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Digital eternities. Post-mortem digital identity from a semio-pragmatic perspective

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, the persistence of digital data after the death of the user changes the way digital self-presentation data may be perceived. Using a pragmatic semiotic approach, we consider social discourse as constitutive acts of social relations and place strong emphasis on the technical dimension of the objects supporting communication phenomena (Meunier & Peraya, 2004). This paper proposes to analyse the system of personal data constituting the digital profile of a living or deceased user as a semiotic pattern. We have followed a qualitative rather than quantitative approach, examining in depth a limited quantity of relevant web profiles. The results show how the digital identity model modifies the frame of the living user's digital identity.
Keywords: digital identity, death, semiopragmatics, representation, user profile.

INTRODUCTION

With the development of social networking, the Web has now become a normal context in which individuals present themselves. Digital communication is a part of the user's cognitive and informational environment. The user's cognitive schemas are actualised through interactions with digital devices (Peraya 1999; Proulx 2005): the way everyday objects, people and facts are presented on social networks is thus not only a question of design, but also determines the frame (i.e. the cultural pattern or '*agency*' cf. Darras, 2006) through which users conceive everyday life. Beyond the question of whether communication devices allow people to better communicate or not (Wolton, 2011), they nonetheless change the relationship between the user and the Other, define the possible actions open to the user and thus impact the concept of presence. What does 'being present' mean? How does the user 'enact' his existence on the screen? How does he socialise online?

In recent years, the ageing of web users and the death of individuals who created web profile pages have raised the question of post-mortem data. What happens to the data that individuals have left about themselves on the Internet? Do deceased persons leave a digital identity behind them? In what way is this phenomenon linked to that of their digital identity while they were still living? As the physical permanence of digital data does not depend on the presence of the individual but on the server and the web platform owner, if no third party intervenes, the user's digital identity should remain as it was when the user was alive. However the presence of these traces on the Internet may be upsetting for family and friends as a constant reminder of their bereavement. This may be further exacerbated given that participative web platforms such as

Facebook send out reminders to an individual's contacts if his or her account is inactive. As Facebook cannot differentiate between a dead user and a user whose account is simply inactive, it sends automatic notifications to the deceased's entourage encouraging them to reconnect, which may arouse a feeling of distress and reawaken the pain of grief.

Although studies on digital identity are well represented in current research, the question of what these identities become and how they change after the user's death is still in its infancy. It is, however, bound to become an increasingly important issue for society on account of the ageing of Web users.

A semio-pragmatic approach to living and deceased user profiles

This paper proposes a perspective based on a pragmatic semiotic approach to digital identity (cf. first section), taking the intersubjective relationship between the subject (the creator of the profile page) and the object of the page (the deceased) (cf. second section) as the discriminating criterion. The originality of this approach is that it analyses the system of personal data constituting the digital profile of the living or deceased user as a semiotic pattern. This differs markedly from today's approaches based on interviews or big data. The present approach lies midway between these two methods. On the one hand, it conserves a qualitative dimension by observing the personal data constituting each web profile and, on the other hand, it opens avenues towards a quantitative 'qualitative approach' by creating models that could serve for massive data extractions.

To highlight the specificity of post-mortem data examined through this original prism, we first need to present the theoretical framework of the 'trace' commonly used in France to theorize digital identity in communication sciences: this perspective, crosscut with a pragmatic approach adapted from James' model of self-awareness, will enable us to define the model (or typology) of digital identity. In the last section of this paper, we apply it to post-mortem profiles and develop perspectives for a post-mortem identity model highlighting some particularities that should be analysed in further research. Our corpus comprises one hundred living users in Facebook and twenty profiles of deceased users. We have followed a qualitative rather than quantitative approach, examining in depth a limited quantity of relevant web profiles.

Living user digital self-presentation

Whereas there is a long tradition of studies on the notion of identity in philosophy, sociology and semiotics, user identity in interactive devices has been investigated in much more pragmatic terms. 'Digital identity' in France is considered as a socio-technical phenomenon that appeared with the emergence of digital communication and the first forms of Internet user profiles (Georges, 2009). Pages presenting a user's identity raise questions pertaining to both the transfer of the modalities of self-presentation on the Web (Georges, 2009; Coutant & Stenger, 2010) and to the issues of managing user data and privacy, or the ownership of personal data and the right to be forgotten (Ertzscheid et al., 2013).

