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LA SÉMIOTIQUE DE L'ESPACE-TEMPS
FACE À L'ACCÉLÉRATION DE L'HISTOIRE
Urbanization in the Global Village: analysis of some impacts of the Facebook interface on digital social life.

In 2011, as we celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Marshall McLuhan, we acknowledge that not only can his theoretical contributions be considered unsurpassed, but they have also maintained an amazing descriptive potential regarding the communications of this new millennium. For example, when analyzing the influence of Facebook in the communication between individuals, the reference to two of the best known metaphors formulated by McLuhan becomes inexorable: the notion of the global village, “a world contracted into a village by electric technology and the instantaneous movement of information from every quarter to every point at the same time” (McLuhan, 1964, p6); and the idea that “the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (McLuhan, 1987, p254), or using his own catchphrase: “the medium is the message,” meaning that the form of a medium embeds itself in the message.

This vision of communications, the Medium Theory, shifts attention from content towards technology by considering content mainly as a function of new technologies and the practices they introduce into a society. The Medium theory from McLuhan has not been the only approach underlining this connection between the devices we use to communicate and the content being communicated. The Mediology, proposed later by Régis Debray (1991), further insisted on the dependence of culture on its technology by assuming that the transmission of cultural knowledge always takes a concrete form in which “material technologies and symbolic forms” combine to produce discourses and ideologies.

Nevertheless, the idea that the introduction of a new medium of communication deeply reshapess human societies’ organization at all levels has been challenged and labeled deterministic from many different perspectives. One of its best known critics is Raymond...
Williams (1974, pp. 126–130), who considers it excessively reductionist to think of the form and content of discourses as totally dependent on technologies. It should be clear that, indeed, every distinct discourse can, in principle, find successful ways of expression through very different physical media by implementing appropriated adaptive strategies. On the other hand, the fact that a certain communication technologies become hegemonic against other concurrent technologies can be taken as effect (and not cause) of socioeconomic changes. For example, some authors consider the popularization of the Internet as a result of the need to protect communication from nuclear attacks during the cold war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union (Segovia, 2006, pp. 12). Regardless, after the sudden increase of regular users of Online Social Networks (OSN) both in professional fields and personal domains, the importance of analyzing the impact of new technologies on social discursive practices, and through them the whole social structure, should be clearer now than ever. Undertaking this goal, the present article will explore the influence of the Facebook interface on shaping personal interaction on a global scale, thus trying to determine the extent to which “the medium is the message” in this particular case: that is, how does the outbreak of this concrete technology induce changes for the discursive practices carried on through its interface?

In only the first seven years of its existence, Facebook has already become the best materialization of the idea of a global village. Together with the remaining online social networks (hereafter, “OSN”), Facebook has deeply altered our daily routines of interpersonal relations, and not only in western societies. Nevertheless, we must recall that this phenomenon has only just begun (at the time of writing, the Spanish version of Facebook had only been online for three years), and it is difficult to predict possible developments and stable scenarios for it. Erik Qualman has compiled and popularized some data intended to give an idea of the coming importance of Facebook (Qualman, 2009). For instance, if we consider the currently active “inhabitants” of this network, it would be the third largest country in the world, with twice the population of the U.S. or Brazil. For these “inhabitants” of the global village, Facebook is one of their main activities. Up to 50% of the mobile internet traffic within the UK is generated by this OSN, and in the U.S. it already generates more traffic than the preferred search engine, Google. OSNs can no longer be considered solely a free-time activity. They are now moving more data on the internet than the traditional leader of this group: the digital porn industry. OSNs
are shaping our lives at every level. Today, one out of eight couples getting married in the U.S. met through digital networks. Facebook alone receives more than a trillion (10e12) posts every day, many of them originating through any of the 10,000 web pages that integrate with this OSN.

