Chapter 8
Narbs as a Measure and Indicator of Identity Narratives

Ananda Mitra
Wake Forest University, USA

ABSTRACT

Social media systems allow individuals to create a discursive identity for themselves using differ-ent tools all of which function as narrative bits of information, or "narbs," which in unison create a composite identity of an individual. The narbs possess certain specific measurable attributes - type of content, authorship, frequency of appearance and spatial information. Each of these attributes offer bits of information about the individual and careful examination and enumeration of these attributes of the narbs produce a narb weight and a narb matrix which can be examined numerically to provide a preliminary understanding of how granulated an identity narrative would be when narbs are examined for a particular individual.

INTRODUCTION

The growing number of people who have began to subscribe to social networking sites (SNS) in the early part of the Twenty-first century has been a phenomenon that has attracted significant attention from scholars, popular media, and the general population as people have embraced the SNS system as a tool of communication (Kirk-patrick, 2010; Lenhart, 2009). This growth has also resulted in concerns over the way in which

SNS information could be used by individuals and institutions to learn about each other. The two concerns that are addressed in this chapter deal with first, finding a way to systematically enumerate and analyze the information on SNS and secondly using the enumeration system to better manage the way in which narrative bytes or "narbs," are produced and used (Mitra, 2010). To begin with, it is useful to consider the place of SNS in a larger context of creating a presence for an individual or institution when the "real" object disappears from sight to be substituted by a discursive presence.

The phenomenon of creating a digital discursive presence on SNS is an example of the increasing digitization of everyday life activities as an increasing number of people are creating social media profiles or micro-blogging their every single mundane activity. However, the process of creating a presence via technological mediation existed before digitization became the driving force behind much of modern tools. Consider for instance the phenomenon of creating the "party line". This was a popular use of the familiar telephone technology that would allow many people, often women, to connect with each other in a synchronous manner and talk over the phone for long periods of time and share a variety of information about each other, and most importantly, about others in the form of gossip (Rakow, 1988). The telephone allowed individuals to transcend the barrier of space and create a "telephonic presence" where the telephonic glue held together the people even if they were not "there" in the real. This idea was extrapolated when digitization allowed for the creation and circulation of the "digital presence" through tools such as such as listserves and Usenet groups that were popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s[1]. The technology was not sufficiently sophisticated to allow for sharing of much beyond written texts that would create the discursive space where the virtual communities would be formed (Mitra, 1996, 1997).

A crucial common element in all the different networks was the way in which a person would choose to present themselves within the network independent of the technology used to connect the people. Bracketing out the real networks, where the "flesh and blood" person would actually interact with another "real" person, the specific networking technology had an impact on the specific presence that would be created. The telephone only allowed for the voice to be the vehicle for creating the presence whereas the multi-media options provided by Web sites such as Chatroulette (Kreps, 2010) can allow for the production of a more detailed and variegated presence based

primarily on the content of the connection. This chapter examines the ways in which the existing and emergent tools are producing opportunities for creating the presence that brings with concerns around deciphering the identity of an individual based on the digital presence that is created for and by the individual. The key objective is to develop a systematic way of understanding how the presence is created around different elements such as content, authorship, place and frequency at which the discourses are produced. The specific form of digital tool is what has been labeled as SNS[2] and it is useful to consider the idea of social networking where presence exists and identity is constructed.

OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

The transformation from the virtual communities based around text-intensive discussion boards to the SNS was made possible because of two major developments in the technological sphere – availability of powerful digital machines, and the wide-spread penetration of high-speed data connections. The first component of the change refers to the proliferation of digital tools, from computers to smart cell phones, that are able to rapidly process the large amounts of data produced by the digitization[3] of audio and image information. The second component of the change refers to the way in which the digital tools are able to connect to central repository of data files which can store extremely large amounts of data that can be rapidly transmitted from a centralized location to a digital tool. These two technological developments led to the emergence and popularity of a class of Web-based applications that quickly came to be known as SNS. As pointed out in the articles in the special theme section of the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* compiled by Boyd and Ellison (2007) there were numerous SNS forums that came and went in the latter

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