SOCIOLOGY IN SWITZERLAND

Towards Cybersociety and Vireal Social Relations

Between Life Ticker and Autobiography
Some reflections on diachronic personal identities in the Facebook Age

Hans Geser
Zuerich, March 2012

"The present age may be stiled with great propriety the Age of Authors; for, perhaps, there was never a time, in which men of all degrees of ability, of every kind of education, of every profession and employment, were posting with ardour so general to the press." (Samuel Johnson 1753)

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1. Facebook and Google: two fundamentally opposed conceptions of the Internet and its Users

"For Google, the World is a Village,
for Facebook, a Village is the World."
(Ralf Sander 2011)

Whenever individuals have to make a choice among a number of alternatives (e. g. by selecting a menu, a job or a life partner), they can follow an individual or a social strategy for reaching a decision.

The first is aimed at improving personal cognition and at gathering comparative data on different options, on sharpening subjective preferences and on adapting selection procedures ranging from irrational "gut feelings" and intuitions to rational calculations. Given the predominance of intrapersonal determinants, such procedures are likely to accentuate differences between individuals: up to the point where everybody has his or her own combination of best liked food, tourist destinations, music songs, novels or closest friends. Evidently, this is particularly functional in a monogamous society where it would be disastrous if too many men were in love with the same woman.

The second strategy is to reduce (or eliminate) complexity by relying on the selections made by others: e. g. by relying on the judgment of "best friends", group opinion leaders – or just the anonymous conformity pressures associated with collective fads and fashions. In contrast to the first option, this second course is evidently contributing to the homogenization of human beings – a consequence particularly functional for voluntary associations, political parties or religious sects where the leveling of individual goals and preferences is a prerequisite for rewarding shared experiences and/or successful collective activities.

Given the immense diversification of consumer goods, cultural products, leisure activities, travel destinations, wellness programs, educational courses, TV channels, associational memberships etc. due to the economic and technological development of modern industrialized (and post industrialized) society, it is no surprise that the weights have shifted very much from social to individual choice. In other words: individuals find themselves increasingly in the position of making lonely decisions in accordance with their subjective beliefs, preferences and tastes, thus lowering the probability to find companions who have made the same choices: e. g. partners for discussing a book both of them have read or a country both of them have recently visited (Berger/Berger/Kellner 1975: 59ff; Geser 1995).

The Internet plays a fascinating dual role in this longer term historical evolution. On the one hand, it has additionally amplified this process of individualization and idiosyncratization: giving rise to the lonely PC surfer at home relying on his ephemeral subjective moods and reflections when deciding about which web links to follow, which songs to download or which discussion fora to choose of active participation. On the other hand, the Net also provides means for overcoming exactly this centrifugal processes by enabling individuals to accord any decisions with any other users: irrespective of social or spatial distance. Thus, the recent

breath-taking expansion of "Social Media" may be at least partially explained by their function to reduce the exactly the same loneliness and excessive self-reliance created by the Net and to redeem individuals from the constant absorbing need to make their own decisions: by allowing them to regain the comforts of informal social interactions (and even communalistic belongingness) that have been so much eroded in the course of societal modernization.

It seems highly fruitful to compare two of the most successful dominant Web actors. *Google and Facebook,* under this larger theoretical perspective.

In a simplified ideal-type formulation, *Google* provides tools for individuals to scan the total Internet according to an unlimited manifold and variety of self-selected criteria: thus *organizing* complexity without *eliminating* it. "To google" means to navigate the unbounded open sea of the Internet stretching all over the globe: with the permanent chance of discovering and colonizing unknown territories, reaching out to all locations where public digital human communication takes place and with ever more potent means to zoom into any more specialized digital environments and to fulfill any kind of specialized communicative and interactive needs with precision and within very short time. Using *Google* means to organize the whole digital world according to one's own perspectives and preferences, and to assimilate anything found to one's own mindset and customized digital environment (e. g, by personalizing research procedures or using programs for immediate translation)

By automated procedures, *Google* can learn what individuals are seeking by drawing inductive conclusions from their past behavior: thus boosting their capacity to "individualize" the Net by expressing and implementing their idiosyncratic preferences and interpretations.

Thus, using *Google* will tend to make individuals more different from each other: amplifying the degree to which they diverge in the particular mix of information they accumulate, the different paths of hyperlinks they are travelling, and the different social circles at the cross point of which they are located.

In terms of Talcott Parsons' pattern variables (Parsons & Shils 1952), *Google* cultivates a "universalistic" perspective by allowing to exploit information sources and contact people indiscriminately on the basis of their objective qualities and potentials, disregarding any idiosyncratic social bonds and collective identities of the respective users.

In sharp contrast, *Facebook* promotes extreme "particularism" by providing a platform for boosting individual identities and biographies, and for facilitating interaction within networks based on personal acquaintanceship and "friendship" (in a rather inflated sense).

Instead of confronting the anonymous outside world, users become even more forcefully embedded in their particularistic circles of "friends" who tell them what music to listen, what books to read, what events to visit etc.

Thus*, Facebook* wants to eliminate rather than to open up the complexity of modern life: by providing a densely regulated, pacified "gated community" freed from all unexpected nuisances, so that participants should be motivated to do everything they intend to and to fulfill all their needs without ever leaving these gates.

"The world created by Mark Zuckerberg is closed like a gated apartment compound with a surrounding fence and a janitor: a setting where everybody knows everybody and where the dingy kids from the other end of the city don't come by to play. Or to use another metaphor: Facebook is a sort of digitalized Disneyland all visitors are experiencing a state of virtual cosiness by depending on their friends and by getting all their wishes fulfilled by free home delivery." (Sander 2011).

