Becoming a 'tweep'.
Networks of affiliation and relational pressures on Twitter

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Abstract

The paper presents findings from a qualitative study about sociality and the self in network-based social media, as examined through a case study of ordinary Danes' uses of Twitter. Drawing on Georg Simmel's work on networks of affiliation, the paper investigates the collaborative process through which individual users' expressions of self are negotiated in specific networks of affiliation on Twitter, and demonstrates the significant role played by these networks in this process. The communicative affordances of Twitter, and the interactional and relational dynamics create a pressure towards the expression of a particular, restricted version of the individual user's self. By enhancing certain aspects of the self and not other aspects, the user can connect to relevant others and become accepted and recognised in a network of affiliation. That is, the use can become 'one of the tweeps'.

Keywords: Twitter, networks of affiliation, relational pressures, Simmel, social media

Introduction: social media and the self

'Social media' is broadly considered an umbrella term for a range of digital communication tools and services that can be used to interact with others through network technologies like a personal computer or a smart phone (boyd, 2008). 'Social media' comprises a multiplicity of communicative genres, including blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, microblogs, social network sites, image- and video-sharing services, and location-based services, in which the individual can produce and distribute content, and interact with content and with fellow users. Social media are often described in contrast to mass media in that they are distinctly meant for self-expression and interpersonal communication between ordinary users (e.g. Lomborg, 2011b). Related, social media are based on distributed agency, since they facilitate not only classic broadcast through one-to-many communication, but also communication one-to-one and many-to-many. Being online implies engaging in a variety of communicative practices and social relationships. We may share brief encounters with strangers, or develop close personal friendships with online peers. The expression of self varies accordingly, and is shaped both by the communicative affordances of the genres in which we participate, and by the people we interact with.

In academia, the advent of the internet has sparked a now long history of inquiry into self-presentation online, and, in a more philosophical vein, what happens to the self on the internet. Earlier, scholars stressed the online self as increasingly fragmented and distributed (e.g. Turkle, 1995), while in recent years

there has been a renewed focus on the continuity between online and offline expressions of self (e.g. Robinson, 2007; boyd, 2008). Many studies of self-presentation online have invoked Erving Goffman's theories on facework and impression management (e.g. Goffman, 1959) to describe how users adjust their self-presentation to their peers online (e.g. Brake, 2009; Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006; Donath, 1999). Boyd (2008) has framed this as 'writing oneself into being', lending a catchy phrase from Sundén (2003) to describe how establishing online presence requires people to represent themselves to an audience by constructing profiles on social network sites, blogs an so forth, and filling in the information that they find relevant (boyd, 2008: 128-130).

Instead of approaching identity as the individual user's self-presentation to an (often unknown and unfamiliar) audience, this paper contributes to discussions of the online self by emphasising the collaborative process through which users' expressions of selves are negotiated and adjusted in specific social networks and networked interactions. Drawing on Georg Simmel's work on networks and group affiliation (1955), I analyse and discuss the self as a relational and interactional accomplishment, arguing that the networks in which individual users belong play a significant role in the process of negotiating the self in social media.

For this purpose, I use a currently popular microblogging service, Twitter, as an illustrative example and reference point. Twitter is a relevant case because communication in Twitter is explicitly structured around articulated networks of affiliation. Through analysis of network configurations and how Twitter users attune to their networks, I demonstrate how Twitter entails a collaborative expression of the individual user's self, and argue that this collaborative or negotiated self, while not new and distinctly linked to social media, becomes particularly visible in the networked interactional dynamics characteristic of social media.

