

## «My Friends are my Audience»: Mass-mediation of Personal Content and Relations in Facebook<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Facebook identity management implies a selective front and backstage: users perform multiple social roles for a multiple spectator audience (boyd 2008). But as friend lists increase and the discussion about sensitive topics becomes more critical, people tend to protect their image by dealing only with content that may be interesting to all their contacts (Hogan, 2010).

Starting from field research on Italian users (40 in-depth interviews with Facebook users aged 14-55), this paper discusses the idea of Facebook as a place where people are engaged in building their social relations and their self-representation by managing their online presence in a way that can be both intriguing and acceptable for most of their contacts.

The paper will highlight the strategies of content homogenization and the online behavior adopted by users according to their perceptions of their «imagined audience» (Litt, 2012).

The article aims at underlining that Facebook use is surprisingly consistent with mass-media and generalist-media cultural models: users seem to apply models of television spectatoriality, not only in terms of passivity (lurking), but also in terms of consumption (skipping uninteresting content) and content production performed for a generalist audience (developing a distinctive and acceptable style of interaction).

Keywords: social networks; imagined audience; online identity management; self-representation; online content selection

### 1. Introduction

Back in 1998, Nick Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst published a very successful book organized around the core idea that «the qualities and experiences of being a member of an audience have begun to leak out from specific performance events which previously contained them, into the wider realms of everyday life» (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 36-7). According to Abercrombie and Longhurst, we live and act

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within a reality that has performative qualities and at the same time is part of a never-ending process of spectacularisation.

Fifteen years later, and aside from the criticisms that have been made of the book, we think that this idea perfectly describes our online-offline continuum of performances, and that it is still useful when conducting analysis of Facebook user activities at the threefold level of social interaction, identity management, and symbolic production and consumption (Raine, Wellman, 2012). Abercrombie and Longhurst help us understand that, whether we are primarily managing our identities and networks or whether we are simply relaxing on Facebook, what has changed is our being part of a general spectacle/performance process that comes about within the diverse and specific interpretative communities of our Facebook audiences.

Facebook users have multiple audiences: friends from different cultural and social backgrounds and belonging to heterogeneous generational cohorts; former, current and potential colleagues or partners; parents and relatives. «There is an accumulation of many social circles of friends under a single rubric», as Hewitt and Forte (2006) state, which becomes even more complex after some years of Facebook use. According to boyd (2008a and 2008b) and her application to SNSs of Erving Goffman's «dramaturgical model» (Goffman, 1959), Facebook identity management implies a selective front and back stage where users perform multiple social roles before a multiple spectator audience.

But as friend lists increase and discussion about sensitive topics becomes more critical, people – according to Hogan (2010) – tend to protect their image on Facebook by dealing only with content and news that may be interesting to all their Facebook contacts, and in so doing they try to adhere to what Hogan calls the «lowest common denominator» of their entire friend list. On the one hand, users decide to perform only a part of their personal identity, the part that can probably be appreciated by the majority of their Facebook friends. On the other hand, users block, «unfriend», or hide contacts who usually post content and news that they do not want to receive within a SNS (Madden, 2012). The consequence is what Pariser (2011) calls the «Filter-Bubble» effect: Facebook only shows people and news that users want, and they prefer not to impose their opinions on others.

In this process of potential «homogenization» of news and contents, Facebook is increasingly a fundamental platform for the dissemination of news chosen and collected by «friends» and online contacts in which mainstream media are losing their centrality in terms of time consumption but also in terms of reliability (Newman, 2011).

Starting from empirical evidence drawn from fieldwork on Italian Facebook users, this article discusses the approaches that emphasize the idea of Facebook as a place where people are engaged in building their social relations and their self-representation by managing their online presence (or absence) in a way that can be both intriguing and acceptable for most of their contacts.

