

Preface

Networked individualism is a social pattern, not a collection of isolated individuals. (Castells, 2001, p. 131)

The younger sister of a close friend of mine recently returned to Rome after a period spent abroad (on the Erasmus exchange program). As is fairly normal among Erasmus students, she fell in love with a young man living abroad. When she was providing me with some of the details of her romance, face-to-face and mediated interactions between the couple were given the same importance: she mentioned hour-long conversations that took place on Skype, Facebook messages that were exchanged throughout the day, and an extensive use of the mobile phone (both for coordinating their meetings and negotiating their meanings).

Over dinner, I heard myself saying: “When I was on my Erasmus program, 12 years ago, I did not have a mobile phone, while Facebook and Skype simply didn’t exist.” We did have emails, but we had to be at home or at university to check them. Some of my fellow students already had a cell phone (it was mainly a matter of who could afford them), and only a small minority of us were using instant messaging platforms.

Even if some major applications (such as Facebook or Skype) were conceived later on, communication technology already existed. What has changed completely, over the past 10 or 15 years, is the way in which common people use technology: the way it is integrated in our everyday lives, especially with regard to personal communication. Portable devices and wireless connectivity offer new environments in which people can manage their personal relationships, allowing people to maintain long distance ties more easily, by staying in touch throughout the day. Moreover, *multitasking* practices allow people to experiment with multiple relationship patterns, both on and offline, by offering them forms of *social presence* that do not necessarily imply exclusivity (I can be chatting with more than one friend, while at the same time talking at the phone and/or sending emails; moreover, we can experience lighter forms of social presence at a distance, where our presence often only consists of having an open channel for communication, and we may not even be continuously talking to our contacts).

By the time I was on my Erasmus program, scholars had already begun to explore the characteristics of the “network society” (Castells, 1996) and the transformation of social patterns that has led to “networked individualism” (Wellman, 1999). In the subsequent years, digital technology has become increasingly integrated in common people’s everyday lives, becoming an even more important tool for the management of personal relationships. This book explores some of the main characteristics of digitally-mediated sociability.

INTRODUCING NETWORKED SOCIABILITY AND INDIVIDUALISM

The aim of this introductory chapter is to offer a brief overview of the main conceptual perspectives that are shared by all of the chapters in this volume. I will therefore briefly introduce Wellman and Castells' understanding of networked individualism and networked sociability, describing the shift from communities to networks and underlining that networked individualism does not lead to isolation, but instead gives rise to new patterns of sociability. I will then focus on the "online vs. offline" dichotomy, which is still widely adopted, both by scholars and by mainstream media: as digital media are embedded in our everyday lives, the "online vs. offline" dichotomy is quite useless, both from a theoretical and an empirical point of view. Even if they can primarily be observed in online environments, the processes that are described in this book are not *determined* by technology. Technology, instead, offers powerful environments that *enable* people to manage their identity performances and their relationships. Each digitally-mediated platform offers specific *affordances* that contribute to the construction of unique communication environments. Social network sites (SNS), for instance, are powerful playgrounds, both for the user and for the researcher. After a brief overview of the international literature on SNS, I will focus on some of the recent research trends surrounding this topic. In the age of the *convergence culture*, however, the phenomena which need to be addressed are wider than SNS, and include the wide variety of ways in which people are linked to each other. In the final part of this introductory chapter, I will briefly present each chapter of this book, also mentioning the theoretical and methodological options that have guided this choice of chapters.

From Communities to Networks: A Brief Overview of Networked Individualism and Networked Sociability

In late modern societies (Giddens, 1991), identity performances and social relations are increasingly being understood through the frameworks of *networked individualism* and *networked sociability*. Far from being immersed in densely-knit groups or *communities*, people are instead leaving the "little boxes" they used to live in (Wellman uses the term "little boxes" to refer to the group-based societies in which people's homes, neighborhoods and workgroups used to play a major role; Wellman, 1999, p. 1) and are moving towards a "network society."

The concept of "community" has a long theoretical history. According to Bauman, the very concept of community, based on early formulations by classic sociologists such as Toennies, evokes "everything we miss and what we lack to be secure, confident and trusting" (2001, p. 3). Many definitions can be found for "community," both in sociological literature and in public discourse (Baym, 2010, p. 74). Although urban sociologists have argued, from the late 1970s onwards, that community should be understood independently of the physical neighborhood (Wellman, 1979), the "community question" arises periodically in scientific literature (for a recent reconceptualization, see Hennig, 2007).

In contemporary societies, community has to be understood in a "weak" sense, as referring to a culture and a set of ideas, rather than a physical place (see Parks, 2011, p. 107), as intended by Anderson (1991) when he proposed the idea of an "imagined community." Following on from this perspective, the widespread debate on "virtual communities" arose in the early 1990s, following Rheingold's (1993) proposals.