The analysis summarises key findings from a larger qualitative case study about communicative norms and sociality on Twitter that I carried out in early 2010. In the study, six ordinary Danish Twitter users allowed me to archive and analyse all their tweets and the @replies they received in a one-month period.[1] I also interviewed the participants about the role of Twitter in their everyday lives, including their usage habits, preferences, and the relationships that they maintain to fellow users via their engagement with Twitter. The participants were purposefully sampled according to a maximum variation principle, allowing me to capture a broad range of use practices characteristic of specific subsets of the Danish Twittersphere. Specifically, the parameters used to ensure variance in Twitter profiles were network size, updating frequency, thematic focus and degree of conversationality, which previous studies have found important to explaining differences in Twitter use (e.g. Huberman, Romero & Wu, 2009; Naaman, Boase & Lai, 2010). In

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[1] The participants have signed informed consent statements granting me permission to use the data for the present study. The informed consent forms were constructed according to the research ethical guidelines laid out by the Association of Internet Researchers.

addition, three participants were female and three were male, and they were all between 25 and forty years old, which is the dominant age group in the Danish Twittersphere (Lomborg, 2011a).

The collected data was analysed inductively, using descriptive sociograms of participants' Twitter networks and ethnomethodological strands of inquiry into the social organization of practices and their accomplishments (Sacks, 1992; Garfinkel, 1967), before linking the findings to Simmel's work on networks of affiliation and the relational self. To delimit the analysis, I will focus on two participants, A (female in her early thirties) and B (male in his late thirties), who are both part of a distinct cluster in the Danish Twittersphere. The findings are, however, general for the entire material.

Structure

After a short theoretical introduction to Simmel's ideas about the networked self, I establish Twitter as a specific type of network, namely a freely chosen network that evolves around the activity of establishing and maintaining connections with like-minded others about common interests. Then I turn to the data and provide a short descriptive analysis of the composition of the network or cluster in which A and B take part, demonstrating how the activities within the cluster are located in and driven by articulation of stronger affiliation to a smaller subset of peers, who may be labelled the 'tweeps'. Next, I provide a detailed analysis of the dynamics at work when new participants aspire to become acknowledged members of the cluster, arguing that the need for feedback and recognition creates a pressure towards becoming like the already established members, that is, attuning one's conduct to the group, by acquiring its characteristic style and tweeting about a limited set of topics that the group members have in common. Finally, I explore the cluster from a thematic perspective, showing how author and readers collaboratively negotiate the appropriate content, how these topics come to define a certain group identity, and how this nurtures the expression of particular aspects of the individual user's self, while making other aspects only peripherally if at all relevant.

Networked selves and Twitter

In his essay, *The web of group-affiliations* (1955), Simmel unpacks a relational conception of the self by locating individual identity at the intersection of social circles. That is, a person's self is conceived as the sum of its expression in the different social activities and networks to which the person is affiliated in everyday life (Simmel, 1955: 155, Finnemann, 2003: 50). A fundamental principle in Simmel's relational conception of the self is that the expression of self varies with context. We constantly attune our behaviour

and thinking to the different contexts of interaction in our daily lives, because these shifting contexts are characterised by different agreements about the purpose of social interaction, interactional norms and so on (Simmel, 1955: 139). Hence, in any specific setting, some elements of our identity are highlighted, while others are toned down, so that we can relate and carry ourselves appropriately in the presence of others.

Twitter is one social setting or genre in which the self is relationally expressed. While not new and specific to Twitter and social media more broadly, the relational dynamics inherent to the process of negotiating expressions of self stand out distinctly in social media. Online, it is possible to track, observe, and document stability and change in the expression of self over time – at least in those services in which content is archived. Because of this, the role of the network in shaping expressions of identity are made more visible to the observer, thus providing an excellent opportunity to study how networks of affiliation come about and how individuals attune to them over time.

Twitter as a dynamic network of affiliation

According to Simmel, the relationship between the individual and the social group or network has shifted through history. Specifically, modern society involves an increasing individual freedom to choose networks of affiliation based on personal needs and interests. A person's choice of affiliation thereby reflects the aspects of the self that he or she would like to emphasise. The infrastructure of the internet enables an intensification of such freely chosen and interest-based networks, because it allows for people to connect with likeminded strangers across space and time in a way that was not possible before.

