Facework on Facebook
The presentation of self in virtual life and its role in the US elections

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Fig. 1. The front page of a Facebook user (the author). It is mainly filled with links to news as to the doings and whereabouts of one’s friends. Facebook urges users to write what they are doing right now as a way of feeding news to their friends. All personal names and faces apart from the author’s have been obscured in this and the following images, except for those that are freely available to the public at their web addresses.

The title of this article could just as well have referred to MySpace or any other of the by now numerous websites that are used to connect people who know each other and want to demonstrate this connectivity to the other users of the worldwide web. LinkedIn, Orkut, Bebo and Hi5 are other examples of such web utilities known as social networking sites, but MySpace and Facebook are the best-known on a worldwide basis.

What I want to discuss is two recent shifts in the public and the private presentation of self that have occurred with the proliferation of these websites. One is the tendency for persons to exhibit themselves on the internet by showing their relationships on these sites. The second is the increasing tendency for politicians to focus on mobilization via such sites, as has been evidenced in particular by the overwhelming success of the Obama-Biden campaign, which mobilized millions of active campaigners and donors worldwide through sophisticated networking techniques, such as through the my.barackobama.com site built for the campaign by Chris Hughes, a co-founder of Facebook (Stirland 2008).

Social networking sites
Within a given web utility (e.g. Facebook), people build a web page with links to the pages of their ‘friends’, or in the case of politicians to their ‘supporters’. As a social phenomenon, exhibiting one’s relations seems like a very new development in the West, but it is in fact not that novel when considered through the ethnographic or anthropological lens. These two shifts point in turn towards a theme of hierarchy, which seems under-explored in many scholarly discussions of the internet.

The proliferation of websites focused on persons as nodes or nexuses in networks is an innovation to the Western world, but is at the same time a natural consequence of a development that has been under way for some time in the West. For the last two centuries, individualism has been the dominant mode in the understanding of social identities and personhood in the West, but this individualism is now beginning to be exhibited in new ways that in fact mirror forms of sociality as they are experienced every day in other parts of world, particularly Melanesia. Where others (most notably Mosko 2007) have argued in favour of applying classical anthropological theory (especially the so-called New Melanesian Ethnography) to understand modern consumption in a Melanesian context, I will attempt the reverse move and argue that the same theory could illuminate new forms of consumption in and of cyberspace in a Western context.

In her book The gender of the gift (1988), Marilyn Strathern, as the main proponent of what is today known as New Melanesian Ethnography (cf. Josephides 1991), presents the thesis that people in Melanesia ‘are as dividually as they are individually conceived’ (1988: 13). According to Strathern, Melanesians consider themselves ‘partible persons’ in that they are made up of parts that they...
have been provided from others – from their social relations such as parents, uncles, aunts, cousins and other partners with whom they engage in social transactions. The Facebook phenomenon is in many ways comparable to this perspective on Melanesian sociability. There is a recognized tendency in the West today for the formation and representation of a person’s social identity to be based on exhibiting who one is via material and immaterial consumption. This aspect of processes of social identity formation has been discussed in anthropology at least since the 1980s (e.g. Bourdieu 1984, Miller 1987, Friedman 1994). People adhere to specific social identities by sporting, for instance, a particular style or dress associated with specific forms of ‘cultural capital’, distinguishing one from others that one does not want to be identified with or identifying one with those one wants to be included with. Social identity can also be exhibited via taste in music, literature, choice of transport and much else (cf. Bourdieu 1984).

