

# APPEARANCE, AFFECT AND APPROPRIATE PARTICIPATION ON FACEBOOK

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In this article, we address how norms of appearance and participation on the social network site Facebook are negotiated through the personal profiles and interactions of a sample of Danish Facebook users. The study is based on a survey followed by focus group interviews and observation of participants' profiles. We argue that communication on Facebook is characterized by an ambiguous performativity by which politicized discourses on public appearance are socially filtered and negotiated as social norm-building. Accordingly, we demonstrate how the personal profiles of Facebook take the form of 'publicized modes' of appearance and how a negotiation of 'appropriate' vs 'inappropriate' participation is taking place.

Keywords: social network sites, Facebook, personal profiles, connectivity, performativity, affect, self-accounting, (in)appropriate participation, norm-building, phatic communion, small talk

## *1. Contextualizing our study on norm-building on Facebook*

As José van Dijck (2013) has put it, the social media are the drivers of the present 'era of connectivity'. In this era, connectivity has become the core societal value and the key metrics; it is initiated not least by the social media – of which the social network site Facebook is the most widespread worldwide, also in the country of our study, Denmark. Facebook presents users with new affordances and new ambiguities of risk and trust, to be socially negotiated. Connectivity – and Facebook – are, according to van Dijck, neither good nor bad per se, but are entangled in a range of political, economic and social issues. The convergence of different informational resources, the use of algorithms

to generate and structure available information and social interaction, and the increasing commercialization of the social media are just some of the questions facing users as well as researchers.

The concept of connectivity rephrases the widely used term ‘networked publics’, coined by Boyd (2008, 2011), but adds to its dynamics and complexity. The term ‘networked publics’ designates, on the one hand, how social network sites are embedded in the general mechanisms of digital media as driven by computerized algorithms; it implies that Facebook users and their profiles are automatically (internally as well as externally) connected. On the other hand, the phrase signifies how the personal networks in terms of ‘friends lists’ are established by specific users, bringing together people from different social contexts and thus creating personal networks (boyd 2011). This, in its turn, is said to erase the borders of private and public, as constituted by the analogue era and its concomitant society, thereby raising a communicative situation of ‘mixed contexts’ as well as ‘invisible audiences’ (boyd 2011). Like van Dijck, Boyd does not see this as either good or bad, but rather as a changed communicative condition.

According to Boyd and others, for most ‘ordinary’ Facebook users, the aim of taking part is to connect to people with whom one is already affiliated, with the intention to establish a personal channel for networking and communicating (boyd 2008, boyd & Ellison 2008; Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield 2006, 2007, 2008). Research on social network sites and Facebook has tended to see this as either suiting neo-liberal discourses of self-promotion and building social capital, or as supplying resources for peer-to-peer-support and empowerment (Gilbert & Karahalios 2009; Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield & Vitak 2011; Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin 2008). By contrast, other studies highlight how, freed from the discursive framing as either public or private, participating on Facebook is both less obliging and more emotionally invested. It is claimed to enhance a whole new register of social sensibilities, to be continuously called upon to disclose, share and contribute in a socially mixed and fluent context (Haythornthwaite

2005; Vetere, Howard & Gobbs 2005). Other researchers have argued that networked publics establish a digital co-presence, a sense of being connected as part of the vital stream of communication; this, then, is claimed by some to trigger a certain type of intensified, but empty ‘contact communication’, or even a ‘hysteric’ intimacy (Miller 2008, drawing on Wittel 2001).

From this point of departure, the present article investigates how Facebook is used, interpreted and emotionally invested by a sample of Danish users, and how communicative norms of proper forms of appearance and appropriate participation are negotiated. So far, studies on norm creation on Facebook have been few; they mostly refer to social- or discourse-psychological theories of norm-violation (as summarized by McLaughlin and Vitak 2012). By contrast, we approach the issue by way of post-structural discourse theory and analysis, with an emphasis on performativity (Butler 1997, 2005) and affect (Ahmed 2004; Probyn 2005). We build on these studies by doing a qualitative study on Danish Facebook users (in focus group meetings and profile readings); the study follows up on earlier surveys of Internet use in Denmark (Finnemann et. al. 2012; Jensen & Sørensen 2014a).