Twitter, a so-called microblogging service, exemplifies the idea of freely chosen interest-based networks. Twitter is a permeable and highly dynamic social network that the individual is free to join and leave. Tweeting is voluntary, fulfils a personal purpose, and is typically driven by an interest in something, the wish to connect with likeminded people, or a need to express oneself in regard to something (e.g. Java, Song, Finin & Tseng, 2007). The activities on Twitter evolve on and around individual profiles embedded in a network of users. The main feature of the Twitter profile is a text box framed by the question: 'What's happening?', in which profile holders can write brief status updates of up to 140 characters in length, to share their current state of mind, whereabouts, experiences, or links to interesting content elsewhere online with their social networks (Naaman et al., 2010). The status updates can be read and commented on by those who have subscribed to them. The easy access and possibility to connect with like-minded others is part of what attracts many people to Twitter.

Users are required to generate and articulate a network of other users with whom they share a connection, which will enable them to view the activities and traverse the social networks of self and others within the

system (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Twitter thus relies on 'a highly connected social space, where most of the information consumption is enabled and driven by articulated online contact networks' (Naaman et al., 2010: 1). In other words, to enter the flow of information and engage in conversations in Twitter, users must establish *connections* with each other. In Twitter, the tie structure is asymmetric, because the connections are not necessarily bi-directional but merely reflect an individual's attention to specific others who may or may not reciprocate the attention. Twitter profiles thus display a list of people that the user follows, and a list of 'followers' of the Twitter user. Hence, Twitter can be said to be a loosely connected structure with more densely knit clusters or sub-groups forming around particular themes and interests, and in which the participants link to and interact with each other. Because of Twitter's explicit articulation of the networks and aspired belongings of individual users, it is a useful site for examining the interplay between networks of affiliation and collaborative expressions of the tweeting self.

Positioning participants within the network

Both A and B have quite expanded networks of followers and people they follow, and they are both very active in tweeting and commenting on other people's tweets. They are part of a quite densely knit, primarily Danish cluster of about 150 Twitter users. Albeit being a quite large cluster, it only represents a small part of the Danish Twittersphere.[2] The cluster is characterised by many bi-directional links, that is, users who follow each other, rather than just one following the other. By reciprocating attention, participants recognise each other's membership of the cluster and reinforce symmetrical relationships and equipotentiality as the normative standard within the cluster. Further, the cluster is highly conversational as participants comment on each other's tweets. This is particularly true for the core members of the cluster. According to B the core of the cluster consists of about 40 very active users that interact in shifting constellations on Twitter on an almost daily basis. The table below summarizes the main figures of A and B in the archiving period, January 2010:

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[2] The size of the Danish Twittersphere is notoriously difficult to measure. According to Statistics Denmark, four percent of the Danish population between the ages of 16 and 74 say they have a profile on Twitter in 2010, corresponding to approximately 165,000 users (Danmarks Statistik, 2011: 26). However, these statistics probably include many inactive profiles (i.e. users that have signed up for Twitter but never access the service). The number of active users, who tweet and read other people's tweets on a regular basis, is probably much lower. For a discussion of the problems of measurement in social media studies, see Lomborg (2011a).

Participant	Following	Followers	Number of tweets posted by the author	Number of replies to the author	Total activity (tweets + replies)
A	233	290	252	140	392
B	286	365	912	399	1311

Table 1: Networks and Twitter activity in January 2010

The numbers show a high degree of embeddedness and activity for A and B, as well as a lot of response from other users. This indicates that both users may be considered core or semi-core members of the cluster: they are recognised by their Twitter peers as users that contribute something useful and valuable to the network. This further suggests that participants A and B are good entry points for understanding the specific dynamics and interaction norms that constitute this particular blog cluster.