While intriguing, and able to capture the zeitgeist of the emerging online world (Parks, 2011, p. 105), the term “virtual community” can be somewhat misleading, if it is understood as the main pattern of sociability to be found online, both because of the term “community” and because of the term “virtual” (I will elaborate on the opposition between virtual and real later in this chapter). Both on and offline, communities can arise as specific patterns, but are not to be understood as the dominant form of sociability (Parks, 2011; Baym, 2010). Most of the time, and in most contexts, people are immersed in sparsely-knit self-centred networks, rather than in densely-knit communities (Wellman, 2001); nevertheless, personal networks can also include densely-knit groups (Boase & Wellman, 2006).

Moving from *place-to-place* towards *person-to-person* and *role-to-role* connectivity, “the person becomes the portal” (Wellman, 2001). Such a shift in the nature of social relationships has been facilitated by both mass transit and telecommunication systems. According to Boase and Wellman (2006), these social relationships have at least three important attributes: “(1) Relationships are both local and long distance; (2) Personal networks are sparsely-knit but include densely-knit groups; (3) Relationships are more easily formed and abandoned” (Boase & Wellman, 2006, p. 718).

These three elements have been used by Wellman over the past decade to define networked individualism. Boase and Wellman (2006) have further elaborated on this model by adding two more characteristics: “(4) While homophily still exists, many relationships are with people from different social backgrounds; (5) Some social ties are strong, but many more are weak” (Boase & Wellman, 2006, p. 718).

In a context where networks are becoming increasingly personal (Wellman, 2007), it is the individual’s responsibility to activate and manage his or her own relational networks, thereby continuously switching between the different roles he or she plays in everyday life (with family, and in his or her personal or professional life, etc.). The individual has become “the primary unit of connectivity [...]. Each person is a switchboard, between ties and networks. People remain connected, but as individuals rather than being rooted in the home bases of work units and households” (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002, p. 34).

Our societies have experienced an overall shift toward individualism. In this context, the following are the three main elements that have contributed to the rise of networked individualism: the personalization of communication flows (facilitated by increasingly personal and ubiquitous digital technology), ranging from one-to-one communication to what Castells defines as *mass self-communication* (Castells, 2009); the privatization of sociability; and role-to-role connectivity.

According to this perspective, however, individualism does not lead to social isolation, nor to the atomization of individuals. Through their personal networks, people negotiate and obtain support, information and a sense of belonging (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002, p. 34). In other words, they also experiment with new forms of sociability, but they are more likely to experience them as individuals, rather than as part of a broader group.

The culture of individualism does not lead to isolation, but it changes the patterns of sociability in terms of increasingly selective and self directed contacts. [...] The critical matter is not technology, but the development of networks of sociability based on choice and affinity, breaking the organizational and spatial boundaries of relationships [...]. Networked sociability leads both to an individual-centered network, specific to the individual, and to peer-group formation, when the network becomes the context of behavior for its participants. (Castells et al., 2007, pp. 143-144)

While sociability and sociality may appear to be synonymous, sociability can be defined as “the ability to perform the social behaviors that lead to sociality” (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 316). Networked sociability emerges as a specific social pattern, both leading to ego-centred networks and to the formation of peer groups. It is enabled by multiple sets of environments, both digitally-mediated and not; digital media, and so-called social media in particular, however, appear to have a central role in enhancing this particular type of sociability. Their affordances “permit persons to maintain the individuality of their private sphere as they traverse to sociality” (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 317).

A deeper understanding of networked individualism and sociability requires a knowledge of the multifaceted concept of *identity*. As many scholars have pointed out (Goffman, 1959; Giddens, 1991; Thompson, 1995; Buckingham, 2008), contemporary identity has to be seen as a process, or as a performance. In this tension between a process-based understanding of identity and the opposing viewpoint, according to which an individual identity is consistent and stable over time, resides what Buckingham (2008) defines as “the paradox of identity.” While the Latin root of the word “identity” (*idem*) means “the same,” “the term nevertheless both implies similarity and difference” (Buckingham, 2008, p. 1). The self can be described as a “reflexively organized symbolic project” (Thompson, 1995, p. 233), or, in Buckingham’s words: “identity is something we do rather than simply something we *are*” (Buckingham, 2008, p. 8).

Following this framework, the individual side of identity cannot be separated from the social aspect: identity is a social process (R. Jenkins, 2008). In accordance with this belief, while observing the self in so-called social media, Papacharissi has pointed out that “individual and collective identities are simultaneously presented and promoted” in such environments (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 305). Baym underlines the role of both individual and social identity in the self-presentation processes that people perform in digital media (Baym, 2010, pp. 105, 111).

