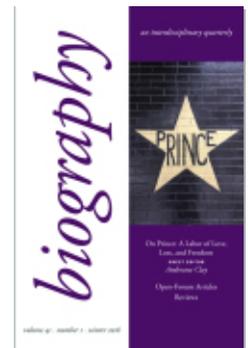# PROJECT MUSE®

Self-Narratives on Social Networks: Trans-Platform Stories and Facebook's Metamorphosis into a Postmodern Semiautomated Repository

Stefano Calzati, Roberto Simanowski

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SELF-NARRATIVES ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

TRANS-PLATFORM STORIES AND FACEBOOK'S METAMORPHOSIS INTO A POSTMODERN SEMIAUTOMATED REPOSITORY

STEFANO CALZATI AND ROBERTO SIMANOWSKI

EXPLORING IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

In recent years narratology studies that specifically concentrate on processes of identity construction and self-reflective writing (such as diaries and autobiographies) have gone from focusing on big life stories—long, retrospectively written accounts (Freeman)—to small stories—fragmented ongoing talks-in-interaction (Georgakopoulo; Bamberg). This change is due to the fact, as Michael Bamberg suggests, that "to stumble upon someone recounting his/her whole life from a distant past to the present moment is an extremely rare occurrence" (109). By contrast, the mundanity inherent in "small stories"—from face-to-face interviews to phone calls, emails, and chats—makes them virally widespread and provides valuable materials for investigating how we recount ourselves.

This shift has foregrounded the role of the context and the medium that respectively "frame" and "carry" these small stories. In fact, in its so-called "second wave," narratology studies have moved toward an ethnographically inspired path that demands new tools for situating and understanding autobiographical writing practices within a broader sociocultural and medial horizon (Gubrium and Holstein; Morrison).

Within this scenario, the booming of online forms of self-representation, such as blogs and social networking sites (SNSs), has provided scholars with an unprecedented opportunity to investigate self-narratives from an ethnographic perspective. In fact, SNS platforms represent a privileged environment for this kind of analysis: they are free of charge and quantitatively

consistent in terms of the amount of data they host. Moreover, online forms of self-representation constitute a valuable archive to be compared with traditional, analog autobiographic writing, with the chance of highlighting medial, hermeneutic, and ideological similarities and differences between the two realms. For instance, Helen Kennedy has shown that both realms require compliance with a certain degree of authenticity—what Philippe Lejeune defines as the "autobiographical pact"—which makes these forms trustworthy as a fair representation of the subject involved. At the same time, however, online self-representations occur within a rigid set of technical protocols—such as the click-in effect of preset lists, the type-in effect of fill-out prompts, and the suggestion of brevity through the design of the status update box—that deeply constrain and commoditize the online construction of identity (Lovink). By contrast, in offline interactions, subjects tend to maintain a greater control over the situation in which they are involved and of which, indeed, they not only are actors but co-creators (see Hull, Lipford, and Latulipe). Self-representations on SNSs respond to strict social patterns, chiefly in the form of immediate, quantifiable evaluations by other users/readers (through likes, reposting, and comments). These interactions foreground a logic of online presence based upon an attention economy and emotional capitalism (Illouz), which turns SNSs into tools for self-branding rather than self-knowing and self-reflecting. Offline, social capital is more dependent on an array of contextual factors—not least of which is physical co-presence, whenever communication is synchronous—which influence subjects when they recount their stories.

These differences in social capital highlight the extent to which digital technologies have affected how we think of and represent ourselves. In this regard, recalling Sidonie Smith's question, which Laurie McNeill and John Zuern quote in their introduction to the 2015 *Biography* issue titled *Online Lives 2.0*, we might ask: To what extent do SNSs "affect the organization of consciousness?" and our ability to reflect upon and narrate ourselves? (Smith qtd. in McNeill and Zuern vii). At present, few scholars have inspected the construction of identity through Facebook (McNeill; Walker-Rettberg) and only a few studies have delved into the implications of digital technologies on self-description from the perspective of narrative theory (Page and Thomas; Poletti and Rak; Simanowski, *Facebook*). More generally, the question of how algorithmically generated news items mix with user-authored ones (and whether this mix does constitute a coherent narrative of the self) has yet to be systematically addressed. As Roberto Simanowski puts it, "these questions need to be explored on the basis of comprehensive empirical studies" ("Instant Selves" 239). Our research builds precisely on these premises by directly entering the SNSs arena via an ethnographic study.

FACEBOOK AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY: A DIGITAL AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

In fall 2016 we designed and taught the practice-based course "Facebook and Autobiography: How We Narrate Ourselves on Social Networks" at a major Hong Kong university. Our aim was twofold: 1) to explore how processes of self-representation are affected by the infrastructure of SNS platforms (Facebook in particular), and 2) to compare offline and online autobiographical practices (in the traditional form of the written diary and on SNSs) to assess differences and similarities in identity-construction practices between the two realms. With these goals in mind, we recruited students to participate on a voluntary basis, and we elaborated an auto-ethnographic approach (Ribas and Gajjala). As analysts we entered the platform by creating a Facebook profile that the participants had to friend so that we would be able "to live, to work, and to do things in and with [the platform]" (Ribas and Gajjala). This connection allowed us to conduct a five-week close reading of the participants' profiles while taking precautions not to influence their postings (we never interacted with them). Additionally, we asked participants to reflect upon their Facebook use and SNSs diet through a number of assignments, which were part of the module's final evaluation. By comparing the insights derived from these two perspectives, we managed, on the one hand, to understand better how participants present themselves on Facebook and other SNSs and, on the other hand, to sharpen their critical awareness concerning their self-projection across different SNS platforms.

The class counted fifty-four students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. Thirty-eight students (70 percent of the class; twenty-eight females and ten males) agreed to take part in our project, while the remaining students provided "traditional" in-class presentations and submitted a final essay elaborating upon the readings discussed in class during the semester. Fifty-two students came from Hong Kong, one student came from Mainland China, and another was of Cambodian descent. The language used for posting oscillated between Chinese and English. When students posted in Chinese, we asked them to provide translations.