Google sees human being as *highly autonomous "inner-directed" actors*: eager to engage in self-guided searches, preferring to let themselves guide by impersonal search algorithms rather than by social influences from any side; *Facebook* sees the human individual basically as an *externally guided "zoon politikon"* (Aristoteles) endlessly seeking informal social contacts and permanently prone to accept advice and to bow to conformity pressures from his or her peers.

While *Google* is just an *instrumental gateway*, *Facebook* is an *ultimate destination* where people want to stay because it wants to offer a secure place within the vast open World of the Internet: a community within society, where a comparatively higher level of trust and predictability can be maintained. Instead of inciting people to go out in order to travel to unknown territories, *Facebook* encourages them to turn their attention to the narrower familiar spheres of their personal life: by relating to their "friends" in almost everything trivial they are doing, and by reflecting constantly on their own self and personal identity: e. g. by feeding their current Life ticker and managing their longer-term "Timeline" biography.

Again using Talcott Parsons' pattern variables, *Google* promotes social relationships that are "functionally specific": e. g. based on precisely circumscribed needs for speedy and accurate information and highly focused social communication. *Facebook,* on the other hand, promotes "diffuse" relationship by relying on the premise that people want to share almost all their activities, thoughts and experiences with their same "friends".

"Mark Zuckerberg wants you to share. He doesn't much care if you want to share. Sharing, in Zuckerberg's view, has morphed from an affirmative act— that video was hilarious, I think I'll Like it!—to something more like an unconscious state of being. I watched that video, and therefore it will be shared." (Manjoo 2011).

In a certain (parasocial) way, then, Facebook allows to „resocialize" cultural activities that have become highly individualized and solipsistic with the advent of modern media: thus returning to earlier low-tech times when cultural activities where all embedded in social contexts for mere absence of technological media (e. g. by watching artist performances, reading in the family bible or listening to music in concert, attending a theatre play).

"Facebook enable(s) people to shed the pre-digital cloak of isolation and treat their life as a 24/7 reality show, broadcast to those in their social spheres." (Levy 2011).

In addition, *Facebook* is based on the premise that everybody wants to make visible his or her total social network to all of its individual members, instead of differentiating it into insulated

partnerships or small groups: thus creating a panopticon fully transparent for everybody in a multilateral network: a kind of customized "pseudo-public" sphere (Manjoo 2011).

Thus, *Facebook* implies a regressive model of personality insofar as humans are seen as being predominantly determined by informal primary social relationships. Consequently Net users can become "oversocialized" insofar even very specific selective procedures like filtering out relevant from irrelevant news may now no longer be determined by subjective preferences, but by microsocial influences emanating from peers:

> *"When a user allows Yahoo News to connect to Facebook, each page on Yahoo News contains a horizontal bar displaying all of their Facebook friends, and by hovering over a friend's picture, users can instantly see what their friend is reading. This provides Facebook users with an opportunity to read something they might not have read otherwise, while also giving them a chance to learn about what kind of news their friends enjoy reading."* *(Smith 2011).*

Rationalistic models of human behavior (based on the egocentrical "homo oeconomicus") become hard to maintain because even economic decisions like leasing or buying a product are directly determined by advices or model actions of personal "friends".

"When people see on their newsfeed that friends have been listening to a new Wilco tune, a single click on the song title actually plays the song, through the third-party service. (It feels like it's playing on Facebook.) If you're not a member of the service, you automatically get signed up, via your Facebook information. This makes Facebook the prime way that these services will now sign up new users and the Open Graph has sparked a gold-rush level frenzy among the various services, who see a limited window to lay claim to the all-or-nothing network effects that will ultimately funnel users into a very few favored services." (Levy 2011).

This regressive, somehow even infantile character of of *Facebook* is manifest in its "integralist" conception of the individual: as a person who appears and acts consistently in private as well as professional roles, so that a single public biography does justice to his personality as a whole. With good reasons, this integralism is denounced to threaten a most valuable achievement of human civilization on which our individual freedom is based: the liberty to show different faces to different audiences at various occasions and different periods of time:

> *"Facebook's longstanding demand that its users should only have one identity is either a toweringly arrogant willingness to harm people's social experience in service to doctrine; or it is a miniature fig leaf covering a huge, throbbing passion for making it easier to sell our identities to advertisers." (Doctorow 2011).*

This same simplified integralism drags over to the idea that people maintain a simple one-dimensional conception of friendship: by just grading their acquaintances by "closeness", rather than by a multitude of more specific criteria like emotional empathy, reliability, common interests, ideological consensus or valuable complementary skills.

> *"A lot of people have noticed in the last week that Facebook has been aggressively requesting them to hone the list of their closest friends. This can be useful in the same sense*

that Circles is — helping them share personal items with only those they trust. But while Google sees Circles mainly as a filter that enables users to maintain privacy, Facebook is using its close friends list as a launching pad for new applications that let people share within a tighter social circle."

In other words: Facebook promotes a "regressive" thinking in terms of such simple dichotomies based on a one-dimensional scale of "closeness", as it is the case in more primitive "communalistic" social settings dominated by dichotomized like "ingroup vs. outgroup" or even "friends and foes".

This illustrates the much more general impact of *Facebook* on global civilization: by diffusing and institutionalizing highly simplified everyday cognitive patterns, values, norms and behavioral habits of Western culture on a planetary scale.