Even before digital technology became widespread, scholars had underlined the central role of the media in identity formation processes (Thompson, 1995; Meyrowitz, 1983), as the (mass) media provide “mediated experience,” to be incorporated “reflexively into the process of self formation” (Thompson, 1995, p. 233). As we will see in the following paragraph, social media develop this process even further, contributing a great deal to the process of self-formation, together with “older” media and “lived experience” (Thompson, 1995).

BEYOND THE ONLINE VS. OFFLINE DICHOTOMY

When faced with each new communication technology, from writing to the Internet, people have always tended to react in a polarized fashion. Some of them express fears and concerns about the consequences that the new communication tool may have on personal relations, culture and society as a whole, young people and learning processes, while others tend to draw an enthusiastic picture of the “new world” that could be achieved through the adoption of new technologies. As people become more familiar with new technologies, such polarities become weaker, and “we come to see [new communication media] in more nuanced ways. Eventually they become so taken for granted they are all but invisible” (Baym, 2010, p. 1).

The same is happening with regard to the Internet, and especially to those digital environments that can be used as tools for personal communication. Through the work of Wellman (2004; 2011), we can identify three ages of Internet studies. In the first age of Internet studies (1995-1998), which was strongly affected by *presentism* and *parochialism*, *utopians* saw the Internet as a “bright light shining

above everyday concerns. It was a technological marvel, thought to be bringing a new Enlightenment to transform the world” (Wellman, 2011, p. 18). On the other hand, *dystopians* worried that the Internet could “disconnect [...] us from each other” (Wellman, 2011, p. 19). In this first age, opinions were rarely based on social science knowledge. Moreover, it was commonly believed that what happened on the Internet (in terms of identity performances and social relations) could be explained in terms of the online world alone, without paying attention to the broader context in which people lived.

While the digital divide still constitutes a major issue, especially for non-Western countries (for a comprehensive analysis of the digital divide, see Warschauer, 2003; Wilson, 2004; van Dijk, 2005; Ferro et al., 2010), in subsequent years, the Internet was rapidly adopted, and digital technology progressively became a part of the everyday life of a growing number of the global population (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002; Bakardjieva, 2005; Bakardjieva, 2011). At the same time, scholars started to carry out systematic research, recognising that “neither the utopian hopes [...] nor the dystopian fears [...] have been borne out” (Wellman, 2011, p. 20). Technology is not disconnecting us from each other, as early dystopians feared; nor is it creating world-wide democracy and wealth, as predicted in many utopian visions. We are now living in the third age of Internet studies (2004 to the present day), in a “world of ordinary people routinely using the Internet” (Wellman, 2011, p. 20). Social researchers are now focusing on the relations between online and offline sociability, in an attempt to understand the specific affordances of each digital environment that help people to become “a communication and information switchboard, between persons, networks, and institutions” (Wellman, 2011, p. 22). Nevertheless, echoes of both utopian and dystopian claims are still to be found in public opinion, and mainly in broadcast media.

Both early utopians and dystopians based their opinions on the assumption that online and offline environments should be considered as completely separate worlds, moving from a “deep confusion about what is virtual – that which seems real but is ultimately a mere simulation – and what is real” (Baym, 2011, p. 5). In theoretical terms, as proposed by Lévy (1995), “virtual” is not the opposite of “real,” but of “actual.” Moreover, the degree of “reality” of any communicative act, in terms of emotional or cognitive value, cannot be determined by assessing the delivery system which it adopts. It depends, mainly, on the subjective perceptions of the people involved, and on the value which they attribute to any specific communicative act.

Furthermore, both utopian and dystopian critics implicitly adopted a technologically deterministic perspective, focusing on the consequences of Internet adoption and use, and failing to consider, instead, “what people do with mediated communication” (Baym, 2010, p. 59), what contexts they are living in, what purposes they are pursuing and the mixture of media which they adopt in personal communication.

The processes described above (the shift from communities to networks, the rise of networked individualism and of networked sociability) are not determined by technology. Technology, instead, *enables* each person to build and manage their own social networks, both on and offline. Technology facilitates such processes by providing tools that are increasingly personalized, portable, and ubiquitous; these transformations, however, are clearly rooted in broader social phenomena.

As Jensen points out, in the early years of Internet studies, the divide between online and offline practices “may have been a necessary step for theory development” (Jensen, 2011, p. 43). As the Internet has become a part of our everyday lives, however, it “has become increasingly counter-productive in methodological terms” (Jensen, 2011, p. 43). Even if we still experience the “popular mythology of the digital boom, promising a placeless, raceless, bodyless future,” Rybas and Gajjala have shown that, when interacting with others online, people cannot “escape real world identity completely,” as each of us is shaped by the ways in which race and other characteristics affect us offline (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007).