The assignments of the project were designed as follows: we initially asked our participants to answer a round of questions aimed at providing us with a general understanding of their Facebook use, including 1) "Why do you use Facebook?" 2) "To what extent would you say that your Facebook profile reflects yourself?" 3) "Does Facebook work as a diary for you?" and 4) "What do you look up on Facebook?" Students were asked to write down the answers to these questions and elaborate on them as freely as they wished.

Subsequently, we asked students to tag all their Facebook posts based on four categories (which could also be co-present): 1) the type of content, 2) the

authorial stance responsible for the posts and its relation to the user's self-representation, 3) the mood of the post, and 4) if/how the post had a time-related connotation or interrelation with other posts along the user's timeline. The first category (type of content) was inspired by some of Roman Jakobson's communication functions. Participants were instructed that content would have a "referential function" whenever the Facebook user or one of his/her friends geolocated themselves or tagged other friends, thus giving importance to the context of the given situation and the people involved or interested in it. Secondly, content (and related comments) bore an "emotive function" when they overtly expressed the user's emotion or state of mind. In our study, emotive posts often had to do with relationships—with friends, partners, or family members—or the recollection of past events, either positive or negative. A case in point is a photo posted by a student in which she is portrayed with her sister, mother, and father at a dinner just before her father's departure for Sweden. The message, which includes a reference to the user's Christian faith, reads, "Dad is going to Sweden for two months. We hope he will have His protection," and a "heart" emoticon closes the sentence. In this case, the user also added the geolocation of the restaurant where the dinner took place, so that the post also acquired a referential function. Thirdly, content (and comments) had a "phatic function" when they were meant to simply tease and keep in contact with friends. This function comprised emoticons, bare expressions of agreement/disagreement, likes, and similar reactions. An example was a funny YouTube video titled "Study in 100 Seconds" that a student posted on her timeline about all the distractions she experienced while studying. She shared the post and tagged a friend (a referential function) with the message, "procrastination and study schedule :D." Her friend responded with a smiling emoticon, a reaction that further attested to the phatic function of the whole exchange. The participant confirmed our interpretation by arguing, "I reposted the video and tagged my friend because we keep delaying our study all the time."

The second category of tags moved along the Self-Other axis. We asked participants to identify whether they had created the post themselves (if it was self-authored) or if it had been outsourced (or other-authored), also noting whether it had been "shared by user" or "shared by other friends" in posts in which the user is then tagged. We also wanted to know whether the content of the post directly referred to the user (and was therefore self-related) or to a different topic/issue (and was therefore other-related). A very good example of a self-related (and self-authored) post came from a student who at the beginning of the semester posted an aerial picture of the university campus and added the message, "'Travelling within CityU': Went to SRO to take the

receipt; then to HRO to hand in a form; then AC2 building to order food for party; then to the doctor on campus; finally, went to ARRO to renew the ID card. Long day at CityU; FINAL YEAR." With this post, the user signaled the beginning of his academic year by enumerating all the bureaucratic steps he accomplished during the first day of the semester (the post also had a time-related connotation, see below), as well as by adding a photograph he took himself from the rooftop of one of the academic buildings. Examples of other-related posts (shared by user or other friends) often concerned international news, commercials, and entertaining materials. For instance, insofar as the survey period coincided with the last US presidential election, some students tended to repost excerpts from the TV debates between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, or to share video commentary taken from US TV channels.

The third category addressed the mood of the posts: "euphoric" (positive content), "dysphoric" (negative content), or "neutral." While the description of this category's tags is self-explanatory, it is interesting to note the emergence of some discrepancies between what we analysts considered to be euphoric or dysphoric posts and the users' own interpretations. For instance, we sometimes interpreted posts recollecting old memories as positive, while students told us at various occasions that remembering past events kindled an ambiguous emotion: at once good and painful. In other circumstances, we thought of evaluating those posts that manifested stress or overwork as dysphoric, while more than one student confirmed that being tired is a good sensation as it made them feel engaged and busy. No doubt, further studies to be conducted within different sociocultural contexts would help explore the cultural specificity of such emotions.

Under the fourth category fell those tags that dealt with the unfolding of time, which, from a narratological point of view, constitutes the precondition of any narrative. We were interested in investigating if/how posts connected to each other along one's timeline as well as in those occurrences where a single post contained a "small story" within itself. From here we defined three tags: "temporal," which signaled the centrality of time (either as a single moment or a duration) with respect to the action/event described in one or several posts (for example, journeys, anniversaries, and the timeframe of the semester); "hermeneutic," in which posts (or comments) displayed an effective process of understanding among users (as is the case of posts and comments that contain questions and answers); "cause-effect," when timeline posts were linked by a clear cause-effect relation (for example, when a post is published as a critique or in support of previous posts or comments). Time-related posts were the most recalcitrant to identification, insofar as in most cases only participants could disambiguate how one or more posts bore a temporal connotation.

An example of a hermeneutic post was an exchange that occurred on the timeline of a participant who was asked a question by one of her contacts about an upcoming music festival: "Are you going to Pentatonix?" A series of comments followed, constituting a brief conversation between the two: the participant replied in the affirmative with an exclamation of joy, and her friend responded by asking for the price of the ticket, to which the participant replied "$788" and her friend concluded the conversation with a frowning emoticon suggesting that the price was too high for her. This post was also interesting because it was connected with another that appeared a few days later on the participant's timeline: the picture of a huge stage illuminated by blue lasers, accompanied by the bare message: "Pentatonix!" and followed by two hearts. In this respect, despite being quite distant along the timeline, these two posts were connected by a cause-effect relation in that the second one constituted the effective proof of the user's attendance at the aforementioned event (although, in this second case, the participant did not get any comments from her friend).