2. Autobiographies and Diaries as two complementary media of personal expression

"For a man who no longer has a homeland,
writing becomes a place to live."
(Theodor W. Adorno 1974)

The current proliferation of online life tickers, diaries and biographic accounts makes it useful to throw an eye on the history of the forms and contents of autobiographic expression – developments that are of course tightly linked to the changing technologies available for encoding, transmitting and storing information.

Autobiographies are essentially documents designed for the public and the posterity. The *Confessions of St. Augustine* (AD 397/98) can be said to have provided both a model and a foundation (Spengemann 1980: 32). Typically, they are not dedicated to the mere mirroring and outward presentation of a life course, but to an artful synthesis and *"creative re-working of the self"* (Heilbrun 1989). Authors take the freedom to combine "Dichtung und Wahrheit" (Goethe) by reflecting and reorganizing their life course from a later, hindsight point of view, embedding biographic details into an order often dedicated to specific goals: e. g. purposes of self explanation and self-justification (Serfaty 2004: 461ff.)

In traditional culture, autobiographic accounts were highly elitist literary products: culminating in the famous works of Cellini, Rousseau, Goethe, Thoreau and others. Typically, the writers were males of the currently dominant races and ethnicities occupying a central role in society and culture: much less frequently women or minority group members.

Some time before the advent of the Computer and the Internet, however, a democratization of the autobiographical genre can be observed: illustrated in the growing tendency of social scientists to rely on "oral histories" of any elderly individuals capable of providing informal "bottom up" remembrances of bygone time eras, vanished cultural milieus and lost communal life (Marcus 1995: 13). An outstanding pioneer work was Florian Znaniecki's "Polish Peas-

ant" that was based on life histories of Polish workers: encompassing a variety of personal documents like letters, memoirs and notices that have hitherto been found too "trivial" for including them in serious social research (Thomas & Znaniecki 1958). Feminist researchers in particular have encouraged women to produce autobiographic accounts in order to express their subjectivity and fortify their identity in opposition to a male-dominated culture still committed to Oscar Wilde' aphorism that *"a man's face is his autobiography, a woman's face is her work of fiction." (Felman 1994; Swindells 1995:5; Marcis 1995:22).*

Diaries, by contrast, are linearly progressing open-ended endeavors to generate an immediate written account of current events, personal activities and subjective reflections that are usually started with no clear idea of the time when they are going to end (Serfaty 2004: 462; Watson & Watson-Franke 1985).

Typically, they are multiperspectivistic because their different entries are heavily shaped by the moods, states of knowledge, hopes and fears of the authors at the specific points of time.

Therefore, self-representation is more directed toward "authentic" self-expression than the production of a consistent, unified version of oneself – even if immediacy can be compromised by the fact that as any kind of writing, diaries invite authors to take self-reflexive distance or even to take into consideration that the diary may find later readers.

> *"In past centuries, diaries were ostensibly private, even though a reader or fictional addressee was always surmised or at least implied. Indeed, whenever a diary writer edits or otherwise revises entries, these superficially private writings become unmistakably public documents, intended for an external readership.'' (Bloom 1996: 23)*

In fact, we know of some highly impressive personal diaries that derive their widespread interest because authors were of an outstanding intellectual format (e. g. Max Frisch) or (like in the case of Samuel Pepys) because they were in a position to witness crucial historical developments and events.

3. Basic characteristics of digitalized diachronic life accounts

> *"Facebook timeline is the history of your life.*
> *Your history, your applications express who you are."*
> *(Mark Zuckerberg)*

3.1. Ubiquity and normative compulsiveness

In the 1990ies, it was conjectured that at least in the longer run, most users would accept the Internet just as an another channel for consuming information: relating to it passively like „couch potatoes" watching TV. More recent developments, however, have flatly falsified such predictions, as we have seen the proliferation of personal web pages and bloggings as well as the spectacular rise of the "Social Media" (like Facebook, Myspace, Orkut, CyWorld, Xing etc.)

where currently far more than a billion individuals act as "prosumers" by maintaining a continuous, frequently updated digital presence.

Evidently, these trends have been supported by the appearance of ever more user-friendly web-editing software, by the rapid diffusion of mobile devices that allow updating on a practically synchronic basis, and by the provision of standardized formats that enable everybody to publish any biographic data without any special efforts and skills (Serfaty 2004: 458). The culminating point of these trends have been reached at the end of 2011 when Mark Zuckerberg announced "open graph" applications that enable users to let their own current web contents and communications be uploaded and published "by default": i. e. automatically, without any deliberate personal intervention. This may give Facebook an additional edge against competitive platforms: making it likely that its user base will transcend by far the current size (of about 800 Mio in Jan 2012).

> *"Facebook is letting you write your autobiography in real time. But no writing is involved — instead your work will be in curating the vast amounts of personal information generated by your activity in Facebook and all those social applications utilizing the Open Graph. What tunes were you listening to in March 2008? How much did you exercise? What was your trip to Mexico like? When did you start your relationship with Brenda?" (Levy 2011)*

We may even envisage a near future where maintaining a Social Media Presence will reach the status of an almost compulsory social norm: setting everybody under pressure to reflect about his or her public digital self presentation at least to the same degree as about his or her bodily appearance (by carefully designed dressing, haircutting, jewellery and cosmetic manipulations). As a correlate, we may see the rise of new category of "social deviance": e. g. when no or only a quite uninformative web presence is maintained, when crucial, usually publicized biographic data remain hidden, or when self presentations violate detailed conformity standards as they may appear in parallel to well-known dress codes or strict norms of polite "behavior in public places" (Goffman 1963). In addition to Facebook, there may well be a bright future for more specialized platforms of self-presentations (like LinkedIn or Xing) where even more precise norms of autobiographic presentation have to be observed: e. g. in order to get attractive jobs, catch attractive clients or gain an excellent professional reputation.

