MY FACEBOOK PROFILE : COPY, RESEMBLANCE, OR SIMULACRUM?

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Abstract

This paper offers a theoretical reading of the phenomenon and experience of the social networking site, Facebook, through an exploration of how loyally a Facebook profile can represent the essence of an individual, and whether such Platonic notions of essence and loyalty of copy are disturbed by the nature of a social networking site profile, in ways described by Deleuze's notions of the reversal of Platonism. In bringing a post-structuralist critique to a hugely successful and popular information system, the paper attempts to open up the black box of the 'user' and explore how notions of the Self might be reflected through engagement with IS.

Keywords: User, Cultural and Social, Human Computer Interaction, Human Factors, Societal Aspects of IS, Political and Social Implications

1

1   INTRODUCTION

"Artists, writers, and scientists do not hesitate in their creative efforts and researches to borrow ideas outside their own special fields," begins Philip P. Wiener, in his preface to the Dictionary of the History of Ideas (Wiener 1974). 'Intellectual history', as espoused by this and other later works, suggests that one must study the culture, lives and environments of people to understand their notions and ideas. In the spirit of such an intellectual history, this paper takes a qualitative approach to IS research into the 'users' of social networking sites. The aim of this paper, however, is not to present the results of any field research, nor to set out principles for such an endeavour (e.g. Klein & Myers 1999, Walsham 1995), but to introduce to the IS community a philosophical approach that the author believes to be both pertinent and appropriate to the subject matter. As such it is neither positivist, interpretive, nor critical, but explores a range of perspectives from the vantage point of an intellectual historian.

A number of IS researchers – perhaps most famously Roberta Lamb and Rob Kling - have recently taken part in a deconstruction of the concept of the 'computer user.' (Lamb & Kling 2003; Nakamura 2002) Arguably, in the past, IS research all too often fell prey to the accusation, from more sociologically oriented theorists, of 'black boxing' the 'user'. The recent project to unpack just what is meant by such a concept is to be welcomed. This paper, if not entirely aligned with that movement to "reconceptualize the user as a social actor" (Lamb & Kling 2003), is certainly in the same vein. As Lamb & Kling argue, the many theories that shape the common understanding (and influence the design and use) of ICTs, seem to rely largely on notions derived from cognitive social psychology (Fiske and Taylor, 1991), and cybernetic models (Wiener 1946, 1950) that not only omit the social and environmental context (Hayles 1999)[1], but conceptualise the individual in a rather positivistic way, that is not in keeping with the developments in the understanding of the human individual over the last several decades in sociological and critical theory – specifically in post-structuralism, and the 'decentring of the subject' (Derrida 1974).

The 'user' of social networking sites, moreover, is not confined to any specific organisational context, and must therefore be conceptualised socially – and therefore sociologically – as being influenced, contextualised, and likely to respond to such a web-based information system in ways quite different from the more usual, limited context of say, a business application within the closed network of an institution or company. The 'user', moreover, is more directly implicated in the case of social networking sites, because it is the user him/herself, in the first instance, that is being represented, in the Personal Profile, through which the networking begins to take place. It is this representation of the 'user', within the information system, that makes it paramount, in any study of social networking sites, to unpack that notion of the 'user.' This paper, then, offers a theoretically informed reading of one such social networking site, Facebook, from the perspective of opening up the concept of the 'user' to post-structuralist understandings of the nature of the Self, through an intellectual history of the concepts surrounding representation, most notably the concept of the simulacrum.

Though it may be possible to write a philosophical or intellectual history of the notion of the simulacrum, following the many and varied modifications of the concept, what follows is not an attempt either to achieve or to summarise such a complete history. For the purposes of this paper it suffices merely to summarise the notion of the simulacrum as understood by Plato (1892a-d), and its pivotal role in the Nietzschean project (Nietzsche 1895), taken up by Deleuze (Deleuze 1983, 1990, 1991), to overturn Platonism. Passing mention only will be made of some of the other writers who have contributed to that history of the concept. It is hoped, nonetheless, by touching on the ideas of these thinkers, to familiarise the IS reader with the often thorny issues to be tackled when discussing

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[1] See Hayles 1999 for a critique of Wiener's cybernetic models

the nature of representation, and why the representation of self on a social networking website might have so much impact upon our understanding of Self, Other, of Friendship, and of the nature of contemporary information society.