Therefore, we need to abandon our dichotomous vision, and adopt a more nuanced one: “we cannot really separate our being online from being offline, because online and offline are not discrete entities” (Gajjala, 2009, p. 61; for a broader debate on this topic, see Orgad, 2009 or Bakardjieva, 2009).

Moreover, as technology becomes increasingly ubiquitous and portable, the practices of multitasking lead us to experience both an online and an offline presence simultaneously. This happens explicitly when we use geosocial networks (digital environments aimed at integrating the physical location of the user with his or her online activity), but also each time we use a digital device while situated in an offline context.

Moreover, in the age of the *convergence culture* (Jenkins, 2006), we cannot separate what we do with one medium from what we do with another. Nor can we strictly separate so-called “old” media from “new” ones. People are continuously – and seamlessly – shifting from offline contexts to online ones, from mediated to non-mediated experiences, and from one platform to another.

When it comes to personal relationships, there are two main elements to be considered in order to overcome the online vs. offline dichotomy: (a) first, with regard to the kinds of relationships which people maintain using the Internet, empirical research has shown that people mainly use digital technology in order to communicate with people they also know in the so-called real world; (b) second, with regard to specific relationships between pairs of people, these subjects use a wide variety of platforms in order to communicate with each other, and adopt a wider variety of media when in closer relationships (a phenomenon that has been defined as “media multiplexity” by Haythorntwhaite, 2005, pp. 130-134).

The same applies to identity processes: as Turkle points out, when we engage with digital media, we do not create “second selves,” as suggested in her earlier works (Turkle, 1985); instead, we are facing “a new state of the self, itself” (Turkle, 2006, p. 121) that is *tethered* to “always-on” devices and is able to continuously switch from one role to another.

Furthermore, if we were to consider this topic analytically, the overall distinction between online and offline communication is far too generic, as every environment offers distinct and specific affordances to the user, in terms of forms of expression (text-only or multimedia; the communicative styles supported; one-to-one, few-to-many, many-to-many communication) and the social norms and habits that are shared by the users. For example, wording turn management not only depends on whether or not the platform mainly supports synchronous or asynchronous (or almost-synchronous/almost asynchronous) communication, but is also deeply influenced by the social and cultural norms that are intersubjectively negotiated by their users. Moreover, external contexts also deeply influence the way in which people communicate online (the strength of the ties between them, their socio-cultural backgrounds, etc.).

Digital platforms, in fact, can be analyzed through the lens of *architecture*: they build environments that offer specific affordances (as happens in the case of traditional architecture, which shapes the affordances of our physical environment). People build their communication strategies, both by taking advantage of such affordances and by further shaping this architecture (boyd, 2011).

WHAT IS A NETWORK?

As the term ‘network’ is widely used throughout this book, it is worth clarifying its meaning. In fact, its very definition is that a network is a set of interconnected nodes (a network is formed of nodes and links). Communication networks can be defined as “the patterns of contact that are created by the flow of messages among communicators through time and space” (Monge & Contractor, 2003, p. 3). The

scientific investigation of networks is rooted in “graph theory,” as previously discussed by Euler and further elaborated on by the mathematicians Erdős and Renyi (for information on graphs and graph theory, see Easley & Kleinberg, 2010).

Networks are not only technological tools; they are also social patterns. When he first proposed the theory that our societies were experimenting with a shift from communities to networks, Wellman (1979) was certainly not referring to the Internet. Although telecommunication networks played an important role in his model, he was primarily referring to a shift in social patterns. Over recent decades, social network analysis has examined social relations and social structures, starting from “the assumption of the importance of relationships among interacting units” (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 4). More recently, physicians and mathematicians have started to study numerous different networks, giving birth to what has been (somewhat emphatically) defined as “the new science of networks.” The two approaches share not only an interest in similar objects (network patterns), but also some important concepts (such as the “small world” theory, proposed by Milgram, 1967), which constitutes a core element of the contemporary understanding of network structures, and the “strength of weak ties,” proposed by Granovetter, 1973). Nevertheless, the first attempts at a convergence between the two approaches have only been observed in the last few years (Easley & Kleinberg, 2010; Watts, 2004; Barabási, 2011; for an analytical reconstruction of “network science,” including both approaches, see Lewis, 2009; for an insightful perspective on network theory, see Galloway & Thacker).

