintain social relations online.

The social networking sites selected for this study have distinctive rules and forms of interaction among their users. These sites invite self-biographical expression in diverse ways. Facebook was established in 2004 by undergraduate students from Harvard University and was first aimed at university students. This linked to a long tradition in universities of establishing networks among students while they are studying and later on through associations. However, as opposed to more traditional associations, Facebook initially functioned as an informal dating site where students could obtain photos and contact details from their classmates. The members of the site would thereby attain links to other users' details, with their permission, as "friends", a term used as a marker of trusted identities for this site. The network's building blocks are the users' profile pages and its design relies on a clear protocol, which allows users to accept or reject friends' requests (Zarrella 2010). In 2006, Facebook was opened to anyone with an email address and it became extremely popular. The site announced that it had reached 400 million

members in February 2010 (Helft & Stone 2010). It has also proven to be a very profitable business; the company reported $210 million in U.S. ad spending in 2008 (Buss & Strauss 2009). Nevertheless, the network has also received hard criticism for claiming ownership over the content uploaded by the users, a debate that resulted in a revision of the terms of use by the management of the site (Stone & Stelter 2009).

TripAdvisor is the largest networking site focusing on tourism and travel. It has over 11 million members and it had amassed more than 30 million reviews of tourism products by February 2010 (TripAdvisor 2010). Contrary to Facebook or Twitter, TripAdvisor is an open network and it is not necessary to register or become a member in order to access the published content. However, it is necessary to create a virtual identity to upload content onto the site.

Twitter uses microblogging, a form for blogging which limits the amount of text posted (a maximum of 140 characters). This technical limitation has created a very specific form of communication that has had a burst in popularity since the first half of 2009. Twitter is used by individuals and companies alike, and it is a kind of "news" site where users can upload and share all types of updates. It can be seen as a major news channel with a diverse mixture of traditional news and information about individual members' real-time daily life activities.

Wikipedia is an iconic representation of user generated content. It is selected in this study as the counterpart of the other social media platforms of the sample. Wikipedia encourages the creation of content but, unlike the other platforms mentioned above, its focus is not on sociability but on the co-creation of knowledge. In some of the literature wikis are not considered to be online communities, because their focus is on the content rather than the contributors and because the content's authorship is anonymous (Buss & Strauss 2009). However, participation in wikis can provide a feeling of belonging and social recognition, as seen in the open source movement (Castells 2001). Wikipedia appeared in 2001 thanks to the wiki technology. This technology allowed any user to upload content to a communal web site without any approval by a central administrator. This collective experiment made it possible to handle a massive amount of amateur contributions using a very clear regulatory system of online behaviour. In this type of community anyone can become a contributor (or editor) but the result is a collective effort where the individual creative effort is diluted into the community. It is a system of libertarian roots in which individuals are given equal voice so "neither our reputations nor our qualifications have any intrinsic value" (Keen 2007: 43). It is an example of an interactive Web in which the individual identity is excluded on purpose to give room to the wisdom of the crowds.

Digital Exhibitionism

Social media platforms are technological tools mediating in the construction of late modern "lego" biographies:

> The second modernity's totally normal chaos is regulated by non-linear systems. It is also regulated by an extraordinarily powerful interlacing of social and technical systems: by, precisely, socio-technical systems. It is at the interface of the social and the technical that we find the second-modernity's individual. It is at this interface that we take on the precarious freedom of a "life of our own"; that we "invent the political", that we take on ecological responsibility. The individual in the second modernity is profoundly a socio-technical subject (Lash 2002: xiii)

Social media sites are new tools that contribute to a larger complexity of these socio-technical systems. These platforms can be placed on a continuum. There are those that promote self-biographical expressions (such as Facebook or LinkedIn) and on the opposite pole those enhancing a communitarian effort and a dilution of individuality in the "commons" focusing on a product or the content of the site (such as Wikipedia).

A common feature for Twitter and for Facebook is that they encourage users to share brief textual narrations in the form of microblogging. The most prominent tool in Facebook's profile is a microblogging tool, which invites individuals to write something personal in answer to the question: "What's on your mind?". Twitter has a similar question: "What's happening?", oriented towards the outside world. Individuals are invited to join the network activities by publishing updates about their lives and thoughts. In the first case other members of the network can become "friends"; in the second, "followers".