Concerning posts that contained in themselves the unfolding of time either visually or verbally, examples were mainly related to anniversaries or the reposting of old posts. These cases usually drew back to the past in the attempt to reactualize bygone memories, as we will discuss later in this essay. However, we also detected future-directed posts. In one instance, a student posted a picture of four full glasses of beer, accompanied by the ironic text: "This beer tastes like I'm not going to class tomorrow." Here we found the unfolding of a small story to be concluded the following day; yet, such a story remained suspended, that is, it did not develop through any subsequent posts. In fact, when we asked the participant about the conclusion of the night and the following day, she replied, "I didn't feel to post [*sic*] anything related to the night because I did go to class the next day. So the caption is more like a joke to make fun of myself with friends."

Alongside the tagging of all posts, which we observed and stored as a list of screenshots, we also asked participants to keep a written diary for the whole survey period in which they jotted down, on a weekly basis, reflections about their SNSs diet and all their activities on Facebook, including posting, sharing, liking, and commenting. The goal was to let participants digest their daily SNSs use and prompt a "distanced" reflection via the traditional act of writing.

Lastly, because the friending of our Facebook avatar occurred on a voluntary basis, those students who wanted to join the research study but opted not to reveal their own profile to us were required to write a final essay that elaborated on the experience of having kept a written diary alongside their use

of Facebook and other SNSs. Eventually, two groups were constituted: group A (sixteen students) submitted a diary, the tagging, and a final essay. Group B (twenty-two students)—those who friended us on Facebook—submitted a diary, the tagging, and answered a second round of customized questions at the end of our five-week survey period.

AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

In terms of our network's breadth, we counted a total of 19,957 friends for the entire corpus, which means an average of 908 friends per user. This number is much larger than that of the average Facebook user who, according to 2016 statistics, accumulates roughly 150 connections (C. Smith). Over five weeks, a total of 378 posts were recorded, equaling an average of 17.1 posts per user, that is, 3.4 posts per week. Such relative scarcity is in line with recent demographic surveys' reports that most Facebook users are between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four, and make up 29.7 percent of total Facebook users ("Top 20"). By contrast, younger generations—like our participants—tend to opt for other SNSs, such as Instagram and Snapchat ("Statistics"). While these SNSs hardly can claim a narrative conception of their functioning (Snapchat does not even have an archive for the material posted), in the case of Facebook a feature like the timeline seems, indeed, to be naturally open to (self-)narration, which is the reason why we made it the core of our study.

With regard to the Jakobson-inspired tags, content tagged as "phatic" constituted the greatest group with 8.1 posts per user on average, or approximately 50 percent of all posts, followed by "referential" (6.8), "time-related" (5.2), and "emotive" (4.8) posts. The phatic predominance becomes more evident when taken alongside comments: out of the total, 420 (62 percent) simply contained basic agreement, disagreement, surprise, or happiness in the form of exclamations or emoticons. To this must be added the total of 5,890 likes (or other recently implemented reactions such as "love," "happiness," "anger," "sadness") that express a bare acknowledgment of what was posted without, however, deeply engaging with it.

As for the tags "self-related" and "other-related," a majority of the latter was detected: 14 posts against 11.9 on average. Put differently, the participants favored the posting of content that did not concern their lives directly. This finding echoes a 2014 Pew Research Center's report according to which 36 percent of Facebook users "strongly dislike" sharing very personal information, while 24 percent of them "dislike" the social pressure of posting something about themselves (A. Smith).

These data tie well to the tags about the authorship of the posts. Taken individually, we remarked that the tag "posted by user" was the one that recurred slightly more often than the other two: 6.5 posts per user against 5.5 ("shared by others") and 4.8 ("shared by user"). Significant, however, is that once one adds up all posts that are not authored by the timeline's owner ("shared by user" and "shared by others") they amount to almost two thirds of the total, signaling that Facebook's founding logic (that is, the most profitable) is, above all, to circulate and recirculate content regardless of who the author is.

Once we recast these findings in the context of the second wave of narratology, we detect a certain discrepancy with the conclusion of earlier studies. In her work on small life stories on Facebook, for instance, Ruth Page notes, "the emphasis is thrown upon interpreting the updates as self-contained units rather than as the bricks of an ongoing narrative" (437). Despite such fragmentation, however, according to Page, it is still possible to "fill the gaps" between statuses, notably to retrieve small life stories as soon as the reader proceeds to synthetize the posts. In a similar vein, by pointing to the networked outreach that SNSs grant to the practice of self-writing, Theresa Sauter argues that SNS platforms "provide a means for people to subject themselves to a public gaze and make their self-forming activities visible to others" (832). However, our findings hardly show such processes of self-formation. In fact, we witnessed an increasing withdrawal of the user's self-representation from Facebook due to 1) the participants' shift to other SNSs and the adoption of a passive attitude toward Facebook (limited posting), 2) the tendency to post or share content that is "other-related" rather than "self-related," and 3) the preponderance of other-authored content over self-authored content. Beyond the potential sociocultural differences characterizing the corpuses of participants analyzed by these studies, one main explanation for our diverging conclusion has to do with the change of the medial and technological affordances of the platform. When Page conducted her study, Facebook had not yet introduced the timeline, and a great deal of what was then posted came, indeed, from the users themselves. Just a few years later, after the platform's reshaping, Laurie McNeill acutely showed the extent to which the networked construction of Facebook's profiles had taken over the "I" as a unified authorial subject. By now, it is no longer a matter of solely recognizing the posthuman nature of Facebook's self-representations but of realizing that the platform has radically changed its raison d'être. The withdrawal of our users from self-narrating activities on Facebook, we argued in our previous article, is at once cause and effect of the revised operational strategy of the platform, which shifted from being focused on communication among users to serving as news-aggregator,

as its founder Mark Zuckerberg admitted recently (Gibbs). Here, we contend that this shift has brought with itself a series of consequences for both the users and the platform, which can be fruitfully unpacked by further expounding on the findings of our digital ethnography (it remains to be seen how the 2018 implementation of Facebook's new algorithm, apparently aimed at foregrounding once again posts by friends on one's timeline will impact that shift). Specifically, the following sections of this article will discuss: 1) the turning of Facebook into a repository of memories with a strong nostalgic connotation, 2) the spread of entertaining/ironic posts devoid of effective critical edge, 3) the emergence, according to the student feedback, of undetected and/or unexpected practices concerning their use of Facebook, and 4) the displacement of the participants' self-representations across multiple SNSs.

