

# Multiple Identities on Social Networks:

## Issues of Privacy and Authenticity

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**Abstract—** This essay focuses on the way in which individuals produce multiple identities through a discursive process of building a digital presence in different social networking Web sites. As a result the process of identity production becomes problematic when multiple virtual faces are constructed by the same individual operating within the “public” sphere of different social networking Web sites. Using the methods of narrative and discourse analysis the essay focuses on the strategies used by a set of subjects who have created multiple presences across the various social networking Web sites.

*Keywords-social networking, privacy, face*

### I. OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

The transformation from the virtual communities based around text-intensive discussion boards to the social network sites was made possible by two major developments in the technological sphere – availability of powerful digital machines, and the wide-spread penetration of high-speed data connections. The first component of the change refers to the proliferation of digital tools, from computers to smart cell phones, that can rapidly process the large amounts of data produced by the digitization of audio and image information. These are tools that have become commonplace in the late 2000s with instruments like the iPhone being highly penetrated in many communities. The second component of the change refers to the way in which the digital tools are able to connect to central repository of data files which can store extremely large amounts of data that can be rapidly transmitted from a centralized location to a digital tool. This has been possible with the high-speed Internet connections and through systems such as the “3G” cell phone systems which transmit data at a very fast rate. What is important to note is that these two changes are primarily technological changes but do not refer to any fundamental shifts in the way in which people would want to interact with each other. The people who might have been members of virtual communities could now use the social networking tools to create more technologically efficient connections with other people. Yet, as discussed in this essay, the technological shift to social networking technology does lead to some major shifts in the way in which people would produce their identities using the tools of social networking.

The shift to the new technologies for creating communities became noticeable around 2005 when users

discovered sites such as MySpace and Facebook that quickly came to be known as social network sites (SNS) and users migrated from their existing virtual communities to the SNS forums because these offered a greater degree of technological sophistication in terms of the way in which the users to interact with other members of the SNS. As pointed out in the articles in the special theme section of the Journal of Computer Mediated Communication compiled by boyd and Ellison (2007) there were numerous SNS forums that came and went in the latter 1990s and the early 2000s, with different SNS providing different kinds of functionality and attracting different levels of following among users. For instance, MySpace was an open site that was popular among a large cross-section of users since it provided unrestricted access to the SNS, and the creators of MySpace stayed well in touch with the users to provide specific features that the users demanded. On the other hand, the early version of Facebook was restricted to young people in academic institutions and most of the users of Facebook had a priori connections with each other and the SNS was an extension of the real life connection as compared to MySpace that facilitated connection between people who might not have known each other in real life. Other SNS were restricted to specific parts of the World as in the case of Bebo which had a large following in Europe but not in the rest of the World, and Orkut that had an initial following in Brazil, and later in India. The development of SNS was relatively uneven in the early days, but by 2009, the participation in SNS was becoming commonplace and a large number of people Worldwide had experienced digitally mediated social networking.

The experience is made up of several factors. One of the most important aspects of social networking is the ability to make connections with people who are spatially distant from an individual. Much like the process of connecting with party lines, it is possible for members who belong to SNS to be able to make connections with other individuals who might be spread out all across the World. The barrier of distance for networking was quickly taken down by SNS changing the nature of social networks which was originally defined by Barnes (1954) around a continuum of stability and function of the networks where a network was made up of a limited number of spatially adjacent people who would create a connection to achieve a particular purpose. In the case of Barnes, his focus was on a small Norwegian community where

he noted that the networks were of three major types: Stable organizations with formalized modes of interaction, unstable connections that were created for specific functions, and networks based on interpersonal connections where other social phenomenon like class would play a critical role in the creation and maintenance of the network. To be sure, all these connections were based on spatial proximity limiting the number of participants in any network.