The microblogging tool is a technological application that enhances the exhibitionist tendencies of social media. Common to the culture of these sites is the acceptance of the recording and publishing of daily life activities or banalities. Both platforms invite the broadcasting of the "immediate thought" or the "immediate observation". In much of the discussion around the evolution of modernity (Bauman 1998; Held et al. 1998; Giddens 1999, 2002) there is focus on the increased reflexivity of individuals. However, these platforms invite instant communication and lightness of being, like an online playground characterised by the immediateness of feelings and emotions, and members are encouraged to engage in a less reflexive practice of interactivity and self-portrayal.

This technology supports the change from reflexive behaviour to "reflex" behaviour. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) describe this change as a movement towards an increased non-linearity of individual life. The non-linear modern person may wish to be reflexive but does not have the space or the time to devote to reflectivity. In social networks the recording of the memorable has been changed by speed and by immediateness. Facebook and Twitter represent the dilution of the frontier between what is considered as being essential for one's biographical

record, and therefore needs to be stored and shared, and those daily routines and thoughts that can be seen as a futile part of anybody's life.

Artistic expression has proven to be able to reflect upon socio-cultural change while it occurs (Giddens 1999). In the film *Julie and Julia* (2009), directed by Norah Ephron, Julia Child's story as a cook and writer is intertwined with blogger Julie Powell's challenge to cook all the recipes in Child's famous cooking book. The film portrays the power of exhibitionism and exposure of intimate emotions that lies in blogging. Julie shares with her online followers her more intimate feelings, her self-esteem problems and lack of career prospects. This exposure challenges her personal relationships; her husband makes her promise not to write about their quarrels and her boss prohibits her to mention him in her blog. One of Julie's friends blogs about her extravagant sexual experiences, and therefore achieves huge online audiences and is portrayed as successful.

The inherent exposure of blogging is highly present in the microblogging of online communities. This is not to say that everyone who uses platforms such as Facebook or Twitter will share all intimate details of their private life with the community, but the culture of social media is that it is all right to do so, and those that do are seen as active and well-functioning members of the community. In the ethics of these communities it is accepted to expose one's "self".

In the profiles studied in Facebook, different levels of emotional exhibitionism are present. It is possible to distinguish between those who use Facebook with a larger level of intimacy, expressing emotions and personal opinions about different issues, and those who use it as a news board to announce interesting events for the community or to list their different daily life activities. Nevertheless, the latter type of user also includes expressions of intimacy and emotion in recounting their thoughts on the events they are informing about.

Besides microblogging, other typical activities members of the social networks in this study engaged in are: interactive diaries or blogs; publishing original photos or videos which other members can tag and comment upon; and participation in interactive games, quizzes or discussion groups about specific topics. Facebook and Twitter's updating systems allow members to receive regular information about other members' activities. Some of these activities have exhibitionistic tendencies similar to those seen in microblogging. For example, it is possible to see the results of other users' tests. One of them is called "The truth" and aims at disclosing private opinions of emotional character. After a member (X) has taken that test, the rest of the community can get updates such as "See if X fancies Y" or "Are you in love with X?". Other similar applications inform that "X just took [a]: Who is your love story? Test" and invite other users to check the results. There are also updates on game behaviour, such as "X played The Family Farm today" or "X just got a new high score in Kamikace Race". In general, social sites trace members' activities on the network and feed information back to the network. Accordingly, the design of these networks not only encourages interactivity, it

also discloses information which may be felt as an invasion of other members' privacy. Some users may take an IQ test on Facebook just to discover that all of their "friends" are being updated about their results with the offensive note: "One of your friends got the score idiot, click here and see which friend".

While users may be in control of which private photos or videos they want to upload to the network, little can be done about the visual content published by others. The culture of exposure of these media creates a collage of visual virtual identities co-created among community members and defies personal control of the content. Social networking promotes group interactivity as opposed to individual control, and although these platforms have increased their privacy settings, the question remains of how these platforms try to educate their users in this matter (Tapscott 2009). Personal control upon visual content can only be achieved by a constant monitoring of the network activities, a task that may prove to be extremely time consuming.

