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WHEN FACE TO FACE WE CANNOT SEE THE FACE?

N.A. Tarabanov

The present paper considers such phenomenon as using Social Networking Sites (SNS) as the primary means of communication between young people. Current situations of communication are often associated with the active use of various SNS which are a convenient tool for information exchange, as new media, and one of the most widespread ways of self-presentation.

The author comes to some interesting conclusions such as the fact that a SNS such as Facebook gives no effective means to discern the real face – ego-, personal or actual social identity, when we want to know who we and our interlocutors really are. However, modern Internet technologies provide us with useful instruments, applied to the social network analysis and semiotic approach, to define the virtual social (or personal) identity *that can (or cannot) be the same as the* real one.

> Tell me who your friends are, and I shall tell who you are.
> *Proverb*

Current situations of communication – especially, between young people – are often associated with the active use of various Social Networking Sites (SNSs, see Figure 1 for the brief evolution of theirs), which are a convenient tool for information exchange, as new media, and one of the most widespread ways of *self-presentation.*
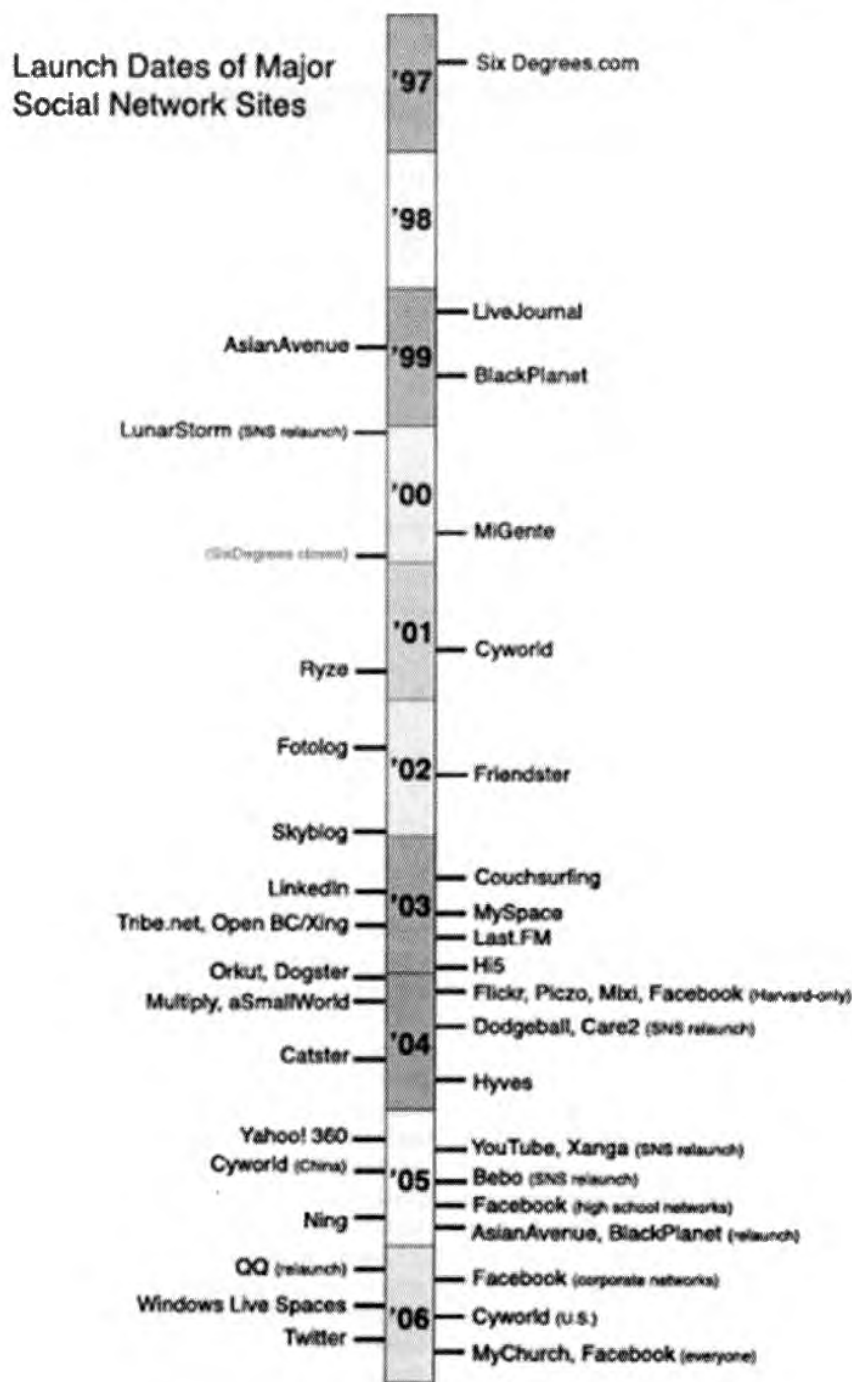
Figure 1. Launch dates of major SNSs (retrieved from www.emeraldinsight.com)