The digitization of human communication, specially with the explosion in computer mediated communication (CMC) which is still most popularly manifest as electronic mail, changed the conditions under which the networks seen by Barnes would operate. The discussions of virtual community point towards tendencies where CMC tools would allow people to come together and accomplish the same things that the Barnes' test group in Norway did in the 1950s. The adaptation of CMC changed the scale of the networks, but the groups retained many of the characteristics seen in earlier communities. While much did not change, there was one significant development that emerged from the early virtual communities based on CMC tools like listserves that set the digital networks as a completely novel entity – the real person was replaced by a discursive construction of the person. Given the discursive nature of much of the early CMC of the 1980s and 1990s, most of the interactions that made up the virtual communities were based on textual discourse made up by people who would use the computer to present a virtual self to other members of the group. The recognition of the disappearance of the “real” person and the accompanying cues that modify interpersonal communication continues to be an area of focus for scholars as there is a continuing desire to understand the way in which the process of communication changes when some of non-verbal cues are replaced by textual elements like “smiley faces” or emoticons that remains a popular and standard set of symbols in much of CMC (see, e.g., Walther, 2001).

The replacement of the real person by the virtually available discourse also created a condition where the discourse became the primary mode of creating a presence of the person. This presence was removed from the real because it might have been impossible to ever have a clear understanding of the real entity since the entity was always produced by discourses that are available in cyberspace. This phenomenon produced specific issues related to the authenticity of the entity that would be available in a discursive way (Mitra, 2002). It would be impossible to be sure that what was being presented in a discursive form was indeed what the entity was. This phenomenon extends to all entities that have a digital presence – from a person to an institution – and the presence is often the careful construction of a “face” that is visible to the World (Hyde and Mitra, 2000). The user of the information must decide if the presence is authentic and trustworthy so that the observer can make specific attributions about the real entity that is depicted online. The matter, naturally, is simpler if the observer has some a priori information about the real entity. For example, if one were to know that a person is likely to exaggerate then this prior information would attenuate the interpretation of whatever is reported in an online situation. In such cases, the real and the virtual coalesce to produce a

specific cybernetic presence where both the real and the virtual are considered together to understand who a person is. This specific phenomenon of discovering the real and the virtual presence of a person have become particularly predominant with the growth of digitized social networking.

The traditional social networking was significantly biased towards the real. People who interacted on porches and verandahs, in parks and pubs, and on party lines were real people who had no opportunities of creating a different persona that could be distinct from the real person who stood in front of others and communicated. This limitation began to change with the advent of online systems such as Multiple User Dungeon (MUD) games that allowed people to take on specific personalities within gaming situations. That process has evolved into technological possibilities provided by systems like Second Life where a real person ceases to exist all together and the person only has a virtual presence within a discursive forum called Second Life (SL) where the person exists only as an avatar that interacts with other avatars. These specific avatars might never know the “real” person representing the avatar, and that knowledge is unimportant within the virtual forum of the SL. The digital social networking systems offer an interesting synthesis where the real and the virtual blend together as real people, perhaps already connected with each other in real life, begin to present a digital presence that becomes the conduit for new connections where the digital presence can become the material for connecting with another digital presence where the real bodies might not know each other at all, but the digital elements interact together.

One of the ways to understanding the digitized social network systems is to place it in an appropriate place between the social networks that are based on real life interactions and those that are based entirely in the virtual as in the case of SL and massively multiple user games where the digital players might never know the real self of the other speakers. The digitized social networks offer a mixture where the real and the digital could coalesce into a single entity when members of the digital social network are also tied with each other in real life, as in the early manifestation of Facebook when it was restricted to specific academic institutions (boyd and Ellison, 2007; Livingstone, 2008). Only people who already knew each other would be able to overlay a digital social network on top of their existing real network. Presence on Facebook could open up the opportunity to network with other people who have extended themselves to the digital forum. In this condition, Facebook did not represent a new network but primarily an extension of an existing set of connections. Other digital systems, most notably MySpace, however, operated more in line with the MUD model where a person could set up a digital presence and then wait for others to stumble on to the presence and make a connection. MySpace offered the opportunity to extend real networks to the digital realm, but the “openness” of MySpace, as compared to the limited scope of the early Facebook, offered the open ended potential of creating connections where the real people might never network with the real bodies. At that moment, MySpace became much more like SL. The uniqueness of digital social networks is significantly obtained from this uniqueness where these networks represent a phenomenon that is not necessarily technologically unique but

offers certain networking opportunities that neither real life by itself or the virtual by itself can provide. The digital social networks operate in cybernetic space where the real and the virtual create an organic whole – sometimes the real becoming peculiarly central and at other times the virtual trumping the real. This fluidity offered by the digital social networks is central to the focus of this essay which deals with the notion of identity.