In the following, we first detail the methods of our study and present our sample of Danish Facebook users in order to be able to analyse their attitudes towards, attachment to and daily use of, Facebook. Next, we present the theory of performativity as a discursive practice ‘commemorating’ (to use Judith Butler’s term) politicized and affectively invested discourses of proper appearance and appropriate participation. Finally, we use the theory for the analysis of our empirical material, zooming in on the concept of ‘contact communication’ and relating it to a particular finding of our study, which we will name the ‘small talk controversy’. Our aim is to address the tacit process of norm building on Facebook in terms of what Butler has phrased ‘publicized modes’ of appearance (Butler 2005), ‘appropriate behavior’ and ‘prohibited’ versus ‘preferred’ stories (Butler 1997).

Our study took place from 2009 to 2012. Much has happened to

Facebook and social media in general since then. Even so, we argue that our data and our approach in terms of norm building and affective investment are still relevant, as some of the moral dilemmas involved are typical for social media behavior and social life in general. These dilemmas and the resulting ambiguities are assumed to become more intense (but also more diversified) following the move from ‘networked publics’ to ‘connectivity’. There are also cases in which Facebook and the users’ behavior may have changed; we will touch upon this issue in the Conclusion.

## *2. Triangulation of methods: Survey, focus groups, and profiles*

In this section, we outline the mixed methods we used to grasp users’ experience and their norm construction on Facebook in an everyday setting. We have argued elsewhere (Jensen & Sørensen 2014a) that this task requires quantitative as well as qualitative methods: measuring objective characteristics and content, as well as doing subjective interpretations of users’ habits and perceptions. In the present study, we combined an online survey of users’ subjective perceptions; their in-depth considerations about everyday life practices and evolving norms, as these emerged in off-line focus groups among the survey participants; and observation of their actual behavior, as evidenced in their Facebook profiles. In choosing this combination of on- and offline methods, we have taken our inspiration from research on methodology in internet-based contexts with regard to issues of validity and ethical standards (Ess 2007; Markham & Baym 2008; Ess & Thorseth 2010). Our specific mixed-methods approach was developed to grasp user practice and experience of, as well as affective investment in, Facebook with a focus on their constructions of norms for sensible and appropriate participation (see also Jensen & Sørensen 2014a). As to the ethics aspect, we have used proven ways of anonymizing our informants. Further, our informants have had first-hand access to our publications.

Our 2009 survey of Internet use in Denmark included 1,710 re-

spondents, recruited from the national panel of Capacent Epinion, a Danish company specialized in online surveys and data analysis; as part of the survey, we constructed a special section on social media. It turned out that 970 of the respondents used social media, first and foremost Facebook, on a more or less regular basis. In this part of the survey, the respondents were asked rather simple questions about their everyday use of Facebook, as well as about their attitude and attachment to it; the answers were graded on a scale from 1 to 5.

The three themes (daily use, attitude and attachment) were then explored further during four focus group meetings. Among the survey respondents who had volunteered, in all 20 (N) were selected; the meetings were held during 2010 in the three major cities of Copenhagen (1 meeting, N=9), Aarhus (1 meeting, N=5) and Odense (2 meetings, N=3 in each). The selection ensured a spread with regard to age, gender, region of origin, and education/job situation (gender: male N=10, female N=10; age: 23 to 75; education /job situation: from unemployed to academic). This spread was prevalent in the two larger focus groups, whereas the two smaller groups were more homogenous. The most vivid and diversified discussions took place in the larger groups; still, though we could not identify significant variations among the four groups as to the core parameters of our analysis, significant variations turned out to be related to age and gender, followed by familiarity with the media (more on this below). (Following the meetings, we had some email contact in particular with one participant who wanted to supplement her contribution to the focus group in relation to the tacit norms of self-accounting; also this will be commented on in the analysis).

