

Creating a presence on social networks via narbs

By Ananda Mitra

Abstract:

There has been an exponential growth in the number of people who use digital social networking tools to stay connected with friends and family. The connections are built and sustained through numerous digital “posts” that include simple “status updates” to elaborate videos and pictures that are made available through these tools. This paper argues that every such digital imprint is indeed a small narrative bit (narb) that tells a tiny story about an individual. Here a systematic approach is provided to categorize the narbs and explore the implications of creating a digital presence through numerous narbs distributed in different parts of the Internet.

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The early days of networked computers allowed for the exploration of systems that would allow people to connect to each other using the computer as the portal to join networks where the members would share some common interest. The development of the PLATO system at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the 1960s and 1970s offered the preliminary opportunities to experiment with creating networks of computers where the individuals sitting before the computer would become the social network although such networks defied some of the basic assumptions of creating a community such as spatial proximity. Yet these people would have claimed to be a part of a community by virtue of the fact that they were able to share their thoughts via the discourses they created on their computer keyboard and transmitted instantly to everyone else on the network (Mitra, 2010). This capability of connecting discursively with others remains the bedrock on which most virtual communities are still built.

The transformation from the virtual communities based around text-intensive discussion boards to the social network sites was made possible by two major developments in the technological sphere – availability of powerful digital machines, and the wide-spread penetration of high-speed data connections. The first component of the change refers to the proliferation of digital tools, from computers to smart cell phones that have become commonplace in the late 2000s with instruments like the iPhone being highly penetrated in many communities. The second component of the change refers to the way in which the digital tools are able to connect to central repository of data files which can store extremely large amounts of data that can be rapidly transmitted from a centralized location to a digital tool. This has been possible with the high-speed Internet connections and through systems that allow for high speed data connections with cell phones. What is important to note is that these are primarily technological changes but

do not refer to any fundamental shifts in the way in which people would want to interact with each other. The people who might have been members of virtual communities could now use the social networking tools to create more technologically efficient connections with other people. However, this essay shows how these technological changes create a new set of opportunities for creating a sense of the self in virtual communities and the way in which the personal digital presence influences the relationships produced on social networks.

The shift to the new technologies for creating communities became noticeable around 2005 when users discovered sites such as MySpace and Facebook that quickly came to be known as social network sites (SNS) and users migrated from their existing virtual communities to the SNS forums because these offered a greater degree of technological sophistication in terms of the way in which the users to interact with other members of the SNS. As pointed out in the articles in the special theme section of the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* compiled by boyd and Ellison (2007) there were numerous SNS forums that came and went in the latter 1990s and the early 2000s, with different SNS providing different kinds of functionality and attracting different levels of following among users. For instance, MySpace was an open site that was popular among a large cross-section of users since it provided unrestricted access to the SNS, and the creators of MySpace stayed well in touch with the users to provide specific features that the users demanded. On the other hand, the early version of Facebook was restricted to young people in academic institutions and most of the users of Facebook had *a priori* connections with each other and the SNS was an extension of the real life connection as compared to MySpace that facilitated connection between people who might not have known each other in real life. Other SNS were restricted to specific parts of the World as in the case of Bebo which had a large following in Europe but not in the rest of the World, and Orkut that had an initial following in

Brazil, and later in India. The development of SNS was relatively uneven in the early days, but by 2009, the participation in SNS was becoming commonplace and a large number of people Worldwide had experienced digitally mediated social networking.

The experience is made up of several factors. One of the most important aspects of social networking is the ability to make connections with people who are spatially distant from an individual. Much like the process of connecting via PLATO, it is possible for members who belong to SNS to be able to make connections with other individuals who might be located thousands of miles away. The barrier of distance for networking was quickly taken down by SNS changing the nature of social networks which was originally defined by Barnes (1954) around a continuum of stability and function of the networks where a network was made up of a limited number of spatially adjacent people who would create a connection to achieve a particular purpose. In such “real” networks the individual was physically present in the network and thus forged a personal identity that would be recognized by others in the network.

The digitization of human communication led to one significant development – the real person was replaced by a discursive construction of the person. Given the discursive nature of the Internet most of the interactions that made up the virtual communities were based on textual discourse produced by people who would use the computer to present a virtual self to other members of the group (see, e.g., Mitra 1997). The recognition of the disappearance of the “real” person and the accompanying cues that modify interpersonal communication continues to be an area of focus for scholars as there is a continuing desire to understand the way in which the process of communication changes when some of non-verbal cues are replaced by textual elements like “smily faces” or emoticons that remains a popular and standard set of symbols in much of CMC (see, e.g., Walther, 2001).