In fact, this “(new) science of networks” appears to be primarily oriented towards the identification of recurrent network patterns, such as “scale-free networks,” which are structures that are dominated by a small number of highly interconnected hubs, while large numbers of nodes have only a few connections between them (Barabási, 2002). These have been found in a wide variety of different networks, ranging from the World Wide Web to the professional relationships between actors (the so-called Kevin Bacon number), and from the power grid to metabolic processes. While insightful and fascinating, some of these assumptions seem not to be fully integrated with a knowledge of social science, which is absolutely necessary when studying social relationships, which are intrinsically reliant on the “subjective responses of subjects” (Newman, Barabási, & Watts, 2006, p. 5). On the other hand, social research would benefit a great deal from a deeper integration of network scientists’ research methods.

Some scholars have criticized network sciences, and specifically the related social models, by arguing that they are proposing a deterministic approach (see, for example, Musso, 2003, who critiques Castells’ work). On the contrary, when he first proposed the idea of a “network society,” Castells (1996) was fully aware that it was not a technology-driven phenomenon. In fact, as he argues, networks have always represented effective organizational structures in human history, due to “their strength in their flexibility, adaptability, and self-reconfiguring capacity.” Nevertheless, “beyond a certain threshold of size, complexity, and volume of exchange, they become less efficient than vertically organized command and control structures, *under the conditions of pre-electronic communication technology*” (Castells, 2004, p. 5).

In accordance with this perspective (and the significant amount of research produced by social network scholars), we can therefore surmise that social networks have always existed (or, to be more precise, that social structures could always be analyzed in terms of network patterns), even before the spread of information and communication technology. However, digital technology offers a wide variety of affordances that enable specific relational patterns, making it easier, among other features, to manage large amounts of relationships, long-distance ties and long-distance feedback. The Internet, in fact, offers “appropriate material support for the diffusion of networked individualism as the dominant form of sociability” (Castells, 2001, p. 131).

SOCIAL NETWORK SITES: A POWERFUL PLAYGROUND FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

The recent popularity of SNS such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and MySpace, as well as microblogging sites such as Twitter, shows that there is a growing interest in articulating, making visible and managing personal or professional relationships through technology-enabled environments. The phenomenon addressed is wider than SNS, and includes the wide variety of ways in which people are linked to each other. For a better understanding of identity performances and relational patterns, this book will not only examine SNS, but rather consider the wider context, including the variety of ways in which people are linked to each other: a context in which old and new media collide, and where mediated and face-to-face social relations are becoming increasingly integrated.

Nevertheless, SNS are powerful playgrounds, both for the user and for the researcher. From a sociological point of view, one of the main points of interest of SNS, besides their ever-growing popularity among Internet users worldwide, is that they represent powerful environments in which to observe “publicly articulated” (Boyd, 2004) self-presentation and identity performances. SNS make such processes visible, trackable, and, therefore, easier to study. Far from constituting an alternative or “virtual” world, social media are embedded in everyday life: using SNS, people connect to one another in ways which they perceive as seamlessly connected to their face-to-face relationships. Nevertheless, this aforementioned “trackability” has increased people’s awareness (we are now more consciously engaged in the management of our personal networks than ever before).

According to the work of Boyd and Ellison, we can define SNS as web-based services that allow individuals to:

1. Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system;
2. Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection;
3. View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site. (Boyd & Ellison, 2007)

As these two authors underline, in SNS, the emphasis is not on “relationship initiation, often between strangers” (so-called “social networking”), but on “articulating and making visible” the user’s pre-existing social networks. More recently, during a broad discussion on the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) list, boyd (2009) further clarified this definition, distinguishing between “social networks” (“ties between people, regardless of mediating infrastructure”); “online social networks” (ties between people that are mediated by online technology); “social networking” and “online social networking” (the practice of creating new ties, regardless of mediating infrastructure or with the mediation of online technology) and “social network sites” (see definition by Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

The definition outlined above suggests that the main elements of SNS are *profiles* and *contact (friend) lists*. Consistently, early SNS research has mainly focused on self-presentation and identity performances, social relations and “friending” strategies. Another important research topic, from the inception of SNS research, has been concerns about privacy. Sonia Livingstone (2008) studied the way in which teens articulate their identity performances in SNS, and proposed two different models: *identity as display* and *identity as connection*. Of course, we are not faced with a rigid dichotomy between identity as display and identity as connection; we could see it instead as a *continuum*, in which each user positions himself or herself, often changing his or her strategies as time goes by.

Identity performances in SNS have mainly been conceptualized in terms of personal profile shaping, underlying people's awareness in self-presentation practices (Pearson, 2009; Mallan & Giardina, 2009; Livingstone, 2008; Rybas & Gajjala, 2007; boyd, 2008a; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008; Pearson, 2009) and *impression management* processes (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006).

