ONLINE IDENTITY AS A NARRATIVE PROJECT

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the reinterpretation of online identity in the conceptual frame done by Giddens' key terms "self-identity" and "reflexive project". This rethinking of digital identity emphasizes the conscious, active, and introspective modalities in which an individual constructs and manages her or his identity using the digital tools. Thus, constructivism and symbolic interactionism underpin this investigation. The choices that new media offer introduce from the very beginning a sort of awareness about the project of virtual self-building. The differences that occurred between the early stages of the development of new media and the actual state of affairs in the digital realm impose some changes in the presentation of the self and in its conceiving. In this respect, the paper underlines some relevant developments and possibilities for the affirmation of the self, but, in the same time, presents some constraints and limitations that are visible in the current stage of new media. The problem of digital archive that should preserve the autobiographical narratives is the main example that I will develop, because the identity-forming process is shaped by the narrative pieces that we select as representative for our image about ourselves. Thus, the understanding of the modalities through which people compose their digital self-narratives (writing, posting, or archiving) and use them in the self-knowing process describes a chain of action that is very valuable for the edification of our identity.

Keywords: *archive, online identity, project, reflexivity, self-identity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on some key aspects of interpreting the concept of online identity. In this respect, I will use Giddens' terms "reflexive project" and "self-identity" that I will put at work in the context of computer-mediated communication. The rethinking of digital identity in this conceptual frame puts an emphasis on the active, conscious, and introspective ways in which an individual conceives and manages her or his identity in the cyberspace. Thus, constructivism and symbolic interactionism are considered the main methods that underpin this analysis. The differences that occurred between the early stages of the development of new media and the actual state of affairs in the digital realm impose some changes in the presentation of the self and in its conceiving. The process of constructing an online "face" acknowledges the transformations of the technological platforms, the increasing familiarization with the digital tools and the forms of learning the mediated language. The passing from web 1.0 to web 2.0 brings some great developments and new possibilities for the affirmation of the self, but, in the same time, inserts some constraints and limitations. The problem of digital archive that should preserve the autobiographical narratives is the main example that I will discuss, because the identity-forming process is shaped by the narrative pieces that we select as representative for our image about ourselves. The selection, the control, and the organization of a big amount of digital data that a subject produces in online space are real challenges that require work and self awareness.

2. SELF STORIES

Human beings are considered storytellers by nature[1], the stories being a natural path that may connect us with the fundamental truths and can build our identity. In our culture, the story is the dominant modality of transferring experience, transmitting information, learning new things; briefly, the story is "the dominant mode of communication in our culture"[2]. The basis of this narrative construction of life is the "distributed

intelligence", a term coined by John Seely Brown and Allan Collins, that refers to the fact that a person's working, life, and identity cannot be understood without taking into consideration her or his favored books, data bases, friends, mentors and colleagues. In the same manner, Claude Lévy's "collective intelligence" is a form of universally distributed intelligence that can be summarized in this assertion: "No one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity"[3]. Narratives are one of our relevant ways of understanding ourselves and of interpreting the world and "we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on"[4]. The narrative study of lives registers two stages: first, in which the autobiographical projects were central, and people tried to construct an integrative, coherent and meaningful self-narrative. Second stage, shaped by the postmodern and socio-constructionist theories, present personal narratives as situated performances, that externalize multiple and often contradictory self-expressions. Considering that narrative identity refers to "an individual's internalized, evolving, and integrative story of the self"[5], Dan P. McAdams detached six common principles of the narrative study of life: 1. the self is storied, 2. stories integrate lives, 3. stories are told in social relationships, 4. stories change over time, 5. stories are cultural texts, and 6. some stories are better than others. Although my paper doesn't focus on the domain of personality psychology, I have to mention that these principles are generally founded in the analyses that deal with the problem of narrative. For Marie-Laure Ryan[6], for example, narrativity is independent of tellability and of fictionality, is not coextensive with literature and the problem-solving remains the fundamental narrative pattern. The self-narratives are constitutive for the entire identity of the narrator; they are telling or just indicating something about her or him, being expressive forms.

