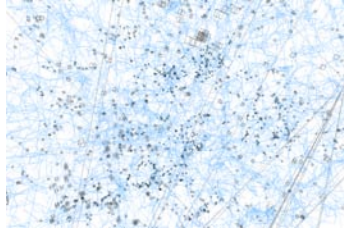ELISABETTA LOCATELLI

STRONG AND WEAK TIES

Online Relationships from Blogs to Social Networks

Remediation | © Damiano Crotti

Blogs and social networks are both spaces for online relationships that can be used for very different purposes. The aim of this paper is to compare the kind of relations that can be developed in these spaces through a corpus of different qualitative micro-sociological researches, conducted between 2006 and 2010, and focused on users and their cultural practices. The paper will provide first a theoretical framework for the analysis, going briefly through the development of internet and blog studies, and then will compare the forms of online relationships, focusing on empirical data and showing the platforms' similarities and differences.

Blogs and social networks as spaces of relationship: a theoretical framework

Since blogs were created in the late Nineties, it appeared clear that they would have changed the internet because they marked a turn towards what later would have been called "Web 2.0"[1] being, as spaces for self-publishing, one of the first forms of User Generated Contents (UGC). To date blogs' fame has been overtaken by Social Networking Sites (SNSs) with their huge number of subscribers. Like blogs, also SNSs brought a change in the way internet was (and still is) lived, focusing once more on UGC and underlining the relevance of the new medium in daily activities.

Before comparing the forms of online relationship developed in blogs it is necessary to clear why a blog can be considered both a space of self-publishing and of social interaction in the same way as a SNS.

The term blog derives from the words "web" and "log" and originally meant "register of online activities". Conceptually it is formed by three elements: a database, a form for entering contents and a form that is

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[1] O'Reilly, T., 2005a. *Not 2.0?* (Updated 05 Aug 2005). Available at http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2005/08/not_20.html [Accessed 21 October 2011]. O'Reilly, T., 2005b. *What Is Web 2.0. Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software.* (Updated 30 Sept 2005). Available at http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html [Accessed on 21 October 2011].

able to display them on the web in a chronologically reverse order[2]. Besides self or collective publishing, blogs have also a space for social interaction in the comments area, not present in their early stages (comments were then sent by e-mail or instant messaging). In this way, a circle of readers soon began to meet around each blog, only online or creating also occasions to meet off-line[3]. During time, blogging platforms developed other social tools apart from comments and blogroll (a list of blogs), such as tag boards, lists of visitors (like Live Traffic Feed[4]) or, nowadays, buttons for sharing contents on SNSs and widgets.

SNSs have a similar technical structure to blogs, combining social networking, a list of contacts and a profile[5]. Each SNS then, has proper features that let users customise their page or their profile. At last, SNSs allow users to manage contacts, as in past we used to do with diaries or phone books, but also to show and organise contacts, making the user's network visible. The features of blogs and social networks changed over time, offering new tools, applications, and instruments.

In this direction, it can be said with Nancy Baym[6] that blogs and SNSs are both computer-mediated communication instruments and artefacts shaped by users. The shaping component is more remarkable for blogs while in social networks is more limited.

Three stages of studies

Internet and blogs can actually be considered both as cultural contexts and artefacts[7]. This is a "heuristic" distinction that helps to study them, though it is not perceived in the users' experience. Saying that they are a cultural context means «looking at the forms of communication, sociality and identity that are produced within this social space»[8], considering them as «a place, cyberspace, where culture is formed and reformed»[9]. Looking at them as a cultural artefact instead, means to see them as «a product of culture: a technology that was produced by particular people with contextually situated goals and priorities»[10]. Researchers looking from the former point of view mainly analyze the ability of internet in creating new cultural forms, studying also the forms of computer-mediated-communication, while the latter try to understand the users' practices and interpreting the internet as the object of processes of appropriation and

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[2] Di Fraia, G. ed., 2007. *Blog-grafie. Identità narrative in rete*. Milano: Guerini e Associati; Granieri, G., 2005. *Blog generation*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

[3] Blood, R., 2002a. *The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining your Blog*. New York: Perseus Books Group; Blood, R. ed., 2002b. *We've Got Blog: how weblogs are changing our culture*. New York: Perseus Books Group.

[4] See for example Feedjit (http://feedjit.com/).

[5] Cachia, R., 2008. *Social Computing: Study on the Use and Impact of Online Social Networking. IPTS Exploratory Research on the Socio-Economic Impact of Social Computing*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.