FACEBOOK AS A NOSTALGIC REPOSITORY OF "STOCK MEMORIES"

The detected scarcity of Facebook posts about and by users has not only made it difficult to identify consistent self-narratives but has also affected the platform's function of self-representation. As many participants remarked, by now they consider Facebook more as a repository of memories than a space in which they actively (daily) perform who they are. One of the students noted, "I sometimes look back to my posts and pictures. It refreshes my memory. If pictures were not posted on Facebook, I would not likely look at them in a photobook." The answers to the second preliminary question posed to all participants—"To what extent would you say that your Facebook profile reflects yourself?"—are also revealing. On a scale that moves from "very little" to "fully," with "to a certain extent" and "to a large extent" as intermediate options, the majority of participants (28) thought that their Facebook profile reflects "very little" who they are in real life. Either profiles are quantitatively inconsistent, or what is posted is carefully crafted if not distorted, leading to euphoric posts outnumbering dysphoric ones (9.6 posts per user against 2.1). One student representatively claimed, "whenever I post something about me I will consider what others will think and if there is a bit of negativity in what I post, I may not share it on my wall."

These tendencies have consequences on what is left of the users' self-image on the platform: "Insofar as I think that I am not exactly the same person I was when I posted something," one student wrote in her essay, "in a sense the posts on Facebook reflect my past self and I can see how much I have changed." This seems to entail that the scraping of one's timeline reflects back, above all, an image of the user as an inflated bygone projection: "FB is a place to 'remember' the most important things or major life events," another student acknowledged, "while Instagram is a place to 'remember' my daily life."

We also suggest that Facebook supplies the technical materials for an involuntary construction of the self, one lacking a narrating stance that consciously and willingly tells a story, so that such a story is rather delegated a posteriori to the platform itself.

In this sense, the finalistic function that is projected over Facebook—although, in theory, it is a space that can be constantly updated—turns the platform into a sort of memorial space, which allows users to reactualize their memories by scrolling down the page. While such scrolling down may hardly constitute a retrospective form of narration, we argue that it often brings to life a feeling of nostalgia that eventually contours the entire platform. As Linda Hutcheon notes, "Thanks to technology nostalgia no longer has to rely on individual memory or desire: it can be fed forever by quick access to an infinitely recyclable past" ("Irony" 20). A significant example of such recycling comes from a participant who reposted a picture she had taken in Melbourne the previous year. When we asked her to further motivate her choice to reactualize that image, she said, "I really had a good time there and I miss the place so much. You can imagine, indeed, that when I found the photo in one of my private albums it kindled a very nostalgic feeling and I decided to repost it." Prompted by these reflections, we analyzed the participants' profiles and their tagging in search of posts tagged as "temporal" and "emotive," a combination that we assumed might signal the surfacing of nostalgia. We realized that 54 percent of all posts tagged as "emotive" (57 out of 106) and 90 percent of those tagged as "emotive" and "temporal" reflected upon past self-related memories and expressed a longing for the past, a concurrence most prevalent in the #TBT hashtag (literally Throwback Thursday, which signals the precise intention to recollect past events by reposting them on the timeline). An emblematic example was a post by one student at the beginning of the semester consisting of a photograph of another photograph and complemented by a brief Facebook caption. In the pictured Polaroid—which one recognizes by the outer frame—the user appears alongside her boyfriend, while the accompanying Facebook caption reads: "See you sooner than you think, till next time ('-:" The post also contained geolocation data, indicating that the user and her boyfriend were at the Hong Kong airport. This case caught our eye because it encapsulated—as the combination of two photographs and hence of two moments in time—the unfolding of time in a single post: indeed, the photo of the older Polaroid works as a sort of mise en abyme of the past, pointing to the period the couple shared together. And yet, such perspectivization of time remains only at a visual level: it is not described or unpacked in words (we got to know that they were a couple only through the participant's diary). On the contrary, the Facebook message projects the post

forward by referring to the couple's future, when they hoped to be reunited. In this way, the post produces two specular temporalities: it visually recycles the past while also verbally pushes it forward to new experiences (and new memories). The effect is that of a nostalgic longing for the past that, by being oriented to the future, is complemented by a specular feeling of melancholy, intended as the yearning provoked by the (imminent) detachment from the desired object (Calzati 427). The student explained, "Apart from the projection towards the future, I can also consider the post as nostalgic as there is indeed a sentimental longing for the bygone time that I spent with my boyfriend. The post somehow concludes the time we've had together in Hong Kong." It is remarkable to note that these temporalities and affects are, de facto, contained in the post, and yet it is only through the participant's contribution that its narrative is fully unfolded. Taken individually, the post juxtaposes past and future, image and words, in one frame, but verbal and visual realms do not ignite any narrative for the readers (it is also remarkable that there were no other posts on the timeline about the couple that could help explain this episode).