3.2. Large bandwidth and multimediality

It is a basic human condition that while individuals live a rich subjective life characterized by a constant "stream of consciousness" (William James 1892) including perceptions, experiences, thoughts and emotions, only a tiny fraction of all these experienced will ever be communicated (or expressed unintentionally) to the outside world, let alone be grasped and deciphered by any attentive observer. Primary face-to-face interactions (usually restricted to a few partners) play an important role insofar as they allow emitting a rather broad range of personal expressions: containing intentional verbal messages as well as nonintentional and uncontrolled emissions by mimics and gestures. Translocal (or "secondary") interactions, on the other hand, were hitherto characterized by very low bandwidth channels and reduced feed-

back capacities: illustrated by phone calls where only oral language is transmitted or written mail letters where texts have to be limited and feedbacks need days or even weeks to realize (Collin/Neville/Bielaczyc 2000).

Here, the Internet enters as a most consequential innovation by enabling individuals to maintain highly complex streams of mutual communication: without losing feedback capacities and/or social reach. Specifically: by messaging complex combinations of wordings, text documents, pictures, videos, audio files and links to other content sources, *"Online diaries provide a space in which to accumulate signs so that daily life and states of mind can unfold in all their chaotic complexity." (Serfaty 2004: 457):* thus reducing the gap between the richness of subjective processes on the one hand and the poverty of external expression on the other.

Given the multitude of communicative media, the Internet invites its users to enlarge their skills of self expression, particularly in realms outside conventional language: e.g. by producing and posting highly "authentic" photos and videos, or by messaging tweets for keeping friends constantly updated about ongoing personal activities, experiences and reflections.

> *"Eager as they are to disclose themselves to the full and aware at the same time of the Sisyphean impossibility of the task, they multiply the angles of approach and attempt all-inclusiveness. As a result, they keep accumulating details about an event or a state of mind, coming back to the same point and trying to unravel its meaning, no matter how minute it might seem, piling up photographs upon drawings, using punctuation erratically in an attempt at enhancing its expressiveness." (Serfaty 2004: 460).*

The multidimensional space of opportunities transforms itself quickly in a source of perpetual, inescapable pressures to make use of it for presenting oneself as a "rounded personality": by providing comprehensive information about work, sports, voluntary commitments, cultural activities, travelling etc. in order to demonstrate that one is fully integrated in society and fully participating in all relevant sectors of social and cultural life.[1]

Evidently, such expansive self display strategies amplify the degree to which every user is presenting him(herself) as a unique individualized subject maintaining an idiosyncratic combination of personal status characteristics, social memberships, values, attitudes, activities and experiences that differ from those of all other users.

> *"The accumulation of signs counters the comforting simplifications of everyday life to point to the radical singularity, the absolute uniqueness and the endless complexity of a given individual." (Serfaty 2004: 460).*

3.3 Hybridization and "cross overs" of self expression formats

As discussed in an earlier publication (Geser 1999), the digital media give rise to a new "semifluid" layer of human culture: occupying an intermediate position between the hard sphere of

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[1] Evidently, this whole trend toward unimpeded public availability of autobiographic data is in blatant contradiction with the current tendency to keep CV information as scarce as possible: e. g. by not indicating ethnicity, religion or even age in order to prevent possible (job) discrimination.

physical artifacts on the one hand and the extremely malleable sphere of subjective ideas and values on the other. Thus, even highly elaborated autobiographic texts – as they would have been fixed on print in the past – can be permanently corrected, revised, shortened and enlarged when they are published in the Net. Consequently, while authors may still cling to the old dichotomies between fluid diaries and unchangeable autobiographies, such categorical dichotomies have lost their anchoring in the objective world

> *"This distinction becomes more nebulous on the Internet because the continuing online presence of these texts gives rise to phenomena such as a discussion list, for Carolyn Burke's diary, or messages in a guest book or plain e-mail messages, all of which afford finite texts a degree of open-endedness. The autobiographical genre fades into the diacritic genre, in a process of hybridization often observable on the Internet." (Serrate 2004: 462).*

As an intrinsically hybrid application, Timeline on Facebook provides multiple, hitherto unavailable "intermediate options" for developing and organizing biographical accounts: ranging from a very fine-grained "life ticker" optics (where people can literally be observed in their daily activity on an almost Real time 1:1 basis) to extremely coarse life overview perspectives (by focusing on rough biographic summaries conveying only the most conspicuous events, role transitions and biographic stages).

On the one hand, Timeline has certainly an informal diary structure: allowing entries at any time in accordance with actual subjective intentions, moods, emotions, reflections and current states of information. On the other hand, it resembles autobiographies in the publicness of all its material as well as in the ability of users to organize and streamline their entries, to condense its information to synthetic life accounts of any preferred size and specificity, to eliminate embarrassing entries a posteriori……thus producing a public self-presentation in accordance with the self-ideal maintained by the author, or by any more tactical considerations (e. g. by instrumentalizing life accounts for seeking an attractive partner or for promoting a professional career; Swindells 1995: passim).