Identity and difference from an empirical perspective

In a pragmatic approach, identity should be considered as the way in which one person or subject may be distinguished from another. Identity is thus closely linked to the notion of difference (Locke, see e.g. Dours, 2003). For instance, when we attempt to describe someone we do not know, we try to find signs that distinguish her/him from other people. Thus, identity in SNS is linked to the capacity of the system to generate enough shared signs to stimulate social links and enough different signs to highlight individual identity. Historically speaking, in many older tools (e.g. IRC, forums), identity is constituted simply by a name. The role of SNS has been to provide specifications for representations of self in such a way that each and every profile can have a distinct identity (Georges, 2011).

Be traceable in order to exist: the 'trace' theory in France

In the 'real' world, the body's presence is an absolute indication of existence. In the 'digital' world, however, the mere fact of consulting web pages does not mean that you have created an online social existence. A user thus has to enact existence to communicate. If he/she does not create a representation (a web profile), he/she does not exist, but remains hidden. To be seen, the user has to be traceable (i.e. must leave traces intended for others, cf. Merzeau, 2009). This necessity to enact existence by becoming traceable represents a radical change in the identity paradigm whereby the sign system of self-representation acquires a shifting meaning ('*embrayeur de signification*', cf. Georges, 2009, 2014).

A digital representation of self-awareness

William James went beyond the apparent opposition between identity and difference by investigating the inner dimensions of an individual or, in other words, self-awareness. Indeed, identity is closely related to the concept of awareness. We could say that, like awareness (James, 1904), identity is a 'stream' and is 'fictitious'. Employing other words, McCall and Simmons (1978) describe role-identity as "*[the individual's] imaginative view of himself as he likes to think of himself being and acting as an occupant of that position*" (p. 65).

In Principles of Psychology, William James distinguishes four constituents of the Self: a physical dimension (a) in a reflexive movement (d) depending on an individual's intellectual being (c), and also the relations linking the person to his/her social environment (b). Identity is a product of the stream of social interactions and personal events that the subject experiences throughout life. Applying this framework to digital communication, the problem of digital identity must encompass all user activities in regard to the Self and identity representation, i.e. data concerning:

(a) *The material Self* including – in decreasing order of intimacy – an inner self, a body, clothes, immediate family, home, and possessions. In SNS, it corresponds to the user's description or personal data, the user profile's graphic and functional layout (equal to 'home'), the user's friends (equal to 'family'), and items owned and/or shared (equal to 'possessions').

(b) *The social Self* or recognition received from one's peers: "*A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind.*" (James, 1904, p.293). In SNS, it corresponds to the user's social interactions (messages sent to the user, comments on his/her homepage, etc.).

(c) *The spiritual Self* or "*a man's inner or subjective being, his psychic faculties or dispositions, taken concretely*" (p. 296). In SNS, it corresponds to the user activities (post comments, share videos, etc.).

(d) *The pure Ego* or "*consciousness of the pure Ego, of himself as a thinker*" (p.321).

Digital identity as a cotton candy

In the stream of Self-Consciousness (cf. William James, 1.2), as in the process of self-representation and identity, we should distinguish a permanent axis around which ephemeral elements aggregate. Indeed, on the one hand, some signs like a 'picture', '(nick)name' or 'birthday' are not often modified and are thus part of the permanent axis of identity. On the other hand, some other signs are often modified, like 'status', 'shared videos', or 'comments'; these are the ephemeral elements of identity.

Online identity can thus be schematically represented as shown in Figure 1: a central axis (black disk) around which ephemeral signs that update the representation aggregate. The central axis is composed of identifying elements such as '*login/e-mail address*' to guarantee access confidentiality (Hypponen, 2008). This group of data is confidential and possibly hidden by the user; it is paralleled in the visible area by a public name, a picture or avatar and other related elements describing the person. The second and third geometrical ellipses contain, respectively, the user's interpersonal relations and objects that are less revealing of Self but which contribute to the identity-difference problematic (see below).