The Internet demonstrates a wide spectrum of possibilities to express oneself virtually. So, there is a view according to which the Internet technologies – particularly, SNSs – provide us with new tools of communication and, therefore, with alternative kinds of identity performance. Moreover, various forms of e-communication can help to create a new kind of person (see: Thomas 2004). Thus, a person has a possibility to construct the desired image of self – just so he would like to appear before people. In particular, such possibility can be realized thanks to the popular SNS Facebook (www.facebook.com), which gives a variety of tools for creating a 'virtual face' (see Figure 2 below). The last is close to 'real face' that is appeared in direct contact with other real faces in everyday communicative situations. How do these (real and virtual) 'faces' relate to each other? Can we say that one of them has some definite advantage over another in respect of effectiveness of self-presentation, as well as the search of personal and social identities? I argue here that the ways of self-presentation used in a SNS (such as Facebook)

have no priority – as compared with the forms of self-presentation in the real life – for the disclosure of personal identity, but the Internet, perhaps, can be useful instrument for the detection of virtual social identity.
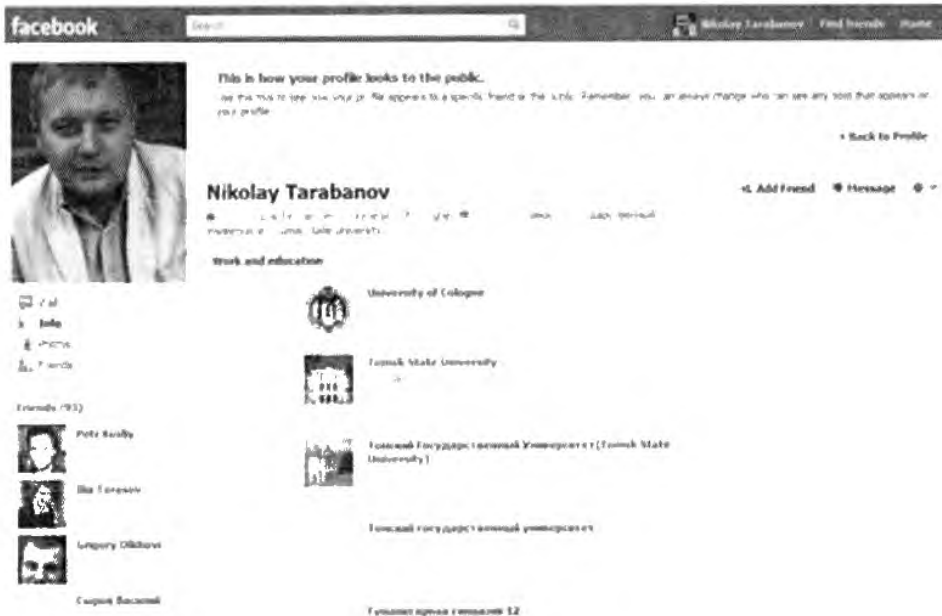