Addressing some key questions in Facebook research, the article will also highlight the various strategies of content homogenization and the online behavior adopted by users according to their perceptions of their «imagined audience» (Litt, 2012), and it will discuss the different motives that inform different strategies. On the one hand, one notes a sort of «assumption» of responsibility (for example, in removing provocative comments and content in order to avoid hurting people) by users in regard to their «networked publics» (boyd, 2010). On the other hand, one can identify criteria of economy and efficiency at work (for example, when users try to arouse interest in the majority of their network's members in order to guarantee some kind of interaction), a strategy which recalls that of audience maximization.

**2. Methodology**

The fieldwork was conducted in winter 2012 in two Italian city areas (Milan and Bergamo districts) and it was based on 40 in-depth interviews with Facebook users aged 13-54. The research, funded as a Project of National Interest by the Italian Ministry of Education (2008), is part of the first large-scale qualitative research project on Facebook uses in Italy entitled "Online social relations and identity: Italian experience in Social Network Sites". The overall national sample included 120 Facebook users selected according to a criterion of geographical distribution: 40 interviewees lived in Northern Italy, 40 in the Central and 40 in the Southern part of the country. Within each of these macro-regions, half of the sample was selected from larger metropolitan areas (20 in Milan, 20 in Rome and 20 in Palermo) and half from smaller cities which are province capitals (20 in Bergamo, 20 in Pesaro and 20 in Cosenza) (see table 1).

Table 1. National sample

Geographical area	City	Respondents by age					Total respondents
		13-18	19-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	
Northern Italy	Milan	3	4	6	4	3	20
	Bergamo	3	4	6	4	3	20
Central Italy	Rome	3	4	6	4	3	20
	Pesaro	3	4	6	4	3	20
Southern Italy	Palermo	3	4	6	4	3	20
	Cosenza	3	4	6	4	3	20
<i>Total</i>						<i>120</i>	

This article draws on the testimonies collected in Northern Italy (20 Facebook users in Milan and 20 in Bergamo). Each sub-sample of 20 people was constructed according to criteria of age, gender and occupation (as shown in Tables 2.1 and 2.2). In regard to this last criterion, three occupation categories (OC) were considered for people aged 25-54: managers, executive managers, entrepreneurs, freelance professionals (OC1); teachers, employees, craftspersons, traders (OC2); workers, housewives, farmers, unemployed people (OC3). In the group aged 19-24 we selected both employed (E) and student or unemployed (S/U) interviewees, while among the youngest we mixed students attending different types of school: lyceums (L) and technical professional schools (TPE). This nonprobability purposive sample was constructed to include both male and female users aged 13-54 also representing heterogeneous professional levels. People aged 55 or older were excluded because of the very small amount of Italian

Facebook users (according to data reported by Facebook Insights) at the time when the research was carried out.

Table 2.1. Northern Italy: Milan sub-sample (20 interviewees)

Age group	13-18	19-24	25-34	35-44	45-54
No. of interviewees	3	4	6	4	3
List of the interviewees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• male, L</li> <li>• female. L</li> <li>• male, TPE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• male, E</li> <li>• female, E</li> <li>• male, S/U</li> <li>• female, S/U</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• male, OC1</li> <li>• female, OC1</li> <li>• male, OC2</li> <li>• female, OC2</li> <li>• male, OC3</li> <li>• female, OC3</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• male, OC1</li> <li>• female, OC1</li> <li>• female, OC2</li> <li>• male, OC3</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• female, OC1</li> <li>• male, OC2</li> <li>• female, OC3</li> </ul>

Table 2.2. Northern Italy: Bergamo sub-sample (20 interviewees)

Age group	13-18	19-24	25-34	35-44	45-54
No. of interviewees	3	4	6	4	3
List of the interviewees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• female, L</li> <li>• female. TPE</li> <li>• male, TPE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• male, E</li> <li>• female, E</li> <li>• male, S/U</li> <li>• female, S/U</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• male, OC1</li> <li>• female, OC1</li> <li>• male, OC2</li> <li>• female, OC2</li> <li>• male, OC3</li> <li>• female, OC3</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• male, OC1</li> <li>• male, OC2</li> <li>• female, OC2</li> <li>• female, OC3</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• male, OC1</li> <li>• female, OC2</li> <li>• male, OC3</li> </ul>

The interviews used the "life-story approach" (Bertaux, 1981): a method intended to minimise the interviewer's intrusiveness. The list of topics discussed with the interviewees comprised seven thematic areas: (1) relation between the user and Facebook; (2) friends; (3) practices; (4) contents; (5) timeline; (6) profile; (7) user's reflexivity. After being recorded and transcribed, the interviews were analysed with a CADQAS software (Dedoose).