The focus group meetings were designed to address the everyday use of social media/Facebook, ('where, when and how'), and in particular to expand on attitudes and affective attachment (the 'why') – a topic which could only be touched on superficially in the survey. A further focus was on possible norms of appropriate communicative behavior, established in negotiation among the informants during the meetings. In order to highlight this issue, participants were presented with actual

media debates and illustrative materials, and then asked to discuss examples of their own of 'good' and 'bad' communicative practice in terms of status updates, comments, use of pictures and more. The focus group meetings were recorded, transcribed as word-files, and (rather simply) coded according to the three main themes (use, attitude, attachment) and the overall issue of evolving norms, after which the results were collated and confronted with our theoretically derived concepts. The latter concerned 'modes' of self-accounting as well as of 'appropriate' and 'proper' communicative acting, derived in particular from Butler's theory of performativity, and placed within the genre of 'self-accounting' to be outlined in the next section.

Following the focus group meetings, we turned to observing the personal profiles of the focus group members through 2011 and 2012. Of the 20 focus group members, 17 gave their consent to access their active Facebook profiles (one of which was in fact guarded by strict privacy settings, thereby challenging the very 'contract' we had established earlier, and contributing to this particular issue in its own way). During this two year period, we followed the members' status updates, comments, and other activities, such as uploads of pictures and albums. Our continuous observations were 'nailed' by screen dumps and our reading of the profile contributions, based on our long-term knowledge and appraisal of the material; in other words, our approach was 'nethnographical' rather than content-analytical (Kozinets 2010). For our profile-readings, we were guided by the focus group interviews and our own analyses of these; we also compared what was said in the focus groups with what the members were doing, according to their profiles.

Our research design represents a double triangulation. First, by using different methods we explored aspects of the same phenomenon from different spatial levels: the macro-level of society, the meso-level of group dynamics, and the micro-level of individual behavior. Second, our design allowed us to explore social media behaviors and logics in different social settings: from the anonymous, personal answers given

in an online survey, to the socially present setting of a physical focus group and the embodied but private setting of everyday specific behavior. In this way, we had the opportunity to compare the attitudes and practices described anonymously in the survey, the negotiated agreements and norms in the social context of the focus group, and the actual, lived practice. Especially the comparison between the latter two revealed interesting contradictions and ambiguities, in particular in relation to the issue of small talk.

Our survey data were collected from May 2009 over a period of two years; the focus groups meetings were held in the spring of 2010, whereas the Facebook profiles were followed from the summer of 2010 to the summer of 2012. Rather than doing a fixed triangulation, we chose to sequentially study the development of norms and behavior over time. The current article addresses this issue in terms of particular cases of changes in attitude and practice with regard to what is 'appropriate' communication. The relative age of our material (especially considering the ongoing rapid changes in the technology and use of social media in general and Facebook in particular) will be discussed in the Conclusion.

### *3. Demographics, use genres and, 'sensible' use of Facebook*

The survey documents that Facebook at the time was by far the best known and most used social media in Denmark, as it still is today. At the time, 57% of the respondents used social media in general and 52% (versus 60% percent today) used Facebook; among these, there were slightly more women than men. Among the youngest respondents, aged 18-24, 77% used Facebook. For the oldest, aged 65 and above, the figure was only 31%.<sup>1</sup> Besides gender and age, the level of Internet use is important – among the 95% who used the Internet daily, 54% used Facebook. For the weekly users, the level was only 31%.

With regard to scope and intensity of use (the 'use genres'; Bakardjieva 2006), the respondents were distributed among three distinctive

types: the more steady users (regular and broad use); the more casual users (random and rather narrow use); and the occasional visitors (rare use, and mostly passive, as the profiles were merely used to follow friends, or for the purpose of surfing groups and sites). There was no representation of ‘super-users’ (characterised by advanced, trendsetting use, in terms of fully using options such as multi-modality, linking and settings); in other studies, this group was found to comprise from 10 to 20% of the users. However, also in these studies, 80 to 90% of users were considered to be more random or even rare (Baym 2010; Hargittai & Hsieh 2011).