Figure 2. My Facebook profile

First of all, we should make clear the term 'identity', as well as its main forms or kinds – 'personal' and 'social' identities, and see how the last two can relate with the concepts of 'real' and 'virtual' faces in the context of using a SNS. Then, we will consider how all these quoted words are connected with the identity performance in the case of Facebook which can give us a possibility to define a virtual social identity of each virtual face. But we have no evident reasons to claim that a SNS has some advantages over 'direct' (actual) face-to-face interconnections realized for the disclosure of real personal and real social identity (if any). As a result of considerations presented here, we will see that the concepts of 'personal' and 'social' *identities* (as well as 'real' and 'virtual' *faces*) are closely interconnected if not the same, so that in order to understand the first we need to comprehend the second. And one of best ways to do this is using of social network analysis and semiotic methodologies in an investigation of every person's virtual social identity. In this respect, a Facebook profile, for instance, can be considered as a specific system of various signs and at the same time as a.communicant connected with other communicants, i.e. as a sign system in its relation to other sign systems. We will also mark the questions that are relevant for that matter.

Let's start from the concept of *identity*. What is it?

As a very basic starting point, identity is the human capacity – rooted in language – to know 'who's who' (and hence 'what's what'). This involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are, and so on <…> It is a process – *identification*– not a 'thing'. It is not something that one can have, or not; it is something that one does (Jenkins 1996, 5).

Thus, it is quite evident that 'identity' is a multi-dimensional relation between various agents of (e-) communication, where everyone is involved in the process of (self-) identification by means of different forms of (self-) presentation. Of course, these forms are always mediated and 'rooted in language', so that it is possible to fix them as the 'identity markers' – a sort of signs that can be used during identity performance in order to present of self accurately; such signs also make possible discerning (even if partly) the identity which we are interested in. There are different signs or identity markers employed in process of self-presentation. In particular, an investigation carried out by Pempek et al. (2009, 237) shows some ways of self-presentation in student language (as a system of signs or identity markers) given by standard SNS:

Social networking sites allow emerging adults to construct profiles and engage in activities that reflect identity markers. While friendships, romantic relationships, and ideology remain key facets of adolescent development, it is fitting that in the digital age individual media preferences have also emerged as playing an important role in students' expressions of who they are.

We see that one or another identity marker designates corresponding component of social identity which is " <…> the combination of aspects of our selves – including age, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and socioeconomic status – that make us a part of various social groups" (Hannum 2007). On the other hand, the 'personal identity' consists of individual set of facts, arranged in the form of personal history or biography. Furthermore, according to Erving Goffman, this kind of identity is not what someone thinks about self: "Social and personal identity are part, first of all, of other per-

sons' concerns and definitions regarding the individual whose identity is in question" (Goffman 1963, 105-6). From his point of view, it would be better in this case to distinguish among 'personal identity' and 'ego identity'. The last one is something like reflexive selfhood; as he points out, "<...> ego identity is first of all a subjective, reflexive matter that necessarily must be felt by the individual whose identity is at issue" (Goffman 1963, 106). I suppose that in this respect 'personal' and 'ego' identities can be considered as the aspects of the 'real face' – what the person actually is, while the 'social identity' is what we associated with other persons (in the main, institutionally). Social identity can include, on the one hand, race or ethnicity identities which are usually constant, and on the other hand – identities varied from time to time (age, friendships, media preferences and so on).

However, in many cases it is quite difficult to separate the personal identity from the social one exactly. For example, the fact that Barack Obama is the president of the United States seems to be a part of Obama's biography and, consequently, a component of his personal identity. But this fact also exhibits his social identity – that Obama is a member of such social group as 'presidents of the United States' or simply 'presidents'. Of course, we could concretize to say "Barack Obama is the 44th president of the United States" or "Barack Obama is the president of the United States now", and then this way of saying would refer to the respective part of Obama's personal identity. As opposed to such move, we can imagine a situation where there is another real person who has (maybe virtual) name "Barack Obama", and he spends a lot of time playing a computer game the chief aim of which is to become the president of the United States. This person has won the game recently, and everyone who knows about that circumstance is justified to say "Barack Obama is the president of the United States now". We understand that this is not the case that the first one was, but the question will be "How do we usually fix or express an identity?", and in most cases the answer will be "By *language*". The word 'language' means not only what I am using now to express my thought, but rather a system of mixed (visual, sound etc.) signs, as it is emphasized within the semiotic approach. Consequently, what we can know about a person can be described only by language (in its different manifestations).