In other words: Timeline combines the informality, flexibility and authenticity of personal diaries with the highly intentional, organized character of autobiographies which are never meant to reflect fully a personal life, but to offer a public self-presentation in accordance with specific intentions: e. g. the whish to "justify" past problematic activities and decisions or by "explaining" one's biography by enumerating the various influences and causalities responsible for its course.

3.4. Increased interactivity of identity constructions

Following Lev Vygotyky's view, all diary writing has a fundamental root in social communication, insofar as ontogenetically, it represents a *"transition from speech for others to speech for oneself"* (Vygotsky, 1986: 235; Stone 2006:53-54).). In this perspective, all self-talk originates from "egocentric talk" performed in a social context, in which the child assumes *'that it is understood by those who surround him'* (Vygotsky, 1986: 231; Stone 2006: 53f.). To make diaries public, then, could well be understood as "regressive" act: falling back on those earlier

developmental stages where all verbal communication was directed to others rather than toward oneself.

While traditional diaries were written for oneself or for an implied, ideal reader, online diaries are directed to a specified audience of (current and envisaged future) "friends". Very often, they have a co-autobiographic" quality: e. g. when photos portraying several individuals or news about collective events or experiences are posted. And they may of course be shaped by "pokes" and other feedback messages which inform the author about the expectations and judgments of his or her recipients, and which may even become a vital (and constantly changing) part of the totality of autobiographic information.

In the view of Viviane Serfaty, the self produced fiction typical for conventional private diaries is transformed in a collective fictional endeavour: thus assuming the character of a "collective performance" that may be produced by an "ensemble" for entertaining themselves or for impressing any third partners (in the sense described by Erving Goffman 1959).

> *"Not only is diary writing a creation, reading diaries is a creative process which interweaves with and modifies the diary itself, making it the centre of a collective production of meaning. This meaning takes the form of fictionalization of the self and of the events in the writer's daily life. Diary writers create themselves as the central characters in a fictional theatre populated by a large supporting cast of minor characters and of readers. The fiction thus created is essentially interactive and as such, thoroughly renews the art of the diary by turning it into a collaborative effort." (Serfaty 2004: 466).*

In other words: the Internet contributes to a less introspective, more interactive construction of identity .(Serfaty 2004: 466)**,** insofar as the feedback of readers is required in order to reinforce the sense of the diarist's own identity. Each response to an entry gives diarists confirmation how (and by whom) their self expressions have been received and evaluated: providing them with additional cues how to attune their personal identity to the perceptions and expectations of relevant others.

Thus, the conventional philosophical notion of the "intersubjective constitution of self identity" (in terms of Husserl, Schütz, Berger & Luckmann etc.) gains additional significance: insofar as in life stages beyond childhood, only the digital media may create a strong basis for keeping identity constructions in close contact with permanently ongoing (multilateral) social interactions. In fact, subjects may become socialized in a more totalized fashion insofar as they look at their self permanently with the eyes of (actual or potential) observers.

3.5. From narrative to informational forms of biographic communication

Peacock and Holland draw a distinction between two modes of structuring life account:
- a "story-focused" approach that relies on narrative presentation: emphasizing diachronic change and profoundly shaped by subjective judgments and expressions of the narrator
- a "life focused" mode based on the report of artifacts and objective historical data. (Peacock & Holland 1993: 369ff.).

It is evident that the biographical features on Social media promote the second mode: life histories have no longer been narrated because they are presented synchronically: in a "Timeline" where all stages, events and experiences of life are collected and made visible in an synoptic form. Instead of listening to the narrator's life story (which always needs much time), observers can more easily get a picture by inspecting the objective information: like a medical doctor who has not to rely any more on anamnestic accounts provided narratively by the patient, because he gains sufficient information from objective bodily measurements, CR imaging and the outcomes of various laboratory tests.

Thus, the raw material of Facebook biographies doesn't consist primarily of private thoughts and elaborated memoirs, but of explicit (textual, visual and auditive) information about the movies ever seen, the women ever loved, the songs ever heard, the books ever read, the parties ever attended, the countries ever visited, the occupations ever exercised.

Such *expressions by (verbal and nonverbal) artifacts* have the advantage of presenting individual biographies in objectified terms understandable for at least for everybody who shares the same culture – and are therefore functioning as an easy bridge for relating to the specific sender.

> *"The reader or viewer must perceive and make sense of disparate data provided through diverse media (print, photographs, videos, audio files), in an ongoing process of interpretation and construction of meaning. Yet, no matter how dissimilar the sources may be, each piece of information bolsters every other piece and conveys mutually reinforcing information. Accumulation thus creates density and texture. (Serfaty 2004: 460/461).*

It may be hypothesized that Facebook invites authors to see (and judge) their own life in terms of such externalized items that have been anchors for their own experiences – and neglect private subjective thoughts and emotions that cannot be related to such objectified cues. Even more, we may guess that people engage in many activities and experiences with the explicit instrumental intention to generate material for autobiographic Facebook entries – not for any immediate intrinsic gratification. As a consequence, today's "digital natives" may structure social relationships more and more in terms of such shared cultural products: especially digitalized productions that can easily be shared (like songs made accessible by "Spotify" or similar applications).

Evidently, such objectified, externalized artifacts have the characteristic that they cannot be controlled by its emitter nor kept within the boundaries of any particularistic group, because they have an intrinsic capacity to become "public": by being accessible to any outside individuals on the one hand and any corporate enterprises or governmental surveillance agencies on the other

As a consequence, even the most intimate relationships become "departicularized" by being permeated with objectified, universally accessible cultural patterns. There is no longer a shielded sphere of totally subjective communication - as it takes place for instance on nonverbal levels under face-to-face conditions.