The replacement of the real person by the virtually available discourse also created a condition where the discourse became the primary mode of creating a presence of the person. This presence was removed from the real because it might have been impossible to ever have a clear understanding of the real entity since the entity was always already produced by discourses that are available in cyberspace. This phenomenon leads to specific issues related to the authenticity of the entity that would be available in a discursive way (Mitra, 2002; Hyde and Mitra, 2000). The user of the information must decide if the presence is authentic and trustworthy to be able to make specific attributions about the real entity that is depicted online without ever having access to the real person in real life. This condition existed in the case of massively Multiplayer Games like the World of Warcraft or with members who would join communities like SecondLife where the participants would assume an “avatar” representing the individual in the virtual world.

I would argue that one of the ways to understanding the digitized social network systems is to place it in an appropriate place between the social networks that are based on real life interactions and those that are based entirely in the virtual as in the case of SL and massively multiple user games where the digital players might never know the real self of the other speakers. The digitized social networks offer a mixture where the real and the digital could coalesce into a single entity when members of the digital social network are also tied with each other in real life, as in the early manifestation of Facebook when it was restricted to specific academic institutions (boyd and Ellison, 2007; Livingstone, 2008). Only people who already knew each other would be able to overlay a digital social network on top of their existing real network. Presence on Facebook could open up the opportunity to network with other people who have extended themselves to the digital forum. In this condition, Facebook did not represent a

new network but primarily an extension of an existing set of connections. Other digital systems, most notably MySpace, however, operated more in line with the MUD model where a person could set up a digital presence and then wait for others to stumble on to the presence and make a connection. MySpace offered the opportunity to extend real networks to the digital realm, but the “openness” of MySpace, as compared to the limited scope of the early Facebook, offered the open ended potential of creating connections where the real people might never network with the real bodies. At that moment, MySpace became much more like SL. The uniqueness of digital social networks is significantly obtained from this uniqueness where these networks represent a phenomenon that is not necessarily technologically unique but offers certain networking opportunities that neither real life by itself or the virtual by itself can provide. The digital social networks operate in cybernetic space where the real and the virtual create an organic whole – sometimes the real becoming peculiarly central and at other times the virtual trumping the real (Mitra, 2003). This fluidity offered by the digital social networks is central to the focus of this essay which deals with the notion of identity.

Thinking about Identity

There has been significant attention paid to understanding the notion of identity and one specific strategy to understand the concept of identity is to focus on the narrative construction of identity, which has been examined from many different disciplinary and intellectual perspectives (see e.g., Autio, 2004; Bers, 1999; Bucholtz, et., al., 1999; Hall, 1992; Jones, et., al., 2008; Redman, 2005; Ricouer, 1984; Whitebrook, 2001). In most cases it is argued that identities are deliberately produced through specific stories one tells about the self. To be sure, there are some

identity characteristics that are indelible in real life – one can not easily change one’s skin color – and the white person would remain white, but there are some identity elements that are much more pliable and it is possible to produce an identity by manipulating the specific components of identity that can actually be controlled. Many of the elements of the flexible component of identity are based on a discursive process where an entity – person or institution – could actually tell specific stories about itself to produce the specific identity it wants to create. This is commonly done by institutions that want to promote its products and services. Advertising and “branding” are ways of creating an identity that is built around a specific discourse where the name of a product, and an accompanying tag line, becomes the way people would think of an institution and remember it. The same principle extends to individuals where the fundamental building block of the “constructed” identity begins with naming a person. Thereon, much of identity construction depends on how well a person is able to tell a story about the self. These are not stories in a fictional sense but represent the specific narratives that accumulate to produce an identity. It is often these stories that a person shares with others to present the personal identity. Therefore, in addition to interacting with a real person, people often interact with the stories that the person has shared, and the synthesis of the real person and the stories “produces” the person in real life who becomes a part of a social network. These stories become the vehicle through which specific identities are created and propagated. It becomes more important to know the stories that encrust the person than to actually see or hear the real person. It is therefore, specially important to understand the nature of these narratives that “produce” the person in digital social networks.