2   A BRIEF INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF THE SIMULACRUM

2.1   Plato's Cave

Simulacrum *n*. is defined as an image; a representation, and as an insubstantial, superficial, or vague likeness or semblance,[2] and readers may be familiar with such usage. The Greek philosopher Plato, particularly in *Sophist* (Plato 1892c) and in *Republic*, (Plato 1892b), discusses the relationship between the real and the representation, most memorably in the allegory of The Cave. In this allegory, Plato suggests that people are like prisoners chained in a cave, who think the things they see on the wall (shadows) are real and know nothing of their real causes.   From this, Plato describes his Theory of Forms: the notion that all manifest reality is but a shadow of an Ideal reality that is its essence, a pre-existing Form upon which the world is based, and is but a copy of (Plato 1892b). In this notion, certain copies are made by those who are truly in touch with the Ideal Form, and whose copies, whilst still merely representations, nonetheless capture the essence of the original Idea, and certain other copies are merely representations, empty and without any true link to the essence of the Ideal original. Thus "copies" or icons (*eikones*) are well-grounded claimants to the transcendent Idea, and "simulacra" (*phantasmata*) are like false claimants, built on a dissimilarity and implying an essential perversion or deviation from the Idea. (Plato 1892b).

Notions of the Self, from this Platonist point of view, therefore, were focussed around being a true claimant, rather than a false one, being 'true' to one's nature in the pre-ordained scheme of things, rather than a pretender to a class not one's own. This view was absorbed and modified by Aristotle and went on to become a central plank of Western philosophy and Christian doctrine for the next two thousand years.   With this philosophical background, the nature of mediaeval identity was clear: a unity of self and other, of self and the world; a feeling of belonging and connectedness that brooked of no separation from the whole. The sense of self of mediaeval man was defined by his relation to and above all by his resemblance to everything else around him. Everything has its place in the god-given order of things, and his only concern is to live up to God's expectations of His Creation, as defined by His priests on Earth.

2.2   The Inversion of Platonism

At the end of the nineteenth century, as part of a wider project to overthrow Platonism altogether, to reverse it, Friedrich Nietzsche addressed the concept of the simulacrum in *The Twilight of the Idols*, (Nietzsche 1895) turning the Platonic definition on its head, and accusing the 'decadent', predominantly Christian philosophers of the previous two millenia of ignoring the reliable input of their senses and resorting to mere constructs of language and reason - a distorted copy of reality.   In the twentieth century, Gilles Deleuze (1983, 1995, 1990), among others, took up Nietzsche's challenge to the future of philosophy, and focussed a good deal of attention on the concept of the simulacrum.

The problem of reversing Platonism, on the face of it, would seem to suggest that the shadows of the cave be given ascendancy over the light of truth, that appearance should triumph over essence, the image over the original. But this is not the inversion that Nietzsche implies, or that Deleuze puts forward. For Deleuze, the inversion of Platonism means the overturning of "*both* the world of essence *and* the world of appearance." (Smith 2006).   To achieve this, Deleuze unpicks Platonism itself: the

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[2] Dictionary.com

2

world of essences and ideal forms exists for Plato only as a means by which to select, to sort, to distinguish, and it is this Platonic operation of sorting that Deleuze focuses upon. The Theory of Forms is proposed by Plato as a means by which to satisfy a more primary motivation to sort out – to *faire la difference* – between true and false images.