Despite being densely connected in the Twitter cluster, the two participants do not keep equally in touch with everybody in their networks. They only activate a minor subset of the cluster through interaction on Twitter (@replies, retweets, direct messages etc.). This active part of the network is even smaller when considering the relations that are reciprocally activated more than once or twice and thus are continuously kept vibrant through conversation over time. To illustrate, B has 24 interaction partners with all of whom he has 15-30 exchanges, while A has seven fellow users with whom she has 15-30 exchanges in the archived period. These reciprocal relationships signal stronger interpersonal affiliations in the cluster, but a glimpse beyond the individual profiles archived in this study shows a tendency that some of the people with whom the study participants have many conversations also have conversations with each other on a regular basis. Rather than reflecting a strong, isolated one-to-one relationship between two specific participants in the larger cluster, such vibrant relations seem to indicate subgroups within the Twitter cluster. The individual user may be affiliated with different subgroups in the Twitter network. These densely knit and continuously activated networks within the cluster likely reflect groups of people who share a niche interest in something and use the group to exchange information about this topic of interest, or a group of people who just like each other's company and use Twitter to hang out and small talk. The fact that small subgroups emerge within the larger cluster is interesting in this context because it shows that participants may manage their engagement and membership in the cluster through a stronger affiliation to a relatively small group of important peers within the networked environment. These mutually affiliated core members are often referred to as 'tweeps' in the conversations on Twitter. The findings from the present case study are consistent with a recent large-scale quantitative study on Twitter networks and social interaction by Huberman et al. (2009). They found that despite following and being followed by many others, people's

interactive engagement is limited to the few that matter and build on reciprocation of attention. Thus, this seems to be a prevailing tendency in Twitter use in general, and not something specific to my sample. The actively maintained bidirectional relationships point to norms of mutuality and reciprocation of interest being pivotal to the interactional patterns and practices of small groups on Twitter. These continuous actualizations of relationships to important peers play a vital role in positioning the individual user not only as a member of the cluster, but as a member with closer association to specific other members of the cluster: the relevant others, the tweeps. With reference to the Simmelian idea of relational selves, the individual Twitter user's actualised connections and interactional activities with relevant others in the network implies that these relevant others have an influential role in negotiating the individual's expression of self. It is in the continuous articulation of relationships with relevant peers that the individual user is portrayed as a competent member of the cluster. As the subsequent sections document, these continuous articulations of relationships take place against the background of specific thematic and stylistic norms.

Building and maintaining networks of affiliation

A key tenet in Simmel's relational theory of the self is socialisation, the process in which an individual marks his or her belonging to distinct social circles by attuning his or her conduct to the norms of the group and context (Simmel, 1955: 138-142). Accordingly, understanding the characteristics and norms of conduct in a given social setting becomes pivotal to describing the individual's expression of self in this context. Moreover, our conceptions of appropriate behaviour, and our understanding of ourselves in one context of affiliation intersects with and feeds into our conduct in other social situations and ensures that we can maintain a coherent sense of self and the social world (Gajjala, 2009; Robinson, 2007). How does socialisation play out in the dynamics of affiliation on Twitter?

The common account of how the users in this study started using Twitter is a story of curiosity and disappointment. Having heard about Twitter in the media, or seen interesting people (e.g. gadget and tech experts, design people and celebrities) refer to their Twitter profiles and activities, they created profiles on the site. At first, they would conceive of the site as all about individual status updates and accordingly something that did not really add anything new to their repertoire of communication channels. As A states, 'I could not see the point with it, I thought it was strange to take such a small part of Facebook' (A, Interview).[3] In addition, since none of them really knew anyone on Twitter, it was hard to figure out whom to follow, no one followed them, and thus it all seemed pretty useless. As a consequence, the profiles of the two study participants remained inactive for a long time. Only when A and B began to put effort into

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[3] All the quotes from the study participants were translated by the author.

finding interesting people to follow, composing tweets, and gaining followers, did Twitter start 'growing' on them.

Following these accounts, it seems that Twitter is only perceived as useful and fun when the users have somebody relevant to talk and listen to – when the network is activated. Other studies confirm this, in that they have found that conversation with other Twitter users in one's network strengthens the attraction and motivation for being active on Twitter (e.g. Honeycutt & Herring, 2009; Java et al., 2007; Marwick, 2010). To grasp the meaning of the interactional and relational dynamics on Twitter in the users' daily lives, in this section, I analyse how users establish connections, become part of networks and initiate conversations with relevant others on Twitter.