The identity narratives

All the digital social networking systems make an assumption that members would be interested in creating specific identity narratives about themselves. This is facilitated at the time of subscription when new members are requested to provide some basic information about themselves. These are often considered ‘demographic’ information that could include basic attributes like gender and race. The participant is expected to truthfully indicate their specific attributes which are essential to become a member of the group. The entire process of identity construction is based on information that is deliberately solicited by a digital social network system and disclosed by the one seeking membership in the network.

There are generally two mechanisms that are used to create these short stories. First, a member of any digital social network is asked to complete the basic demographic information at the time of joining the network. The members could also choose to disclose other information ranging from taste in music to political preferences. In combination, these self-disclosures create a “profile” of the person that could remain relatively stable over long periods of time. Indeed, some components might never change such as the place where one was born or the date of birth of an individual. Secondly, the member is expected to continuously update specific events in one’s life so that all those connected with the member would remain informed about the specific events in an individual’s life, however banal or commonplace those events might be. Nevertheless, those constant updates could become the pieces that tell the story of a particular individual. These two strategies are shared by most social networking systems and together these strategies offer the opportunity to create a narrative within specific boundaries allowing participants to carefully pick and construct their selves. These discursive elements serve as “narrative bits (narbs)” that must be carefully selected by the person who is providing the narbs. When creating the personal profile the choice of the narbs is a mindful and deliberate process

where the member is consciously offering up specific pieces of information about oneself. In the case of the digital social network there is nearly nothing about the self-disclosed profile narbs, and the update narbs that is not controlled or constructed by the person providing the narbs. To be sure, there are specific strategies that are used to select and distribute narbs.

Selecting Narbs

The process of selecting narbs amounts to deciding what an individual wants to tell about oneself and how that information is propagated to many others. This process becomes most visible since many people are members of different digital social networks (see, e.g., Lenhart, 2009). The process of signing up for different involves providing new sets of narbs that are available in cyberspace. Moving from one digital social network to another involves nothing more than opening a new page on a Web browser. Unlike real life, where moving from one network to another, as in the case of the movement from a neighborhood to a work place, involves real travel through space, there is no such affect in hopping from one digital network to another. There is no difference between the networks besides the “look” of the Web site that serves as the point of entry into the network. The primary difference is in the narbs that are deliberately shared on specific networks. Those who are interested in constructing the identity narratives of another individual could be confronted with very different narbs based on the digital social network being observed. Most individuals would present completely different sets of narbs on different networks not only because they want to do so, but also because the network systems are designed to accept only a certain set of narbs. The differentiation between identity narratives is the product of the way in which the narbs are used in different parts of cyberspace.

Consider for example a basic narb – the personal picture. People who are members of all different networks might not use the same picture in all the sites. For instance, a member could use a small cartoon face on Facebook, a personal picture on Orkut, and a cropped down version of the same picture in LinkedIn. These are three different narbs that contribute to three different identity narratives. Substituting a cartoon face for the real face could indicate a variety of things including a desire for privacy on a predominantly social network as opposed to using a professional looking picture on a more “professional” network. These are specific choices made by the member and the observer must create the narrative based on the available narbs. The selection process also extends to the discourse that members use to describe themselves. An individual might highlight one’s professional background on a professional social network like LinkedIn whereas the same person could provide information about political and religious preferences on a social network site like Facebook . These are different narbs distributed in different places in cyberspace and each narb could be the source of a specific identity narrative. All the different narratives would perhaps provide a glimpse at the real person.

The process of selecting narbs could also be influenced by the perceptions of privacy held by individual members. Those who are less concerned about disclosing information could be far more likely to select very personal narbs whereas those that are concerned about privacy are likely to select a different set of narbs (Orr, et. al., 2009). The sensitivity to issues of privacy is also partly governed by the kind of social network one joins. The process of selecting narbs thus becomes a deliberate one where individuals would not only select the narbs but also select privacy settings to control the overall identity narrative that is eventually produced.

The issue of privacy is a central construct in the way individuals are able to manage narbs to create specific identities. The matter is complicated by the fact that there are narbs that remain

outside the control of the individual when “friends” would provide information about an individual. Sharing a picture with the members named or tagged in the picture is a common way in which narbs could be created by someone other than the individual. Similarly, there could be specific stories produced by others when, for instance, there is a “Wall” post on Facebook where all friends would see a narb produced by someone other than the individual. Individuals have little control on these kinds of narbs that originate with others.