### **3. Writing, networking, managing identity: a multidimensional approach to the use of Facebook**

In their article on value creation in social media, Bechmann and Lomborg (2012, 4) conduct a review of user-centric studies on networked communication. They find that the user, or better the 'producer' (Bruns, 2008), is conceptualized in three main ways: (a) «as someone who interacts and connects with fellow users, drawing from these relationships a sense of social belonging»; (b) «as someone who engages actively and sometimes creatively with technologies to express and explore their senses of self»; and finally 3) as someone using social media more instrumentally as a source of information and expertise in everyday life.

For analytical reasons, we can of course keep different issues – social interaction, identity making and content consumption – separate, but in everyday-life practices these levels are closely connected, and people's reflexivity operates on precisely this connection.

Facebook users have it clear in their minds that the people in their network are the audience for which they engage in content production and interaction for the purpose of networking and identity building. They want to: 1) be popular by maximizing their audience (by producing and sharing content suitable for anyone: «If I publish something, I publish it in order that anyone could see it» (F 25); 2) perform their identities also by producing and sharing content (personal or otherwise); 3) want to receive news and (personal) information produced and shared by their friends.

Not having a Facebook account means being excluded not only from a relational network, but also from friends' agendas and discourses – agendas to which users contribute by sharing content that they judge important for friends.

[Who do I write for?] Someone else who maybe shares my interests, because we have similar political ideas, or he hasn't heard this news, or he hasn't seen the video but could be interested in it. If I have the person with this status clearly in mind, I immediately publish it on his timeline. Otherwise I tag him, so that I'm sure he will receive this information (F, 25 )

The «imagined audience» works as a powerful filter in users' practices of reading («I want to be updated about topics I consider relevant for my friends») and writing because any post is intended to be read and possibly shared and commented on, not only by a small group of strong friends, but also, potentially, by a larger number of contacts.

[When you publish something] You really never know who'll read it (F, 24)

If I'm sure that information will remain between you and me, it's okay; but who knows who'll read my status or my opinion? (F, 38)

As friend lists increase and discussions about sensible topics becomes more critical, people – according to Hogan (2010) – tend to protect their image on Facebook by posting only «safe» content that may be interesting to all their Facebook contacts. Users try to adhere to what Hogan (2010) calls the «lowest common denominator» of their entire friends list.

All of them are careful enough. I mean, if they want to be polemical or publish something that isn't exactly neutral, it seems to me that they are absolutely cautious. Most of my contacts have understood that Facebook is fun but it can be very dangerous, so they avoid posting nonsense statuses, things that might be embarrassing or backfire (M, 38)

In the past three or four years of social network use, users have built a Facebook network that comprises several dimensions and phases of life (professional, personal, public, private). As the network of Facebook friends increases, so a higher number of users deliberately produce content for a large and not totally controlled audience, and they strategically perform their identities through a broadcasting production of content approach («be polite, be relevant, be interesting, be smart»).

This means that users restrict themselves through a form of self-censorship: not everything can be published, and people often publish content coherent with the opinion of other users, or content that reduces the possibility of conflicts (and the time spent on dealing with conflicts that may arise):

If it's something easy, I don't have to think about it for very long. But if I think it's something that could start a quarrel with someone, no, I don't publish it at all (F, 24).

A friend of mine wrote a post on my FB timeline that I knew would create problems. I got angry because that status would hurt other people and get me in trouble (M, 23).