The group with a more persistent use consisted in part of younger women (in their 20s), in part of somewhat older men (in their 30s and 40s). These users had the most varied friends lists, but also the strictest privacy policies in terms of access, only allowing ‘friends’ to follow their profiles. Contrary to common expectations (as also documented by other studies; McLaughlin and Vitak 2012), the younger women were more restrictive than the older men as to what to disclose, particularly in terms of photographs (Livingstone 2007; Larsen 2009). Conversely, the most private pictures and intimate postings (like declarations such as ‘I love you’), stemmed from the males (see Jensen & Sørensen 2013a, 2013b for more detail). By contrast, the group of random and rare users, comprising different genders and ages, had less mixed friends lists; their circles were typically dedicated to the family and to leisure and civic activities. While most of these users claimed to restrict access to their profiles to ‘friends’, some had actually made part of their profiles (the ‘about’ feature) accessible to the general Facebook public. As to providing access to ‘friends’, only a few users in each group would consider restrictions. Rather, it was generally acknowledged that it is a particular quality of Facebook that one provides equal access to everybody, and expects to be treated in the same way oneself.

Overall, the respondents’ approach in terms of privacy and friending was considered a ‘sensible’ one, dictated by their awareness that, due to Facebook’s networked structure and automatic monitoring, one never



knows what information will be divulged to a wider public. Consequently, even within strict privacy settings, one has to behave the way one would in any other public context. “As a matter of fact, you are sitting in a glass house with a microphone on”, as one male interviewee, aged 50, said in a follow-up interview. In terms of putting this ‘sensible’ use into practice, we noticed that the younger women rarely used one of Facebook’s core features, the status update. When they did use it, they did it in an almost ‘clinic’, matter-of-fact way, maybe using their I-phone and the popular feature for ‘checking in’ at different places in the city. Scrolling down the younger women’s walls, one observes that almost all posts were linked to places they were going to and events they either had joined recently or just ‘liked’. We have interpreted this behavior as expressing a kind of sensible privacy strategy, but also an attunement to the networked sociability and communication specific to a generation, prioritizing ‘cool’ manner. Furthermore we see this, on the one hand, as confirming what was said earlier about ‘contact communication’ and, on the other, as expressing disapproval of what was dubbed ‘hysterical intimacy’. All of this will be argued in more detail in the analysis.

#### *4. Performativity, affectivity and norm-building*

At the core of Butler’s theory of performativity is the hypothesis that politicized regimes of discourse arise in public domains that deem certain kinds of speech, talk and stories as being more morally qualified than others. Since such discursive regimes are socially embedded and distributed, social interchange tends to take the form of stylized repetition of acknowledged discursive scripts: “The subject’s production takes place not only through the regulation of that subject’s speech, but through the regulation of the social domain of speakable discourse” (Butler 1997:133). Performativity designates how speech, by citing such powerful discursive scripts, tends to bring about what it utters. However, this kind of ‘social mimicry’ is also fragile and may be un-

done by miscitation as well as by deliberate social critique. Thus, there exists an intricate dynamics between politicized discourses, collective morals and inter-subjective communication as also pointed out in affect theory (Ahmed 2004; Probyn 2005). In this context, the basic affect regulating this dynamics is *shame*. Shame is about the feeling of self, of being a human and a human of worth (Probyn 2005); it is therefore also what regulates the exposure to the other and to the public eye. Shame can be demolishing to a subject, but it can also serve as a means of self-critique and self-transformation (Ahmed 2004).

According to Butler (1997), performativity is at stake in self-accounting as a speech genre. As a genre, this is distinguished by a rhetorical claim of authenticity, displayed in an ambition to critically self-investigate. Drawing on Foucault's theory of self-governmentality in her essay *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Butler argues that the modern subject has to be self-reflective and engage in a continuous being-seen-doing in order to be acknowledged as a subject that counts. The legitimate form of this activity is self-accounting; in self-accounting, the modern subject embodies given social scripts, both in order to have a say on, and negotiate, them. The self-account, then, becomes a speech act through which the subject critically explores the relations between self and other, and self and society. It has to do so in 'a publicized mode of appearance' in order to be recognized as a legitimate member of the collective, but simultaneously has to give it the imprint of the individual body and voice to be accepted as authentic (Butler 1997: 114).