Deleuze approaches Plato's thought – in the style of the intellectual historian - by locating it in Athenian politics – in the *agora* or public centre that replaces the palace as the centre of Greek city life. The motivation to sort between true and false is thus a historically contingent one, rooted and contextualised in the rivalry of Athenian democracy. Plato's philosophical dialogues reflect the fundamental issue in the Greek city states that derives from their fundamental difference from the imperial states around them: where a monarch, emperor or despot appoints his functionaries, the citizens of a Greek city state must elect from among rival claimants the best man for the job (Plato 1892a; Smith 2006). Deleuze's argument is that in the Theory of Forms, Plato reintroduces the *transcendent* that was left behind in the imperial state, but in a new, philosophical form – the Idea. A claimant is well-founded only insofar as he/it *resembles* or imitates the foundational Idea. "This resemblance is not merely an external correspondence, as the resemblance of one thing with another, but an *internal* and spiritual… resemblance of the thing to the Idea." (Smith 2006) In plain terms, "the aim of Platonism is to deprive nature of the being that is immanent to it, to reduce nature to a pure appearance, and to judge it in relation to a moral Idea that transcends it." (Smith 2006).

In the *Sophist*, (Plato 1892c) Plato reverses the approach of the *Statesman* (Plato 1892d) and of *Phaedrus* (Plato 1892b), seeking out not the true, but the false claimant, aiming to define the simulacrum itself. Yet this dialogue reaches a remarkable conclusion: "By dint of inquiring in the direction of the simulacrum," writes Deleuze, "Plato discovers, in the flash of an instant as he leans over its abyss, that the simulacrum is not simply a false copy, but that it calls into question the very notion of the copy… and of the model." (Deleuze 1990:294) The Sophist, for Plato, *is* the simulacrum – and in the end dangerously indistinguishable from Socrates himself – so wily is the cunning of appearances.

Deleuze redefines the simulacrum, wrests it from its lowly Platonic position as that which is furthest from the Idea, the purely negatively conceived false copy, and repositions it as differing from the copy not in degree but in *nature*. For Deleuze the ability of the simulacrum to lay claim to anything and everything is not what singles it out as a false claimant, but what enables him to create a newly affirmative definition of simulacra. Three characteristics define the Deleuzean simulacrum: firstly, whereas the "copy is an image endowed with resemblance, the simulacrum is an image *without* resemblance" (Deleuze 1990). The reason why Plato so maligned the simulacrum, and which became the thorniest problem of the mediaeval Christian world (Lucifer the fallen angel, closest to God, yet furthest from Him) is that the simulacrum is "beyond good and evil" because it renders them indiscernible – as with Socrates and the Sophist – and thus internalises the difference between them. Secondly, whereas the Platonic copy is true to its foundational Idea by dint of its internal resemblance, the simulacrum is defined by its internal difference or disparity, an internal identity that does not derive from any prior Idea or Form but exists in and of itself within the simulacrum and nowhere else. Thus the concept of uniqueness, of things being in and of themselves, owes everything to the internal disparity of the simulacrum, and resemblance becomes something only evident on the surface of things – a matter of appearance. "Resemblance is always on the exterior, and difference – small or large – occupies the centre of the system." (Deleuze 1983). Thirdly, the simulacral enters the region of Pop Art. The multiplication of images, for example in Warhol's Campbell Soup cans, begs the question: which is the originary model?

Once the hierarchy of Idea, copy, false copy has broken down, when there is no original, no first copy, second copy, and so on, no privileged point of view, there are only Masks. The Platonic illusion is that a face exists behind the mask, that an originary model sits behind the copy. The simulacrum, in short, can no longer be said to be a 'false' copy, false in relation to a supposedly 'true' original. The Mask is all.