## II. THINKING ABOUT IDENTITY

There has been significant attention paid to understanding the notion of identity and one specific strategy to understand the concept of identity is to focus on the narrative construction of identity, which has been examined from many different disciplinary and intellectual perspectives (see e.g., Autio, 2004; Bers, 1999; Bucholtz, et., al., 1999; Hall, 1992; Jones, et., al., 2008; Redman, 2005; Ricouer, 1984; Whitebrook, 2001). In most cases it is argued that identities are deliberately produced through specific stories one tells about the self. To be sure, there are some identity characteristics that are indelible in real life – one can not easily change one's skin color – and the white person would remain white, but there are some identity elements that are much more pliable and it is possible to produce an identity by manipulating the specific components of identity that can actually be controlled. Many of the elements of the flexible component of identity are based on a discursive process where an entity – person or institution – could actually tell specific stories about itself to produce the specific identity it wants to create. This is commonly done by institutions that want to promote its products and services. Advertising and “branding” are ways of creating an identity that is built around a specific discourse where the name of a product, and an accompanying tag line, becomes the way people would think of an institution and remember it. The same principle extends to individuals where the fundamental building block of the “constructed” identity begins with naming a person. Thereon, much of identity construction depends on how well a person is able to tell a story about the self. These are not stories in a fictional sense but represent the specific narratives that accumulate to produce an identity. It is often these stories that a person shares with others to present the personal identity. Therefore, in addition to interacting with a real person, people often interact with the stories that the person has shared, and the synthesis of the real person and the stories “produces” the person in real life who becomes a part of a social network.

In most real social networks the stories are centered around a real person who is inescapably connected with any of the stories that are produced. This is the person who speaks in a specific real voice, with its unique intonations, and articulates the identity narratives. The real person and these narratives together make up the “face” of the person, and as Goffman (1959) points out in his seminal work people present their faces in a careful manner as they interact with different kinds of individuals in specific social settings. Most people are able to present a public face which is appropriate for certain conditions and hold a private face suitable for other conditions. In general, however, when interacting with a real person in the “real” it is possible to piece together a cohesive identity

narrative by considering the stories told and the attributes of the real living person who tells the stories.

In the digital social networks, because of the nature of the technology, the focus could easily move away from the real person, whose physical attributes might not be evident on Facebook, but the “face” of the person is a purely narrative construction. It is important to appreciate this change even in the case of digital social networks which might connect together people with prior relationships – such as people who might have gone to high school together 25 years ago. It is not difficult to imagine how radically a person's real face and appearance might have changed in the quarter of a century, but the Facebook presence might not reflect that change at all. In such situations the real face of an old friend is as obscure as the real face of a person with whom the connection is based solely through the digital social network without any opportunity of real life interactions.

The development of digital social networks and its relationship with real social networks offer the opportunity to examine the ways in which the digital system is altering the way in which identity is produced, maintained and negotiated on and through the digital systems. Understanding this becomes especially important as more people, with fewer former connections, are populating the networks. Simultaneously, a single individual is a member of multiple networks which are all visible to anyone interested in learning about a person. This transparency offers a much more elaborate opportunity of learning about the identity of a person. And those who are curious about a person and those who are creating their identities are both aware of this opportunity and can manipulate the narratives appropriately to manage the composite narrative produced across multiple digital social networks. Thus, the key question for this essay is: What are the different attributes of the way in which narrative identities are produced across multiple digital social networks?

## III. METHOD

A word on method is appropriate because the question raised here can be approached in many different ways. It is possible to do elaborate content analysis of identity narratives that are selected after a careful numeric analysis of the way in which the digital social networks are produced. Such an analysis could generate a large amount of information, especially when the narratives of the same nodes of different networks are analyzed to find a composite identity narrative. Other approaches could begin with specific nodes and use a standardized instrument to query the people about the way in which the individuals have managed their identity narratives. Such an approach would require a careful sampling procedure that is based on numeric network analysis to ensure that the appropriate nodes are selected. Specific sampling challenges would also have to be addressed to ensure that the responses from the nodes are carefully weighted to represent a specific node's place within a network, and within the network of networks.