Today this happens also on the internet, where on Facebook and MySpace for instance, one can display one’s choice of music, photos and videos of oneself, and also one’s social relations – a person can display his or her ‘friends’. But social networking sites are more than just a reproduction of the work of distinction that takes place in real social life. They go further in that they are meant to present people as being in the centre of the world. They allow people to display themselves not just as self-made individual persons, but as individuals. In one way, they give everyone the chance to be individual in the sense of being unique, because any person can be shown as being in the centre of a social universe – their own. No matter who you are, your Facebook website has your as the one in focus.1

It is a matter of exhibiting one’s perspective or point of view on the social relations that one is made up of. That people are made up of social relations may not be explicitly conceptualized by Facebook users, who still regard themselves as individuals, but the websites in question provide the applications and a medium for exchange of perspectives that match individual sociability. It offers – perhaps even demands – changes of perspective in the sense that people must see their friends as centres of their own universes, since their uniqueness is defined by the relationships they embrace. The Facebook-person is presented relationally, in that a profile without connections to friends would make no sense since that is the whole point of the social networking site. Furthermore, most interaction on Facebook is built on and facilitated by small exchanges of information, challenges, photos etc. between friends. Facebook persons are thus not presented as bounded individuals, but rather as unbounded individuals.

The Facebook person is a dividual that incorporates her/his social relations to form the representation of her/his identity. The concept of the dividual has been employed in discussions of sociability on the internet by Tom Boellstorff (2008), who uses it to describe people’s use of different ‘avatars’ displaying various sides of themselves in the virtual world Second Life. However, his use of the concept is far from the Melanesian understanding that a person is constituted relationally in exchange, which is what I find to be the case on social networking sites and Facebook in particular.

Structuring relationships
It must be noted that there are a number differences between the setups of specific sites. MySpace, for instance, is to a wider extent a platform for individualistic self-representation and self-promotion where people share their own generated content, while the electronic applications on Facebook profiles encourage exchanges between friends, which create the content (McCler and Anderson 2008). Similarly, there are differences in terms of whether

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1. For an overview, see boyd and Ellison (2007).
2. Mark Mosko (n.d.) has done much the same by arguing that Christianity contains the recognition of dividuality in Western persons. This implies that what I am describing in this article may not involve any new forms of Western personhood, if the Western individual already contains the potential for dividuality just as the Melanesian person, according to Marilyn Strathern (1988), may be individually conceived under specific circumstances. It is the technology that endangers new perspectives on dividuality and individuality.
3. This ‘you’ it’s not that! The phenomenon is also alluded to by Time magazine’s announcement that in 2006 its Person of the Year was ‘you’ on the grounds of the increase in user-generated content for the internet such as videos, blogs and social networking profiles (Time magazine, 13 December 2006).
the general public or only your ‘friends’ can see your profile, and how much of it. There are also both geographical and demographic differences in terms of which site people prefer and how they use it. The site Orkut, for instance, was virtually taken over by Brazilians employing it to ends other than those intended by its creators (Nafus, de Paula and Anderson 2007). Of the two best-known sites, Facebook is generally more popular than MySpace in Western Europe, while the latter is more widely used in the US at the moment.4 However, the fundamental aspect of displaying who one is by displaying one’s friends is common to all of the social networking sites (see boyd 2006).

Taking my cue from the above observations on similarities between Melanesian sociality and the Facebook phenomenon, I argue that the internet has been shaped into hierarchical forms by the way that people use it in practice. Others before me have shown that people’s use of the internet reproduces concerns and differences from ‘real life’ (e.g. Miller and Slater 2000, Castells 2000), but some commentators still seem to be taken with the internet as a new and fascinating technology, and refer to it as flat and non-hierarchical without providing any qualitative or quantitative empirical evidence or social theoretical argument for this assertion (e.g. Urry 2005; see also Castells 2000).

Non-hierarchical to whom, one might ask? In theory the web may be so from the perspective of the omniscient scientist, who knows that the internet is ‘just’ a very large number of computers that are connected to each other, and that the internet drawn out on paper seems like a two-dimensional model of how people relate to each other and follow links from one web page to another. The argument would seem to be that interaction can take place horizontally and directly between users, without having to pass via ‘hubs’ or ‘nodes’. But most often it does pass through just such nodes, as communication travels through a medium forming a network. Practical use of the internet entails several different kinds of ranking systems or hierarchies that often match social differentiation outside the virtual world, and much more communication on the internet is not horizontal – in part because networks are not by default horizontal or devoid of differential rank. This is to say not just that access to the internet reproduces already existing social and economic polarization and stratification (cf. Castells 1998), but that much internet interaction involves several more or less tacit forms of ranking – some hierarchical, some not.