3

In this way, *difference* becomes the great Idea. Platonism, although reversed, is at the same time rejuvenated, even completed, and the Platonic project retrieved on a new basis. The old, imperial element of transcendence – the inclusion of which was Plato's error – now jettisoned, the purely immanent theory of Ideas is free to begin with the simulacrum itself. We enter a world in which "Simulacra are those systems in which the different relates to the different *by means of* difference itself. What is essential is that we find in these systems no *prior identity and internal resemblance:* it is all a matter of difference" (Deleuze 1990:299). Immanence and internal difference thus become the basic tenets of a pure concept or Idea of difference in a rejuvenated Deleuzean Platonism, whereby difference is no longer a pure quality of things, as with a Platonic Idea, but rather the "reason behind qualities." (Deleuze 1990:57).

2.3   Summary

To summarise our intellectual history of the simulacrum, then, we may see that the Platonic project of differentiating between rivals, in the athletic democracy of the Greek city state, led him to borrow the concept of transcendence from the surrounding empires, and to bring that transcendence within the field of immanence into a new notion of the Idea. Differentiating between rivals was then a matter of discerning which was a true copy of that Idea, and which had only the appearance and not the internal resemblance of it. Deleuze shows us that it is this very internal difference from the Idea that is characteristic of the simulacrum, which undermines and overturns Platonism, allowing us to escape the transcendent altogether, and bringing us a new great Idea, that difference is the defining concept of immanent reality, and inner uniqueness the truest nature of things – and people - beyond whatever surface resemblance they may have to one another.

3   SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Our brief intellectual history complete, then, we must turn back to more familiar ground for the IS researcher, and examine, first, the nature of social networking sites and what other IS researchers have said about them that is of interest to the concerns of this paper. We will then see what impact our intellectual history of the simulacrum may have on our understanding of such sites, and their use.

Since their introduction, social networking sites (SNSs) such as MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, Habbo, and the many, many others[3] have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily lives. These sites allow us to connect or reconnect with people both locally and from all around the world through email, instant messaging, sharing in business or fun exchanges, and video conferencing. Through these sites we are able to rediscover and talk to old friends from school, connect to existing or potential business contacts, or make new acquaintances in local or far-flung places. We are able to build relationships with people in ways that human beings have never before in our history, no longer bound by region, nationality, ethnicity, social role, family, or occupation as to the kinds of companionships we can forge and call our own. This allows us to meet people based on shared interests, political views, or other social activities, or on common language or shared racial or sexuality-based identities.

These sites offer a range of different technological features, catering to a wide range of interests and practices. While their key technological features are fairly consistent, the cultures that emerge around SNSs are varied. Some, like for example Ecademy or LinkedIn, are specifically professional, others, like MySpace, more centred around music. Bebo, Habbo, ClubPenguin and others are almost exclusively for children or teenagers, and others still, like Facebook, attempt to bring many disperate social groups together in one space.

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[3] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites for a current list

Whilst there has been a fair amount of scholarship – for example in the Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC), and Human Computer Interaction (HCI) fields – concerning SNSs, much of it has focussed on the interactions and networking of such sites, and much of the criticism upon the tendency to collect 'friends' in a competitive manner, so devaluing the meaning of friendship to mere cyber-acquaintance. Facebook, interestingly, carries a range of different options through which to identify how one knows someone who wishes to add you as a 'Friend,' including living together, working together, being members of an organisation or club, 'hooking up,' and others. The last of these options reads: "I don't even know this person." Click on it, and Facebook replies – "Then why do you wish to add them?" Facebook "friendliness," however, despite this apparent self-awareness, is no substitute for genuine friendship, according to Professor Ray Pahl, co-author of *Rethinking Friendship*, (Spencer & Pahl 2006) and only leaves us feeling dissatisfied. In his opinion, Facebook is a form of immaturity, "It's not a real social network," he says, "it mimics the playground insecurities of primary school kids piling up best friends to find their social niche. When people grow up and settle down, they realise that real friendship isn't about turning on the computer – it requires real effort and taking the rough with the smooth." (Independent 2007)