In this essay, the method is based on examining selected components of narrative discourses of people who are members of more than one digital social network . Three

specific digital social networks become the focus of analysis: Facebook, LinkedIn, and Orkut. These networks are deliberately chosen because they represent different kinds of functionalities. As discussed earlier, Facebook is most akin to a real life social network of people who have connections in real life. This network is still primarily used by people in America. Orkut represents a network that is similar to Facebook, but the way in which the network is designed allows greater opportunities for people without any prior real life connections to interact quite easily opening up opportunities for people to examine the identity discourses of people who might not have any understanding of who the real person is. Furthermore, Orkut has been popular more outside the United States with a larger global population of members (Flora, 2008; Hastings, 2008; Sachitanand and Bhattacharya, 2008). Finally, LinkedIn represents a network where people congregate for the specific purpose of creating professional connections. Like Orkut, there is a great opportunity for connecting with completely new people in this network which has increasingly become a global phenomenon (Black, 2008; Fowler, 2009; Voight, 2007).

#### IV. ARGUMENTS

##### A. *Deliberate Identity*

All the digital social networking systems make an assumption that members would be interested in creating specific identity narratives about themselves. This is facilitated at the time of subscription when new members are requested provide some basic information about themselves. These are often considered 'demographic' information that could include basic attributes like gender and race. The participant is expected to truthfully indicate their specific attributes which are essential to become a member of the group. There is, however, no good way for the systems to check the authenticity of the information offered by the members. In most real social groups there are some identity elements that remain openly visible and easy to authenticate. It usually does not take much effort to categorize a person based on skin color, and then make specific attributions. This is a characteristic that a person has little control over in real life, but on a digital social networking forum the only way to be sure about one's skin color is through existing information provided by the person. In a similar way, the entire process of identity construction is based on information that is deliberately solicited by a digital social network system and disclosed by the one seeking membership in the network. What is interesting to note is the way in which different networks seek different levels of information. In the case of Facebook a participant has the opportunity to complete personal information where an individual can describe a range of tastes from the person's favorite music to quotations. Additionally, members can announce their activities and interests and say a few words about themselves. This offers the opportunity to create a narrative within specific boundaries allowing participants to carefully pick and construct their selves. The process is supplemented by declaring information about relationship status, political views and religious views. The Facebook profile also offers the opportunity to name the sub-groups a person might belong to. All of this information, along with any picture the person chooses to provide, would

make up the identity narrative of a person on Facebook. The observer has to piece together the information available in the profile information to produce the narrative identity of the person. This compilation of the identity is an inferential process. The observer must be able to draw specific conclusions from the facts that the participant has presented in the "profile" section of Facebook. The member does not "tell" the story but only provides a set of facts about oneself and the observer has to interpret the facts to get a sense of who the person is. This is specially the case when the observer might not have any knowledge about the individual other than the facts seen in the profile. The same process happens with Orkut and LinkedIn where the members must also present a series of facts about oneself.

All the digital social networking sites ask the participants to deliberately and consciously disclose nuggets of personal information that can be pieced together to create the identity narrative. The sites are differentiated from each other on the basis of the kind of information that one can put into them. For example, Orkut seeks information about political views as in the case of Facebook, but also asks about the sexual orientation of the member as well as ask the participant to disclose what one might find in the person's bedroom. Any member who is willing to provide an answer to all the queries offered by the computer system that drives the digital social networking sites would have to offer a significant amount of information that would help to create the identity narrative for that person. In a similar fashion, LinkedIn also asks for information, but given the more "professional" focus of this digital social network the queries are less personal and more professional with the site asking for detailed academic and professional background so that an observer can piece together the identity narrative of the member.

All the processes offer the user an opportunity to deliberately offer information that the controls and constructs. There is nothing taken for granted in the process. Unless a person completes the gender information, or provides a picture there is no natural way of discerning that information, particularly for skilful users who are willing and able to withhold that information. This significantly differentiates the digital social networks from most other networks, and it would be useful to consider the implications of this process. One important implication is understanding the kind of information that is usually provided.