There are also occurrences when Facebook's algorithm directly kindles users' memories. In these cases, it is not the users who willingly look back at their walls, but the platform that prompts such recollection by supplying what Roberto Simanowski, recalling Marcel Proust's *Recherche*, terms "digital madeleines" (*Abfall* 76–82). Examples include Facebook's various reminders of anniversaries and birthdays, as well as the invitations to celebrate years of friendships with other contacts, or to recollect old posts through the "On This Day" feature. Although arousing the same feeling of nostalgia, in these occurrences, we could not say that it is we—as subjects—who do the remembering; rather, we are prompted to remember by the algorithmic memo-technics at the base of the platform. This enforced recollection does not correspond to the involuntary recollection the madeleine inspires in Proust. Though for Proust the impulse is also external, it merely activates a link that already exists in the unconscious of the remembering person, as something that is meaningful. If this were not the case, the madeleine would remain a small French pastry that is consumed without any sense that the person eating it is passing up an opportunity to remember. It is precisely this option of meaninglessness that is missing in the memories served up by Facebook. For Facebook, the occasion for recollection also signals a duty to recollect, and not remembering betrays a corresponding, perceptible lack of capacity. Hence, the memory prompted by the underlying technology is no longer a seismograph of one's own life but a fully commoditized simulacrum of it: commoditized because it is technologically created and one whose re-collection—literally, the

gathering together of pieces—exceeds our will. It is such commodification that generates what Bernard Stiegler defines as the "mercantile production of memory" ("Memory" 79), insofar as memories are no longer the instantiations of a process of which we are the masters. They are rather the fragments of a mechanical story that has lost its vital (narrating) motive. Moreover, insofar as these memo-fragments are the byproducts of digital technology, they can be stacked, reassembled, and reenacted without our having a say. The subject is expelled from them and objectified: sharing stories (memories) becomes a matter of simply reposting them. The idea by Galen Strawson of an "episodic self" opposed to the self as a narrative construction returns here, but charged with an allegation. Because it is not the self who perceives itself as episodic, but it is the technology that creates such fragmented representation, we are eventually confronted with a flattened juxtaposition of pieces that are not (part of) the subject but merely an attachment to it. In other words, we witness the gradual reduction of the subject to an ensemble of predetermined possibilities: as Franco Berardi suggests, the singularity of the subject as "a way of becoming" is impaired and progressively "reduced to a set of components, or a format" (21–22). Ultimately, not only are we told what to remember, but also, more radically, how to remember ourselves and how to identify the relevant pieces of our identity.

In this respect, the algorithm at the base of Facebook produces particular kinds of memories, which could be named "stock memories," a concept that parallels the common idea of "stock images" as pieces of information that are "generic" and whose core features reside in "their alienability from a particular referential source, their autonomy from a specific intentionality of use and reception, and their archival origination" (Frosh 134). Memories, however personal, become interchangeable; we relinquish the possibility of authoritatively synthesizing them. Far from defending here an essentialist conception of memory—we do not remember in isolation—at stake is the idea that if we as subjects forfeit the privilege of remembering as a process and delegate it to technology (our student's confession, quoted above, that she would not look at old pictures if they were not on Facebook sounds as a warning), we open the way to an automated homogenization (and impoverishment) of what and how we (are supposed to) remember. The point is that, as Clive Thompson remarks, "even if we are moving towards a world where less is forgotten, that isn't the same as more being *remembered*" (33, emphasis in original), meaning, indeed, that technology may be well suited for storage but less so for processing memories. To have the past events of our lives stacked in Facebook diaries—some of which we could have also, ironically, forgotten about—does not directly imply that these memories are worth being remembered. And

yet, technology does not know oblivion, nor can it conceive of (un)conscious removal: its horizon is that of a depthless, paradigmatic present, emptied of all subjective and temporal perspectives, where everything that is there is *also* relevant. The algorithmic logic on which Facebook is based simply turns quantitative parameters, such as the number of comments and likes, into qualitative worthiness, with the consequence of sometimes making us recollect events regardless of both our willingness to do so or their importance to us. The Proustian serendipitous chance of recollection, as a syntagmatic process with subconscious roots, has become a fully externalized, atemporal necessity—a devoir required of the dutiful social user.

PLAIN IRONY AND TOOTHLESS LAUGHS

At this point, we added a further tile to the nostalgic connotation of many of the posts published by our participants. During the close reading of their profiles, we also noted a widespread tendency to post ironic content. In fact, during the (customized) second round of questions, many participants defined Facebook as an "entertaining tool" and a platform where one checks and shares "funny stuff," depending on one's interests. More precisely, we found that one post out of five (75 out of 378) bore an ironic connotation. Often these posts consisted of the reposting of gifs, memes, funny videos, and "soft news": sometimes they were accompanied by a brief message by the user, which worked as commentary; more often they were shared without messages, or by simply tagging friends who might be interested in them; only rarely were the posts authored by the users themselves. An example of the first type was a shared meme in Chinese that read, "What to do with your friend's ugly picture? Use it as the WhatsApp group icon." To this meme, the user added the caption, "Can we change our Whatsapp group icon, please?" and she tagged three of her friends. This was because her profile photo was indeed being used as the Whatsapp icon of the group, as she explained in her diary (in this case, then, the post is self-ironic). Alongside, we got plenty of examples of ironic posts effortlessly shared without any added caption by the user. This is the case, for instance, of a short clip titled "Best game of hide & seek ever" that shows a girl hiding behind a door to deceive her dog, who keeps looking for her. The user reposted the video found on the website "Unilad" and did not demonstrate any willingness to make it her own by adding a comment or tagging any friends. In fact, not only did the video receive very little feedback by her contacts—three likes over a network of more than 1,200 friends—but the user also forgot to discuss this post in the weekly diary assignment, hinting at the irrelevancy of the post. Thirdly, a case of an ironic post authored by the user came from the picture that a student posted on her

timeline showing a sumptuous dinner alongside the message "Diet what?" Through the comments that followed (which bore a hermeneutic connotation), we learned that the user was dieting but decided to break the rule and enjoy a nice meal, also triggering her friends' cheerfulness. Among these examples, this post was the one that got the greatest number of comments (19) and likes (34, also as laughing emojis), highlighting the extent to which self-related and self-authored posts usually attract a greater interest than other-related and outsourced ones.