Personal content production or grassroots and media content sharing in Facebook – whether it is a kind of peer information system, an entertainment system, or a kind of mediated «small talk» with a specific «phatic function» (Jakobson, 1960) – serve primarily to keep communication open and to maintain and strengthen both strong and weak personal social ties inside and outside Facebook. Such a production is part of our sociability (Simmel, 1949), but it is also part of our information needs and of our biography. And Facebook users are very careful in two respects. They manage the stage/backstage relation in order to build a personal storytelling (Lundby, 2009) acceptable to the various social networks (and small scale groups) to which they belong and which might collapse within Facebook (Pasquali, 2012). Second, they manage the efforts (in terms of conflict management, for instance) necessary to ensure the stability of the Facebook network and the interaction between online and offline relations with people.

This double level of engagement/disengagement is at work not only in content production but also in content consumption. Facebook users, in fact, have a clear idea of themselves as an audience engaged not only in interaction but also in symbolic consumption and spectatorial activities.

Since the pioneering studies of Baym (2000) and Mann et al. (2003), there has been animated debate on lurking and «coveillance». This, of course, may happen (and also our interviewees admitted that they

sometimes used Facebook in this way, and were afraid that someone might do the same with their profile and timeline). However, in the case of routine Facebook practices, it is clear that «watching» is much closer to mediated content consumption practices than to social control activities.

Within the boundaries of one's own imagined audience, watching and being watched is perfectly acceptable, and this acceptability (for instance in the definition of intimacy but also in attribution of meaning) is rooted precisely in being part of the same imagined audience.

These practices of Facebook consumption have already been studied and categorized in terms of user styles, or even in terms of uses and gratifications (Quan-Haase, Young, 2010, Bakardjieva, 2005, Wagman, 2010). The purpose of this paper is to link these practices to an audience studies paradigm. It seeks to understand not only what performance models are involved but also what spectatorial models operate within Facebook use.

#### **4. Content management on Facebook and massmedia models**

Facebook users are not only producers of content but also, and especially, consumers of content produced by other users. This emerged very clearly from the analysis of our interviews. People often open Facebook just to «have a look», to see «what's happening» – these are words used by our interviewees – in their news feeds, or to check for any notifications that they may have received.

The multiplication of content posted, shared, and commented on in Facebook has stimulated users not only to produce content themselves but also to use Facebook as an important web service where interesting, lovely, strange, unusual, informative, entertaining new content produced by other users can be found.

Furthermore, Facebook users are increasingly careful about what kind of content they produce or share. «Writing content» on Facebook is more problematic than simply «reading content» produced by others; producing content is more stressful than just consuming it. For these reasons, too, we argue that Facebook is becoming a virtual place where users read more than they write.

Consequently, the challenge is to understand what models of spectatoriality people apply when they are in Facebook.

On the basis of our interviews it seems that users apply models of massmedia spectatoriality not only in terms of passivity of content watching, but also in more general terms of consumption.

What does this mean? We shall seek to explain this hypothesis on the basis of three key considerations:

##### *4.1) Facebook news feed as a flow of content*

During our interviews we asked users to access their Facebook page through an iPad and do what they usually do, commenting on their activities. The users started the activity by checking private messaging, they then scrolled («a quick look», said a 45-year-old woman) the news feed as a flow of content in which

they rapidly identified what was of most interest to them. Preference was generally given to more recent posts, posts by close friends, and short content.

A significant number of our respondents talked about using Facebook in terms of a «glance» at the content, and at the activities of friends and contacts. The interviewees checked their Facebook accounts only to «have a look» at what was happening on their news feeds. Sometimes there was no activity: no writing and no clicks on links in friends' posts. In a few cases, «like its» were added to posts, and then a scrolling to the end of the page to see older posts. Besides this «looking at» activity, in some cases, chatting and messaging were still crucial as open, one-to-one channels to comment on news feeds with the user's closest friends. This kind of use was even more common when respondents used mobile devices (in particular smartphones). On the one hand, smartphones are less usable than personal computers, so that people are less interactive and productive, and they use Facebook mainly to read news. On the other hand, the use of smartphones is interstitial, occasional, and often unfocused: in these mobile and sporadic short sessions in Facebook, the productivity of users is very low, and the main activity is looking at other people's content.