The first element in building a network around one's profile on Twitter is to find somebody to follow. It can be quite difficult and time consuming to find relevant others to follow on Twitter. The site does have a search function where it is possible to search for specific others by name, but this requires that users know exactly who they are looking for, which is often not the case. Instead, the most common way to find others to follow is traversing the Twitter networks of others already in the user's Twitter network to locate interesting people in their Twitter networks and begin to follow them. Thus, the Twitter user is from the start highly dependent upon her Twitter network. Related, a collective practice has emerged over time to enable an easier and less time consuming way to find relevant others to follow, namely the practice of recommending others within Twitter to one's followers. The practice is an institutionalised weekly event called Follow Friday (FF), and is a quite efficient way to expand one's network. When somebody, whom a given user already approves of, FF's somebody else, it seems likely that the recommended user might also be relevant to follow.

The possibly relevant others that a user begins to follow are put through a screening process at first. As A describes it,

> When you just start following each other you may have a few exchanges, and then it fades
> out. There are of course some people that you continue to stay in touch with every once in a
> while. It is like sniffing each other, then it is fine and you move on. (A, Interview)

These newly added others are evaluated based on what they contribute to the feed, and they will be unfollowed again if they do not offer anything of interest, value or amusement to the user. In that case, they are just considered to be noise in the feed – something to get rid of. This practice of unfollowing is also executed if a user behaves inappropriately. For instance, A describes how she unfollows other users if their tweets are rude and offensive (A, Interview). B reports something similar when describing an instance where he has unfollowed a fellow user, whose tweets were becoming too rabid. 'I do not want to contribute to that others who follow me can see that I follow him' (B, Interview). He simply would not want

to be associated with that kind of behaviour, and the unfollowing is a way to mark his disapproval (B, Interview). An inappropriate tone can thus simply turn off the network and result in losing one's audience and membership in the cluster. By selecting and filtering other users, an individual user customizes the Twitter feed to suit his or her preferences – you only get what you choose to get, and you can always change your mind (B, Interview). The act of following others is in a sense a way to court them and a way for the follower to signal that he or she aspires their affiliation.

The second element of building a network is to get followers, something that is difficult in an entirely different way: the user must write interesting tweets so that other Twitter users will notice her and evaluate her contribution positively. To be sure, attracting many followers may be prestigious in itself, and a key motivating factor for continuing to put effort into tweeting, as argued by Marwick (2010: 207). However, *who* is in the audience also plays an important role. The individual user may be particularly interested in attracting specific audiences in order to establish dialogue and (professional or personal) connections with a few relevant peers, while other parts of the potential audience may hardly be considered relevant. This can be quite a challenge, considering that the new user can be very hard to find for potential followers, since she has not yet established a network that makes her visible to a wider audience. Added to this, the new user goes through the same trial period as described above, in which she is put to the test by her newly gained followers and either deemed worth following or unable to sustain the readership. In other words: the user must demonstrate that she understands and masters the genre to be included in the networks in which she aspires to participate. As A describes it, 'I think some people have the feeling in there, especially new ones, that they just stand there and nobody listens to what they are saying, and they really have to prove that they contribute something' (A, Interview). It takes time and effort to be included and deemed interesting enough for other users, but once included, it requires less effort to gain new followers because one's visibility in the network is increased: the more followers, the easier it is to be found by new ones. Added to this, for potential new followers it may be a quality stamp that a given user has already amassed a decent number of followers.

Gaining followers is important for both study participants, because it motivates them to continue tweeting, and A admits to be emotionally affected if people unfollow her. For the same reason, she has many considerations concerning how to please her audience:

> If I have to be completely honest, it is a question of making yourself appear interesting,
> make yourself sound funny, and not vulgar, too much or annoying. To do it the coolest way,
> simply make a good impression on others. (A, Interview)

The appreciation of followers and consideration for keeping them interested expressed by the two study participants confirms the importance of being validated and recognised as interesting by fellow users.

Being accepted by fellow users has a lot to do with catching a certain tone and learning what is considered interesting tweets. The two interviewees seem to agree on what constitutes a good tweet: it is a tweet that is both informative and funny. None of them care to read trivial matters from the everyday lives of others, and even less if they are not served with a surprising twist, or a touch of self-irony, so that the reader feels that the author is invested in the tweet (A, Interview; B, Interview). While the participants may have varying conceptions of what kind of information is relevant, simply because they have different interests, the idea that good tweets are served with a hint of humour and personality indicates that there is some kind of norm(s) at play concerning the tone in the cluster, and perhaps on Twitter in general. It is this tone that new participants must catch to be included in the networks they wish to be part of.