Danah Boyd's work on Friendster (Boyd 2006) - the one-time pioneer and leading SNS now reduced to a rump of loyal users - has given us an interesting range of viewpoints on the nature and practices of SNSs. She has discussed, among other issues, how the performance of social identity and relationships has shifted the nature of the SNS profile from being "a static representation of self to a communicative body in conversation with the other represented bodies." (Boyd 2006) Her focus here is upon communication, and the fact that although "Embodied interaction is taken for granted in everyday communication... mediated conversations require individuals to write themselves into being." It is this 'writing themselves into being' which is the focus of this paper. "The Friendster Profile," Boyd notes, "complete with descriptive data, photographs, articulated friendship links, and testimonials, simultaneously constitutes a digital body, a social creation, an initiator of conversation, and a medium for ongoing conversation in multiple modalities." (Boyd 2006) This 'digital body' however, and its relationship to its creator, whom it is meant to 'represent', is not problematised in her work. She notes with some enthusiasm that these 'digital bodies' are "public displays of identity where people can explore impression management," referring to the work of Erving Goffman. However, the notion of 'front' from Goffman's "Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (Goffman 1990) presupposes not just what one 'gives out' – the intentional display to which Boyd likens the personal profile – but also what one 'gives off' – the unintentional, unconscious clues to one's character that are arguably visible only to those with whom one is interacting face to face. Boyd notes that "profiles provide an opportunity to craft the intended expression through language, imagery and media," and that the goal is "to look cool and receive peer validation."

Scholarship in the IS field has similarly focussed on the 'friendship' issue, and on the nature of networked communication. The main strands of enquiry have focussed upon "the generation of online ties and their integration into the individual's existing social network," on the one hand, and the "role of new communication technologies as a new channel of communication," on the other. (Mesch & Talmud 2007) Livingstone and Helsper's work (2007) offers particularly interesting insight into how issues of "anonymity, disclosure of intimate information and exchange of resources" affect communication, and it is what goes into a profile and what does not that is of particular importance to the concerns of this paper. Other work in the computer science field has included an extraordinary hoovering up of data from 100,000 social networking site profiles into a semantic map of personal tastes, (Liu et al. 2006).

Seldom, it seems, has scholarship addressed the philosophical nature of representing the self online, unpacking the notion of the 'user' of such sites in any real depth. Only, perhaps, Sherry Turkle's seminal work, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (Turkle 1995) touches on this – albeit an "idealistic project of reconfigured and reintegrated postmodern identities on the Internet." (Wiszniewski & Coyne 2002) Perhaps the most interesting recent work, in this respect, for the purposes of this paper, is that of Dorian Wiszniewski and Richard Coyne, in their chapter "Mask and

5

Identity" (Wiszniewski & Coyne 2002), recalling our earlier discussion of the 'mask' as replacing the hierarchy of Idea, copy, false copy. "As the Internet and its successors become more pervasive and the technologies become more sophisticated and convincing," they tell us, "then presumably the issue of identity itself comes under review." They take up the issue of Platonism, and of the realm of Forms as a "place of identity… the immutable part of our human being that participates in the realm of the forms," whilst all else is subject to ageing and change. They begin with a critique of the romance of identity in recent IT literature as revealing of such a Platonist grounding, the self or soul being identified with the immutable world of Ideas above and beyond the more tiresome world of the mundane and the physical. Indeed this is a popular interpretation of much cyberpunk fiction: Gibson's characters frequently exhibit contempt for the flesh in preference for a networked virtual identity deemed superior for its lack of substance (Gibson 1993). Making reference to the work of that philosopher of cyberspace, Michael Heim, they suggest that for the techno-romantic, "induction into the digital realm assumes the gravity and significance of the progression to Plato's realm of ideas, as the new real."