To better appreciate the rapid development of Facebook, we can compare it with the time that it took other technologies to reach the figure of fifty million users. Radio had to wait for thirty-eight years, while TV reached the mark in thirteen. The Internet as a whole did so after just four years. Yet, only a year after being online and open to the public, Facebook reached that same milestone. In the last year alone, 250 million new users have joined the network (that’s the population of Brazil and Colombia combined). Through Facebook and other networks, today’s world certainly approaches the idea of a global village: millions of people interconnected in real time regardless of the physical distances between them.

In the case of formerly dominant technologies, such as TV or radio, it was rather easy to determine the differences between the technology (Hertzian waves), media (channels), and content (broadcast programs). The same phenomenon exists within the press or cinema. On the Internet, however, the underlying technology (IP protocol) is so versatile that it offers a plethora of possible uses (HTTP, FTP, email, P2P, IRC, VoIP, IPTV, among others) and such a diversity of services and ways of access that the differences between the technology, media, and content is no longer clearly established; the boundaries have blurred. The prophetic aphorism of McLuhan is now showing all its enlightening potential. In the age of the Internet, medium and message are more interlaced and overlapped than at any previous time; they mutually contain each other. The Internet is a medium of media, a multi-medium that potentially holds every message in every format, a space where all the messages coming from other media can be re-mediated (posted, commented, transformed…) which makes a “content-analysis” of the Internet appear to be an impossible task. Every message can be uploaded to the web. The medium itself and the social practices it arranges are the real “content” to be analyzed, the relevant object of study. Here, more than ever, the medium is the message.

When McLuhan claimed that “[i]n bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion, electric speed heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 3)
1964, p. 6), he was aiming, albeit from an optimistic angle, for the very same phenomenon labeled “emotional synchronization” by Paul Virilio (2006): the real possibility of a digital citizenship, no longer constrained by boundaries or limited by physical distances, capable of real time reaction to events happening on any point of the globe, which opens the doors to the worst of totalitarianisms (and, we would like to add, also to positive social changes). Virilio dubbed this mechanism “the communism of emotions.”

This philosopher also signaled the process of disurbanization of space and illustrated it through the way our society projects its own image. Humans are increasingly disconnected from the perception of their physical environment, progressively installed into what he called a *teletopic* reality, where the distinction between *here* and *there* progressively loses its significance as the possibility of interactively and continuously observing the quotidianity of others through a digital interface becomes real, no matter how far away they are. González Broquen (2011) described this age as the epoch when we inhabit time and not space. Since our personal gadgets, like the smartphone, can make us feel physically closer to people who are far removed, distance doesn’t matter anymore, but different time zones can. In his own words, we are living in “a *now* without a *here*.” The mission of Facebook converges with this tendency.

Paradoxically, it was not intended to house virtual communities, but rather the opposite. Its initial scope was the students of Ivy League universities and, at the time, its creator claimed that “the website has been such a success because it explicitly grounds its online community on a physical one. We don’t view the site as an online community—we bill it as a directory that is reinforcing a physical community. What exists on the site is a mirror image of what exists in real life” (Nagowski, 2004). Indeed, nowadays Facebook purportedly fosters interaction within simulative physical communities that are nonetheless not actually physically accessible: old classmates, distant family, virtual “friends” who seldom contact each other outside the network. If Facebook cannot provide them with a physical space for direct interaction, at the very least it creates a durative present in which they can receive and send “posts,” regardless of whether or not they are online.