Communities allow for more extreme forms of Web exhibitionism, for example, the uploading of webcam videos broadcasting a member's activities in real-time. These technological platforms have the potential to turn into life the "big brother" tendencies portrayed in the movie *The Truman Show*, a film directed by Peter Weir portraying a man who is living in a TV-produced reality soap opera, which is televised without interruptions to global audiences. Anybody is free to broadcast a personal version of the reality-TV success *Big Brother*.

The review genre, which is the main content of TripAdvisor, encourages another type of exhibitionism. This form of social media promotes itself as the place to find "the truth" about tourism products and places. The discourse of the administrator of this digital platform is rooted in the idea of authenticity, which is a contested and problematic concept in tourism studies (Ooi & Stöber 2010). The review genre provides insights into the feelings and emotions of tourists from a micro-perspective. This genre is activity related and self-centred. The online review genre is very different from the traditional reviews we read in newspapers. As in the case of Wikipedia, there is no demand of expertise to legitimise the "truth" of the content. Users frequently write in the first person and include names of family members and friends: "Mom and I went for their Sunday Roast special, £15 for two courses. They were very tasty." or "I absolutely loved afternoon tea at the Dorchester Hotel. First, we started with tea, I chose Earl Grey, scones, clotted cream, and jam".

The legitimacy of the review lies in the expression of the personal emotional experience. A community review includes the exposure of a person's feelings and opinions, akin to a personal biography. It is the lack of commercial or authoritative language and the exposure of feelings attached to the consumption experience that gives users' reviews extra value. Furthermore, TripAdvisor also invites self-biographical mapping with a tool entitled "Cities I've Visited". This tool allows users to place pins on a digital map (using Google maps) so that they can create a

map showing their travel record. Individuals can use this tool to expose their travel conquests, as hunters used to display the heads of their hunted animals at home. Users can now expose their travel patterns by alerting everybody in their network every time they travel to a new city.

Digital Voyeurism and Social Control

Digital exhibitionism fosters its counterpart: digital voyeurism. Voyeurism has been considered a type of deviant behaviour because it relates to the pleasure provided by observing other peoples' private activities without participating in them or making one's presence known. Voyeuristic activity becomes extremely easy in social networks. Facebook provides an application that allows members to seek information about users who visit their profiles. However, it is seldom that members monitor who looks, and for how long, at the personal information they have uploaded, or follow all the conversations that take place among different members. Social networks therefore provide a double pleasure, that of social interactivity and that of social observation. As a researcher, there is nothing easier than to monitor and observe other members private behaviour without making oneself present and it is important to face this ethical problem, as mentioned previously in the methodological section of this paper.

   The voyeuristic tendency of social media is in IT literature referred to as "lurking". A lurker is someone who does not participate, only observes the community and remains silent. A "voyeur" (from the French) is "one that looks". The exhibitionist tendencies of these media make voyeurism a normal form of online behaviour. It is easy to feel like a voyeur when looking at intimate photographs portraying a couple in love or a private party, reading the results of a test about sexual preferences, or being updated about a member's gaming behaviour. However, observing private content is part of the meaning and value of these social communities. Depending of the cultural background of the user, what may be understood as voyeurism may differ a lot. In some cultures observing (or uploading) photos of physical intimacy among lovers or family members may seem deviant, in others publishing political or religious views may be perceived as incorrect behaviour. Therefore, these social networks are redefining what is to be considered as deviant in voyeuristic terms.

   The division between public and private becomes diluted by the empowerment of these technological platforms. How much privacy one wants to expose or get exposed to therefore becomes an individual matter. The individualistic tendency seems to support the thesis of self-directed connectivity (Castells 2001), by which individuals design their virtual conduct. However, much of the online behaviour seen in this study is pushed, transformed and moulded, not by free-individuals interacting in neutral spaces, but by the socio-technical platforms embedded in specific technical cultures.