Figure 1 Digital Identity model

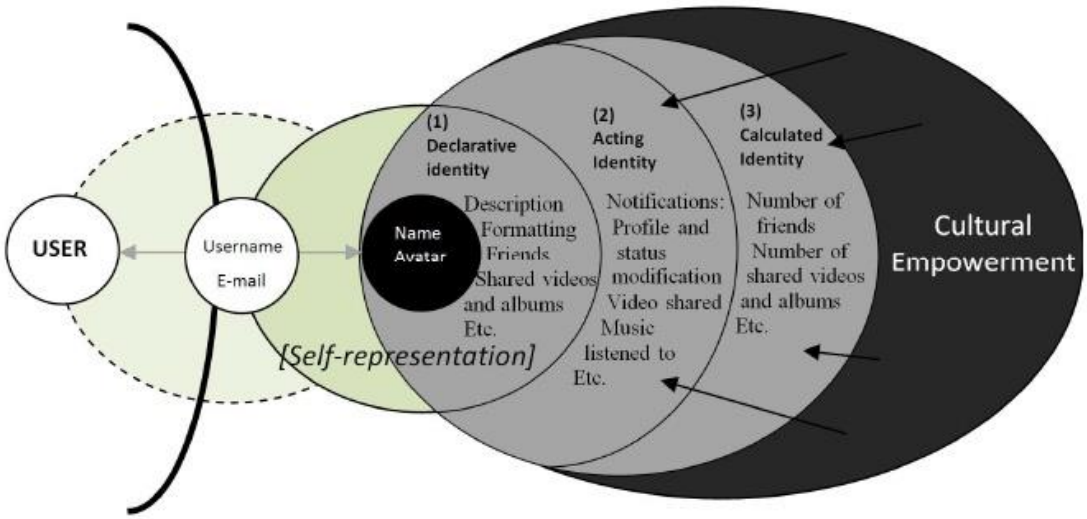

Figure 2 Application of the Digital Identity Model to Facebook (2009)

FROM LIVING USER DIGITAL SELF TO POST-MORTEM DIGITAL MEMORIAL

Now that the theoretical framework has been presented, in the second part of this paper, we apply a model of digital identity, developed from a corpus of living user profile pages, to a deceased user profile page corpus within the same application, Facebook.

Living user identity signs on a digital interface: a model of digital identity

To design the semiotic model of self-representation, all signs of manifest user activity need to be taken into account. Using a pragmatic semiotic approach, Georges (2009) investigated the digital identity of living users on the basis of user profile pages in forums, personal pages, video games, blogs and participative web profile pages. The author thus defined digital identity as the ensemble of observable on-screen signs pertaining to the user. The author distinguishes three parts of self-representation, constituted by overlapping circles around a central axis (Figure 1): declarative identity, acting identity and calculated identity. This framework of 'Selves' determines the general adequateness of a subject in a given society and serves as a cultural pattern.

Post-mortem digital identity: a typology of a memorial page profile

V. Jankélévitch distinguishes death in the third person ("*death in general, abstract and anonymous death*"), death in the second person (the death of someone close, the death of a loved one) and death in the first person (my own death, where no one can replace me) (Jankélévitch, 1977, p.25). This distinction enables Georges and Julliard (2014) to show that, while the conventional media focus on '*death in the third person*', the new technologies offer totally new channels for talking about death in the '*second*' and '*first person*' (Jankélévitch, 1977), or in other words the death of someone close, on the one hand, and one's own death experienced in the future, on the other hand (Rabatel & Floréa, 2011). They draw on the categorisations of Sofka (2009) and

Haverinen (2010) to investigate the post-mortem digital identity from the standpoint of the subject's relationship to the object of the enunciation.

Three types of memorial websites have been identified: memorials created by the user's entourage after his/her death (3rd person), the profiles created by users during their lifetime and then transformed by the entourage after the user's death (2nd person) into a place for grieving and paying tribute, and lastly the sites proposing that users create and manage the data while they are still alive in view of their future death (1st person). The first category of places for the '*third-person*' relation to death is the oldest: as early as the 1990s, cyber-cemeteries appeared on the Internet. They allow family and friends to create online memorials to pay tribute to the deceased (de Vries & Rutherdorf, 2004; Blando et al., 2004; Hall & Reid, 2009; Walter et al., 2012) and enabling users to choose a gravestone, flower it, burn incense and write tributes (Bell, 2006).