Facebook, however, has exceeded the functions that made it so popular, such as bringing back to the present long-lost friendships or making immigrants feel closer to their families. The key role played by this medium in the coordination and expansion of the Arab Spring,
(Fauad, 2010), the movement of the “Indignados” in Spain (Carrión Mena, 2011), which later expanded into the Occupy movement throughout Europe and the U.S., or in the “soft revolution” in Iceland (Burgui Iguzkiza, 2009) has unfolded its potential as a tool for political struggles in the present century in which social conflicts, repression, crime and other problems take place in virtual scenarios, thus defying the validity of national-scale legal frameworks. This, in turn, will undoubtedly force new reorganizations of global political structures. Such a real-time social network without distance limitations was not even imaginable at the dawn of the last century. As with the invention of the train or the telephone, these mutations of time and space for human life are both cause and consequence of the acceleration of history depicted by Virilio, and they have been known to be dependent, in constitutive terms, on technological-scientific innovations. Isabel Marcos (2008) has seen in the World Wide Web a renewal of the same course of action that led to urban mundialization during the 16th century as a factual expression of the first global market. Five centuries later, smartphones take the place of astrolabe, and web navigation replaces sailing “to give global markets the ‘instrument’ of real time ‘urbanization.’” Our case study provides a good example of how, within this virtual mundialization that gave birth to the globalized metropolis and “confronted new means of production of time and space” (Marcos, 2008), the transformations emerge tightly linked to the evolution of the virtual global market, to a non-productive financial economy, the speculative character of which fosters, but does not control, the mutations of human time-space.

This process of urbanization of real time, as Virilio described it (1995), relies primarily on the urbanization of the human body, that is, the process by which the human body is further and further removed from its “natural” deviceless state and grows progressively dependent on cybernetic or bionic machines and apparatus like pacemakers, pedometers, glasses (even 3-D or augmented reality glasses), hearing aids, wireless earphones, videophones, translators, text-reading or dictation-taking personal software, and intelligent prosthesis like Prodigic, the recently developed bionic hand. Within this variety of gadgets, technological prostheses, bio-devices, and other interfaces, our virtual profile (i.e., the digital projection of our self) holds a unique position between all those interfaces-prostheses that over-equip the citizens of this new millennium, qualifying us for new functions while encouraging “corporal suspension” of the “connected human.” Body is not that meaningful for virtual social life. Virilio’s
connected human may be motionless, but in permanent action through
the virtual world that he/she inhabits. Along with virtual “friends,” he/
she is not directly present in every moment but as a telepresent subject
that can always be found, always available to collect posts, be labeled,
or automatically answer a friendship request.

Beyond the poetry that attempts to describe future scenarios and trends,
and due to the fact that foreseeing the range of the social changes that
online social networking is giving rise to may not be viable, we find in
the catchphrases of Virilio, such as the “global emotional synchrony,”
an effort to make visible the direction of the routes through which this
new age of human communication seems to be headed. If we look to
the past, we can say that terrestrial mundialization happened through
the evolution of commercial routes, such as the Silk Road between
the East and the West of the known world at the time. It was followed
by the sea mundialization thanks to Magellan and Elcano, and
finally to air mundialization thanks to inventions like the telephone
or supersonic flight. There are many reasons to think that this virtual
mundialization by means of the Internet or smartphone will also
deeply change the way humankind inhabits this planet and manages
its resources. Facebook makes a perfect icon of phenomena such as
the disurbanization of space (e.g. the tendency to the disappearance of
spatial displacement) and the urbanization of time (e.g. the community
growing and population of non-physical spaces, allowing us to enjoy
a globally shared experience in real-time), and its influence in this
process was evident only a few years after its creation.

Therefore, we find it urgent to gather efforts from different
perspectives and traditions for the deconstruction of the Facebook
interface. Understanding the transcendence of human relation tools
this network provides and how it guides the process of creation of the
virtual projection of our analogical self is critical in order to estimate
the consequences of its mediation in our social life.

THE INTERFACE OF FACEBOOK

Due to the relevance Facebook has as a main public space in this
global village, the exploration of this new topos and its inhabitants’
cultural habits is very much overdue for the socio-semiotics analytical
school. Different approaches would conceptualize Facebook as a web
page, as a digital or social network, as a database or as an economic
and sociopolitical structure. From the semiotic paradigm, the entire
website of Facebook can be taken as a verbal and visual dynamic
hypertext. The devices for the collective co-construction of the
text (buttons, forms, links) are included within the text itself. Some
questions arise at this point: What are the rules that regulate the process of interaction within this text? Where do they come from? How can the protocols used for building such a massive *collage* be negotiated and changed? Before trying to answer, however, we would go deeper into the conceptualization of this text model. It would be an error to think of this co-writing process in terms of the usual binary schemes suited for an operative system interface analysis (Subject-System) or for direct interpersonal communication analysis (Subject-Subject). Every contribution to this text involves at least three elements that we must take into account for the purposes of its analysis: Subject (poster), System (interface), and Subjects (readers). Facebook is a text-system that allows Subjects to communicate with other Subjects if they make use of an interface and follow the fixed system rules it implies, which we will attempt to deconstruct.