Anthony Giddens made the analysis of identity on the background of the investigation of modernity. In his perspective, the modernity is not exhausted and its project is still valuable, the actual phase of it being named "high modernity" or "late modernity". Its own typically presumptions are its "wholesale reflexivity" and its meta-activity of "the self-clarification of modern thought"[7]. In the settings of modern world, the formulation of the narrative identity is a challenge for every person; the multitude of social roles and the changing of contexts don't offer any clear and unique guide on how to live or how to construct yourself. The ability of restyling the identity is in relation with the engagement with brands, consumer society and other activities that can produce a form of affinity with our peers. In the large context of globalization, freed from many traditional constraints, the modern subject has to actively build its individuality, to map its biography, and to maintain social bonds. Thus, the self has to be reflexively made, in a conscious and voluntary effort since some of the most salient narratives (religion, gender, class etc.) were already called into question. For Giddens, identity is something that must be incessantly worked at: "we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves"[8], we have and in the same time we live our biography. The self-identity is not passive and exclusively determined by external factors, but it is rather auto-created and sustained with many personal activities characterized by reflexivity. Thus, the concept of "self-identity" doesn't refer to the persistence of someone's identity over time, but "the 'identity' of the self, in contrast to the self as a generic phenomenon, presumes reflexive awareness. It is what the individual is conscious 'of' in the term 'self-consciousness'"[9]. Reflexivity is conceived as being central for human life and in consonance with the modernity seen as a project, the reflexivity is also conceived as a rational project: "The self today is for everyone a reflexive project – a more or less continuous interrogation of past, present and future"[10]. The reflexive project of the self tries to gives coherence to the biographical narratives, to organize them more expressively, and to revise them for a better integration into a sustained personal image. Self-narratives are ordered in a reflexive manner and some thoughtful activities, such as keeping a journal, are recommended in order to deeply maintain an integrated sense of the self[11]. Although the criticism that Giddens'

perspective created[12], its applicability for the digital age is still relevant. Thus, Giddens' theory resonates with Thompson's approach of a "symbolic project": "We are all the unofficial biographers of ourselves, for it is only by constructing a story, however loosely strung together, that we are able to form a sense of who we are and what our future may be"[13]. Despite the different terminologies, Manuel Castells[14] affirmed that he shares Giddens' main lines of identity theorization; in the "network society", identity is also self-built in an active and organized manner.

3. NEW MEDIA AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

New media have inserted themselves powerfully in the everyday life, becoming a part of the fabric of the activities that contemporary people make. The new technologies and means of communication created original and interactive ways for the expression of the self and for the resetting of interpersonal relationship. The living at the interface have strongly re-opened the identitary interrogations and a lot of articles in the beginning of the Internet tried to respond to the recurrent question "who am I when I am online?". Even if the concept of identity was one of the most analysed items and its existence tended to take the form of a stereotype, the newness of the context in which this theme was translated changed a lot the old perspectives. New media remediated[15] the identity and the alterity, and they gave a new shape to the vocabulary of personal achievement and self-construction.

The limited possibilities offered by the early Internet had led to the presentation of the self in a textual manner that had an impact on the general using of it as a narrative instrument. The present diversification of the technological possibilities expanded the autobiographical textuality on platforms with audio, video, photography, in forms such as blogs, personal pages, social networking sites etc. Even the definition of the "text" has changed with the use on a large scale of new media repertoire "to include verbal, visual, oral, and numeric data, in the form of maps, prints, and music, of archives of recorded sound, of films, videos, and any computer-stored information, everything in fact from epigraphy to the latest forms of discography"[16]. Thus, the freedom of expression is translated in the ability of adjusting the information about the individual combined with the power of auto-creation in the digital world. The choice of the best way to construct the identity online (on which platform, with which tools) introduces from the very beginning a sort of awareness about the project of virtual self-building. The narrations that the subject creates in the virtual medium become significant parts of the projection about the inner soul and values. Even if these narrations aren't truly confessions or self-disclosures, the "likes" on Facebook, the comments on news or on forums, the video clips or the images that we share indicate some relevant things about the user (her or his cultural preferences, political orientation, style of writing or argumentation etc.). Thus, the reconstruction of these digital fingerprints that a user leaves behind may conduct to the possibility of delineating her or his identity profile. In the early stages of computer-mediated communication, when the use of anonymity was consistent, the virtual identity could have been very different from the offline one. In the actual stage of the Internet development, the correlation between the online identity and the offline identity became tight, and the effort is made in the sense of their convergence. The self-narratives have to be up-kept, correlated between them (and with the rest of offline presentation), and made explicit to achieve a coherent identitary image. Thus, the self may consist in the interpretations that a person makes on her or his personal narrations.