##### B. *Identity Narbs*

Most digital social networking sites including Bebo and MySpace information is shared through "narrative bits (narbs)" that must be carefully selected by the person who is providing the narbs. These narbs are made up of statements like, "dry, sarcastic, clever witted," which are some of the pre-formatted descriptors of humor in Orkut that the member must choose from. The choice of the narbs is a mindful and deliberate process where the member is consciously offering up specific pieces of information about oneself. This is very different from the process of identity management in real life where some attributes are communicated without much control as in the case of many non-verbal responses to the environment. In the

## V. DISCUSSION

case of the digital social network there is nearly nothing that is not controlled or constructed by the person providing the narbs. This deliberate process is continued by the person who is looking at another person's narbs. The observer must also deliberately try to piece the narbs together into a complete narrative. This too is a mindful process where a certain amount of sleuthing is necessary on the part of the observer. For instance, in the case of Facebook, when one looks at another person's "profile" the information is presented as narbs that might be distributed in different places and all the pieces must be collated to create the identity narrative. What becomes most evident in the case of Facebook, particularly with those members who are frequent users of the system, that the narbs are dynamics bits of information that tend to constantly change allowing the observer to "update" the narrative information that is produced from the narbs.

Most of the digital social networking systems allow the members to constantly change the narbs. These changes could be in the form of updating personal information, adding new information, or reporting on the status of a person at any time. These make up different kinds of narbs but all add to the overall sets of information that is available to the observer who is trying to put together the composite identity narrative of a person. Some of these updates, as in the case of Facebook, can be done in a dynamic way where the member can send the updates from a cell phone. When someone looks at the profile of the user, they could see a series of updates that tell a story and connects with the identity narrative of the person. Consider for instance the opportunity offered by Facebook to create a box that shows the different cities one might have visited. Choosing to use this function is the first narb that is deliberately used by a member; next the member might choose to update this information whenever the member actually visits a new city. Thus, for an observer, it is possible to create an identity narrative that includes the component of travel and the observer would be able to tell that the identity of an individual is indeed closely tied to travel if a member claims, for instance, visiting more than 300 cities in 23 countries. These narbs are supposed to be updated and each update adds to the identity narrative. The process is true for both Orkut and LinkedIn where members are able to also update their profiles with changes to narbs.

The outcome of the process of creating dynamic narbs is the slippage from a stable identity narrative. It is difficult to find the seminal narrative about another person if the person is deliberately changing the narbs that become the building block of the narrative. The changes could appear to be minor, but they all impact the narrative that must now be produced dynamically about a real person who might be placing narbs across many different digital social networking systems. These narbs all eventually become virtual references to a single real person. Yet the identity narratives of an individual created by different sets of narbs selected from different places in cyberspace could be remarkably different from each other, further complicating the way in which identities are produced and maintained by digital social network systems.

As early as 2006, when Facebook was more of "college" phenomenon, there was evidence to suggest that there were many different observers of the narbs available of Facebook. It was not only that people within the circle of Facebook friends were the only ones looking at the information in order to infer identity narratives by piecing together the narbs that were available on a single digital social network. One of the most alarming examples of this process is seen in the way in which many significant real life decisions are being influenced by the narbs that are available on digital social networks. An individual's career could be placed in jeopardy as employers and college recruiters begin to piece together an identity narrative based on narbs which were never meant to be used in the manner they are being used (see, e.g., Budden and Budden, 2008; Clark, 2006; Finder, 2006). As suggested here, the identity narrative that is obtained using these narbs often represents a fragment of the whole identity and there is no reason to believe that a specific set of narbs obtained from Facebook should hold priority over the narbs available from other digital social networks like LinkedIn where a completely different set of narbs could be used by the same individual. This chapter points towards the inherent fallacy in assuming that the narbs available on any single digital social network can actually provide privileged information about an individual. Indeed, if an identity narrative must be inferred from the information available from the different narbs, then an exhaustive listing of all the different narbs, from multiple digital social networks, personal Web sites, blogs and image sharing systems must be used together to infer an identity narrative. It is no longer the case that a real person only has a presence through a single person Web site. On the other hand, narbs are scattered all over cyberspace, and all of them together can hope to offer the pieces that make up the real person.