In the present case, we argue that Facebook is significant to the networked publics in the sense that it calls upon its users to partake in a continuous collaborative self-accounting, characterized by speed, outreach and density (Baym 2010; van Dijck 2013). We also argue that in order to master the particular art of self-accounting, users have to adjust to the specific social media remix of traditions, from oral confession and textual life-writing to digital (micro)blogging, short-messaging and chatting (Miller & Shephard 2004; Lüders, Prøitz & Rasmussen 2010). The authenticity that is called for in self-accounting is evaluated

not so much according to referential truth as to the ability to (re)vitalize the conventions of the genre, while at the same time developing them further and making them meaningful to the present audience.

In the following, we shall analyse the *saying* in the focus groups and the *doing* on the Facebook profiles, respectively from the viewpoints of performativity and affect.

### 5. *Self-accounting, ethos and publicized modes of appearance*

As mentioned above, earlier research on self-accounting, both on social network sites in general and on Facebook in particular, has tended to highlight either self-management and the building of social capital (Gilbert & Karahalios 2009; Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield & Vitak 2011), or the aspect of personal empowerment and social support (Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin 2008). By contrast, our study found, and put focus on, how the modes of self-accounting display an intricate interplay of, on the one hand, the unique and extraordinary, and on the other, stories of the everyday, the ordinary and mundane. On this ground we argue that, generally speaking, appearing on Facebook is about establishing a position of 'ethos'. It is about engaging in an everyday discourse and displaying oneself as an equal participant in the general socializing on the platform – which is characterized by Butler as taking an 'ethical stand' (see also Warnick and Heinemann 2012). As to ethos, this has to do with an experience of authenticity, which in its turn requires a certain coherence in, and between, one's life and the account; first and foremost, however, ethos is about being seen as, and acknowledged for, doing self-accounting, handling the genre competently, and adhering to 'publicized modes of appearance'.

In the focus groups, it turned out to be difficult to address these and other tacit norms of proper appearance on Facebook directly. Rather, the issue had to be addressed through examples of what is not 'proper' appearance and by showing what *is*. In the focus groups, the examples that came up were related to what has been phrased, also in research

on computer-mediated communication, as over- vs. under-sharing. In terms of under-sharing, it was agreed that, even if Facebook can be used for a lot of different purposes, the main purpose of having a profile is still to affiliate (albeit to varying degrees) with ‘friends’. Accordingly, users have to disclose themselves to some extent, if not in very intimate ways, at least by occasionally announcing the actual ‘state of affairs’: either by showing up themselves, or reacting to one’s ‘friends’. If users look in vain for activity on your profile or never get your response to their own messages, they will probably not return to you; if, on the other hand, they are ‘spammed’ with all sorts of frivolous updates (for instance, concerning your game activities), they will probably ‘mute’ or even ‘ignore’ you altogether, or so it was claimed.

However, the focus groups generally agreed upon that there are no universal rules of turn-taking, sequencing or ‘pair-parting’, the way such conversational rules are maintained in face-to-face, synchronous talk. When people talk one-to-many, non-simultaneously, on Facebook, “they do it for their own sakes”, as one young woman (age 25) expressed it. She even admitted that for her, one of the fascinations of Facebook was the opportunity to follow family, friends, and/or acquaintances without necessarily having to immediately disclose her identity and share some information: “When I – finally – log on to Facebook, it is to pry on [the profiles of] the others”. Still, it was agreed that Facebook’s liveliness depends on everybody’s will to contribute: even if you are mostly a ‘follower’, you will have to signal your presence, for instance by using the ‘like’-feature from time to time. Pure ‘lurking’, in other words, was deemed improper, inasmuch as it revealed a user’s refusal to take part in the general movement to self-account.

The illegitimacy of such under-sharing was also the reason why two interviewees stopped face-booking and had withdrawn their profile. In addition, they said, they had found the contributions of their friends – as well as their own – too trivial and boring. Under-sharing for reasons of triviality turned out to be the most specific indication of non-proper appearance; it is closely followed by its opposite, over-sharing, which

was arguably related to negatively laden themes and feelings. A withdrawal from Facebook due to over-sharing occurred in the case of a third interviewee, whose mentioning of certain body parts and bodily functions had triggered a veritable wave of shaming on the part of her friends – this experience was so traumatic that she has stopped opening Facebook ever since.