The challenge with narbs is thus two-fold. On one hand an individual has to be mindful in producing narbs and on the other hand the individual must always monitor narbs produced by others. Since narbs play an increasingly important role in creating identities, it is specially important to be able to manage the narbs to be able to manage the nature of the online presence of an individual. The next section of this essay offers a categorization of narbs to offer the starting point to consider strategies to manage the different kinds of narbs that often circulate in social networks.

A Taxonomy of Narbs

A starting point for narb categorization begins with the question of agency: Who creates a narb? Generally there are two options, either the narb is created by the person whose identity is being produced or it is created by someone else. In the case of the former it becomes a “self-narb” where agency is retained by the person whose narrative is in question, whereas the other option produces the “other-narb” where the person whose narrative is produced has marginal voice in creating his or her own identity.

Having placed narbs in these two primary categories it is possible to consider both kinds of narbs from the perspective of what makes up the narbs and the role the narbs actually play in

creating the identity of an individual. To begin with, the content-based categorization offers a starting point to systematically classify narbs that use specific symbolic strategies. The primary content-based categories are:

Text narb: the kind of narb that only have a certain amount of words associated with the narb as in the case of the status updates in Facebook. These narbs tell the story using language much in the way a diary or personal journal would narrate the story of a person. These narbs are dependent on the eloquence of the person creating the narb and some of these could be made up of simple phrases like, “in a relationship,” that end up telling a significant story.

Picture narb: the kind of narb that includes a digital still image ranging from a photograph to a clip art. These are often carefully selected by those who produce the narb and distribute the pictures. These are made up of real pictures of people or could simply be a drawing that represents a person or the preferences of the person.

Video narb: the kind of narb that includes a digital moving image with or without sound. These could be ones that are produced by an individual using a personal video camera or some other video production tool, or could be connections to existing video that might be available on the Internet.

Audio narb: the kind of narb that includes an audio signal such as music or voice which could have been produced by an individual or could be a connection to existing audio material on the Internet.

These content based categories are certainly not meant to be mutually exclusive but often work together in a single narb where a video becomes a part of a self-narb that also includes a certain amount of text and an audio component that accompanies the video image. The identity

of an individual is eventually constructed by the combination of narbs that are available on a social networking site where different kinds of narbs work together to produce the composite narrative of a person at any moment in time. The content-based categorization scheme offers an analytical perspective for those who are interested in understanding the different parts of the overall narrative.

The content-based categorization has to be coupled with the functional categorization where narbs of all kinds can also be considered from the specific function they perform in creating the identity narrative of a particular individual. This categorization process can be approached through a simple set of yardsticks that have been central in considering any kind of narratives (see, e.g., Todorov, 1977). The first set of functional categories would deal with the “spatial narb” that offers specific information about the real life spatial location or spatial attributes of an individual. These are the narbs that tell an observer where a person is at any point in time. Profile information such as where a person is born, or where the person lives at any time offer the spatial markers for a person. These can be extremely important to contextualize all the narbs that are related to an individual.

The second functional category can be referred to as “temporal narb” that offer specific chronological information about a person. This kind of information can allow an observer to get a better sense of the flow of the identity narrative of an individual. In this case the narbs provide the information that shows when the person has been born, perhaps how old the person is, and how the person’s narbs are dependent on the specific point in one’s life. The temporality of the narbs is also related to when a narb might have been produced. A person whose narbs appear many times a day produces a different identity narrative compared to a person whose narbs

appear only rarely or at odd hours of the night. These tiny pieces of information related to time tell a specific story about an individual.

A third functional category would be the “causal narb” which offers information about the fundamental attitudes and opinions of a person that shape the identity narrative of a person. This category would be especially important in understanding what motivates a person to do things that become a part of the narrative identity. These are the elements of the profile of a person where the person might be claiming specific religious, political and social points of view.

The fourth functional category focuses on the specific activities that a person does and is called the “activity narb.” Examining this category of narbs would allow an observer to create a narrative identity that is made up of the specific things a person would consider to be the central activities in one’s life. These are often made up of the kinds of updates a person might provide, such as those dealing with travel. A frequent traveler can be identified by looking at the kinds of updates the person provides, or by looking at applications such as those provided by Facebook that allow an individual to mark cities visited on a World map.

These three approaches allows for the creation of a three dimensional narb table that could take a specific narb and place it in the correct block within the table allowing each narb to receive the combination of three tags – the agent, content and function tags. For instance a video update posted by the owner of a Facebook account that shows the person skiing would be tagged as a self-video-activity narb. This process can eventually take every single element of a person’s digital social network and place a narb-tag eventually creating a narb-based image of the individual. Such as process can have far-reaching implications in creating a virtual presence of a person. Since these social networks are a part of the emerging virtual public sphere there are

many ways in which these narb maps produced from multiple social networks can become a benefit and a burden for an individual. The next section explores some of the possible implications.