We can even develop the imagined situation with the online game player Barack Obama and find out that he has the same face, education etc. as the real Barack Obama. Nevertheless, it is not quite clear which of them is more *real* (and in which sense?) than another one. As we know, an online social networking is concerned with a special kind of communication and (self-) presentation, which is usually called '*virtual*', but in different senses. On the one hand, the word 'virtual' means *real, factual or feasible*; on the other hand – *possible, hypothetical* or *imaginary*. So, we have opposite meanings in this case. And it is known, in addition, that this word came from Latin where 'virtus' means *force, action* or *efficiency*. Perhaps, we should distinguish, at least, two different terms: *virtual-0* which means *real* and*virtual-1* which means *possible*. Therefore,

it is most likely that when someone says about 'virtual reality', he/she understands it as a 'possible reality'. Though we should admit that terms 'possible' (as 'capable of being achieved') and 'real' (as 'existent or relating to actual existence') have quite opposite meanings from the logical point of view, so that the expression 'virtual-1 (possible) reality' is in a sense meaningless, as the expression 'future present'. However the expression 'virtual-0 (real) reality' is hardly better than the previous one. All in all we deal either with contradiction (in the first case) or with tautology (in the second case), and I think it is justified to claim that the expression 'virtual communication (or self-presentation)' means no more than just another – albeit specific – aspect of real communication (or self-presentation). This view is deferent from the position according to which in the case of virtual self-presentation we deal with something like fantasy:

When part of your life is lived in virtual places – it can be Second Life, a computer game, a social networking site – a vexed relationship develops between what is true and what is "true here", true in simulation. In games where we expect to play an avatar, we end up being ourselves in the most revealing ways; on social-networking sites such as Facebook, we think we will be presenting ourselves, but our profile ends up as somebody else – often the fantasy of who we want to be. (Turkle, 2011, 153).

But I think it would be better to state that 'virtual face' can be considered in fact as a component of 'real face' multitude, partly because the distinction between 'the fantasy of who we want to be' and 'the knowledge of who we really are' is vague – even in respect of the 'First (real) Life'. Moreover, some researches (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007; Boyd, 2007; Boyd and Ellison 2008) found that the SNS Facebook is employed rather to sustain or develop well-established real (offline) connections, than to meet new people and enter into relations with them. So, Facebook profile is rather another component of person's real face; of course, only in the case if we are sure that we look at and communicate with the same subject [1]. One of the key merits given by SNSs (such as Facebook) is the propitious case for self-presentation in the form of online profiles. A standard SNS profile is usually composed of a profile image, a short self-description (sex, age etc.), and a list of several preferences or interests. All these things establish the *personal* (user's)*identity* and in many respects affect the main characteristics of various face-to-face interactions, forming the *social* (or network) identity. These forms of identity are closely related to one another, and in some cases (like the case with Barack Obama) it can be difficult to discern with which of them we deal. But this is not the most important question that I would like to discuss here. I am ready to agree with accepted point of view that 'virtual' mainly refers to 'computer-mediated', but then a combination of virtual personal and virtual social identities will designate 'virtual face', laying aside the question of real personal and real social identities as constituting 'real face'.