On my mobile I spend only three minutes in Facebook 'cause the train is coming and so I use this break to look at the Facebook news feed. I just take a look. Maybe I open it, just for a news feed scroll, I see some bullshit, and I close it (F, 25).

I use my mobile for only thirty seconds. Just to check if anyone has written to me, and what people have written on the news feed. On the other hand, for Facebook, I spend more time on my PC. But I'm not likely to stay in Facebook for long. Most of the time it's about two and half minutes, I just look at a person I'm interested in (M, 23).

Therefore, for a significant number of our respondents, the Facebook news feed was basically a stream of content produced by others to be watched passively, as people do when they idly watch television:

Nothing is better than Facebook for playing around, 'cause you scroll the page, look at some pictures and see, it's a brainless activity (F, 25).

This type of use recalls what Lull (1990), in *Inside Family Viewing*, called 'idling' in regard to a situation where the viewer has low involvement with watching television because s/he is just passing time between other activities (Gasparini 1998; Aroldi 2007). Similarly, watching Facebook news feeds can be a momentary distraction, a way to kill time before doing other activities. This is even more likely when Facebook is used via smartphones. On the other hand, going on Facebook even when no break is planned (as happens, for example, with students when doing their homework) may be a way (like watching TV) to interrupt other activities in order to engage in a brainless activity (F, 25)

#### *4.2) Facebook news feed as a macrotext and content aggregator*

For a significant number of our respondents, Facebook was essentially an aggregation of content produced by friends and accounts selected and subscribed by the users. Facebook enables users to receive frequently updated content. It is not only a network of friends. It is also a webservice that collects content produced by others and selected by users not only for friendship with other users, but also because it is consistent with the interests and passions of the subscribers.

As news feed and RSS readers, people are enabled by Facebook to consume content produced by their contacts and to stay in touch with the content that is being shared.

Our respondents underlined that it was of great importance for them to receive news, updates, and content coherent with their personal interests. Through strategic use of the 'friendship' and 'I like' functions on Facebook, several respondents tried to construct webfeeds coherent with their personal interests.

[Interviewer: What is Facebook for you?] I signed up for Facebook because I'm involved in social work, and there were groups and associations that I could meet and get in touch with. This way [...] You get in touch with organizations that otherwise you wouldn't know about: the animal rights association, the critical consumption group, or a political group [...] It is a good window that lets you get interesting links (F, 45).

It's like Mozilla: thanks to Mozilla Firefox I create bookmarks relative to several topics I'm interested in, otherwise it would be difficult to control information. Some people use email for that, but I wouldn't be able to, and so I use Facebook for this purpose as well (F, 45).

The management of friendships in Facebook is often related not only to maintenance of relationships with other users but also to interest in content posted by others (friends, friends of friends, celebrities, public figures, etc.). Interesting content posted by others may be a sufficient reason for asking strangers for friendship, and starting a connection whose main purpose is to read posts and content.

Sometimes I share Alessandro D'Avenia comments. He's a novelist and he's got a blog. I read his books and I've enjoyed them, I share his thoughts on the news. I run this blog where Alessandro comments on news stories and I often re-share his posts. I'm one of his followers (F, 22).

Some street art painters, I don't know them directly, but I know their work... I thought it would be cool to include them on my friends' list and share opinions with them and see their work. All of them are very important people. Facebook lets me get closer to them and to the exhibitions they organize, to keep updated (M, 28).

The consequence is the construction of a Facebook news feed with selected, interesting, and relevant content and posts. In some cases, the selection of contacts and friendships on Facebook is related more to the kind of content that people seek than to the intensity of the relationships among users. In Facebook, the coherence and relevance of the content that users read is as important as the friendship. Amid the overabundance of stimuli, content, and news on the Internet, people build their personal content schedules on Facebook by selecting among information made available by other users.

On my page I've selected people able to provide information, especially political information, or to enrich my news feed and notification on what's happening in Milan [...] I'm trying to use Facebook as an events calendar, I've tried to get in touch with people close to Milan's night life, such as club owners, musicians, who tell me what's on (F, 25).