The third category refers to the old tradition of Ancient Egypt and Rome, and includes sites that directly propose that users create their own memorial during their lifetime (Lachut, 2009; Foong & Kera, 2008). The second category is more pertinent to our present research object as it concerns Facebook. This second category comprises websites dedicated to death '*in the second person'*, in particular social networking sites (Facebook, Myspace). Not initially dedicated to the memory of the deceased, death is sometimes presented on these sites through the profiles of the deceased user. On Facebook, impromptu notifications inviting people to reconnect with deceased friends, as mentioned earlier, modifies the mourning process (Wrona, 2011; Brubaker, 2012) by awakening painful feelings for the users (Pène, 2011). Even when a website platform has implemented a functionality allowing – providing that official proof of death is given – the page to be deleted or modified into a static memorial page that sends out no reconnect reminders, the functionality is little known and thus little used (Odom et al., 2010). Facebook is a place for three kinds of death announcements: the death announcement itself, the deceased's profile pages and the commemoration of disasters, crimes, accidents and illnesses (Pène, 2011). These three forms of death announcements pose different emotional and symbolic questions, mainly due to their novel approach compared to cyber-cemetery pages: they may show indexical signs of the deceased (signs of activity, moods, downloaded photos) and for this reason they are close to the death in the first person.

Drawing on previous studies that show the user's loss of control over self-representation, we can also identify the trend on the participative Web to develop a relation to death in the third person. These different enunciative contexts point to the outstanding question of the identity of the subject that creates the page in tribute to a deceased person.

Declarative identity

'Declarative identity' is constituted by data given by the user during the subscription process and which can be modified (name, birthday, picture etc.). Data relevant to declarative identity have the specificity of being provided by users.

Signs composing declarative identity may be (in order of decreasing privacy):

- data about the material self (e.g. sex, date of birth, sexual orientation, marital status), and localisation data (e.g. city, community, college)
- social self data (e.g. interests, friendships, meetings, professional networks; favourite sites, blogs, colleagues, lovers; activity-related data: business, sports, leisure) and

collections: media, items uploaded or shared (e.g. videos, links, files (peer-to-peer), magical objects, weapons).
- spiritual self data (e.g. opinion data: political tendency, religious beliefs).
These data describe the person as a '*material*' and '*social self*', the central axis of identity around which ephemeral signs will aggregate. The avatar or the picture (ligator) are associated with the name given by the user to identify himself/herself (autonym). This dyad acts as a shifting system that shifts the meaning from a system of graphical signs to the representation of a person (autonym ligator).

In post-mortem digital identity, this category is kept after life. It in fact only involves profile pages created by the user before her or his death. In the other kind of memorials, this category, as being a description of self, should not appear.

Acting identity

'Acting identity' is constituted by messages provided by the system and reporting user actions (requesting a friend, etc.). In Facebook, which is currently the software that uses this functionality most, these data are displayed on the homepage in the '*mini-feed'* window, containing displayed messages. For example: "*S., C., S., V. have changed their profile picture*", "*M. and T. have been transformed into vampires*". To refer to the notions of identity and difference, correlations and relationships between users are suggested by these messages. They highlight the identity of the user's network and suggest a global view of the community of friends.

Although users (teens, cf. Lansen 2007) consider these data to be less relevant to identity, the '*mini-feed*' is often denounced as highly intrusive. Such criticism in fact shows that acting identity is to some extent sensed as revealing something private.

Acting identity data can relate to three types of events:

1) Events that are a consequence of changing declarative identity (for example: '*update profile*' means a modification of the picture or of personal information).
2) Events that have a direct impact on declarative identity (for example: '*friend requests', 'participation in an event or group', 'creation of event or group'*).
3) It can also relate to the user's notifications of social activities (for example: "*commented or tagged or sent a gift*", "*sent a collective posting*"), containing indications about the recognition received from one's peers (cf. 1.3 William James's Social Self; for example: "*was tagged by a friend*", or "*recommended by*").