It might be said that managing a Facebook life account is a substitute for what Goffman's describes as "face work" in primary human encounters. While face work is used for generating an immediate personal impression in a current situational frame, the management of life ac-

counts is instrumental for producing a generalized, idealized and highly controlled self-presentation intended to be valid across all specific moments and situations: an objectified personal image devoid of any specific perspectives.

Consequently, consulting Facebook pages is a highly efficient short cut way to get most relevant knowledge about a specific person – without the need to meet him or her personally or to engage in lengthy mutual communication

> *"With the current profile, you look at my wall, you look at my photos, you're done — there's nothing else to do," says Chris Cox, Facebook's VO of Product. He compares it to the first five minutes with a stranger, when you simply find out the basics about a person — where they work, where they went to school, who they know. Even the more extensive information that Facebook has added over the years only adds up to five more minutes of conversation, where you might learn what the person was been doing very recently." (Levy 2011).*

Evidently, such procedures are particularly functional when there is a need to procure highly detailed information about many new people within very short time (e. g. when choosing rapidly between many applicants for a job or an apartment, or in the case of teachers permanently confronted with new students).

The more all my biographic information is public, the more I lose my autonomy to disclose selected parts of it to selected people: e. g. by expressing special trust in somebody to whom I disclose details not revealed to others. Given the ubiquitous availability of informational knowledge available independently of any social interaction, it is no longer a thrilling experience to become acquainted with somebody by meeting him and communicating with him face to face, because all such fascination has been destroyed by online information acquired *ex ante*. Any "First Rendezvous'" tends to be "poisoned" form the onset by all the information partners have fished out of the Net before their meeting. Any attempt to present myself and describe myself to another person may be hampered by the fact (or at least the vague expectation) that he or she has already has formed an image of my personality and my life by consulting my FB biography and by following my lifeticker (or my Twitter activity) over the last days or weeks.

While users remain *technically* free to modify their files endlessly according to their current preferences, they may *factually* not able to do so because they have to keep up a consistent appearance before all their observers. The more my biography is consulted by my "friends", the more I would run the risk of being criticized whenever I try to change my own past: e. g. by eliminating embarrassing items or by adding additional hitherto hidden information.

Thus, I see myself caught in the trap of having to present myself in fashion compatible with all this sedimented information: never maintaining to have never seen a movie I have explicitly commented on my web pages, or not be acquainted with a specific person figuring among my "closer friends". (Geser 2008: 38ff.)

In fact, nobody may be able to start a new life by breaking with his past: e- g. by hiding information about his participation in a questionable political demonstration or his membership in a fascist organization (Güssgen 2011).

3.6. The catalyzation of (meta)-autobiographic" subjective reflections

All personal information on Facebook and other Social Media conveys two kinds of information:

1) *first order information*: providing knowledge about biographic facts or subjective thoughts;
2) *second order information*: revealing the author's readiness to make such items public and to give them a higher or lesser importance vis-à-vis other items, thus revealing something about their "impression management strategies" and the general way they draw a line between private and public life: ranging from an almost complete sealing off to a disposition to disclose carelessly any (even compromising) information about themselves. Even those who flatly refuse to maintain a FB profile at all will inadvertently also convey such personal meta-information: about their obstinate resistance to conform with a norm that has become imperative for over 1 billion human beings within a shockingly short period of time.

Thus, Timeline can be seen as a catalyzer *for biographic self-reflection*: by forcing individuals to rethink permanently the way they construct their own past life course and the way they present it to others. They may even make such changes an explicit subject of their online diary writing: so that a second order "autobiography of autobiography" is created.

By catalyzing such self-reflections, Facebook (and similar Social Media) may well boost learning processes that help individuals to optimize self impression management in view of finding a suitable marriage partner or making a professional career:

> *"Now that Timeline encourages us to turn back the clock, many of us will get a fresh perspective on how we present ourselves to our colleagues and the world — and we may not like what we see. That perspective could be as valuable as a year's worth of executive coaching — if you seize the opportunity to take a hard look at where you spend your time and attention. Before you check out your Facebook Timeline, jot down the professional highs and lows of your past few years. Now look at your Facebook Timeline and compare: Did your big work breakthroughs come when you were barely updating (and perhaps a bit more focused on your job)? Or did your flurries of online activity correlate with the times when you felt especially alive and attuned to the pulse of your organization? You may gain surprising insights into the relationship between your social media life, your professional success, and your personal satisfaction." (Samuel 2011).*

In particular, users may become more prone to develop a consciousness about their own personal developments and changes – including the changes of their own ideal self. By making explicit their preferences, reflections, emotions and activities, they can always go back to any past period of their own life: checking the way they have expressed themselves in those days and compare their past with their present self.

„For the first time, you can consult Facebook for knowing who you would have liked to be two years ago." (Stöcker 2011).

3.7. The increased demand for "remote autobiographic control" (Levy 2011)

For most people, Timeline means an additional channel of autobiographic self-expression: along with Xing, LinkedIn – and at least the old-fashioned CV or "résumé" they manufacture for optimizing their career chances when applying for open positions.