The consequence is an increase in Facebook contacts with «expert and popular» people of influence not known offline but added because of their «popularity» and ability to give significant information and updates:

My friends' list also includes public personalities that I'm interested in because they invite me to join interesting events, they provide me with information about what's happening in Milan [...] For example, If I get in touch with the owner of Atomic [a club], I can access information about events and see artists profiles by looking at his network (F, 25).

Reading relevant and intriguing content is increasingly important. Most of the respondents emphasised how often their Internet access began with checking their Facebook accounts. Moreover, most of them said that they spent the majority of their time on the Internet watching their Facebook news feed, which thus became a sort of «walled garden», a closed ecosystem, quite "apart" from other Internet websites where users can find all the services, contents and information that they need. This also applies to institutional media content. Facebook is profoundly changing the relation between information and the media. Several interviewees used Facebook as their main gateway to information and news, with a partial replacement of institutional (off and online) media. For these respondents, news and information were the sum of selected news produced and shared by Facebook friends and accounts:

I read online newspapers less and less. Before I often visited the websites of Corriere della Sera or La Repubblica [major Italian newspapers]: not now! I don't know if it's a consequence of Facebook. But when I'm on Facebook I receive a lot of things about politics, news, because there are articles published by my friends (F, 34).

An impressive number of respondents believed that Facebook provided them with all the relevant content present in the news media. Despite the (perceived) decrease in the consumption of mass media, respondents considered themselves well informed about the media agenda, thanks to Facebook and the selection of media news made by other users.

Now I watch less television, but if something happens on TV in a short time it's on Facebook. I watch less TV but I know what's going on because there's content and comments posted by my friends on Facebook (M, 28).

Institutional, countercultural, UGC, mainstream, entertaining, informative news and content: everything is available on Facebook, and for a significant number of users Facebook is the only place where they receive information and read content. Whilst in the recent past, news items were a minor component of overall SNSs contents (Glynn, et al 2012), according to our respondents, the use of Facebook for news-related purposes is now very important and significant, without differences in terms of gender or social capital. Through sharing, liking and recommending news contents, Facebook offers a collection of news regarded as more in-depth or more coherent with users' interests than news broadcasted by traditional mass media (Hermida, et al, 2012).

Moreover, Facebook is also the main gatekeeper regulating access to other online content: for several of our respondents, social media furnished an essential collection and review of links to news websites (coherently with Hong's (2012) research findings). For these reasons, Facebook users look for «content distributors» coherent with their interests: for example, it was quite usual among the respondents to use the «like it» function to add groups, pages, and public figures' pages in order to receive automatically (and passively) updates on the Facebook news feed.

Furthermore, also friendship seems increasingly related to the capacity of people to produce meaningful «content»: friendship on Facebook depends not only on proximity between the users (being a friend in contact in everyday life) but also on affinity in terms of content (the importance of producing «good» information, personal or otherwise). «Friends» on Facebook are often «producers of content that I consider relevant», to quote another respondent. Users are constantly looking for friends, pages, or groups that provide interesting content and ideas, so that the news feed becomes the place to find relevant information and content produced through friend selection and subscription to interesting pages and groups. In light of this empirical evidence, it seems that in this case, too, television watching styles may be a good basis for understanding different patterns of Facebook domestication by users.

Since the 1990s, the Italian television system has been characterized by the coexistence of generalist and thematic channels. The television flow has increasingly become a kind of «macrotext» within which the viewer builds his/her television flow by cutting and pasting different texts in a new textual continuum based on personal tastes and performed within and through television macrotext and flows (Aroldi 2007). Today, the Facebook news feed can be conceptualized as a new personal macrotext, one which the user builds by aggregating different contents and news sources present on Facebook. This is a textual continuum made of microtexts (videos, images, texts) posted by different «broadcaster» subjects that find unity of meaning in the user's selective choices in relation to friends, groups, celebrities, editorial subjects, etc.

#### 4.3) Facebook, zapping, and uninteresting or controversial content

A significant number of respondents described what they did in order to receive only relevant and interesting news and content from their contacts in Facebook. They talked about practices of hiding and skipping uninteresting content and profiles.