Social network sites and communities provide another form of social behaviour closely related to voyeurism, that of social control and monitoring. Several researchers have focused on the danger that lies in the possible abuse of personal digitalized information by political authorities or corporations (Hand 2008; Tapscott 2009; Miller 2010). However, the Web as a social control tool can also be seen in other more intimate spheres, such as that of the family. For example, a virtual group was created in Facebook with the goal of excluding parents from the network. This group was created by teenagers who used Facebook as the main communication platform within their community, and who were of the opinion that accepting parents as "friends" in the community was expanding parental control. They believed the parents used the network to monitor their activities. This is not a strange assumption. In the United States it is possible for parents to buy applications that inform about their children's updates and activities on social networks. For many western cultures, to avoid interference by adults or authorities has traditionally been a part of being young. Parents are confronted with the dilemma of choosing between interacting with their children's virtual communities and becoming voyeurs, or keeping out of their children's online activities, which today are an important part of their social life.

A similar dilemma relating to the fear of social control is found in the process of accepting or rejecting "friends" or "followers" in both Facebook and Twitter. Depending on the individual's use of the network it is not always easy to accept the virtual "friendship" of a superior or a colleague at the workplace. How would it then be possible to post negative feelings or frustrations related to work? However, the decision of rejection is not an easy one either. For example, in Facebook it is difficult to know if the rejected member is updated about their rejection. Similar considerations can be given to the online interactivity of students and university professors or patients and doctors/other health specialists. To what extent, for example, do professors want to share their private life with their students? Traditionally, individuals have been able to keep their identities depending on their role in a specific community. A professor would keep a specific role with the student, a different one with a colleague, an old friend or a relative. However, the fluidity of social media also has consequences for the building of individual networks on these platforms. Social rules and procedures of how to keep these different identities separate online are still in the making. The popular social networks studied here allow for the creation of several online identities by one person. Nevertheless, this entails a large degree of reflexivity and purposiveness in the making of virtual identities, which is still rare to encounter.

Virtual Identities

Social networking sites allow people to create new forms of relationships, which are different from traditional face-to-face relationships (for example, the "friends"

in Facebook) and provide new tools to maintain and enhance personal social networks, but they also pose new demands and challenges to the users. These platforms demand a new type of reflexivity about the creation of virtual identities and the management of personal information. Several authors have discussed the implications of digitalising personal data and information (Greenfield 2006; Hand 2008). Others have celebrated it as an era of transparency (Shih 2009; Brogan & Smith 2009) or as a new social transformation (Bus & Strauss 2009: 31):

> Today's teenagers and twenty-something, far from valuing privacy and boundaries, like earlier generations, embody a new kind of self-obsessed, Youtube broadcast culture. The typical high school student today posts her photos on Facebook or Flickr, and tells the world where she is, what she is doing, and how she is feeling on her Facebook status message or Twitter.

The increased transparency is not only viewed as a positive phenomenon, it has also been criticised as a medium to a larger centralised control on personal life. Nevertheless, this study challenges the very assumption that these platforms are transparent. Although users upload a considerable amount of content on these platforms, nothing points to this content being more transparent or more "true" than other traditional forms of non-digital social communication. Individuals can use the relationship-building tools provided by this technology to build and shape their virtual identities and, although it is impossible to monitor all the content that may be uploaded about oneself, users choose specific ways to portray and present themselves in those digital platforms. Users of social networks are becoming increasingly conscious about the image they want to project and the use they want to make of that image. The profile pages of Facebook and the updates on Twitter are virtual blocks of a personal brand. There are plenty of recommendations of how to optimise these tools for personal promotion in the social media literature:

> It's a good idea to do whatever you can to make your profile reflect your personality and personal brand, but don't go crazy – everyone hates the seizure-inducing profile with alarmingly loud pop music (Zarrella 2010: 57).

Some of this literature invites an increased reflexivity in the use of these platforms (Tapscott 2009; Bay 2009). Users adapt to different types of roles in virtual communities. The participation in these communities helps to provide a multidimensional virtual identity, which can take many different shapes depending on the platform of communication. The multidimensionality of social identities is also reflected in the virtual world. The four different social network sites selected for this study are different mediascapes that encourage different types of social interactivity.