More generally, it is significant to remark that nostalgia *and* irony have often been coupled within critical theory as benchmark features of postmodernity. Notably, the copresence of these features has been interpreted as a form of disengagement from and depoliticization of our contemporary condition (Eagleton; Jameson). Specifically within postmodernity, nostalgia and irony represent two reflective gestures, the former being directed toward the past, while the latter addressing the present. Yet, both fail to produce a critical intervention upon these same dimensions because, as Terry Eagleton notes, they are not based upon a "transformed rationality," that is, a truly committed break with and critique of modernity (73). As such, these gestures flatten upon their own dimension of reference and fall short of an alternative or a change. Even scholar Linda Hutcheon, despite initially defending irony as "*not* essentially depthless and trivial kitsch" ("Politics" 82, emphasis in original), later contended that "given irony's inability to free itself from the discourse it contests, there is no way for these cultural modes [irony and nostalgia, to which she is also referring] to escape from the culture of which they are a part" ("Irony" 23). Here it is important to stress two things: firstly, for Hutcheon (and others), irony and nostalgia are strategies based on a mirroring functioning and failure; they adhere to a given present or past situation without criticizing it. Secondly, in the use of irony and nostalgia we witness the merging of public and private spheres in that subjects address what concerns them by reappropriating what is already public and using it for their own purposes. "What irony and nostalgia share," Hutcheon specifies, "is a perhaps unexpected twin evocation of both affect and agency, of emotion and politics" ("Irony" 24), a twin evocation for which SNSs, with their semiprivate nature based on emotional capitalism, seem particularly apt to accomplish. The consistent presence of ironic and nostalgic posts in our participants' profiles suggests that, on Facebook, users neither appear to provide a self-conscious and reflective representation of themselves, nor do they seem to exercise any form of effective critique of the world. In other words, irony and nostalgia are to be taken as symptoms of the commoditization of both user identities and the representation of the world.

Specifically concerning irony, it must be noted that the use of irony on SNSs in relation to the self, on the one hand, and the world, on the other, has different effects. In the former, research has shown that resorting to self-irony on Facebook is a strategy that permits users to be perceived as more appealing to the network to which they belong (Pennington and Hall). More problematic is the use of irony in connection to the sharing of other-related content, such as news. Not only is the extent to which these posts enhance social acceptability debatable (see examples below), but when asked to elaborate on the reason behind so many ironic posts on their profiles, our participants divulged a certain degree of uncertainty and superficiality about their posting. One student overtly claimed, "When I hit some posts that are entertaining and funny, I tend to share them without reflecting deeply." This admission seems to demonstrate that while users thoughtfully select content that is self-related and self-authored (as seen above in relation to positive posts outnumbering negative ones), when it comes to the circulation of other-related and other-authored posts they are not inclined to dedicate the same amount of attention.

This assumption is corroborated by two interesting examples connected to irony. One student shared a video in which one of Donald Trump's speeches against Mexican immigrants, delivered during the last US presidential campaign, was mixed with a song by the Backstreet Boys, whose lyrics oddly matched Trump's words. The user shared the thirteen-second video with an accompanying message: "No wonder it sounded so familiar!" Needless to say, the video was very ironic, as it intended to unveil the shallowness of Trump's speech by mocking it through the lyrics of a boy band known for the superficiality and commerciality of their songs. The interesting question, however, is whether the video's embedded mockery was correctly decoded by other users, thus indicating the potential for critical engagement with the underpinning political issue of Trump's populism. The lack of any comments on the post, which might have fueled a hermeneutical exchange, as well as the fact that the post attracted very few reactions (three) in the form of laughing emojis, suggest an answer in the negative: the post seems to have merely served as a moment of comic relief on users' timelines.

The second example concerns a participant who shared a video titled "4 Reasons Women Should NEVER Breastfeed in Public" in which a woman jokingly pretends to be against public breastfeeding by listing four reasons of "decency" alongside images and short skits that, in fact, debunk these same reasons. Quite obviously, the video's goal is to raise awareness about an issue in a humorous way by creating friction among what the woman says, her tone, and the video's visuals. What is significant is that one of the user's friends did

not recognize the irony of the video and commented disappointingly on the post, "Oh! How can she really say that?! :(" This reaction led the user who shared the video to change her accompanying message from "she puts it out there"—in itself a double entendre mirroring the irony of the video—to "In case you people think I'm against breastfeeding in public, this woman is being sarcastic LOL!" When asked to elaborate on this editing, the participant said, "I suppose that my friend didn't reflect enough when watching the video and concluded that the woman in the video was serious." It seems, then, that not only did the user's friend not interpret the "hidden" meaning of the video, but she also felt the need to "have a say" straightaway.

Of course, it could be pointed out that sharing these kinds of posts constitutes more a gesture of self-assertion by the user rather than a genuine desire to intervene in public discourse. Posts are meant to signal to the users' friends their own opinions on a given issue and possibly show who among their contacts shares the same view rather than to enter a serious discussion. However, the very limited feedback that these posts usually get in terms of likes and comments—the video on breastfeeding received four likes and four comments from a network of 1,380 contacts—reveals that such self-assertion often remains an unheard utterance within the platform's noise. Although private and public spheres tend to conflate online and, it is certainly true, as McNeill and Zuern advance, that "the political is an important part of [users'] identities" (12), we would not project over such "part" a "transformative work," as they suggest. We argue instead that on Facebook we witness the "death of the author" (Barthes), which is reflected in the cooperative posthuman nature of the profiles (McNeill), together with the "death of the reader" (Simanowski, "Death") considered as a conscious agent able to ascribe meaning to what they read. The reader's death is paralleled by the birth of the "naïve critic" who often posts, responds, and comments without the necessary background information.