The most popular SNS (such as Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, etc.), although they have different emphases, share some of the categories which users can fill out in order to shape their own profile: personal *tastes* (referring to music, films, television shows, books etc.) appear to be powerful tools for impression management, leading to what has been defined as *taste performances* (Lizardo, 2006; Liu, 2007; Liu, Maes, & Davenport, 2008; Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Wimmer, & Christakis, 2008; Baym & Ledbetter, 2009). These practices appear to be consistent with the aforementioned assumptions regarding the central role of cultural consumption in identity processes (Thompson, 1995; Meyrowitz, 1983).

In most SNS, these processes can mostly be described as "writing identity and community into being" (Boyd, 2007), thereby underlining the role of "typing" in self-production strategies (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007, p. 5). It is important, however, to focus on the specific affordances of each platform, as each platform "structures [...] identity work according to the site's own internal logic" (Mallan & Giardina, 2009).¹ Profile pictures and personal photographs also play a major role in self-presentation processes, as has been underlined by several authors (see, among others, Sessions, 2009; Mallan & Giardina, 2009; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006).

In accordance with the idea of an evolving and process-based identity, most users seem to be engaged in continuous profile redefinition and re-shaping activities. They modify, for example, their profile pictures, their status updates, their taste statements and even their friends list, engaging in what has been defined as a "continuous revision of the self" (Livingstone, 2008, p. 403).

Early research on SNS has also focused on social relations and "friending" strategies. Some scholars focus on the strength of the ties which we create online (Boase, Horrigan Wellman, & Rainie, 2006), while others argue that even *weak ties* can serve as the foundation of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006). Research has been carried out on "friending" strategies and on the relevant negotiation practices, especially among teenagers: in some cases, acceptance/refusal decisions, as well as inclusion/exclusion from "top friends" lists, can lead to authentic "social dramas" (boyd, 2010, p. 15; on this topic, see also boyd & Heer, 2006). Some scholars focus on the consequences of SNS use on the overall structure of social relations (Andon, 2007; Ito et al., 2008; Tong et al., 2008; Lee, 2009; boyd, 2008c; Lewis & West, 2009), while others underline that the public display of a friends list contextualises each user's identity (boyd & Donath, 2004), while *friending* activities represent an explicit identity performance (Tong et al., 2008).

Even if "friendship" has received relatively little systematic attention from sociologists, important distinctions have to be drawn between "friending" strategies in SNS and our understanding of the overall concept of friendship (regardless of the mediating infrastructure, as defined by, among others, Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Adams & Allan, 1998). In general terms, we can observe a mismatch between the friending practices supported by SNS and the common methods of friendship management which people experience offline, following at least three directions: (a) first of all, SNS require friendship *formalisation*, through the public articulation of social connections; generally, people receive (or send) a friend request which they have to respond to (in a context in which ignoring it has a similar value to refusing it), and their friends list is shown on their personal profile. On the contrary, in everyday life, friendships are seldom formalised or explicitly established and verified; (b) moreover, as argued by boyd

(2010), constant negotiations are underway regarding friending practices, which can have consequences in the offline world (Fono & Raynes-Goldie, 2006; Donath, 2007). The decision of whether to include acquaintances, parents, workmates and people you do not know offline appears to be subject to social norms that are still developing (Lewis & West, 2009); (c) furthermore, SNS generally support a binary and dichotomous definition of “friendship” (friend vs. not a friend), which is far from the nuanced definitions which users adopt in their offline lives.

Finally, early research on SNS has also focused on issues of privacy, claiming that a “privacy paradox” exists (Barnes, 2006), as while users generally appear to be concerned about their privacy in digital environments, they are (paradoxically) often ready to disclose large amounts of personal information (Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Acquisti & Gross, 2006).

Most early researchers looking at SNS adopted a mono-platform approach and limited their observations to online activity. Cross-platform comparisons were missing, as well as more in-depth contextualizations of online activity among the wider (identity-based and relational) contexts in which people live.

In recent years, SNS have become understood according to the framework of “networked publics” (Ito, 2008; Varnelis, 2008; Boyd, 2008a; 2008b). According to Boyd, networked publics “are publics that are restructured by networked technologies; they are simultaneously a space and a collection of people” (Boyd, 2011, p. 41). They offer specific affordances, four of which appear to play a major role: *persistence; replicability; scalability and searchability* (Boyd, 2011, p. 46).

More recently, we have witnessed what could be defined as a *normalization* of SNS use. Their ever-increasing popularity among Internet users worldwide has transformed SNS into “mainstream sites of relational maintenance” (Baym, 2010, p. 134; for information on the *democratization* of SNS see Lenhart, 2009). This means that SNS are becoming increasingly integrated in people’s everyday lives: recent research has started focusing on the relationship between SNS use and the wider contexts in which people live, referring to both relational patterns and identity performances (Lewis & West, 2009, for instance, also focused on the means through which people stay in touch with their close friends; see also Baym, 2010). This also means that cross-platform comparisons are needed in order to identify the specific affordances offered by each platform. From a broader cross-platform analysis, SNS-user typologies may also emerge, as seen in Hargittai and Hsieh (2011).