To understand in what sense we are allowed to say that the Facebook interface is a constitutive factor of the textual communication process as it delimits standards and ways of interaction, we can try to imagine what this whole network would become without it. If we remove the interface, only a huge, dead personal data archive remains. The way data gets in and out of it, as well as the limits and formats of the data on which our hypertext model relies, is provided by the interface, which is therefore a part of the Facebook text itself with a meaningful distinction: it is the only part that is given from the beginning and cannot be collectively built. It is the pre-condition of every other part of the text, but it is not intended to change during the textual interaction. The interface is the point of access for every user; it translates symbolic actions to the machine-level database and back to other users. In semiotic terms, it is the point of *embrayage* for the empirical (vs. textual) subjects of this discourse; it plans the shape of their traces (nicknames, avatars, geotags, and other marks) and provides virtual devices for the production of the characters and actions of this hypertext, thus being the main “silent” voice within this polyphony of Facebook.

First and foremost, we will have a look at how the Facebook interface regulates the processes of the digitalization of human activity. As in every computer system, in order to store data about the real world, the chaotic continuum that our senses and instruments perceive must be translated into discrete, measurable, and labeled informational schematics. The continuum of colors can be stored in the CYMK or RGB system, for example, before being stored, transported, or printed on screens and paper. In a similar way, time, space or sounds must
also be stored as numbers in units with limited accuracy, following international systems. OSNs carry these processes one step beyond when they digitalize human relations through relational units such as the Poke or the Like, minimum measures of active digital interaction between two people. Clicking the Poke button on John’s profile is an interaction completely empty of concrete content, and therefore open to the many different potential meanings its receiver may assign. It would not be exactly the same if the button were labeled “Salute” or “Require” or “Draw attention.” Regardless, the decision is outside of the user’s range; he cannot decide the label of the interaction, he can merely poke John.

Another excellent illustration of the digitalization of complex continuous processes is the need to tag our interpersonal relationship status through a table of labels given in the following order (translated from the Spanish version of Facebook): Single, In a relationship, Fiancé, Married, It’s Complicated, Has an open relationship, Widower, Separated, and Divorced. The designers of Facebook decided to adopt nine possible relationship statuses (instead of five or twelve) to store the very complex diversity of possible statuses for a couple. They are probably much more conscious than the user-writers of Facebook about the ideological implications of these decisions for social life. For example: Why can’t I choose to tag more than one person as being in a relation with me? What is the cultural impact of having options like “Divorced” and “Open relationship” available on Facebook while not having them in my national legal or ideological system? In this global hypertext, different cultures, generations and ideologies are collapsed into a homogeneous common terminology. For instance, this nomenclature recognizes only two genders and prevents any transgender or queer identity, very much behind the discussions in biology, modern tendencies, fashion, queer theory or the social sciences. These kinds of design decisions may pass as transparent or obvious, but are strongly ideological and shape the social life of our global village.

As digital citizens, we should be concerned about democratic issues regarding how the rules that apply in our networks come out, who decides and what impact they have on our cultures. This nomenclature may ideologically influence local cultures as their members start connecting among themselves and with alien cultures through Facebook. For instance, this could foster the acceptance of divorced status in cultures that do not currently accept it if subjects choose it to construct their digital characters in virtual society. That would give great power to the people responsible for the decisions. One can,
course, not say anything about his/her personal status, but to avoid providing personal information also provides useful information about, say, a potential candidate being reviewed in a job selection process. The hermeneutical communities of Facebook will “fill the gaps” and assign potential meanings to the decisions of not sharing what is expected, such as the grade of realism one can expect from a profile or the kind of content one expects from others on our own walls, for example.