When MySpace added a ‘Top 8’ feature where one could list one’s eight best friends, it made offline hierarchies overt in the online forum and created antagonisms between friends, who expected reciprocity in terms of who was listed as the best friend of whom (boyd 2006).

Facebook has not added this feature, but the user can add applications to his/her profile that rank and compare one against one’s friends. This could for example be ranking in terms of ‘funniest friend’, comparison in terms of ‘which superhero are you?’ or small competitions (such as quizzes about European flags, movies etc.). MySpace and Facebook are not the only examples of production of rankings in internet forums, although they are probably the clearest.

The way that some websites function as centres and as access points to others is also a way of constructing a form of rank. There is much more traffic and many more hits on these pages, whereas other pages that are less well-known suffer anonymity in the periphery. Even search engines such as Google have been programmed to make ranked lists of search results based on an evaluation of ‘relevance’ of information (see also Castells 2000). This relevance may not always be relevance to the one doing the search, but could be from the point of view of those whose desire to be found extends to paying to get listed at the top of the list of hits, or deliberately including a number of popular words in titles or key text passages based on a speculation of what people ‘google’ most frequently.

With the array and multitude of websites available today, survival is a matter of being found. Many websites have a ‘hit counter’ that reveals how often they are visited. Entities that desperately need and hence want to be found may be private enterprises dependent on promoting themselves as brands. These also increasingly advertise via social networking sites, where information is passed on via one’s network of friends (see boyd 2006).

Virtual mobilization
Building on New Melanesian Ethnography as a model to understand social networking sites, it is obvious that networks are closely intertwined with the production of hierarchy, which still seems to contradict some people’s perception (e.g. Urry 2005). With the advent of MySpace and Facebook, the possibility of a hierarchical relationship has been reenacted for everyone with access to the internet, where the person as the centre becomes the holistic entity defining and encompassing his/her own sociality if not ‘society’ (see Strathern 1994). Networks consist of nodes, and in the ‘Facebook society’, each person is a node. But there are differences between nodes. Some are more central than others and function as the hub for many more transactions. Some may only have ten ‘connections’ or ‘friends’, while others may have several hundreds – notwithstanding that there is qualitative difference between relationships, that not all relationships are personal, that many ‘friends’ are perhaps what we would normally call acquaintances and so on.
Fig. 6 (above). Politicians on Facebook rated in terms of number of supporters, in which the Obama-related websites gained well over 3 million supporters.

Fig. 7 (right). The home page of Barack Obama's www.mybarackobama.com site as at 11 November 2008, following the Obama-Biden election victory. This effective networking page offers users their own customized view of the presidential campaign depending on locality and personal interests. Designed by Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes, it includes customized tools to help Obama mobilize social networks. The website claims to have attracted into the campaign people from all 50 states, creating more than 35,000 local organizing groups, hosting over 200,000 events, and making millions of calls to neighbours encouraging support for Obama's presidential candidacy.
This testifies to the different ways people make use of MySpace of Facebook. Some want only to invite a close group of real-life friends, while others want to collect and encomase as many friends, colleagues, acquaintances etc. as they can to appear popular (boyd 2006). Thus one hierarchical relationship can be based on one’s ‘popularity’ as a form of comparative ranking. On one level, popularity on these sites subjects the perception of a relationship between part and whole to personal understanding; on another, it can be objectively determined based on the quantity of one’s relations (see Nafus, de Paula and Anderson 2007). The latter definition emphasizes that the relations to ‘friends’ on MySpace or Facebook may just as well be of a symbolic character rather than signifying an important relationship built on long-term mutual exchange of greetings, gifts, favours, opinions and so on.