Discussion

As early as 2006, when Facebook was more of “college” phenomenon, there was evidence to suggest that there were many different observers of the narbs available of Facebook. It was not only the case that people within the circle of Facebook friends were looking at the information to infer identity narratives. One of the most alarming examples of this process is seen in the way in which many significant decisions could be influenced by the narbs that are available on digital social networks. An individual’s career could be placed in jeopardy as employers and college recruiters begin to piece together an identity narrative based on narbs which were never meant to be used in the manner they are being used (see, e.g., Budden and Budden, 2008; Clark, 2006; Finder, 2006). The identity narrative that is obtained using narbs often represents a specific set of components of the individual and there is no reason to believe that a specific set of narbs obtained from Facebook should hold priority over the narbs available from other digital social networks like. Indeed, if an identity narrative must be inferred from the information available from the different narbs, then an exhaustive listing of all the different narbs, from multiple digital social networks, personal Web sites, blogs and image sharing systems must be used together to produce the virtual image of a real person. It is no longer the case that a real person only has a presence through a single person Web site. On the other hand, narbs are scattered all over cyberspace, and all of them together can hope to offer the pieces that make up the real person. When such an image is produced it is also important to be aware of the various categories of narbs that are available about an individual. As pointed out here, it is

important to consider the different types of narbs because they offer different aspects of a person. For instance, self-narbs would present a different picture of a person compared to the other-narbs and any individual image must remain sensitive to the specific location of each narb within the three-dimensional space suggested here.

Even if there were the resources to collect all the narbs to create an identity narrative, it needs to be clear that these are fleeting narratives which could change rapidly as the narbs begin to change. Most users of systems like Facebook update their narbs by posting new status information and images both of which are important components of a person's identity narrative. Other emerging systems like Twitter offer the opportunity to create narbs using a cell phone that can be immediately placed in cyberspace. Systems connected with Global Positioning Systems (GPS) available in many cell phones allow location narbs to be dynamically updated on maps allowing others to see where an individual is at any point in time. In many cases that information might actually be provided about an individual by others who might have presented narbs on a public discourse area as in the case of the "wall" with Facebook where anyone could write anything about a person. All these micro-narratives are indeed mercurial because the information keeps changing and new narrative components are added constantly. This calls into question the permanence of the narratives that are inferred. None of the narratives can become the master story about a person not only because they are always necessarily incomplete but also because they are always changing. The narratives thus become at best a snapshot about a specific aspect of a person at a specific moment in time, or at worst a complete misrepresentation of a particular individual.

The way in which the narrative shifts as new narbs arrive eventually makes it especially difficult to pinpoint the static identity that could be used as a template for interaction. It is no

longer the case that it is possible to claim that a certain person has a set of essential traits that could be expected to stay true for a length of time. As soon as an identity narrative is inferred, it can change with new narbs. Yet, much of interaction is based on having some sense of the narratives that provide the guidelines for interaction. Phenomenon like multiply distributed digital social networking makes it increasingly difficult to find the sense of stasis in identity. Perhaps these systems are also challenging the need for stasis, and providing a forum where true shifts in identity are more openly exhibited than in many other social networks. Returning to Goffman's (1959) fundamental argument about the private and public face, it is perhaps coming to a moment where the separation between the two begin to disappear on Facebook and Orkut and new cybernetic face appears that must be understood in terms of its complexity and dynamism. That is a major shift in the way in which identity narratives are constructed about people and it could be unproductive to apply some of the real world assumptions when inferring the identity narratives from the narbs available in cyberspace.

This change could implicate the way in which the digital social networking sites could develop in the future. On one hand, it is possible that these systems will evolve into dynamic and distributed systems that allow people to constantly produce new identities and monitor how identities could shift. This is precisely the direction that Facebook is moving in with updates of their primary portal. The updates offer the opportunity to see streams of narbs that show all posts from all friends in real time.

Eventually the digital presence of an individual is produced by multi-dimensional narbs that can be plucked off from different places and the narbs cluster together to produce a provisional identity narrative. This narrative shifts as new narbs are created, and over time it is possible to produce a more complete, albeit shifting, identity narrative based on narbs.

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