Authoritarian Virtual Coaching

Users are helped to create and maintain online identities that match the aims of the virtual platform. In the case of virtual communities the employee is not present in a traditional way; there is no "human face" representing the organisation. The

firm is represented by those in charge of the administration and the system architecture of the site. The role of the "employee" resembles the voice of a virtual agent that takes the mask of a facilitator or coach and not that of a traditional manager. The informal style of language and the collegial approach to users is found again and again in the presentation of the different tools available on the sites. This language differs greatly from other, more formal bureaucratic instances, which have normally addressed large populations of users.

The communication style of the facilitator of the sites is very specific. There is no she or he, instead the facilitator becomes a de-personalised voice. The voice addresses the user with a colloquial style, which tries to imitate that of friends or colleagues and is far from other types of more formal communication. However, it combines this "friendly" style with authoritative tendencies (such as the language of the coach of a sport team). Within the sites it is common to find plenty of commands: "Send a message to …", "Write on her wall …", "Suggest friends for …" "Write a review …", "See what people are saying about …". The authoritarian language that appears in the main pages of the sites is always encouraging participation and speed of action; it does not encourage protection of privacy or reflexivity. There are no commands such as "protect your privacy …", "be aware of the type of content you upload …", "reduce the number of people that can see this…" or "think before sending …". The style of communication is informal and resembles that of teenagers. Use of honorifics such as Mr. or Mrs. or other such as Dr. is avoided. Typically the member is addressed in the second person: "You can do this and that here". There is a cult of "youth" and of personalization in the language style used on these platforms. The "coach" seems to say: "Well, let's pretend that we already know each other and let's get started".

Technological systems are not produced in vacuums but in specific cultural settings, and the communication style of the network expresses the importance of the cultures of the internet in the shaping of social media. The specific language of the platforms can be connected to the informality of some of the most prominent web cultures such as the hacker culture or the virtual community culture. Those cultures have their roots in "contra cultural movements" and other alternative lifestyles which appeared during the 1970s (Castells 2001) and are characterised by a lack of formality. Although these "rebellion" tendencies have dissipated in a Web that is a reflection of mainstream cultures, there are still some traces in the communication style of the sites.

The platforms' different goals are stated in the sites' presentations and are further explicit in the different tools used. Facebook presents its aim already in the homepage: "Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life". There is no difference between working life or private life; it is a holistic statement, which invites to self-biographical representation. This appears as a contrast to other popular social network sites such as LinkedIn, which presents itself as the place to "Stay informed about your contacts and industry, find the people &

knowledge you need to achieve your goals and control your professional identity online". Interestingly, this site mentions the aim of identity creation and control and also acknowledges the existence of multiple identities. The edition of the personal profile in Facebook includes questions about political and religious views as well as a section called "Interested in:", with possibilities of selecting men and/or women, apparently referring to sexual preferences although it is not explicit. This may be seen as a fear of sexual references by the administrator (they are not afraid to call politics or religion by their names). The user can also specify if he is looking for friendship, a relationship, dating or networking. Furthermore, the user can indicate all types of preferences from favorite movies to activities, personal data like addresses and educational background. It is a virtual tool to create a mobile, ever-changing self-biographical profile. Twitter has a similar unpretentious and colloquial style, it announces that the aim of the site is to allow users to "Share and discover what's happening right now, anywhere in the world".

TripAdvisor does not display the aim of the site on the homepage. The "coach" in this case indicates the main asset of the site stating that it has "Over 30 million trusted traveler reviews & opinions". It is first in the section dedicated to reviews that the user is addressed in a similar informal and authoritative way: "Write a review. Get Started... Review a hotel, restaurant, attraction, or even the place you visited". Wikipedia is also open to all Web users and addresses the reader in the following way: "Welcome to Wikipedia. The free encyclopedia that anyone can edit". However, from the different sites studied the "coach" of Wikipedia, although informal, is less authoritative, the language used is more explanatory and there are fewer commands. In general this type of network invites more reflexivity and provides reasonable arguments to the virtual audience. For example, it says, "Semi-protection is sometimes necessary to prevent vandalism to popular pages. You can discuss this page with others. You may request unprotection of the page". There is a generalized use of "can" or "may", which seems to favour reflexivity as opposed to the abundant use of imperative language in the social networks dedicated to online communities.