The background for the augmented number of personal narratives in online is the great capacity of this medium to produce self-disclosures. The process of mediating the experience has also considerably shaped the self-identity that can be differently expressed through the oral culture, the printed culture or the electronic media. The story remains important for the creators of technology and they tried almost every time to put together these two domains. Abbe Don[17] considers that computers can play today the role that the storyteller

occupied in the oral culture; every platform tells a story and the specialized sites invite the user to tell her or his narrative. The trait of interactivity is tied in web 2.0 with the user-generated content, which transforms the cyberspace into semantic tissue of stories. Brenda Laurel[18] compares computers with the theatre and the Goffman' analysis made in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* was transposed many times in the cyberspace. Interactive technology provides a good stage for performing the self and its usability transformed it into a necessary reference for the user. The self-narrations produced online are relevant components of the self-construction; these online stories become identitary markers that are expressive and constitutive for the personal image. In his research made on adolescents, Zhao portrayed their digital self as inwardly oriented, narrative in nature, retractable, and multiplied. The act of auto-description made through computer-mediated communication requires "a level of introspection and reflectivity that is not normally exercised in the realm of face-to-face interaction"[19]. In online, the presentation of the self and the conception of the self are closely related, and those processes involve a higher level of reflexivity. As in Giddens' approach, the construction of the online identity is auto-reflexive and takes the form of an organized plan or project that can be realized through the selection of the platforms, information that we disclose, photos that we share etc. Even if there is the possibility of retracting a digital self (by erasing an online profile, for instance), this comes with a price for the self-esteem and for the inner self-identity.

The understanding of the modalities through which human beings compose their self-narratives, write them, post them in online environment, and use them in the self-knowing process describes a chain of action that is very valuable in the contemporary world. Every piece of information posted online can "speak" about its author, but the most evident form of self-expression in the digital age seems to be the blog. As Giddens emphasized, keeping a journal is a kind of activity that can sustain the unity of the self; the blogs expose our hobbies, values, political views and in the same time impose a narrative interpretation of experiences. The blog is a viable format for the written self, which can offer informal, shared and authentic writing. Blogs are also collaborative spaces that are both monologic and dialogic in nature, involving both the personal and the public sphere: "identity with the blog genre is based on a balance between the need for privacy (if one doesn't want to be found) and the need for community based on identification with others through sameness. The balance of public and private in a blog shows how blogs constitute their own genre rather than a new form of an old one"[20]. The sense-making of the content is also challenging for the blogger itself and for the reader. N. Pachler and C. Daly[21] discuss about the potential lack of coherence and of sistematicity by which blogs are indexed and linked, and concluded that the "narrative trail" remains a means by which coherence is created even in ephemeral and distributed context. In a big amount of puzzling texts that can be revelatory for the interpretation of the self, the filtering process, the lack of the context, the heterogeneous e-audience, and the deficiency of linearity may constitute some problems for the user. In the same time, "the life writer may attempt to present an autonomous self to us through their blog or they may present a vacillating or contradictory self"[22], so the effort in interpreting the posts and comments may be bigger. On the one hand, bloggers can develop an ambiguous relation with blogging; on the other hand, as Jerome Bruner[23] warned us, narrative constructions can't be true or false, they can only achieve verisimilitude. Nevertheless, "blogs still function as an important outlet for emotion and self-expression throughout the Internet community"[24]. The navigating back through the years and texts posted on virtual platforms can lead to some new perspectives about our life and can produce a better understanding of contextual decisions or actions. In the same time, the therapeutic effect of writing is very well known, even if the online defamation and other negative actions may also happen.