Checking and balancing over- vs. under-sharing revealed a tacit ideal in terms of a certain ‘cool’ style (to be further explored in the next section). This ideal, as a norm of the non-normative, was mostly expressed by the interviewees as an uncomfortable feeling of missing out on expectations and as a certain anxiety or stress when opening Facebook. One interviewee (female, age 54) told us how she always “freezes up in front of the screen”.

#### *6. On appropriate communicative acts*

Implicit norms as to forms of sharing and contributing were further explored in the interviews on the basis of specific examples. We tried to make sense of the apparent consistent opinion in the focus groups on what can be disclosed in personal profiles, in groups and on pages; here, we made use of Butler’s notions of ‘appropriate’ vs. ‘inappropriate’ speech and of ‘preferred’ as opposed to ‘prohibited’ stories, respectively (Butler 1997:135ff). When asked about proper as against improper talk, and about which stories to tell and which not to tell on personal profiles, a consensus emerged among the interviewees across focus groups and types of users with regard to the phenomenon of over-sharing and to what *cannot* be said or told. The participants agreed that one doesn’t want to hear about serious illness, suffering and death, or about bodily functions and psychological problems. Even if one from time to time may accept, and even appreciate, ‘clean’ postings on such issues, one does not want to be informed in detail or at length. While several interviewees knew of examples of stories about for instance serious illness, and acknowledged the catharsis that could be achieved by

posting such stories, the respective communicative acts were generally considered inappropriate.

When comparing this kind of statements to the interviewees' actual behavior on their profiles, we can confirm that the above approach was generally maintained. Whereas some posts were about seasonal illnesses, such as flu and coughing, there were none dealing with severe illness (if they did, they were disguised). In the literature, it has been discussed whether social network sites are used to expose, exchange information about, and get support with regard to health or social problems in the kind of help-to-self-help way that has been observed on other user-generated platforms, such as newsgroups or blogs (Parks 2011).

A particular case can illustrate that this was not the case for the personal profiles in our study – even though the theme did pop up now and then and aroused strong feelings that otherwise remained unexpressed. One of the interviewees, a then 44-year-old woman, had vehemently distanced herself from the sharing of illness and death by referring to a friend, who had been using Facebook as a kind of diary covering her husband's cancer, death and funeral. Shortly after the focus group meeting, when she learned that she herself had cancer, she started posting about this in the 'clean' way she had pleaded for, and only in order to explain why she was not present as usual on Facebook. In Butler's terms, we could say that she tried to adopt a discursive regime valid in other types of (mass) media, where stories of coping and surviving are allowable (Butler 1997). However (as she told us by mail), some of her friends who opened their Facebook accounts to surf, chat and relax, did not like to be confronted with this kind of story; consequently, she deleted all these postings (in fact, she cut off posting altogether for three months). But the experience had made her change her mind regarding other people's postings in similar situations, and after a while, she could again be seen posting on her personal fight with cancer, this time being supported by her remaining friends; she now also connected to broader issue of health care, civic initiatives, and so on, which indicates that she in fact had found a way to use Facebook

as a medium of empowerment.

Other incidents of over-sharing, inappropriate discourse and prohibited stories dealt with unrequited love, sexual activities and urges, and the mentioning of intimate body parts. While such types of self-accounts were, on the one hand, considered stories not to tell, still, exceptions could be made depending on how the story was told. The ‘modus’ of the account was important here: besides ‘cleanliness’, also humor and irony (‘coolness’) were considered compensating features. In fact, everything might be said, it was claimed – if done with a ‘twist,’ even if it was also agreed that both humor and irony can be misleading, since their effects are very subjective; on the Internet in particular, they may result in misunderstandings due to the lack of bodily co-presence. According to Butler, adding a ‘twist’ to a story by relating it to feelings that could invoke controversial social issues, may be understood as an effort to undo a troubled discourse; however, it might also be interpreted as opening up foreclosures and prohibitions related to the body, to sexuality, and distress, all dependent on the given situation (Butler 1997:136-137).