When it comes to concerns regarding privacy, for instance, the need for a deeper understanding of the wider context in which people live implies that we should adopt a *social privacy* perspective (Raynes-Goldie, 2010), focusing on *context collision* and on the ability to control “who knows what about me” (Livingstone, 2008, p. 404), rather than adopting a traditional definition of privacy, based mainly on the disclosure of information. Moreover, recent research has also underlined that people generally have a high level of awareness when it comes to the revelation of information on SNS (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). For an up-to-date bibliography on privacy and SNS, see Raynes-Goldie (2011).

As SNS have become *mainstream*, the associated research needs to become more specialized. While relational and identity-based topics are still an important part of SNS scholarship, a growing amount of research is being devoted to the practices of applying SNS to more specialized fields, such as civic engagement, political participation, public administration, branding and consumption, etc.

Moreover, a deeper level of integration between social research and information science has started to offer powerful insight into volumes of data that are unprecedentedly large in the field of social science.

Finally, as new platforms emerge, the research turns to focus on them. Geo-social networks constitute an interesting and emerging trend, as platforms that provide a high level of integration between the online and offline dimensions.

THE BOOK

While SNS certainly appear to be one of the most powerful environments for networked sociability-related research, a wider range of phenomena need to be addressed, including blogs, other websites and, in more general terms, the wide variety of digital environments that enable the practices of a *participatory culture* (Jenkins et al., 2009). The theoretical chapters of this book, while addressing specific aspects of networked sociability and individualism, include in their analyses a wide variety of environments; the majority of research chapters, on the other hand, specifically address SNS, as such environments offer powerful resources for social research.

The first section of this book (“Networked Sociability and Individualism: Emerging Conceptual Patterns”) focuses on specific theoretical and conceptual concerns, ranging from collaborative practices in wiki environments to a reconsideration of the online vs. offline dichotomy in networked spaces; from online surveillance and registry culture to a reflection on audience research on web 2.0.

More specifically, the opening chapter (Matei & Bruno) focuses on the emergence of social media as collaborative tools functioning within a set of individualistic and community-oriented patterns. By focusing specifically on wiki environments (and Wikipedia in particular), the authors analyze and provide insight into collaborative practices, which are understood to be one of the core elements in contemporary social media. Far from emerging as a means to overcome the tension between individualism and community, collaborative practices appear instead “as a product of their conflict, which they epitomize.”

Kennedy analyses social interactions in digital environments, reconsidering the rigid dichotomy between online and offline interactions and proposing the concept of “networked spaces” as a tool for overcoming this dichotomy. Drawing on the concept of affordances, the author focuses on everyday practices in networked spaces, arguing that “the social is spatial.”

Zavala focuses on new models of online surveillance. This chapter aims to question the predominance of the organizational perspective in “surveillance studies” by reclaiming a “social” dimension, thereby contextualizing “surveillance” within a “networked sociability” framework. The author deliberately uses terms such as “register,” “record” and “trackability,” instead of those associated with unidirectional relations (such as “surveillance” or “privacy”).

Andò focuses on audience research on Web 2.0, reflecting on the newly emerging trend of “sentiment analysis” (the analysis of the views and opinions that individuals express in the social media web). The author reflects on the opportunity to apply such methods to media audiences, considering the context of the research, and the critical issues relating to this quantitative approach.

The second section of the book (“SNS, Relational Patterns, and Identity Performances: New Research Trends”) consists of nine chapters which each propose empirical research on networked sociability and individualism, mainly (but not exclusively) focusing on SNS. SNS have become *mainstream* tools for relational behaviour, and are therefore becoming increasingly integrated into people’s everyday lives. As a result, new research trends have emerged, regarding both the relational and identity-related implications of SNS, as well as more specialized social media usage practices, which mainly refer to institutions. Section 2 offers innovative research perspectives on relational patterns and identity performances on SNS, by filling some conceptual gaps that are to be found in the previous research. The chapters range from a study of *latent social interactions* through an analysis of a large social graph, to proposing comparisons over time and platforms; from analysing social behavioural patterns in non-English speaking countries, to considering the dynamics of “brand appropriation” in the identity performances that take place on Facebook, and analyzing the use of emerging locative technologies, such as Gowalla and Foursquare.

More specifically, the opening chapter of the research section (Metzger, Wilson, Pure, & Zhao) provides an unprecedented insight into *latent social interactions* (which involve passive activities such as “profile browsing”) through an analysis of Renren, the largest SNS in China. The data presented in this chapter are based on a social graph with 42 million users and 1.66 billion explicit social links. The authors have compared the structural properties of the latent social interaction graph with those of both visible interaction graphs and social graphs, offering new insights into the current debates surrounding both relational online behaviour and identity management in SNS.