We find similar situations for every decision a user must make when creating a personal profile, such as residence, personal picture, family, contact details, education, philosophy, beliefs, religion, hobbies, sports, interests, ideology, among others. For most of these data fields, Facebook provides an advanced method of discretization of the social continuum: it will invite us to label ourselves through the tags previously stored or given by other users earlier, thus inducing a common system of categories for our personal thoughts and experiences. Let us leave for the moment, however, reflections on the digitalization of the human experience and proceed to other aspects of the semiotic analysis of the Facebook interface.

Software interfaces can never be hidden or totally transparent, but while some of them may be heavily present (even uncomfortably so), the Facebook interface avoids excessively showing its presence and uses the opposite strategy: it aims to be a minimalist, translucent arbitrator of interactivity. Common users (readers and writers) of this hypertext operate the site matter-of-factly, quickly becoming familiar with the different items that allow them to place, edit, delete or access content in the different areas; its surface quickly becomes second nature for the virtual citizen. Nevertheless, an interface can have many qualities, but not be natural. It is always the result of several decisions made by graphic designers, coders, owners and project managers, among others according to usability studies, technical and budgetary constraints, legal frameworks, or ideological interests, whether conscious or not. Given the magnitude of this network, we claim that these decisions have an impact on the repertoire of the social habitus of our global village. Let us become aware of how artificial these digital relation devices are by comparing them to how they existed some years ago.

The first Facebook was fairly “lifeless” and interactive. Shortly after it became public (2004), the Wall was added as well as the possibility of creating Groups, but interaction between pairs was still not possible.
Moreover, the opportunity to upload *Pictures* came later (2005). The *Newsfeed* that now constitutes the homepage of the web was not implemented until 2006, when Facebook grew beyond the university. The options for interaction multiplied in 2007 when third-party apps and mobile access developed, but it wasn’t until 2008 and 2009 that some practices that today may seem obvious to Facebook users, like chatting or giving a username to profiles, were available. Only one year after the application for online voting and polls was included in Facebook, it became one of the main tools that made possible people’s organization of revolutionary phenomena (such as the recent Arab Spring or the “Indignados” movement in Spain), a fact that would benefit from additional study. Causal relations can, of course, not be proven, but the impact of this interface on social life may be greater than commonly assumed.

This progressive urbanization of the virtual space, as new apps are added to the network, entails the sprouting of new uses and practices, new hermeneutical communities between the settlers of this digital village. This includes the emergence of new formalisms (*Netiquette*), arising hypertextual genres, and a whole implicit and explicit normative system for virtual citizenship that, as happens within any other kind of human groups, must be learnt (and challenged) by the incomers. The web includes its own interfacial meta-texts intended to “inform” users about the correct use of its own resources, with claims such as “You are currently not available for a chat. Join in!”, “Peter has not set up a profile picture, help him by sending one,” or “Susan doesn’t have many friends in her profile, suggest some for her” (translated from the Spanish version of Facebook). These phrases invite reticent users to activate the potentialities of this virtual environment, as its designers intended. But users never follow instructions completely; they adapt them to their necessities and desires, so that the outcome is a process of negotiated acceptance and rejection of different aspects of the interface protocol to welcome a standard user.

We will find users who show their real identity (the only possibility accepted by Facebook), but we will also find “cheaters” with several identities, profiles for dogs, strategically fake and obviously fantasizing identities, and many other uses explicitly discouraged or forbidden by the system owners in Palo Alto, California. Other kind of rules must instead be set up mainly by the users’ customs, such as which kind of info is appropriate to be published on a friend’s wall and which should be sent through private chat. But beyond the explicit and implicit rules, during the progressive urbanization of the
net, other less visible protocols have crystallized. Technical methods for collective time and space management are a fine example, based on concrete choices for the indexation of extern space and time that are hard but silently conditioning the schemes of interaction among the digital settlers.