This brings us to the core of the chapter – the story of the Mask and Identity. Briefly summarised, "the romantic might celebrate the mask as a means of assuming different roles, dressing up, or living out a fantasy." This of course is how much of the current IT literature (e.g. Murray 1999, Boyd 2006) regards the ability to use avatars and personal profiles. "A conventional, empiricist view of masking," Wiszniewski and Coyne continue, "would recognize that, outside the false imagery of the carnival, our experience is also fraught with exposure to superficialities – custom and prejudice." But for both the romantic and the empiricist, the face behind the mask remains the true object. "For critical theory, the mask is constituted by all the ruses of the capitalist system to conceal the hegemony of oppression. More perniciously, the mask conceals the fact that there is a mask." (Wiszniewski & Coyne 2002). For the phenomenologist, the mask and what lie behind it are both subject to the same context, and must be understood within that light. But to the radical, Deleuzean eye, the 'essential' behind the mask is shown to also be a mask: there is, in fact, in place of the Platonic hierarchy of Idea, copy, false copy etc, a whole series of masks, each referring back to another influence, to a further context, beyond which there is no final fixed referent, no authentic face. "This is tantamount to asserting that there is nothing behind the mask, there is everything behind the mask, or the mask is everything." (Wiszniewski & Coyne 2002). In the end, identity, under these conditions, is always in question, and cannot be discussed as a static idea. Difference, as we have seen in the earlier discussion, and the continuous change that it implies, is the "central dynamic that conditions identity," and so identity is always a question, and never an answer (Wiszniewski & Coyne 2002).

4   MY FACEBOOK PROFILE –COPY, RESEMBLANCE, OR SIMULACRUM?

4.1   The Nature of the Facebook Profile

In light of the above discussions then, how might we now characterise a Facebook profile? Facebook was originally built for Harvard college students, in February 2004, and grew during that year to include Stanford, Columbia and Yale. By May 2005 it had grown to support more than 800 college networks, was expanding into high-school networks, and then went international in October. In May 2006 it 'grew up' adding to its over 6million users adult networks based around the workplace – at first college staff, but soon businesses, corporations, and institutions. By the end of 2006 it had 12 million users. The summer of 2007, however, was the moment for Facebook. In April there were 20million users, in May they launched Facebook Platform, an API allowing external developers to create and offer applications within Facebook, and by the time of writing (November 2007) the site

6

boasted 50million users.[4] (It is arguable, of course, whether all 50million are 'active users'). Now active users can find not just old school friends, college friends, and work colleagues, but members of the community groups they are involved in. Now across these many networks and groupings new 'virtual' groupings are springing up daily – many simply for fun, to be discarded tomorrow, (e.g. People Who Always Have To Spell Their Names For Other People) some with business in mind (e.g. the virtual twin of real-world trade association, Manchester Digital), political import (e.g. Support the Monks' protest in Burma), some with strange challenges, (e.g. If 100,000 people join this group I will run from Liverpool to Manchester) and some with more personal pleasures in mind.   From being a focussed community built around the commonality of studenthood in the United States, it has grown into an international community where you can find almost all the people you know who might ever join an SNS – and many for whom Facebook is their very first experience of online social networking. The personal profile changes daily with the news feed of the activities of all of one's linked friends, who are forever sending one messages using new applications which one must first install – and send to everyone one knows – before one receives the message. It is a virtual place of constant change and perhaps this busy-ness is part of its appeal.

4.2   Analysis

All this, moreover, has some fascinating implications. The Facebook Profile, in the light of our discussions concerning the simulacrum and identity, turns out to be very revealing. From a Platonic perspective, one might view the Facebook profile as at best a poor, virtual, second copy of the first copy of one's essential, Ideal Self. When seeking new 'Friends' on the social network, after gaining temporary access to the full profile (via the 'Poke') one might scan the contents of the profile in an attempt to discern whether the information conveyed by it constituted a trustworthy copy that truly resembled its creator, or a false copy, a simulacrum that revealed nothing of the true individual behind it. Judgement on whether to approve 'Friending' might then be based upon whether we deem the profile a true representation or not. Certainly in the case of Bebo, Habbo and other more teen and child oriented social networks and the predatory threat of grooming from much older cyber-stalkers, this judgement carries great responsibility and needs to be, to a certain extent, policed by the social network itself, through proofs of identity as part of the initial registration process. But in the case of Facebook, the 'culture' of this social network is to present oneself, with one's full real name, to those whom one already knows, in networks already established in real life. One adds additional, new 'friends' on the social networking site itself only through recommendation via pre-existing networks, or through chosen channels such as the befriending applications that have proliferated to facilitate chance meetings. Thus the profile is required to achieve several things at once – and to several different potential audiences, both known and unknown – rendering its representative burden extremely complex.