Other types of inappropriate sharing concerned what presumably were political confessions or otherwise polarizing and radical messages. In fact, the interviewees from the focus group in which this particular subject was most emphatically addressed, tended to claim that political disclosures are always illegitimate: “I have never written anything political about myself or others” (as a woman, age 23, said). In a follow-up, it was agreed that while Facebook may be used for pursuing political purposes when looking for, or joining events, groups, and pages, on a personal wall this kind of messaging is inappropriate (except, for instance, when indicating one’s being involved in relief work).

In particular, the difference between what one does on one’s personal wall and what one does when venturing out and engaging in more open Facebook contexts, was brought out by a female sclerosis patient and her single father, who both subscribed to several relevant pages and groups, but did not do much posting on their walls. Another

interviewee, a labor union representative, used his profile to engage in a range of groups and events around labor market issues; while he in fact addressed these issues from time to time also on his personal wall, he typically mitigated his postings there by means of humor. In these ways, the interviewees discriminated between the private and the public sphere, but in so doing, they relegated very intimate disclosures from the inner, supposedly more private areas of Facebook in order to move troublesome discourse to designated spaces in its outer, more public territory.

Finally, it was considered inappropriate to talk about people not present on Facebook; to speak ill of any third person, or to expose disagreements among interlocutors (see Mc Laughlin & Vitak 2012). It was also discussed whether it was inappropriate to express negative feelings and attitudes at all; moreover, it was agreed that one should not only behave the way one behaves in other (semi-)public groups, but in addition, that one had to be more careful online due to the lack of contextual clues (Baym 2010). As one participant expressed it, “I try to keep my tone and manners the way I do it among us here, now. And try to keep a sensible and sober voice. [...] Since you don’t have that face-to-face-situation that makes you able to read the persons you talk to.” (Male, age 43).

Observing such restrictions helps shape the expected framework of conviviality and desirable social intercourse. In this, we align with Lundby (2009), who refers to the sociologist Georg Simmel, who argued that ‘pure’ sociality is social intercourse in which manners are directed by the premise that the joy of the individual maximizes with the joy of the collective. From the profiles of our interviewees, it transpires that conviviality implies having an educated perspective on the daily news, public affairs and popular culture; alternatively, it could mean having a sophisticated take on reality that makes life surprising, fresh or even bizarre. Preferred stories, then, represent a clever perspective on everyday life, one which is inclusive rather than exclusive and is not driven by interests of either the private or political kind.



### 7. *The status update as phatic communion and the small talk issue*

We now move to norms of what could be said. The typical status update is about “what you are doing right now” (Male, age 43), an intended real-time reporting on the actual state of affairs. Such type of communication comes close to what the linguist and semiotician Roman Jakobson (1964[1960]) has termed the ‘phatic function’ of communication. Taking his cue from Jakobson, Miller (2008) goes further and talks about this phatic function of communication as a type of empty signaling, the aim of which is to keep the channel of communication open. This in fact fits well in with what several interviewees stated, namely that Facebook is about “the very possibility of contact” (male, age 34) or “being able to communicate” (woman, 25 years) – that is, communication for the sake of communication.

Applying this to the core feature of Facebook, the status update, we found four generic types among the 16 profiles: a) the *situation report*, which is a short statement about what is happening right now (or what is about to happen), such as “A new week ahead”; b) the *evaluative report*, which is a short statement about what has been happening (a moment ago), such as “Blockbuster trip to Copenhagen”; c) the *self-disclosure*, which is an emotion-laden statement (often expressed idiomatically), such as “Can’t wait”; and finally, d) the *interpellation* or *interlocution*, which addresses the user/reader directly, such as “Anybody wanting to [...]?”.

These four generic types can be combined in different ways. They all refer to the overall phatic framework, even if they can also refer to others of Jakobson’s specific communicative functions. Whereas c) and d) are concerned with the addresser and the addressee, denoting respectively the emotive function and the conative function, a) and b) both demonstrate the referential function, since they refer to actual events and situations. In our material, referential communication can be identified as a particular style among a group of male participants who do in fact use their profiles to pursue certain professional interests or leisure activities and engage in public debate on, for instance, the

labor unions, tenants' associations, military history or sports. What Jakobson calls the poetic function, on the other hand, is found in the creative use of spelling, grammar, and audio-visual communication or in experiments with fictive profiles. Meta-linguistic messages are most often used to express humor or irony, as in the following comment on the challenges of self-publishing: "What to post?"