4. THE IDENTITARY ARCHIVE

In the online environment, the reflexivity done by the voluntary project of expressing the

self is doubled with the reflexivity done by the care of selection of information that we can disclose. Furthermore, the interactivity of the new media platforms generated another problem concerning the reception of our personal narratives by e-readers. In the same time, the multitude of things that a person posts (even the photographs may compose a visual narrative with a replete sense for their author), on many media, raises an issue about the accessibility and conservation. The problem of archive is real with regard to online self-narratives and leads to general interrogations about the archiving of media: "What can or should be preserved from our radio, TV, and Internet culture? Is conservational thinking even appropriate in this electronic age, which venerates the principles of renewal and recycling? Where does necessary collecting end and legitimate forgetting begin?"[25] The archive is in direct relationship with memory; controlling the archive implies the control over the memory. The archive is not a passive tool, but an active one, because it presumes the act of selection: "the archive is first the law can be said, the system that governs the production of utterances as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents"[26]. The abundant autobiographical stories may shape the ongoing identitary process, but the flexibility of the digital tools may lead to an arbitrary or totally unrealistic selection of the digital documents that will be preserved. The natural tendency to positively evaluate your own self may conduct to the conservation of the good or pleasant information and to the erasure of unpleasant digital memories. In this respect, the errors or the imperfections may disappear and the digital archive can mystify the real self. Moreover, if the user has many different or even contradictory online identities, or between the virtual identity and the offline identity is a gap, his or her task of selection and interpretation becomes difficult. The decipherment of identitary directions may not lead to a unitary perspective, but some theories (postmodernism, for example) assume that the quest for a coherent identity is another metanarrative, because people change too often and sometimes too deeper.

The digital archive is also a place of informational gaps and some self-narratives (produced on chat, for instance) may be lost and the intention to save them might not be present from the start. Thus, the archive is a powerful filter giving access to the past and also a differentiation tool[27]; the active incorporation of the online self-narratives in our self-interpretation remains a personal effort. The managing of the digital archive is in itself a project that involves control, selection and self-awareness.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the lavish online space, the possibilities for constructing an identity are numerous. In the early stages of the development of new media, the academic perception of online identity was influenced by the poststructuralist theories, which talked about the fluidity of the self, the lack of a center and of an identitary vision, and the fragmented forms of speech. In this direction, the text-based communication and the use of anonymity strongly confirmed the idea of multiple identities that cyberspace can create. Moreover, the disembodiment was another trait of digital culture that seemed to ensure the overcoming of the inequalities (gender, race, old etc.) and that created the desire of trying different identities. Internet was labeled as an "identity laboratory", a space where the self might be reinvented. Thus, the freedom to choose seems to have been a powerful imaginary that produced many self-narratives and self-projections.

In the contemporary technological context, the user-generated content and the other-provided information may weaken the strategies that a person can use for her or his identitary construction[28]. The nowadays platforms are more diverse and the computer-mediated communication tends to be similar to face-to-face communication. Even if you can easily create a fake identity, use a pseudonym or manage multiple accounts, social media put tremendous pressure for constructing a single identity for a user. Nancy Baym[29] remarked that many individuals don't create radical different

identities in online in comparison with their identity outside the network. Nevertheless, more than ever, the online presence is a real project to be worked on and continuously perfected. The online construction of the self is consciously assumed and is visible in the project of the personal branding online. In this case, every comment, post or photo is carefully selected and monitored; the best strategies of self-presentation are put into practice. Also, the reflexivity and the management of self-narratives are effectively at work. This example is suggestive for the numerous possibilities opened to the contemporary forms of online identitary expression and in the same time for its difficulties and constraints.

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