We often try to identify ourselves with what we are included in as a part – with one or another social network, consisting of various face-to-face relationships. Consequently, it is quite evident that if we want to know the real

face of person with whom we are connected, it is not sufficient to communicate with him for a long time; we should additionally ask her/his friends – what do they think about that person? We can also look at the characteristics of various face-to-face interactions. Demonstration of friendship links, which provide identity markers for the online profile possessor, is another important facet of self-presentation in the Facebook. Thus, it is possible to analyze such characteristics through Facebook network visualization, particularly by means of the network structure of Friendship (see Figure. 3) [2].
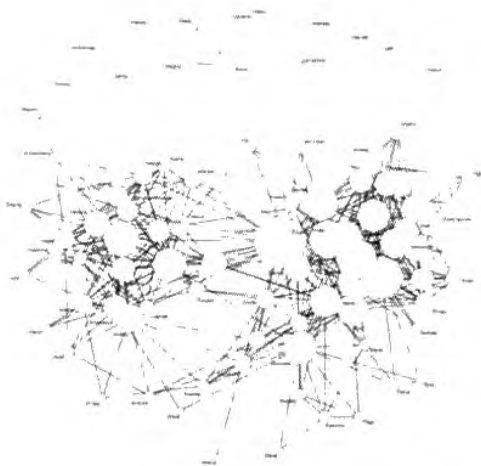

Figure 3. The network structure of Friendship

We can interpret this figure differently. For instance, it is allowed to say that the figure shows the most important clusters of user's social interaction in the SNS. The more octagon size is the more interactions (with the user's friends) the person designated by that octagon has. Consequently, the octagon size is something like scale value of friendship similarity. And this interpretation is a (reduced) way of social network analysis, which can help us to define the user's virtual social identity, but only partly. It should be added by semiotic analysis of identity markers and sign systems that we have in one or another case.

My main idea here is that the SNS Facebook has no advantage over various social networks of everyday life (school, university, hobby etc.) in providing an integral assessment of personal (or social) identity, which corresponds to the real face. If someone wears a tracksuit, maybe, it means that she/he goes in for sports. But, maybe, it means that the person just likes that kind of wear, or that she/he wants to seem more athletic, or that it is her/his one and only clothing. So, there may be different reasons why someone wears a tracksuit, however we usually seek to know the real one(s).

When we ask "Does the widespread use of SNS by young people for particular forms of identity performances have an essential influence on their consciousness and behavior in the real life?", I think the answer hardly must be "Yes, absolutely", because all what they do within SNS is just one of many parts of their real (virtual-0) life. Of course, we could make some difference between particular forms of identity performances that we usually meet in the Internet and everyday life. But, perhaps, no one of such differences is crucial when we discuss the problem of self-identity through that of self-presentation; every possible way of self-presentation is concerned with using of different signs, forming a system of signs or *language*.

On the basis of the foregoing considerations, we are justified to ask the following questions:

– Does the spreading of SNS (like Facebook) among young people help them to make sense of social and personal identity that is appeared in the everyday real/virtual life?

– What are the basic features of language use for identity performance in the Facebook and other SNSs?

– How does the virtual face (online profile) connect with the real face from the semiotic and social networking analysis points of view?

– Can we say that the forms of self-presentation used in a SNS have no definite advantages over the forms of self-presentation that we find in our everyday real life?

It is not quite clear whether SNS possibilities of self-presentation have any definite advantages over the ways of self-presentation in the everyday life. Nevertheless, we can fix some kind of close similarity among different, *prima facie*, forms of communication (or self-presentation): real and virtual. Accordingly, we should distinguish 'real face' and 'virtual face' which seemingly must correspond to different forms of self-identity. But is it so? I think that half and half. A SNS such as Facebook gives no effective means to discern the real face – ego-, personal or actual social identity, when we want to know who we and our interlocutors *really* are. However, modern Internet technologies provide us with useful instruments, applied to the social network analysis and semiotic approach, to define the *virtual social (or personal) identity* that can (or cannot) be the same as the *real* one.

1. First of all, I mean the cases of profile breaking and pretending to be absolutely another person.

2. The figure is constructed with help of Challenger Network Graph (https://apps.facebook.com/challenger_meurs), which demonstrates an intuitive visual representation of friends, as a graph, grouped in clusters based on the relationships tendencies. You can use also another computer instrument for this purpose – 'MyFnetwork' (https://www.facebook.com/ MyFnetwork).