Computer engineering has traditionally applied universal time references, expressed according to formats like HH:MM:SS – MM/DD/YYYY, and measured as seconds from the first of January 1900. But Facebook designers made a different choice by taking the present as the reference. Hence, in order to record the moment in which a text was posted to a wall, we see expressions such as “Two seconds ago”, “Approximately one minute ago”, “Yesterday at 10am” or “Last Friday at 11pm” (translated from the Spanish version of Facebook). This deictic terminology is not understandable without knowing the present moment in which those labels are being read (and they point to), they are “experiential” forms, essentially interactive, that address the real living time of the reader, and thus are not able to be copied and pasted outside their reading context (we are not able to say which Friday the previously used sentence was referring to). We won’t find the same approach for spatial references (no labels like “Post inserted 8000 miles from here”) because the world wide web experience has a common time we can live, but not a common space. So, the network can only bring all our relations close to a virtual here, but it can refer them to a physical now, the present moment, by not stamping a defined time reference to every post when it is written, but by recalculating the time reference whenever it is printed out on the screen. Is not this as close as it gets to the idea of an “eternal technological present” introduced by philosopher Paul Virilio?

Time is not treated the same throughout the interface, however. Something characteristic of the four subareas in which Facebook can be divided (Homepage, Wall, Profile and Chat-messages) is the way each one of them manages time, how their contents organize and evolve according to the different strategies adopted. Profiles do not appear as a stream of posts, for example; they just show the actual state of the user (e.g. if he has an open relationship or is interested in men), and leaves no visible signs of its past status (maybe the virtual character had been single or interested in women years earlier). The rest of the subareas are based on the idea of scrolling. By rolling the mouse, we go through a seemingly endless succession of posts that can be arranged in inverse (Wall) or direct chronological order (Chat),
where all the text-units identically appear on a common homogeneous surface with no time lapse representation and no signals of aging (Virilio’s eternal technological present echoes here). The fact that new users can find newer posts both in the lower part (Chat) or at the top of the list (Wall) does not make them feel lost; it quickly becomes natural and obvious. Something analogous happens with the homepage, where time organization is much more intricate since it does not follow any physical time order at all, and posts are ordered regardless of their moments of creation. This may not even be noticed by regular users. Lived time is reordered here into a virtual time, which is personal and calculated ad-hoc by the system for each user, and whose criteria is not public, depending on an unknown algorithm. The program evaluates the relevance of posts and displays them according to its priorities and decisions which may not match ours (or those of our human interlocutors) and may not be known. Facebook decides which of our friend’s texts will appear at the top of our homepage, and which fall down into the abyss of digital oblivion. This structure fosters accumulative dynamics as occurs in some news aggregators: the news on top will get more views, comments and Likes, and therefore will more likely appear at the top of even more walls. This is an invitation to the adoption of advertising discursive logics, applying “high-impact” enunciation modalities, suitable to competing for readers’ interactive reactions and drawing more attention from the digital audience.

Something similar happens with most of the side-areas within the interface, right and left columns that show context-dependent contents, which are renewed whenever we refresh the screen and impossible to predict beforehand. The selection of friends that appear in the left column, for example, or the list of events and advertisements appearing on the right column change every time I press F5, but I don’t know why. Why does Facebook recommend interacting with some friends and not others? According to the “Help” section of the page, “this variable selection may include the friends you often interact with” (translated from the Spanish version, emphasis mine). This will, of course, be an open door to insufflating the previously mentioned advertising logics into the space of interpersonal relations between a user and his/her audience, with intense interactors getting more interactions and popular profiles accumulating digital attention. But this criterion is only partially true, and verifying its falseness is straightforward: if it only depended on the number of interactions, it wouldn’t change every time I refresh the screen. The real algorithm is
not the one stated by Facebook and is not random. It will remain secret as long as the owners of the new social virtual agora do not publish it, and therefore its impact on the actualization frequency of our digital social relations will remain secret as well.