More generally, these examples show the traps and dangers inherent in irony when deployed in an environment as fast and informationally saturated as Facebook. At best, these posts are perceived as merely funny, and at worst they are misinterpreted; either way, the power of irony as a critical gesture seems to be reduced to a monochord "pastiche" in the way Fredric Jameson describes it as "like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives" (17). The quality and quantity of ironic posts on Facebook seem unable to provoke deeper thought on the issues they are mocking. In this context, the replies to the fourth preliminary question we posed to our participants are telling: "What do you look up on Facebook?" Eighty-five percent of the students (32) responded, "news," among whom twenty-six coupled "news"

with "entertaining stuff," highlighting the extent to which "hard news" and "entertaining content" are perceived as overlapping. Notably, one student acknowledged, "Facebook is so vast that I am wary to choose what news I want to read," while another paradoxically argued, "I would not consider Facebook as a reliable source of information" but "apart from the unreliability, checking news on Facebook is actually convenient." Above all, these claims signal the lack of expertise of our young participants in discerning between reliable and unreliable news sources (which goes hand in hand with the increasingly problematic phenomenon of "fake news"). It is in this sense that Facebook (but also other SNSs) can be alleged to work as the hotbed of mass distraction, disempowering news and experts—plunged in a continuous flux of data and watered down by playful content—and realizing, in the end, the famous warning, "The liberation which amusement promises is freedom from thought and from negation" (Horkeimer and Adorno 144). This statement denounces the double logic on which mass culture rests: the entertainment to which we resort daily to find solace brings with it—in a mixture of plain irony and toothless laughs—the erosion of critical thinking and the ability of understanding and discerning in the long run that which is worth discussing from that which is mere gimmick.

"I FORGOT WHAT I LIKED"

Overall, collating our participants' replies to the first and second rounds of questions with their written diaries allowed us to bring the tendencies of nostalgia and irony to the surface. At the same time, from the point of view of new media literacy, the collation turned out to be beneficial also for the students, insofar as it revealed to them uses of Facebook of which they were not fully aware. Here we cross the threshold that separates conscious and unconscious authorship and agency, addressing the merging of human and technology. One student discussed how the keeping of a written diary affected his reflection about potential upcoming posts: "I can't deny that keeping a written diary affected my posting: I became more aware of things or moments around me and I wondered whether I would really like to share them with others." Another participant—one of the most active in terms of self-authored and self-related postings—confessed: "over the five weeks of logs, I changed some of my views toward my use of Facebook and other SNSs. I have always thought that I kept a very low profile on social media. However, after this self-tracking, I found that I don't keep at all a low profile." These testimonies attest to the synergies between the online and offline realms and the distanced self-perception that the assignments triggered with regard to online modes of self-representation.

In a similar vein to the latter example, which reveals the difficulties of attaining full self-awareness on Facebook, it is remarkable that the act of liking posts remained largely untracked in the diaries of the majority of our students (although this was part of the assignment). It seems that liking, which is actually the most frequent activity on Facebook (Finn), was a semiautomated act that was not deemed relevant of commentary. One student emblematically reported, "Out of my expectations, when checking my activity log I discovered that I liked an overwhelming number of 639 posts in five weeks!" The problem is that, while liking is an act that sinks rapidly below the threshold of awareness, it is not so for Facebook, which tracks and remembers everything we do on it. Here, the prosthetic function of the platform fully unveils what Stiegler in *For a New Critique of Political Economy* calls its "proletarianist" force, that is, the individual's loss of competence and mastery ("savoir faire" and "savoir vivre") brought about by any synergy between humans and technology. According to Stiegler, every time we interact with technology, our abilities and faculties get eroded insofar as we forfeit a portion of our know-how (and, we might add, of ourselves) to the machine. At this point, then, we should ask to what extent we are really aware of what Facebook is doing to us? To what extent is it "us" that we project onto Facebook if we do not even remember our activities a few days later, or if we tend to share and comment superficially on what we see? Aren't we losing the mastery of our autobiography? Isn't the platform writing its own (hidden) narrative of us?

We have seen that our participants claimed to carefully craft what they publish when the posts are about themselves: "Everything I post on my Facebook account is filtered by me," one participant explained. And yet, as we have just remarked, such filtering is only a small portion of the whole story. In addition to one's own posts, there is a whole galaxy of outsourced activities that, albeit not constituting authorial stances or overtly conscious acts by users, do contribute to the users' own online self-representation. Within the economically driven logic on which Facebook is founded, these acts are the most profitable for the platform precisely because they occur on a semiconscious level. It is no news that all these acts of liking and sharing constitute invaluable bits of users' information to be sold by Facebook to advertisers, institutions, political parties, and influencers. It is especially important that users do not stop declaring their tastes, attitudes, ideas, and hobbies once and for all, but remain engaged with "novelty," ever refining their datafied image as consumers. In this way, Facebook (and SNSs in general) seems to provide the ideal environment to validate Eagleton's claim about the contemporary subject, defined as "a dispersed, decentred network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychical interiority, the ephemeral function

of this or that act of consumption, media experience, sexual relationship, trend or fashion" (71). Keeping users engaged in the world that surrounds them, Facebook's great deception lies in the creation of a self that, no matter how many selfies it transmits, is not really conscious of itself.

WHERE HAS EVERYBODY GONE? IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION ACROSS PLATFORMS

Insofar as users and their small stories have withdrawn from Facebook, the last question we attempted to tackle during our research—a question that was raised, indeed, by the students' self-reflections—was the following: Where do our participants represent themselves online? The bare answer is that their stories cannot be found on one single platform but have spread across various SNSs.

From the participants' essays and replies to the second round of questions we realized that our students make a rather heterodox use of Facebook. This means that the modalities with which they approach and use Facebook depart in some respects from the normative terms of use defined by the platform itself. The most emblematic example is the creation of profiles that adopt aliases. To be sure, we are not confronted with fake accounts—recent statistics show that there are up to 89 million fake profiles on Facebook ("The Top 20")—but certainly with a tendency to play with identity. One student specified, "My own Facebook profile's name is 'F****a *****'. F****a is my nickname while my real English name is Tracy. I don't use my whole real [Chinese] name on Facebook." Beyond the contingent fact that Hong Kongers often accompany their Chinese name with an English alternative, here we have a testimony of how Facebook's basic principle—people should present their real identities—gets challenged.