Several Facebook users erased from their network contacts who produced uninteresting content, who posted things that they disagreed with, who posted too frequently on a specific topic (e.g. politics, sport, private and private life), or who posted items that worried, offended or bored them

Our research confirms the tendency of users to block, «unfriend», or hide friends posting content which is irrelevant or useless to them (Madden, 2012). The consequence is the multiplication of what Pariser (2011) calls the «Filter-Bubble» effect: Facebook give users information that that they want to see based on information about the users, past click behaviour, search history, past preferences.

User often skip boring and annoying content: if the author of uninteresting content continues to produce and share irrelevant information, the user starts to consider hiding his/her content or, in extreme circumstances, removing him or her from the list of friends. «Erasing» practices are also performed with regard to «real» friends; in this case, users do not unfriend the contact (this would be too rude, and it would have consequences in terms of conflict); rather, they «hide» the content from their news feeds.

I very often take people out of my news feed. I don't want to see their updates. I don't cancel them because it's too much. People that post pictures of dogs or children, vulgar or political messages, or messages that annoy me when I scroll my news feed, or redundant people: maybe they are people that I've got nothing against, but if they post things that bother me, I take them out of my news feed, I don't want to see their updates (F, 28).

One of my classmates posted links with pornographic content, or depressing and boring things. So I told her that I'd removed her from my Facebook friends because she was ruining my news feed (F, 17).

[Interviewer: Have you ever cancelled anyone?] There are people who publish too much. There are two reasons [for canceling a friend]: if they jam your news feed, or if they don't post anything. So go away! (M, 28)

Friends are turned off as if they were television channels when something is wrong in online or offline relationships with them:

She was unpleasant and I cancelled her. At the beginning we were friends, then she changed. Her attitude changed» (F, 15)

However, whilst this quote describes an episodic cancellation due to specific reasons, many respondents said that they periodically «cleaned» their network by deleting friends with whom interactions were absent

or rare, friends regarded as annoying, publishers of «pointless content» (F, 34), friends whose use was not in line with the user's expectations, friends perceived as being simply «voyeurs» who did not actively interact with the user.

We have already mentioned the similarity of these practices of content selection with the television audience practice of 'zapping' from one channel to another to avoid commercial breaks or search for content closer to the viewer's interest. Because television zapping allows viewers to consume the television flow less passively, and to build personal pathways of content consumption, the practice of blocking or hiding Facebook friends on the basis of what they publish is the response to the need to control the Facebook information flow, and to search for content more in tune with personal identity traits and tastes.

There are profiles of friends who always chat about the same stuff. This friend of mine talks every time about snow and snowboarding. That's a bit exaggerated. You should talk about anything (F, 29).

At the same time, apparently quite common among our respondents was the idea that it is preferable to have Facebook friends that produce «generalist» content (in terms of tone – not too serious, not too superficial, not too intellectual – and heterogeneity of arguments) and develop a distinctive and acceptable style of interaction by avoiding controversial content that might generate highly time-consuming flames or conflicts.

The consequence is that, among friends in the same networks, the presence of heterogeneous points of view and conflicts is less and less tolerated. For several respondents, the Facebook news feed was a collection of content coherent with their interests and attitudes.

Therefore, a large number of our respondents considered it more important not to have controversial content on Facebook news feeds than to be able to confront different ideas and points of view: Facebook was not perceived as a place where people can peacefully debate.

About the Israeli-Palestinian question: if I'd expressed my opinion, it would have appeared pro-Israel, but it wasn't a pro-Israel position. It was simply a less radical position than those I read on Facebook, shared by my friends: so I prefer to express my ideas face to face and hide too controversial content, like photos of dead children (M, 29) .

This last point may be indicative of a kind of progressive «massification» and standardization of content on Facebook, in terms of production (see the previous section) but also in terms of content judged acceptable to be read on Facebook. The reduction of conflicts, no deep intimacy, no flaming, no insults, no sex, and no violence, are becoming increasingly desirable.