The creation of hierarchy or rank in the size and centrality of specific nodes in the network is again comparable to Melanesian groups shaped around so-called ‘big men’ who dominate others via competitive exchanges of wealth. To a big man, the number of relations is key to his status and social significance. Drawing upon a large number of people through gift exchange enables him to channel large amounts of wealth through himself in ceremonial exchanges. This allows him to sustain a large number of relations over time, thus increasing the amount of wealth he can attract for his next ceremony. The more relations then, the bigger he is socially – as a person.

Something similar in appearance to this ‘big man competition’ is occurring in Western politics, when politicians use Facebook or MySpace profiles to mobilize support in terms of both votes and funding, although here it happens on a much larger scale and with a much larger audience, given the possibilities presented by new technologies of communication. During the Danish parliamentary election campaign in 2007, the Danish prime minister bragged of more than 4000 Facebook friends. Other candidates for the Danish parliament also employed Facebook to gather support, mustering numbers in the thousands (Politiken, 17 November 2007). In comparison, according to his own website Barack Obama had mustered 293,952 MySpace friends on 30 December 2007 (see www.barackobama.com); Hillary Clinton had 152,647 according to hers (www.hillaryclinton.com). By 20 February 2008 – after ‘Super Tuesday’— these numbers had grown to 287,853 and 185,694 respectively; but Obama’s site kept on growing reaching 871,963 shortly after his election victory, with his Facebook profile nudgeing 3 million supporters, a record for any politician on Facebook.

On Facebook, political mobilization has become so popular that politicians as a category of people now have specific kinds of profiles, where they have ‘supporters’ instead of ‘friends’. Here it is not votes that strengthen the politician, but relationships, and it is the revelation of their quantity rather than their quality which counts. The politician in question stands as the central node in a network of supporters with the aim of reaching further out along the links provided by these supporters. Like the big man, the politician on Facebook is also constituted relationally, in that by gathering a large number of supporters s/he appears as a candidate with widespread public appeal – an appearance which is necessary in order to be taken seriously in an electoral contest. ‘Facebook size’ is one way to demonstrate appeal, and it feeds into and becomes a competition parallel to the voting. Perhaps it gives a good picture of the cultural or social aspect of voting.

Offline political support is based on exchange relations to a larger extent than is often recognized in political theory or sociological literature on elections (see Bertrand, Briquet and Pels 2007). Interestingly, if this MySpace or Facebook ‘model’ was applied to an election in Papua New Guinea, for some candidates there would be no significant difference between a candidate’s actual social relations and the amount of votes s/he would get, and to a large extent this is what elections are about in Papua New Guinea, where ‘big man-style’ politics is a common phrase (see e.g. Rynkiewich and Seib 2000). However, had MySpace or Facebook really been used, there would be a difference even though political supporters are typically relations of the candidate. Political support is not always something that can be given to a candidate openly and freely, for fear of repercussions from those candidates one chooses not to support – especially if one of them happens to win. A politician in power may not be able to harm those who did not vote for him directly, but he is likely to provide access to the limited resources of the state to his supporters first and to everyone else second – if at all. That is the positive aspect of the secret ballot in Western-style democracies, although support for politicians on social networking sites is as much a statement to one’s network of friends as it is to the politician. The crucial thing to note, however, is the way that social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook have been employed by politicians in Western countries to mobilize political support, and that in the process they enable a work of distinction and hierarchization.

There are many interesting areas that could be explored from here. I have focused in this article on the visible – that which is exhibited and forms the obvious parts of people’s impression management in cyberspace (cf. Goffman 1959). In Melanesian groups, it is also common to have relationships that are not exhibited, but must be kept away from the public. My guess is that all sociability is like that. Almost everyone, in the West too, has relations they would rather keep quiet about. One could argue that the choices people make in what they want to exhibit on the internet would necessarily mirror the complexity of the social relations they are engaged in. One major task that remains is to uncover the ways in which social networking sites provide different possibilities for both revelation and concealment of aspects of personhood and social reality.

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Fig. 8. John McCain’s MySpace page, 21 Oct. 2008, with a request to become his friend. That it is not stated as a personal invitation to become ‘my friend’ may bear witness to John McCain’s own feeling of estrangement from cyberspace.