Both participants orient themselves to the informal and humorous stylistic norm prevalent in their cluster, in that they attempt to apply self-irony and humour in their own tweets, and in that they praise such creative, playful and humorous tweets from others. Accordingly, in working their way into – and maintaining – Twitter networks, the users seek to adjust their modes of expression to fit their peers' already-established preferences. Again, returning to Simmel, the network dynamics simply nurture and sanction a specific expressive style characteristic of that network. Users are socialised and, if successful in creating a network of relevant others around them, become accustomed to the informal and playful style on Twitter. This, in turn, creates and regulates a relevant context for the conversations on Twitter – or a certain atmosphere framing the communication. In this cluster: informal, funny and casual.

An important sign of inclusion in a given network is when relevant others respond to or retweet the user's tweets. Both study participants consider this a sort of recognition of their contributions. As B puts it: 'it is a little bit funny when somebody like C, who has been a part of this for many years, retweets something I have written' (B, Interview), indicating that he sees C's retweet as a quality stamp of his tweets. Besides indicating that some well-established cluster participants may be particularly well positioned for granting other members' acknowledgement, this suggests that commenting or refraining from it may be a tool for regulating membership. By bothering to post an @reply, the reader indicates that the tweet is relevant and interesting, thus implicitly sanctioning the behaviour of the author as appropriate and welcome. It is likely that many @replies to particular types of tweets encourage more tweets of the same sort. Similarly, if a tweet receives only few @replies, or if the tone of the @reply is negative, it is likely that the author will be less inclined to post a similar thing. In this way, the author adjusts his or her tweeting activity to the audience's expectations and interests to keep the audience committed. This reflects a process of socialisation in which individual members attune their behaviours to each other and the network at large. This implies that aspects of themselves – interests, opinions, expertise and experiences – that are not as attractive to the relevant others are toned down.

In her ethnographic work on the San Francisco tech-scene, Marwick (2010) describes these dynamics in terms of self-branding to get access to and status in specific social networks. In contrast to my study's focus on ordinary users, her work focuses explicitly on media professionals and aspirants. For Marwick, the self-promotional element implied in branding involves a professional, strategic impetus, and is a natural consequence of a competitive, entrepreneurial, and highly commercial environment. In contrast, ordinary users like the participants in the present study may adjust their self-presentations to their relevant peers' norms and preferences with no other strategic aim than simply to sustain companionship and good discussions on Twitter. Nonetheless, the studies align in showing how Twitter users may present a rather polished version of themselves to fit in and attract relevant others.

These possible constraints on the individual user's self-expression mean that the author cannot expect to engage her relevant peers in other topics and modes of expression that may be of personal value to her. Hence, the expression of self in Twitter networks is a highly collaborative accomplishment, driven by the mutual constitution of the user and the relevant others she may wish to connect to. This socialisation and movement towards conformity is of course not an instant dynamic, but it is likely that over time a specific tone and a specific set of topics become more central to the communication within the cluster and its sub-groups, because these specific topics unite the different users in the network and spark conversation. This set of topics thus comes to define the network and its members.

'We are the tech elite' – themes and purposes that unite participants in the cluster
In this final analysis section, I briefly analyse the topics pertinent for the cluster in which A and B participate, to illustrate how the thematic orientation in the conversation on Twitter lends a specific image or expression of self to the cluster and its members.

While the participants in the cluster tweet a great variety of topics, it is remarkable that the conversation in the collected Twitter feeds from A and B often evolves around discussions of new technologies, social media services and gadgets. Google Streetview, Google Buzz, the Kindle and the iPad are just some of the examples of topics of this kind in the data. The continuous pop-up of technology and media-related topics points to this being a core interest for many users in the cluster, and something that unites them.[4] To be sure, quite a few of the other participants in the cluster work in the media and communications industries (journalism, marketing, IT-development, research etc.), and may have a professional interest in new media services and gadgets. Neither A nor B are professional experts on these topics, but by participating in

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[4] This focus on technology could seem to be a general thing that many people like to discuss on Twitter. My data are, however, not of a scope to make such a general claim.

discussions and being recognised for their contribution they may come to see themselves and been seen as knowledgeable frontrunners in this matter.