The excessive expression of feelings irritates me... in the pictures... in the texts. It irritates me if it's too much (f, 25).

I consider it inappropriate to express feelings on Facebook: Facebook is more a space to share interests, not personal and private feelings (F, 22)

This phenomenon is related to the increasing awareness of the public dimension of Facebook, but also to the increasing importance of having an «interesting» personal Facebook page, with good, sincere and heterogeneous content, original but not too narrow, up-to-date but not too eccentric in comparison with the common general agenda shared in personal networks of friends.

## **5. Limitations, further research and conclusion**

This article has some limitations which at the same time are new directions for future research. We list those of which we are aware. A first limitation of our results concerns the fact that Facebook users are often members of other SNSs; the relation between the use of heterogeneous social networks and the way in which they interact with each other in people's practices is fruitful terrain for further investigation. Second, after our research, the number of Facebook users aged over 55 increased significantly in Italy, according to data published by Facebook Insights: an extension of the fieldwork in the next few years will require interviews with senior users as well. Third, consistently with the low general penetration of Twitter in the national market at the time of the research (approximately 4.3% of the Italian population was daily active on Twitter in January 2013: MecConsulting, 2014), our respondents showed low use of Twitter compared with other Western countries. But in recent months there has been a significant increase in Twitter use in terms of penetration and frequency (with a +20.3% increase in Twitter users in 2013 and a +16.6% increase expected in 2014: eMarketer, 2014). In-depth study of the impact of Twitter in the general news consumption environment would be useful, especially now that, after years of use only by "innovators", also in Italy Twitter is becoming increasingly popular among the "early majority" of users (Rogers, 1962). Finally, the past few months have seen a dramatic spread in Italy of WhatsApp and, in general, of mobile Instant Messaging applications (Snapchat among teenagers, for example). Further research may investigate the impact of these innovations on social network uses: could the privatization of conversations through multimedia and sophisticated Instant Messaging (IM) applications change the perspective of the «imagined audience» (Litt, 2012) on social network sites, and how? Could the strategic use of IM segment the heterogeneous list of friends in SNSs, and how? A hypothesis to be tested is the following: if Facebook's private and public spheres collapse and Facebook and Twitter become increasingly related with news and content management, IMs (inside and outside Facebook) will become the platforms where, in a private and controlled environment, feelings and private discourses can be displayed without risk or fear.

Aware of these limitations, in this article we have analyzed the relations among identity making, social interaction, and content consumption on Facebook. Several research studies on digital and social media have examined the production of content by users, and they have often underlined that the production of content is important for user identity construction and social networking. In this paper, we have sought to

show that, also in the consumption of social media content, users express their identities and their desire to be connected, especially by adopting strategies of content selection.

We assume that, as Facebook friends networks increase, so more users will have to deal with information overload, and will therefore act strategically to consume relevant content.

Users select such content from their most significant Facebook contacts: they build their identities through their consumption and sharing of (homophile) content significant for their groups and communities and consistent with their interests.

In these selection strategies, where it is important to keep abreast with the collective agenda of their network, users often consume content by applying a massmedia consumption model. As users watch, skip and select, they produce their personal media agendas and content feeds.

From this perspective, Facebook use is surprisingly consistent with mass-media and generalist media cultural models: users seem to apply models of television spectatoriality, not only in terms of passivity (lurking), but also in terms of consumption (hiding and skipping uninteresting content and profiles) and in terms of content production performed for a generalist audience (developing a distinctive and acceptable style of interaction, avoiding controversial content that might generate highly time-consuming flames or conflicts).

In Facebook, not only is it important to be connected to someone, and to produce content while managing timelines and profiles, but it also (and in some case, more) important to be connected to someone able to produce relevant, stimulating, and coherent content. Consuming in Facebook is as important as producing (and it is much more common), but it is far from being a passive activity or an act of disengagement. Even when users only have a look on Facebook, they express themselves as connected and reflexive audiences, increasingly aware of being part of complex processes of mediation that happen in our «typing ourselves into being» (Sundén 2003, 3).

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