Even if there were the resources to collect all the narbs to create an identity narrative, it needs to be clear that these are fleeting narratives which could change rapidly as the narbs begin to change. Most users of systems like Facebook update their narbs by posting new status information and images both of which are important components of a person's identity narrative. Other emerging systems like Tweeter are offering the opportunity to create narbs using a cell phone that can be immediately placed in cyberspace. Systems connected with Global Positioning Systems (GPS) available in many cell phones allow location narbs to be dynamically updated on maps allowing others to see where an individual is at any point in time. In many cases that information might actually be provided about an individual by others who might have presented narbs on a public discourse area as in the case of the "wall" with Facebook where anyone could write anything about a person. These narbs could be out of control of the individual whose identity narrative is being inferred, but could affect the narrative in profound ways. Yet, all the narratives are indeed mercurial because the information keeps changing and new narrative components can be added. This calls into question the permanence of the narratives that are inferred. None of the narratives can become the master story about a person not only because they are always necessarily incomplete but also because they are always changing. The narratives thus

become at best a snapshot about a specific aspect of a person at a specific moment in time, or at worst a complete misrepresentation of a particular individual. This dynamic nature of the postings also calls into question the stability of identity. When individuals have some degree of control on the narbs that are available to others, the person has also gained control in shaping the narbs in the way that is most beneficial to the person. This is precisely why different narbs are used in different digital social networks because different components of the dynamic real identity are presented skillfully in the different forums to obtain the greatest advantage from the system. It is the interplay of the narbs that eventually produce the dynamic identity narratives where both the real identity and the narbs are constantly shifting.

The way in which the narrative shifts as new narbs arrive eventually makes it especially difficult to pinpoint the static identity that could be used as a template for interaction. It is no longer the case that it is possible to claim that a certain person has a set of essential traits that could be expected to stay true for a length of time. As soon as an identity narrative is inferred, it can change with new narbs. Yet, much of interaction is based on having some sense of the narratives that provide the guidelines for interaction. Phenomenon like multiply distributed digital social networking makes it increasingly difficult to find the sense of stasis in identity. Perhaps these systems are also challenging the need for stasis, and providing a forum where true shifts in identity are more openly exhibited than in many other social networks. Returning to Goffman's fundamental argument about the private and public face, it is perhaps coming to a moment where the separation between the two begin to disappear on Facebook and Orkut and new cybernetic face appears that must be understood in terms of its complexity and dynamism. That is a major shift in the way in which identity narratives are constructed about people and it could be unproductive to apply some of the real world assumptions when inferring the identity narratives from the narbs available in cyberspace.

This change could implicate the way in which the digital social networking sites could develop in the future. On one hand, it is possible that these systems will evolve into dynamic and distributed systems that allow people to constantly produce new identities and monitor how identities could shift. This is precisely the direction that Facebook is moving in with an update of their primary portal in 2009. Now, the portal offers a stream of narbs that show all posts from all friends in real time. This move focuses on the dynamic identity as opposed to containing identity within static boundaries. On the other hand the way in which such narbs are used could have an impact on the way in which members decide to deploy narbs. There is evidence that some counselors have been advising people about the "proper" use of narbs to manage the identity narratives that could be obtained from the digital social networks; this process is evident with some Universities that offer specific advice to students about Facebook (see, e.g., Mitrano, 2006). If more users would follow those guidelines then the very nature of these systems will begin to alter and what started as an extension of real life networks could transform into managed identity documents that are skillfully and deliberately produced around carefully

selected narbs. Such a transformation could indeed be antithetical to the original purpose of systems like Facebook that allow people to share narbs for the purpose of building community and not necessarily to "sell themselves."

It is probably too early to obtain a final word on this but one exit out of the conundrum could appear in the form of specific digital networks like LinkedIn which claims to be a professional network and external observers would be more careful about selecting the appropriate narbs from relevant digital networks to piece together the identity narrative knowing all the time that what has been inferred is indeed provisional and incomplete.

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