Sharing and discussing information about issues of common interest may begin with a posted link or a user's observation concerning a given technology-related event or new product that other users in the network are eager to learn more about through exchange of experiences and viewpoints. Hence, Twitter becomes a vehicle for knowledge sharing and a source of inspiration and advice concerning new technology. Apart from functioning to enhance knowledge and exchange experience with peers, connecting and engaging in conversations around topics of shared interest in the network has added value to the participants, and A and B describe it in terms of both personal and professional networking (A, Interview; B, Interview). In essence, this involves using Twitter to facilitate easy mobilisation of the individual user's contacts, and occasionally this results in 'real-world' partnerships and business projects being launched. For instance, B has contributed to pitching ideas to an iPhone application developer through Twitter. A has used her involvement in Twitter-conversations about the Kindle, and her Twitter talks with other entrepreneurs as a kick-start for becoming an entrepreneur herself and starting her own e-book business (A, Interview). In short, the Twitter cluster is engaged for collegial sparring.

Networking in various ways epitomises Twitter's role for users that are part of the cluster in which A and B participate. Besides reading and commenting on each other's tweets, the cluster participants hook up with each other on LinkedIn and Facebook, typically on so-called 'network Friday' – a Friday happening on Twitter initiated from within the cluster. Many of them meet up and have a drink the first Friday every month at a bar in Copenhagen for 'Twiday bar', a social event where people hang out and small talk over drinks to mark the transition from work to weekend. The recurrent Friday bar event is also organised from within the cluster. They have a 'Twitter Christmas party', meet up to play table tennis and participate in an annual Twitter charity event, 'Twestival' (B has even assisted in organising a Twestival). A few of them have even begun to see each other privately in small groups, suggesting that closer relationships may develop from sustained commitment to conversation with likeminded strangers on Twitter. Indeed, the core members of the cluster are connected across contexts and socialise with each other on a regular basis.

While the focus on technology and social media-related products and issues are central to the cluster, because they serve informational and network mobilising functions, they also facilitate the establishment of relationality within the group, in that its members use Twitter as a space for hanging out with likeminded strangers and acquaintances. There is a very subtle line between information-sharing and pure sociability in the archived data. Sociability and socialising often work in tandem with information-sharing and networking in the sense that both purposes are often fulfilled in the same ongoing conversation. Further, the fact that core members of the cluster have begun to meet up for more socially oriented events outside Twitter

suggests that over time the cluster has further developed the relational dimension of participation in the cluster. The casual, informal and joking style characteristic of the cluster underlines these sociable and relational aspects. A explicitly describes her Twitter activity in terms of fun and cosiness, especially in the evenings, and on Fridays:

> Sometimes, I can sit at work behind the screen and simply hide and giggle about it for half a day, because, I would say, especially on Fridays the atmosphere is quite unrestrained in there. These themes run, like 'dirty Friday'[5] and other things. So usually it is quite fun in there and relaxed and people are happy. (A, Interview)

The repeated themes that especially play out on Fridays in the cluster often have only vague informational value (i.e. exchange of knowledge and experiences concerning a topic), whereas the relational output generated may be important to creating cohesion within the cluster. Arguably, a more relational, or sociable, dimension is added to the cluster over time as a result of continuous information exchange and a growing sense of cohesion in the cluster (Baym, 2010: 128).