A fundamental value of the hacker culture is freedom, which is fostered by the lack of formality in relation to ownership of production, whereby many contributors use anonymous signatures. In social media there is a vast use of nicknames and anonymity. This is clearly the case on TripAdvisor or Wikipedia. Wikipedia is the most extreme case of those studied. The final product or article appears as one collective work without any indication of the individual contributions and without references to the authorship, whereas in TripAdvisor there is a specified authorship of content. However, signatures are unreliable as they include anonymous names, nicknames, signs and what may look like the real name of the author. In Facebook and Twitter contributors' names are important and they seem to correspond to real names that can be traceable, although identity theft can occur in both platforms. From the examination of these platforms it is possible to con-

clude that those platforms which focus on self-biographical exposure are also those that have a larger tendency to reveal the real authorship of the content. While those that focus on knowledge, such as product reviews or encyclopaedic articles, have a tendency towards anonymity and nickname use. Personal exposure on the web reflects the tension between the real and unreal (use of nicknames, chat language and the brief commitment of web groupings; vs. the expansion of open-sources, wiki and other forms of more "objective" forms of contributions). It allows the production of hypertext about personal realities; not only including the personal details but also linking them to other personal contacts, other contributions, and other sites with information.

The ten profiles studied in Facebook show the real identity of the contributors. However, tendencies towards anonymity and informality of authorship often appear in the photos that these contributors use on their profile. Three of them use pictures of objects or of other famous persons (Hollywood actors or sport stars) as their profile photo and they tend to change their photo often. The majority, however, use traditional portrait photos on their profile. The examination of the identification of personal identities points towards a very different use of social media for shaping virtual identities. While platforms like Facebook and Twitter may be used to enhance and promote a personal career or individual social networks, TripAdvisor and Wikipedia provide other types of rewards which relate to peers' recognition as it is known from the open source movement.

Disembedding Biographical Experiences

Web 2.0 disembeds the recording of biographical experiences. This takes place in two different ways: in relation to space and in relation to ownership. Firstly, there was once a clear spatial limitation between the production and sharing of traditional biographical records in the forms of familiar photo albums or analogue-written diaries. There was also a specific natural setting for the sharing of those creations. Digitalisation processes have profoundly altered these spatial boundaries. There is no physical space limitation for digital content. Everything can be documented and stored and therefore every banality or daily activity can become important in the self-portrayal of one's life. Mobile devices have increased this tendency, providing access to these virtual platforms from anywhere, not only from a computer desk. The democratisation tendencies of Wikipedia, in which amateurs and experts are considered as equals, displays a parallel development in these social network through the "flattening" of our own life experiences, where everything is to be considered good enough to command attention from our network. The constant interaction and updating of the platform is a silent expectation of these communities; several of the "friends" studied in this article apologised for not being active enough, concluding that because of their lack of activity their profile would not be of interest. For Facebook members, quality of performance is related to constant interactivity; it is like the virtual "Reuters" of one's social life.

In the future we may see a whole virtual world of graveyards of biographical banalities to be carried along as we get older.

Secondly, social media entail a profound change in the control and ownership of the created content. Traditionally published narrative, visual or audio texts had a clear authorship and functioned as closed works after their publication, e.g. a published review of a restaurant in a newspaper or a diary notebook. Texts published on the web are open. The work is not completed, and it invites the contribution of other users. Social network sites encourage people to write about people, so that individuals in a network can upload narrative texts, photos or videos of others, creating a biographical hypertext. The influence of the "open-source movement" in social media is evident in the openness of the virtual texts. An example of this is that the personal home pages of Facebook do not only show the photos or videos of the user, which have been uploaded by herself, but also those that have been provided by other "friends" of the network. Furthermore, it also includes a tool to comment on personal updates. This encourages virtual social interaction and also provides new layers of meaning to the personal contribution. This interactivity is an embedded characteristic of these systems, and individuals are invited to alter the original work by rating it, providing extra comments on the content, including tags in photos and videos, linking it to other contents, or sending the content to be published at other network sites. The character of most of the user-generated content is dynamic and fluid, always open to alteration. There is little self-direction in this socio-technical behaviour. The lack of full control over one's own production is part of the essence of this virtual sharing of information, and the assumption of this lack of control of the final product is part of the system architecture of the social network sites.