Utz adopts a cross-platform approach, documenting Dutch students’ migration from Hyves (formerly the most popular Dutch SNS) to Facebook. Self-centered and other-centered SNS use is explored, as well as the relations between personality and SNS adoption. This chapter fills a major conceptual gap (the lack of comparisons across time and platforms) and addresses, from this perspective, the main theoretical debates surrounding SNS (relational patterns, identity processes, privacy concerns). The data presented show that SNS have become an important tool for many Dutch students, and that they are mainly used for interaction between close friends.

Kneidinger focuses on social behavioral patterns by discussing data that are based on an online survey of Facebook users from German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany, and Switzerland) and on qualitative interviews. The motives for using Facebook, the role of status updates as a tool for self-presentation, and positive and negative social feedback on SNS are also addressed in this chapter.

Roberti and Marinelli focus on the relations between individuals and brands in the process of identity construction. For this purpose, they have carried out a qualitative explorative study, monitoring the *buzz* generated on Facebook by four popular brands. This chapter focuses on identity construction and on the social dimensions of consumption, showing the extent to which Facebook can constitute a powerful environment for “talking about ourselves through brands.”

Berg proposes an analysis of the “spatial turn” in Internet research, focusing on locative technology. Applications such as Foursquare and Gowalla are understood to be examples of the increasing degree of integration between the online and offline dimensions, the boundaries of which are collapsing. Through an analysis of qualitative interviews carried out with Swedish Foursquare and Gowalla users, the author underlines the relations between what he defines as “electronic flâneurs” and digital geographies.

Section 3 (“Social Media and Institutions: New Research Trends”) focuses on more specialised social media usage practices, which address – to varying extents – different institutional contexts. The chapters include an analysis of our reliance on digital media and SNS for political information (analyzing selective exposure both to blogs and to SNS), a study of public communication strategies on Facebook and an analysis of Church blogging in Australia.

Johnson, Bichard, and Zhang focus on political information-seeking on blogs and political websites, underlining the role of “selective exposure” (purposefully seeking out agreeable political information) and “selective avoidance” (purposely dodging disagreeable political information). The data presented are based on an online panel of Internet users, and this study aims to investigate, among others, the following dimensions: motivations for using the Internet to gather political information (information needs, entertainment needs and communication needs); reliance on online sources for political information; selective exposure to blogs; and selective exposure to political websites. As the authors argue, “the question of whether people practice selective exposure to information has important implications for the democratic system.”

Kaye and Johnson propose an analysis of selective exposure to SNS for political information in the US. By analyzing the responses of 1530 politically interested SNS users, they have provided insight into: selective exposure and selective avoidance; reliance on SNS for political information; motivations for using SNS for political information; and the respondents' political attributes and demographics.

Lovari and Parisi focus on how SNS influence public communication strategies and online users' interactions. They propose an exploratory analysis of the Facebook activity of the capital cities of four Italian provinces, comparing their web pages and carrying out a content analysis in order to identify the prevalent types of messages on their Facebook walls. Although representing a recent tool in the public communication media-mix, Facebook seems to offer important opportunities for communication to municipalities, especially regarding direct interaction with citizens.

Emerson Teusner focuses on Church blogging, showing how the use of blogging technology can fuel networked individualism's impact on religious identity and community. By carrying out an exploratory content analysis of 30 blogs created by Australians involved in the "emerging Church movement," the author shows that "the creation of fluid, decentred, and global networks plays an important role in the development of religious identity."

By sharing the conceptual framework of networked sociability and individualism, these chapters offer new perspectives on both theoretical concerns and research practices. The theoretical chapters explore emerging conceptual patterns that are crucial for a deeper understanding of relational practices in a networked world, while the research chapters explore emerging trends by adopting innovative and multidisciplinary approaches. Moreover, while existing research on these topics mainly (although not exclusively) focuses on the Northern American context, chapters in this book analyse various international contexts (from the US to Italy, from Australia to the Netherlands, from China to Sweden, etc.).

As digital technology is becoming increasingly integrated in our everyday lives, it is widely recognised that a deeper understanding of the relational and identity-based patterns it enables is crucial, both with regards to theory and to the broader social context. We hope that the multidisciplinary and cross-national approach proposed by this book will make a significant contribution to advancing our knowledge of such topics.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ Due to the initial *bug*, for instance, MySpace allowed users to elaborately customise their personal pages, using html code to change the backgrounds and layouts of personal profiles and to embed multimedia content (mainly music and video) in sections of personal profiles originally intended to be filled by textual information.