In relation to expressions of the self, the orientation towards technology and social media-related topics in this particular cluster means that the cluster comes to base its group identity on the interest in technology, and on being sort of a 'tech elite' (B, Interview). Through continuously invoking new technologies and gadgets as reference points in the conversation, the participants shape their Twitter-membership according to certain topical criteria: namely that participants must be eager and able to take part in these gadget-, social media- and tech-related discussions and demonstrate technological savvyness (A, Interview). Being able to contribute to these discussions is a status marker for the participants. For B, who claims to have a long-time passion for new technologies and gadgets, Twitter offers a platform for sharing his expertise, getting easy access to discussing the newest media and technology trends, and associating with likeminded, and often more established, professional experts in the field. On the flipside, the technological savvyness required to gain access and recognition as a relevant other in the cluster excludes those who may not be as knowledgeable and well informed on new technology trends from entering the conversation.

By bringing technological trends to the thematic fore of participation and membership in the Twitter cluster, the interactional and relational dynamics create a pressure towards the expression of a very particular version or aspect of the individual user's self that fits the group. By enhancing this aspect of the self and not other aspects, the user can connect to likeminded others in the setting and become accepted and recognised by relevant others in the network in which the user aspires membership. This pressure is not unique to Twitter and other networked media, but is a fundamental social dynamic. A person's choice of affiliation reflects the aspects of the individual's personality that he or she would like to emphasise. In other

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[5] 'Dirty Friday' is a recurrent event on Fridays where the core users within the cluster tweet links to funny and sexually loaded pictures, videos and writings online. The event is initiated from within this particular cluster and is thus a unique happening within this specific group of people.

words, a person uses his or her network of affiliation in a given context to enact and sustain a specific sense of self. We want to be seen with specific others in specific contexts, because their company puts us in a certain light: as one of them; part of a group. In many ways, what happens on Twitter is similar to what we see when people chose to wear a certain type of clothes and consume specific cultural products that make us fit into specific sub-cultures, professional communities and so forth (Simmel, 1955; Baym, 2010: 112). However, with Twitter and other networked environments, the influence of the network of affiliation, the dynamics of socialisation, and the process of mutual adjustment in the expression of self become very explicit. Further, they manifest themselves in a special way, as successful socialisation is likely to be reflected in the mutual recognition and acknowledgement within the network of affiliation that is expressed in and through sustained conversational activity among participants.

Conclusion

In this paper I have analysed and discussed the process of becoming a 'tweep' as a relational and collaborative accomplishment, negotiated through interactions within networks of affiliation to relevant others. Presenting key findings on network dynamics from a larger qualitative case study on networking and sociality in Twitter as an emergent communicative space, I have demonstrated how networks of affiliation and specifically interactional dynamics within these networks fundamentally shape an individual's expression of self. To establish oneself as a Twitter user and begin building networks of affiliation, it is pivotal to make oneself visible by 1) identifying relevant and interesting Twitter users to follow; and 2) offering interesting tweets in return to gain followers, keep them committed and possibly engaging them in conversation. These basic dynamics of socialisation, inherent to the Twitter network, create a pressure towards adhering to certain norms, negotiated within a given cluster, concerning relevant topics and stylistic-expressive means. In short, densely connected networks of users nurture specific conventions regarding the expression of self. This implies that the self expressed is a socially sanctioned one in which there is little room for idiosyncratic aspects, including interests and opinions that may be of personal value for the individual user, but irrelevant for the group.

Returning to Simmel, patterns of group-affiliation have tendency to treat the individual as group-member rather than as an individual (1955: 139), implying that the expression of an individual's self in a given social circle will be significantly coloured by the group identity of the social circle. Analytically this implies that when zooming in on one isolated social grouping, a person's total expression of self is overshadowed by the specific social identity enacted in the setting. It is in the patchwork of affiliations to different groups that the uniquely personal shines through (Simmel, 1955: 138-142).

In relation to this, a promising path for future research would be to consider how different expressions of individual selves intersect online. Does presence and participation in different social media nurture different, and perhaps more nuanced expressions of self? What strategies are used to sustain a coherent sense of online self (e.g. interlinking profiles on social network sites, blogs etc.)? What role do existing networks (e.g. old school friends, family, colleagues etc) play on sites like Facebook play vis-à-vis networks of likeminded strangers (e.g. blogs and Twitter)? And, related, what may be the role of the specific communicative genre at hand (i.e. the communicative characteristics and constraints of various genres of social media) in the process of collaboratively negotiating the expression of self?

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