But from the Deleuzean perspective, the Facebook profile understood as a simulacral mask worn by its creator in the virtual world of computer mediated communication, hides no essential, Ideal self more authentic than the mask. The profile is but one of its creator's many masks, and the representative burden lifts, becomes more playful, and perhaps even more revealing. Indeed we might go so far as to suggest that the continuously changing nature of the profile – through the news feed and new applications - is revealing of the differential nature of the identity/question that created it – and defines the profile as a 'digital body' (Boyd 2006) with a life of its own. Yet perhaps rather than "public displays of identity where people can explore impression management," (Boyd 2006) these digital bodies/masks might better be understood as public identities/questions, being continually co-created with the medium, through which we can explore new modes of being. Difference, as we have seen in the earlier discussion, and the continuous change that it implies, is the "central dynamic that

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[4] http://www.facebook.com/about.php

conditions identity," rendering identity as always a question, and never an answer (Wiszniewski & Coyne 2002).

Certainly the phenomenological constraints of the context within which the profile is situated – the features and applications provided by Facebook and those at play with its API - narrow what the mask can display. If "mediated conversations require individuals to write themselves into being" (Boyd 2006) then the tools available prescribe the range of what one can be in this medium - presenting for us a figure of the phenomenological constraints our identities are placed under within the socio-political context of the networked society within which such profiles are made possible. It is also clear that the romantic notions of the virtual profile gaining us freedom in the cyberspatial world from the perils and tribulations of the mundane are as illusory as the shadows of the allegorical Cave.

The Facebook profile, bringing together the masks of professionalism, of family, of social group, school friends, college acquaintances and net-friends, constitutes not one, but a 'soup' of masks that interrelate and occasionally clash – 'giving off' more than we would sometimes wish (Goffman 1990). From the Platonic perspective, these clashes can cause us to rush headlong for the delete button on the latest post from the friend who knows things about us we would not wish other friends or work colleagues to know. This soup of masks exposes our careful ploys – the identities we try to present in different contexts and at different times – and thus foregrounds the chain of reference, the endless cycle of masks with no fixed final referent, which we have seen through Deleuze's eyes. More perhaps, than any other more specialised and less populous SNS, Facebook brings us face-to-face with the multiplicity of our own natures, and begs the question – who are we?

A Facebook profile, we can say, therefore, as a result of the discussions in this paper, is neither copy, nor resemblance of any essential self 'I' might identify as 'me'; a Facebook profile is a simulacrum, a mask in its own right combining many others, defined by its internal difference from the person it is supposed to represent – the person who is always someone different according to whichever context s/he is in, and never all of them at once, or in any sense 'essentially' one of them rather than any other.

4.3   Implications

As a paper at the recent IFIP Workshop on the Future of Identity in the Information Society pointed out, "Communities are affected by the individual identities of their population but likewise those communities also provide information to allow the formation of personal identities." (Anderson 2007) In small rural or village communities, and in respect of children, teenagers and young adults in the formative phases of life, this is of particular importance, as whether our definitions of identity are Platonically essentialist or straddle Deleuzean multiplicities the effect upon each other is the same: individuals affect the formation of each others' personal identities. This is almost a given in much contemporary sociological literature (e.g. Goffman 1990). In the Information Society, where arguably, in comparison to more traditional communities, we are experiencing "the devaluing of any human 'knowledge' or 'experience' that cannot be reduced to digital impulses," and, worse, a form of "retreat into cyberspace," (Anderson 2007) that effect upon one another takes on new, mediated forms. In our Information Age "a direct pathway to individuals has been established" Anderson reminds us, "which bypasses geographic community networks and traditional forms of identity formation." (Anderson 2007) We might say that, as seen above, Facebook in particular transcends temporal networks as well as physical ones, rendering friendsreunited obsolete as soon as it opened up to the wider adult population.