This category is the centre of the living image pertaining to the user after his or her death. It could explain the phenomenon pointed out by Brubaker and Vertesi (2010) of the recalcitrance of the deceased's representation: this phenomenon, whereby the user's identity remains active after death, can be explained by the 'acting' dimension of digital identity in this model. To adapt the model to the post-mortem perspectives, one should define the post-mortem acting identity by: all the signs that are notified in the timeline of activities before and after the user's death, whether these are produced by the user, the system or the user's friends.

Calculated identity

'Calculated identity' is constituted by numbers automatically calculated by the system and appearing in the user profile (number of friends, number of groups, etc.).

Unlike declarative identity, calculated identity is not provided by the user, but only by the system. Like acting identity, it reveals the activity of the user. Unlike acting identity, it is the product of an interpretation that depends on rules fixed by the system or, more accurately, by the people who designed it.

For example, the message displayed on the personal profile "*180 friends*" is part of calculated identity, which is different from the message "*X is now friends with Y*", which is part of acting identity. The latter message has a direct impact on the former: X had 179 friends and now, because of her new friendship with Y, her friend score grows to 180.

Among these automatically generated variables, it is relevant to distinguish between two categories, as they each carry different meanings:

- Qualitative variables: qualitative information about the user's presence and current activity (connection status –online/offline – availability, unavailable/away from keyboard/busy etc.). Due to their qualitative aspect, these variables are the product of a certain level of interpretation carried out by the system itself.
- Quantitative variables: the number of friends, the score, the rank, number of likes.

In the 30 post-mortem page profiles analysed, it can be seen that the number of likes is extremely high and used as a sign of compassion and sympathy more than a sign expressing happiness or encouragement.

As was the case for the living user digital identity model (Georges, 2009), this model opens avenues for its application to massive data extraction and data visualization.

Conclusion and perspectives

The typology of memorial profile pages enabled us to point up the question of enunciation on memorial pages. On the online social networks especially (category 2), the representations of the deceased person in the second and first person coincide. In particular, Facebook pages paying tribute to the deceased, whether created by the users during their lifetime or by the entourage after their death, raise the question of the encounter between the subject and the object of the representation. We integrated this phenomenon into the framework of digital identity study presented in the first section, so as to clarify the problem of enunciation.

Firstly, in the case of memorials created ex nihilo by the entourage after the user's death (cf. second category of the typology), websites such as Facebook that specialise in profile and not memorial pages imply that the creators of memorial pages present themselves in close proximity to the object of the web page. For example, the memorial page "*Rest in peace (Last name, first name)*" is authored by "*Rest in peace (Last name, first name)*", who is not the object of the page, but in fact one or more people in the deceased's entourage. This equation of the subject and the object represented, which is not neutral, thus seems a priori very specific to the non-specialist social networking sites, and has no equivalent in the traditional funeral and mourning processes.

Secondly, post-mortem identity can be viewed as prolonging the delegation of self-representation to the website platform or to 'contacts'. What happens when the user dies and can no longer be in any way the subject of the discursive production of his or her page: does their digital identity continue to be constructed? Brubacker and Vertesi (2010) have shown that this is the case: after the user's death, his or her digital identity continues to be constructed through the actions of their entourage, who thus perpetuate the memory of the deceased. Their research even shows that this process engenders a specific phenomenon of 'persistence': the entourage expresses the feeling that the deceased, through his or her Facebook profile, is still 'persistent and active'. The use of memorial profiles may thus have consequences for the actual mourning experience as it keeps the distress of bereavement alive while easing the pain, and prolongs the mourning process (Brubacker & Hayes, 2011).

The phenomenon of '*persistence of identity data*' pointed up by Brubacker and Vertesi (2010), may partly be explained, on the basis of our previous studies, by the growing importance of the acting and calculated dimensions of digital identity. Yet, this can only be valid for the profile pages created while the users are still alive. As the modalities of enunciation change in the memorials created ex nihilo by friends and family after the user's death (cf. second category of the typology), we may question the linkage that this ambiguous enunciation creates between, on the one hand, the entourage who creates the page and the enunciative subject and, on the other hand, the deceased, who is the object of the enunciation and materially present in the subject of the enunciation.

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