The examination of the data also entails that there is no single virtual identity or specific way in which social media contributes to identity building, but many diverse shapes and a multiplicity of platforms that help users to create a collage of multiple, fluid and complex virtual identities. These essential elements of social networks will soon demand necessary tools to manage this increasing complexity and solutions to monitor a portfolio of different identities created in different forums, which aim at different goals.

Individuals begin at an early age to develop virtual self-biographic texts in different social media platforms. This poses new and different types of challenges to the management of the exposure of private life on-line. Today's children and teenagers will accumulate a large record of biographical content. Real ageing will be mirrored by the virtual ageing of identities and profiles created through time, providing different self-portraits and do-it-yourself biographies. This traceable web behaviour may in turn become a heavy burden to carry, as information about one's life becomes more and more fragmented and difficult to comprehend and control. There has long been a debate about the impact that the massive amount of information provided by the Web will have/has had on younger generations (Bay

2009). However, the information found in social media is not just any kind of information, it is information about one's private life and intimate world.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to examine how social media has contributed to the making of personal biographies, while discussing the shift towards a culture of digital exposure and digitalisation of personal life. The findings illustrated that online communities and social network platforms are new technological tools mediating in the construction of late modern biographies and that they expand the complexity of today's socio-technical systems.

The analysis of the different platforms indicates that the use of social media promotes non-linearity in the making of personal biographies due to the encouragement of instant communication and the broadcasting of immediate thoughts and observations. It also shows that the architecture of the sites and the culture of online communities promote digital emotional exhibitionism, although it is possible to distinguish between the different levels of emotional involvement of the users. These socio-technical systems support the change from reflexive behaviour to reflex behaviour and help to erase the frontier between the documenting of a person's biographical record and daily life banalities. The exploration of the sites illustrates that social networking promotes interactivity instead of individual control and personal privacy. This, together with the encouragement of speed and lack of reflexivity, poses important ethical questions in relation to the management and ownership of virtual identities.

Digital exhibitionism provides the necessary grounds for the development of digital voyeurism. Besides eroding the division between the memorable and the ordinary, these technologies also challenge the division between the public and the private. The traditional frontier becomes diluted by the empowerment of the socio-technical cultures that enhance disclosure and exposure of information as well as voyeuristic tendencies. The exposure of personal content also enhances the possibilities of using these technological tools for social control. This has posed new challenges to the users of these networks while ethical rules and procedures for the management of online identities are still on the making.

The analysis of the cultural, technological background has provided insights on the processes that allow the user to create virtual identities. These processes reveal the significance of the system architecture of social network sites, tendencies towards anonymity and informality of authorship, and show that the communication style of the administrators is informal but with authoritarian tendencies, aiming not at the encouragement of reflexivity but at group interactivity and speed of action.

The study points towards the multidimensionality of online social identities, an addition to the complexity of today's late modern biographies. The lack of control

over one's production is an essential part of these technical platforms. The large interactivity of social media in the form of comments, tags, signs, etc., provides new layers of meaning and content to the uploaded personal contributions. This feature, combined with the participation in many different online communities and networks, contributes to the digitalisation of a personal life as a collage of multiple, fluid and complex virtual identities and challenges the idea of a self-directed Web.

Hundreds of millions of users are digitalising personal and biographical information. Online communities and social network sites are seen by many as providers of individual realisation and mediated pleasure. However, these platforms are not culturally neutral playgrounds. They are technological platforms embedded in the cultures of the Internet, which enhance the making of reflex-biographies. This analysis points towards some complementary characteristics of this popular phenomenon: the exhibitionistic and voyeuristic features of the communities, the lack of reflexivity, the authoritative tendencies and possibilities of social control, and the power of these technologies to act as agents of socio-cultural change.

Further study may reflect upon the management of virtual identities over time, how the dilution between the memorable and the banal and the private and the public impacts on the ageing of biographies, online and off-line, and how the different socio-cultural backgrounds of the users reflect upon the use of these media. As our world's use of IT and social media increases and expands, an enhanced understanding of the impact of these technologies in the making of personal identities and relationships becomes more valuable.

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