To this trend we can also ascribe all those decisions to provide fake information on the profile page concerning relatives and age. During our study, we often noticed how these fields were filled with the names (sometimes aliases) of close friends and with preposterous dates of birth. Identity plays in the online realm are by no means a new phenomenon: in the early age of Web 1.0 it was the norm rather than the exception to present flexible and even multiple identities online (Wittkower). Yet the advent of SNSs, based on the idea of creating a network that bridged offline and online realms, seemed to have eradicated such trends, at least until very recently. As a matter of fact, not only have other SNSs (like Instagram) proved to thrive without the need for users to reveal their real identities, but Facebook too has gradually softened its "one real identity" policy (Stone and Frier).

Secondly, while parsing the participants' feedback it became clearer to us that the content students post on Facebook represents only a small fraction of the total amount of content they share across SNSs. Facebook constitutes just one platform of a more conspicuous SNSs diet. Overall, our participants claimed to post on Facebook only very relevant life events or episodes of public interest, delegating the bulk of social interactions to other SNSs, namely Instagram and Snapchat. Therefore, we became interested in understanding both the reasons behind the choice of a certain platform over others and how these mutually integrate. From the testimonies we gathered, this process of integration follows a logic of concentric circles: the wider the circle of friends on the platform, the weaker the posting. One student summed up the point as follows: "I post everything on Snapchat, then I pick some of these posts and I post them on Instagram, after which I pick some Instagram posts and I share them on FB." This idea is further strengthened by a student who said, "Facebook can connect you with too many people who may be acquaintances but not close friends, and this sometimes puts me off." As we have seen, the average number of contacts of our corpus (908 per user) is astonishingly high, with the consequence, according to their own opinions, to warrant the lowest number of posts. This reflection is also complemented by the students' reluctance to erase old contacts, a gesture that is found "unfair" and "time-consuming." Students, then, are more inclined to disclose themselves on SNSs that are perceived as more private and intimate. One of the participants commented on her SNSs diet in these terms: "I do customise content depending on the platform I use. For example, if I feel unhappy I would upload a photo on Instagram and express how I feel in the caption, but I would not post it on FB because I do not know all my FB friends well. As for Snapchat, only my close friends can see my profile so I do not need to restrain myself." It seems, then, that the logic of concentric circles does not only imply a quantitative narrowing down but also a qualitative selection: Snapchat is where users tend to be more authentic and unreflexive, Facebook is where they choose to present a strongly and positively crafted self, and Instagram works as an in-between semi-private form of photographic diary. This means that, across the three platforms, there are degrees of overlap as well as discrepancies concerning what is posted. If we are to look for identity construction and self-narratives, we need to conceive of a comprehensive approach to SNSs in that "to fill the gaps," as Page suggests, has become a matter of collation among different SNSs.

More precisely, such self-narratives occur not only inter-platform but also intra-platform. Many students revealed that they hold multiple accounts within the same platform, depending on the kind of post they publish and

the circle of friends they address. One student claimed, "on Instagram I have two accounts one of which is more private and only allows my close friends to follow me," while another wrote, "I even created more than one account on each platform, in order to fulfil my expectations and needs." This suggests a rather proactive and skilled use of SNSs, one that oddly contrasts with the reluctance in our participants to periodically curate their network by erasing contacts or modulating Facebook's privacy settings. In fact, a third criterion, beyond the quest for privacy and the authorial customization of content, to determine the preferred platform has to do with the technical features of each SNS.

By now Facebook is perceived as too cumbersome and time-consuming, while Instagram and Snapchat provide users with more intuitive and stream-lined tools. Two students in particular claimed respectively, "I upload photos more frequently on Instagram than on FB because if you try to upload photos on FB it takes time to provide all the info required," while the second argued, "I use Snapchat the most because I really take many photos and it allows me to upload them more quickly than using FB and Instagram." It is clear, there-fore, that one's choice of platform is also driven by the impulse—an urge—to share as immediately and effortlessly as possible.

Here two phenomena fuel one another: the information deluge that char-acterizes social media triggers an acceleration of communication and socia-bility, which in turn produces even more messages. The problem, as Berardi puts it, is that this "acceleration is provoking an impoverishment of experi-ence, since the intensive modalities of pleasure and knowledge have become stressed to the point of exhaustion" (33). The exhaustion Berardi mentions is well reflected in the kind of content published on SNSs. We showed that messages shared on Facebook are largely phatic and are often grasped superfi-cially. It could not be otherwise. Senders and receivers are entrapped within a logic of mutual deficiency: due to frantic acceleration and overload of infor-mation, senders can only guarantee a minimal level of reflection about what they are going to communicate, while receivers can only provide a minimal amount of attention. The meaning of the message is no longer the point; it is all about filling the gaps of daily downtime. This is especially evident on Snapchat, where people "tend to be casual and share whatever they feel in the moment," as one participant wrote. "Casual," "feel," and "moment" are cru-cial terms here: they imply a communication that has lost its intentionality beyond a mere emotional and contingent shouting out of one's own existence against the noise of the world. But this shouting falls into oblivion as soon as it is emitted, silenced by the same system it nurtures.

Although the conclusions we have drawn in this study depend upon a rather small and homogeneous corpus (young Asian students), we believe that our analysis reveals patterns and trends of behavior on SNSs that may spark further research with more participants and in different sociocultural contexts to evaluate the significance of our remarks. We consider such analyses important to understand not only the impact of SNSs on self-representation and self-understanding but also the strategies to tackle human-technology interaction. As SNSs keep changing at a dizzying pace, new radical trends in the way we daily construct and recount ourselves will arise from the full implementation of the Internet of Things, which will likely make any distinction between online and offline realms as obsolete as written diaries are for digital natives. It is unlikely that any academic activity can hinder technological development, but it is imperative that we prepare, through empirical studies and philosophical elaborations, for its cultural and literacy-related implications.

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