Facebook therefore presents us with a mediated influence upon identity formation which, this paper would argue, foregrounds and emphasises the Deleuzean multiplicity of our Selves, and contributes to an understanding by its users that each of us wears any number of masks according to the context we find ourselves in. Less positively, however, it does so by pooling together in a single virtual space the most superficial of details from each of those masks, and thereby contributing to the magpie-like "friend collecting" behaviour so often written amount by other commentators (Boyd & Heer, 2006, Boyd 2006, Livingstone & Helsper 2007, Mesch & Talmud 2007). Only through the email messaging

system incorporated into Facebook, perhaps, (and the instant messaging service due soon to be introduced) does some semblance of traditional correspondence live on, whilst the vast majority of traffic seems to be about Vampires biting each other, virtual and therefore conspicuously dry water fights, people 'poking' one another, and the sending of pixellated clipart masquerading (*sic.*) as gifts.

For the IS researcher, and for the sociologist of the internet alike, it would seem that the intellectual history of the simulacrum – and what implications it might have for the nature of our identities, and whether they might be straying from some essential Ideal form or merely coming out in all their multiplicitous glory – opens up a very fruitful field of qualitative research on the nature of virtual identity, and the impact of social networking upon the Self. This is an undertaking beyond the remit of this paper, which has sought to present no more than a theoretically informed reading of one such social networking site, Facebook, towards the further opening up the concept of the 'user'. IS researchers, then, might take from this paper the suggestion that social networking sites, in the digital age, present us with the possibility not so much of representing ourselves on the world wide web, but of exploring the multiplicities of who we are – and that the explosion of popularity of such sites may indeed owe more to this looseness than to the degree of authenticity the tools of an SNS profile-builder might offer us in 'representing' our 'selves'.

5   CONCLUSION

In conclusion then, we have delved into an intellectual history of the notion of the simulacrum, as understood by Plato (1892a-d), and in its pivotal role in the Nietzschean project (Nietzsche 1895), taken up by Deleuze (Deleuze 1983, 1990, 1991), to overturn Platonism. Through thus familiarising the IS reader with some of the issues to be tackled when discussing the nature of representation, we have seen that the representation of self / user on a social networking website has a good deal of impact upon our understanding of Self, Other, of Friendship, and of the nature of contemporary information society.

It is perhaps in the very cornerstone of Deleuze's argument against Plato, that in the Theory of Forms the democratic revolution was reined in once more by the notion of the transcendent, whose imperial forms it had only just escaped, that we might find renewed enthusiasm for the revolutionary power of the internet, and of the world wide web. Deleuze's simulacrum presents us with a concept that values difference and uniqueness above all else, albeit that our notions of the individual self become thereby more fluid, more contingent, more contextual – less 'centred'. In the mutual identity formation in which we participate as users of Facebook, perhaps we see a form of horizontality, or 'flat social networking', which dissolves the 'silos' presented to us by more specialised sites (among which Facebook itself, of course, once numbered). The dinner party where work colleagues, family members, old school friends and half-remembered romantic liaisons meet turns out, perhaps, at least in its virtual form, not to be so bad after all, in the mirroring that it presents to us, about the nature of our selves.

For the IS researcher, armed now with newly unpacked concepts of the user of social networking sites, a whole range of new survey questions and lines of enquiry opens up, with the promise of some extremely revealing results.

9

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