As to phatic communion, it may come very close to and be difficult to distinguish from small talk. The latter was, on the one hand, downgraded in all the focus groups; on the other hand, it is what most postings admittedly are about: "I see it as mostly small-talk and passing the time" (Male, age 53). The dilemma is further illustrated by the fact that social media researchers such as Vetere, Howard & Gobbs (2005), and in particular Miller (2008), tend to blame not small talk as such for a decline in verbal communication proper, but instead blame the overall, more profound influence of phatic communion, as being non-dialogic, non-substantial, and non-narrative. In the Facebook context in particular, small talk is believed to bring about a forced, almost 'hysterical', yet superficial intimacy.

The small talk conundrum was resolved by our interviewees by appealing to the notion of 'smart' small talk, providing the seemingly mundane with a twist that brings about reflection, most often having to do with formal features: "It is the funny thing, the funny way, I mean the way it is written", as a female participant, aged 44, said; compare "but again it has to be [pictures] with a twist", as said by a male, aged 70. In other words, smart small talk is talk that uses the transient character of the medium to transmit a skewed snapshot of everyday life – lifting the ordinariness of the experience up to something extraordinary and 'right on spot'. From this perspective, seemingly trivial or even non-sensical postings such as: "I am now home!" or "I wonder what I am going to have for dinner on Saturday" can be understood as miming everyday discourse in ways that may be banal; but they also raise the small talk issue by referring to its ability to create a social play (Lundby 2009). Humor and social play were appreciated, if used

with circumspection – a fact that was expressed in a range of different ways (see also Lomborg 2013).

### *8. Conclusion and perspectives*

The participants in our study shared surprisingly congruent conceptualizations of norm-building with respect to appropriate vs. inappropriate forms of appearance on Facebook and participation in its activities. Using our theoretical approach, we found that such norms are negotiated by the networked publics; they pay tribute to classic social virtues such as being humble towards one's audience and showing oneself to be an equal/ordinary part of the shared platform, but at the same time adjust the norms to the current digital context. Our approach revealed the existence of fairly explicit notion of under-sharing as well as over-sharing, along with a more subtle notion of appropriate sharing as the funny, clever or 'cool' take on the media and everyday life.

We also found a rather consistent moral codex in terms of handling different types of practices, such as Facebook 'lurking', defriending/blocking of 'friends' or treating friends differently. In addition, we were able to identify a high degree of consistency between what was said on these matters in the interviews and what was done on the profiles; by contrast, a more complex picture was discovered in terms of discourses on and practices of small talk and the use of irony. In particular, small talk seems in fact to be a highly contested issue that deserves further investigation. Even if the personal profiles were conceptualized as potential public spheres, (some) users allowed themselves to communicate more intimately and publish more private information, such as reports on family events and holiday activities. Typically, public discourses on (cultural) politics and social affairs were acceptable on personal profiles only in proper doses and if served with humor.

As argued in the beginning of this article, it is also obvious that norms and practices on Facebook have changed between 2012 and 2016 as a consequence of the (earlier mentioned) shift from 'networked publics'

to ‘connectivity’. In an era where connectivity norms are negotiated in a wider and more diverse context than they were in the social media’s early years, and where the basic norm has shifted from maintaining a network to keeping it in flux and putting it on display, new dilemmas arise in terms of proper appearance and forms of contributing and sharing. For instance, we now see a more dedicated political use of the medium; likewise, current discussions about Facebook are marked by a rougher tone, especially when politics is involved. While Facebook now clearly encompasses tensions and antagonisms existing in the wider society, some users may choose to get further involved in such debates, while others will probably be more quiet or withdraw altogether – thus exhibiting the same general development as observed in other online debates which have become more antagonistic over time (Jensen 2014).

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