Evidently, this creates a constant need to keep these different self-presentations "clean" and consistent with each other, because manifest flaws will evidently throw a questionable light on the person's sincerity, thus discrediting him or her in a very general sense:

> *"To create a strong propersonal profile, you have to start by burying any inappropriate content. Use the new privacy setting called "limit the audience for past posts," so that your entire history becomes invisible to everyone except a select group of friends. Then, go back through the timeline and select a representative, but flattering range of posts and photos that you will share publicly. Complete your career information and flesh out any gaps with additional posts or photos (which you can backdate). Review your new Timeline and make sure the story it tells is consistent with the chronology in your résumé, and more importantly, with the way you present yourself in other professional contexts." (Samuel 2011).*

Considering that public digital self displays on Social Media provide a new sphere of "behavior in public places" (Erving Goffman 1963), it is to be expected that they is subjected in the same way to rather rigid conventionalities and conformity pressures which reduce drastically the unlimited freedoms of expressions opened up on the technical level – similar to the constraints governing the specifications of avatars in "Second Life" (Geser 2007).

> *"Making one's diary public from the outset might condemn the writer to rigid adherence to social codes. Being completely transparent to others, being subjected to maximum visibility can lead to so strong an internalization of social conventions that writers can textualize nothing but the most conventional feelings, actions or thoughts. Such diaries merely secularize the religious diary young girls had to keep in the nineteenth century and show to their parents on a daily basis as evidence of their religious purity. They act as metonymies for the self in society and hence do not attempt anything but a record of the trivia from which daily life is made." (Serfaty 2004: 469)*

Thus, at least publicly fully accessible autobiographies are likely to mirror strongly the norms and conventions as well as the transient fads and fashions reigning (or supposed to be reigning by its authors) at the time of their origin – similar to people in anonymous urban environments who display neatly all the currently dominant forms of clothing, cosmetics and ritualized civil behavior (Goffman 1963).

3.8. The Self-defeating concept of "total sharing"

Recent developments enable users to increase the posting of autobiographic materials almost indefinitely: e-g. by using applications which allow automatic uploads without any active intervention by the sender. As a consequence of such innovations, the FB founder may well see outperformed his own "Zuckerberg's law" which predicts that the volume of photos, status updates and other online material each individual posts on Facebook will double every year.
But on the receiving side, however, limits will soon become insurmountable: The more people use "uploading by default", the less everybody will be able and ready to invest all the time for reading all these daily growing "raw logfiles" constantly generated by all their "friends."
Consequently, interpersonal relationships may become destabilized and "anomic", because individuals will become ever less certain about the effects of their self displays on other people. Under conventional no-tech or low-tech conditions, social relationships and interactions are heavily shaped by a restricted set of cues: e. g. associated with the current bodily appearance of the individuals as well as their current verbal and nonverbal utterances, and a rather limited set of information referring to the biography and current social statuses and social roles. To the degree that Facebook Timeline (or similar applications) enters into such informal interaction, it may have the effect of widening the range of cues which can potentially have an impact on social communication.
As biographic information about all my life periods and a wide variety of my interests, activities, roles and memberships is available with the same explicitness and visibility, it will be highly uncertain what specific information my friends have absorbed and what aspects of my (current or previous) life become salient in any contact or conversation. Maybe somebody will refer to a book I have completely forgotten because I have read it several years ago: just because he has recently stumbled over it recently, or he or she wants to talk about my impressions about Uruguay (I have visited ten years ago) just because he/she intends to go there in the near future.

There will certainly arise a growing need for countering automated upload procedures with similarly automated applications for filtering, streamlining, compressing, structuring and simplifying the received information, because most recipients lack the time, energy and skills necessary to implement their own selection criteria. For instance: making inductive inferences about the "music taste" of a person by synthesizing all the information about single songs this person has ever listened to, or his "literary taste" by drawing conclusions from all the Kindle books he/she has ever downloaded or read. Evidently, advertizers have the same need for simplification, in order to identify homogeneous consumer segments and to address their messages to each person in optimal ways.
Such programs will have to incorporate standardized rules - by implicating that most individuals agree with them, or are at least willing to accept them homogeneously: thus reinforcing highly homogeneous and standardized ways how everybody relates to his own biography and displays it to other people.

3.9. A rich new source for "autoethnographic" research

Since the 1970ies, social scientists have shown a rising interest in autobiographic materials in general and "oral histories" in particular as a source of qualitative empirical material that provides deep insights into everyday life and the subjective thoughts and emotions of individual actors that cannot be obtained from statistical data, survey results or other more standardized sources (Laslett 1999: 391). In the United Kingdom, for instance, such approaches have found expression in the very large scale "Mass Observation Project" (founded 1980 by David Pollock at the Sussex University) aiming at gathering informal autobiographic materials from thousands of voluntary informants over considerable periods of time (Sheridan 1993).
Traditional ethnographic methods have always been applied to pictures, sounds, videos and other non-written artifacts as they are nowadays richly displayed in Facebook pages (Reed-Danahay 2001: 407ff.). More and more, ethnographers have learnt to read even highly personalized autobiographic accounts as valid expressions of a specific collectivity and shared culture (Obnuki-Tierney 1984). In her study on Plains Indian males, for instance, Hertha Wong stressed that pictographs can be an important dimension of autobiographic accounts – and thus be used as a valuable source of ethnographic evidence (Wong 1989: 295).