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ROMANIAN YOUTH ONLINE CHARACTERISTICS

V.M. Ularu

The following material is a structural approach of Romanian youth online audience, which will apply the uses and gratification theoretical model, proposed by Katz and Lazarsfeld. It's a secondary data analysis, of the researches' results realized by Audience Audit Institute of Romania and "Daedalus Consulting of Romania". It presents data regarding Romanian youth, between 16-24 years old, internet uses and gratification, a two years comparative data (2010–2011) regarding youth online internet accessing rituals, preferences, time spent on internet and attitudes regarding information posted online.

Introduction. Online socializing and gaming, photo and video "sharing", gadgets such smart phones and tablets build together the culture of nowadays youth. Several years ago, we couldn't even imagine that so many technologies will be present in our lives, all meant to facilitate the communication between people (Buckingham, D., 2008, p. 2). In the context of online communication, the study of youth preferences regarding types of usage and information searched becames an important part of discovering and understanding youth's ways of learning and lifestyles.

At the end of February 2012, in Romania, were over 7 million Internet users, representing more than a third of total population. In the same time, approximately 50% of young people between 14–24 years of age say they use Internet daily and almost daily, while over 48% of them say they spend at least three hours daily online. Over 80% of them said they trust in information posted online. The increasing number of Romanian youth in online and the importance of Internet in their lives, demands a closer and detailed study of this segment of audience characteristics.

The need to analyze and measure the audience came in 1940, in the context of an extremely fast media growth. McQuail (1987) defines four types of audience measurements, and grouped them depending to the variables that are defining the typology: audience (groups and sociocultural categories) and media (offers and contents) (McQuail, D., 1987, p. 73).

To analyze the online audience it's a difficult task. It's too fragmented, and it's almost impossible to follow users' trends and patterns of browsing from one website to another. Plus, as Alasuutari estimated more than 13 years ago, each type of audience "has different reactions to messages and use media channels different from other types" (Alasuutari, P., 1999, p. 53). The Internet growth in the last decade brings new opportunities and challenges in audience researches. Online, the public has the chance to offer feedback in real time, express opinions and construct identity. Understanding what people do with online media, in a continuously growing Internet era, is now an opportunity to understand new lifestyles and ways of interactions.

The study of media uses was recommended by Katz in 1974. In his opinion, this approach reveals different patterns of media exposure (or involvement in other activities) resulted from people's need of rewarding, or from other different motivations, a part of them inadvert (Katz, E., Blumer, J., Gurevitch, M., 1974, p. 20). In this approach, the audience use media to satisfy psychological and social needs. Therefore, they use media to satisfy needs like: fun (escape and entertainment), relationship (social interaction), personal identity (identification and strengthening personal values), and research (information gathering). This perspective defines the public as a series of individuals linked in a social network, more than fragmented ones into a monolithic mass. More than that, the model recognize media content and includes in attitudes change the level of knowledge, behaviors, beliefs and audience values system.

The following part of the material will apply the model proposed by Katz on Romanian youth online audience, offering information trends and patterns in Internet uses for youth between 14–24 years of age. The presented data are offered by Audience Audit Institute from Romania, from an annual study realized on 250 websites (the available data are related to 2010 and 2011), and Daedalus Consulting from Romania, on a national research realized at the beginning of 2011. It's a structural approach of Romanian youth online audience.

What do Romanian youth do online? The presented study is realized by Internet Department of Romanian Internet Traffic and Audience Audit Institute from Romania, it's a briefly resume of 14–24 years of age audience characteristics, for over 250 websites monitored by the Institute. It offers information regarding Internet usage (why do they use Internet and what information do they search online) and attitudes about information posted online.

The research is conducted each year, and the data presented in this material were collected between March and August 2010 from a sample of 1566 youth between 14–24 years of age and the same period of 2011 on 1533 youth of same ages. The methodology used is online survey, with 35 questions, which is being successfully applied in countries as Austria, Germany, Spain and Switzerland.

The collected data shows that, in average, more than 93% of youth, between 14–18 years of age, use Internet