As we have seen, human interaction is made possible in Facebook by a dynamic interface that leads us to this virtual chameleonic universe where physical and virtual timelines are handled through different strategies and obscure algorithms. Here, users elaborate the personal records of their virtual lives, and hence a collective digital memory is built not with complete freedom, but through the interface reappropriation and implicit rule negotiation processes we have been describing. As a consequence, the features of the digital identities of virtual citizens will come not only from their own contributions to this hypertext, but also from the projections their friends make of them and from the unavoidable mediation of the interface. Should we expect this to affect our real identities? Are there any reasons to think that there exists something like a “real” identity completely alien to our virtual life? A discursive perspective has developed as a main branch of psychology in recent years, popularizing narrative techniques that focus more on the way we tell our life stories in public and private than on the real facts. If we accept that the modus of our life narrations is a key factor in our identities, then virtual life becomes an increasingly important part of our self. Perhaps then we should start to think about the emergence of new fragmented, off-centered and narcissist identities, just as our Facebook profiles tend to be.

In Facebook, users tend to produce patchy discourses obsessively focused on themselves, but neurotically needing the attention of others to become visible, as they are even partially built and finally sanctioned (in semiotic terms) as successful or not by all the peers in the user’s personal network. The Facebook era transits from the culture of narrations to the culture of sound bytes, a copy-paste “gag culture, which forces us to laugh without narrative mediation,” as the Spanish philosopher Alba Rico (2010) denounces. In the fragmented, accelerated and selectively cut and disordered rhythm of gag-cultural products, reality, like old movies or books, becomes too long and slow for new audiences. Digital native prosumers need quick stimulation, and actually need parallel multi-stimulation. From this technopessimist point of view, we seem to be entering an age where our virtual self has to be built and socially presented through micro-discursive genres, more related to SMS than to epistle,
in a thematic explosion where every new post proposes a new topic, no need for introductions, hopping from euphoric celebrations to disphoric reflections all served in atomic, unlinked, uncontextualized units (reachable from many contexts). The only common isotopy in the Internet’s global hypertext, which allows us to read it and give it a context, is our own vital experience as users and navigators that construct reading segments in our itineraries every time we access the web. But if it is through these dynamics that our sociovirtual character is forged, and if this has an influence or even threatens to dominate our “real” (i.e., external to virtual worlds, if such a place still exists) social character, then we probably cannot expect it to have the same nature in terms of unity, solidness and thematic coherence that the human narratives of the past millennium demanded.

To conclude these reflections on the impact that an interface can have on digital life, we acknowledge the relevance of the three metaphoric notions we took as the starting point of our description of the trends in which this global online social network is framed: the global village metaphor proposed by Marshal McLuhan, the processes of the disurbanization of space and urbanization of time suggested by Paul Virilio, and the virtual mundialization pointed out by Isabel Marcos.

As a matter of fact, the permanent, global, real-time interconnection between humans made possible by new personal media has a profound impact on social life by providing new scenarios for human cultural processes such as scientific research, ideological influence, population control, interpersonal relations, social mobilization, information security, collective memory representation, and many others. The range, strength and nature of these impacts would benefit from additional study, both from cultural studies in general and sociosemiotics in particular.

We have reviewed some of the ways in which these media silently shape our virtual life, such as the experience of digitalization decisions, the adoptions of relational units (Like, Poke, Unfriend), and the selection of nomenclatures and typologies.

Through a secondary vector of analysis, we pointed to the inclusion of commercial discursive logics in the field of personal interaction by means of secret algorithms that anticipate the interests of the user and organize his/her perception of the web, which leads to millions of digital citizens delegating their interaction protocols to privately-owned algorithms that follow unknown criteria.

We conclude that no interface or algorithm design decision can be
considered as ideologically transparent or neutral. Nothing escapes from being ideological in this sense. They have a cultural influence on a global scale in the construction of personal and social virtual identities, and therefore in the emergence of standardized, global ideological schemes that must be further explored and evaluated.


Compar(a)ison, 1, pp. 5-13.