Several years before the advent of the Internet, John D. Dorst provided an astonishingly adequate account of present Social media by asserting that *"the culture of advanced capitalism…or …postmodernity consists largely in the process of self-inscription, indigenous self-documentation and endlessly reflexive simulation"*, and by observing that as a result of this ever growing amount of self-elicited expressions, (postmodernity) *"does for itself, and massively so, the sort of thing ethnographers and other species of documentarist claim to do. The suburban photographer by the roadside is a postmodern paradigm." (Dorst 1989: 2/3).*
From this he concludes that postmodernity *"renders the professional ethnographer superfluous"*, because *"whole institutions central to the postmodern order, mass marketing and advertising for example, engage in ethnographic research and generate countless ethnographic texts." (Dorst 1989: 2).*

For two reasons, autobiographic materials posted on Social Network Sites can be readily seen as rather authentic expression of collective culture:
1) because they rely very much on objectified cultural productions (as users inform about the books they have read, the songs they have heard, the life concerts they have attended etc.);
2) because such personal accounts are basically addressed to a larger collectivity, so that pressures are working to use symbols everybody can decipher and to conform to collective standards (instead of revealing deviant idiosyncratic traits).
Consequently,
> *"…viewing online diaries as primary sources may afford insight into the mores of ordinary people in contemporary America. Focusing on anonymous American diarists makes it possible to explore how this contemporary social practice reflects the transformations of the heartland in present-day America, how ordinary women and men, average Americans,*

> *make sense of their society and can be seen as representative of American culture, while at*
> *the same time engaging in the most personal kind of writing." (Serfaty 2004: 457).*

Thus, Timeline will offer a wealth of objectified testimonies about individual lifes that remain accessible in exactly the form they have originally been posted, not affected by the usual memory distortions of "oral histories" that had hitherto to be used for (re)gaining information about a non-documented past.

4. Conclusions

Given the extreme versatility of the Internet as a polyvalent medium for any sort of informative and communicative human behavior, it is not astonishing that it can be harnessed to a manifold of different purposes and also gives rise to several competing (as well as complementary) commercial endeavors based on highly divergent premises. In contrast to traditional one-way mass media which are mainly instruments for reigning elites, however, all these endeavors have in common that they are predominantly oriented toward the (alleged) preferences and dispositions of average users.

Reviving the old terms introduced by of David Riesman, *Google* builds it empire on *"inner-directed" individuals* optimizing their paths through the Cyberjungle in accordance with their individual goals and preferences , while *Facebook* assumes *"other-directed" users* constantly disposed to react responsively to opinions, suggestions and pressures from their social environment, and to conform to standards of collective culture.

From a general perspective, *Facebook* provides users with many alternatives to post various kinds of information (manually or by default), and to make different information accessible to the public, to their total network of acquaintances or just to more intimate circles of "closest friends."

For social researchers, it will be highly interesting to study empirically to what extent these different options are implemented by various user segments in different countries and World regions, and how such usage patterns will change over time.

By gathering such data, we may be well able to assess the degree to which privacy norms vs. dispositions toward public exhibitionism are maintained by various groups of the population.

Evidently, most people will have to live through long (and maybe painful) learning processes in order to experience how public personal information may impact on their private and professional lifes (e. g by becoming victims of stalking, mobbing, data mining or phishing attacks), so that they will turn to restrictive patterns – or even enforce new legal rules on Facebook rules related to the deletion of unwelcome content or to the rights of survivors to deal with the accounts of deceased user.

Thus, Facebook's fate will depend on the truth of socio-psychological premises that seem at least questionable, because they neglect the evident fact that people have limited time and

energy for engaging in social activities, and that they certainly also have a "need for secrecy" that may correlate with cultural background, gender, age, social status and many other conditions. For instance, people may be reluctant to share when they are in a stage of experimentation: e. g. trying out new music styles they don't yet know whether they will find it "cool", trivial or distasteful, or when they try out new activities (like climbing a difficult mountain peak) while not yet knowing whether they will succeed, or when they initiate contacts with somebody they don't know whether he is honest or belongs to a criminal gang.

Even more specific assumptions are involved in the implementation of "Timeline" which makes it compulsory for all users to organize their posted material in a diachronic autobiographic fashion. It may well be argued that such a format is implicitly anchored in basic premises of Western culture not shared by the rapidly growing number of Internet users in Asian or African countries:

> *"The decision to write a full 'whole' life story, that is, one with a chronological narrative which takes the reader from birth to later in life, through life events and transitions in a journey of self-improvement, has been historically, in Western tradition a cultural choice utilized predominantly by male writers, at least in published autobiographies." (Sheridan 1993: 31).*

Likewise, it has been argued that in Western culture, individuals tend toward a unified and consistent self-identity maintained independently of current contextual conditions, while nonwestern cultures would promote more fragmented and situationally conditioned identities, because individual autonomy and consistent self-organization do not belong to their primary concerns (Peacock & Holland 1993).

Evidently, organizing all diachronic data around single persons gives an additional boost to the Western Megatrend called "individualization".
In the longer run and with increasing weight of nonwestern users, there may well emerge a countertendency to organize such information around collectivities: e. g. by installing Timelines of families, neighborhoods or cities, business firms, fan groups or voluntary organizations, provinces or nations. Such "Collective Timelines" could well become instrumental for defining, stabilizing and propagating *the identity of ethnic groups, nations and all kinds of supraindividual actors:* by increasing the awareness of common memories, shared ideologies and consensually acknowledged values, goals, leaders, institutions and cultural traditions, thus reinforcing the internal cohesion as well as the mutual separation of different social entities.

Thus, Facebook will place itself in the long historical tradition of Euro-American institutions that have originally been created for the worldwide propagation and implementation of Western norms and values: this time aiming to make *patterns of US college socializing* normative for mankind as a whole. As we can learn from other bold undertakings with similar ambitions, it will certainly be soon adapted (and maybe even perverted) to fulfill the needs of various nonwestern cultures.

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