[6] Baym, N. K., 2006. Interpersonal Life Online. In: L. A. Lievrouw & S. Livingstone, eds. 2006. *Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Social Consequences of ICTs. Updated Student Edition*. London et al.: Sage, pp. 35-54.

[7] Hine, C., 2000. *Virtual Ethnography*. London: SAGE.

[8] Slater, D., 2006. Social Relationship and Identity Online and Offline.In: Lievrouw & Livingstone, eds. 2006, p. 534.

[9] Hine, 2000, p. 9.

[10] Slater, 2006. p. 534.

consumption[11]. This paper will follow the borderline of this distinction, trying to focus on both aspects. Before presenting the analysis it is useful to contextualise it in its theoretical framework within the internet studies.

As Silver[12] and Wellman[13] remarked, three stages of internet studies can be identified. Silver calls them *popular cyberculture, cyberculture studies* and *critical cyberculture studies*. The term "cyberculture" was influenced by the period in which the author wrote, when online space and its culture were defined as cyberculture. As Gurak[14] observes, most part of western culture can be now defined as cyberculture suggesting to replace the term with the expression "internet studies" to make it clearer. The three stages can be then renamed as *popular internet studies*, *embedded internet studies* and *contextual internet studies*, that will now be briefly described.

The first stage can be placed at the beginning of Nineties and is defined as "popular" because people who were interested in the internet were mainly early adopters or journalists, and not academics, who produced a wide collection of articles and essays. The nature of this production was descriptive and enthusiastic. As Wellman also remarked: «in their euphoria, many analysts lost their perspective and succumbed to presentism and parochialism. […] They thought that the world had started anew with the internet»[15].

They were often split into optimists and pessimists, the first putting emphasis on their points of strength and opportunities and the latter focusing mainly on risks and problems. Paradigms were often methodologically frail and fascinated by the upcoming novelty[16]. Besides its "descriptive nature" and "rethorical dualism", this perspective described cyberspace as a frontier to conquer, deeply separated from the offline world:

> They insisted on looking at online phenomena in isolation. They assumed that only things that happened on the internet were relevant to understanding the internet. Their initial analyses of the impact of the internet were often unsullied by data and informed only by conjecture and anecdotal evidence: travellers' tales from internet *incognita*[17].

The stage of *embedded internet studies* began around the middle of Nineties when internet started to become more and more integrated in everyday life, and the researchers' point of view changed. As Van Dijk[18] remarked, those years were characterised by the passage from a socio-psychological model to a socio-cultural one, called "social information processing model", where uses and daily practices of media were

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[11] Vittadini, N., 2006. Reti di computer, reti di culture: la presenza online dei migranti. In: L. Bovone & P. Volontè, eds. 2006. *Comunicare le identità. Percorsi della soggettività nell'età contemporanea*. Milano: Franco Angeli, pp. 75-91.

[12] Silver, D., 2000. Looking Backwards, Looking Forwards: Cyberculture Studies 1990-2000. In: D. Gauntlett, ed. 2000. *Web Studies. Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age*. London: Arnold, pp. 19-30.

[13] Wellman, B., 2004. The Three Ages of Internet Studies: Ten, Five and Zero Years Ago. *New Media & Society*, 6 (1), pp. 123-129.

[14] Gurak, L. J., 2004. Internet Studies in the Twenty-first Century. In: D. Gauntlett & R. Horsley, eds. 2004.*Web studies, Second Edition*. London: Arnold, pp. 24-33.

[15] Wellman, 2004, p. 124.

[16] Marinelli, A., 2004. *Connessioni. Nuovi media, nuove relazioni sociali*. Milano: Guerini e Associati.

[17] Wellman, 2004, p. 124.

[18] Van Dijk, J., 2006. The Network Society: Social Aspects of New Media. London: Sage.

the research's focus. In the same period, Walther[19] presented his relational perspective and Turkle[20] her studies on online identity. They are just three examples of the many studies that can be quoted to show the change of the paradigm:

> The internet […] has become embedded in everyday life. The ethereal light that dazzled from above has become part of everyday life. We have moved form a world of internet wizards to a world of ordinary people routinely using the internet. The internet has become an important thing but not a special thing. […] The second age of internet studies has been devoted to documenting this proliferation on internet users and uses. […] These studies have counted the number of internet users, compared demographic differences, and learned what basic things people have been doing on the internet[21].

New themes, such as identity and online communities, and new research approaches emerged, with a need of quantitative data[22].

At the end of the Twentieth Century, and up to date internet studies transformed again, into *contextual internet studies*:

> As the internet became the domain of many, and as websites covered everything from the news to college courses to home recipes, it was not possible to say that online communication is *one thing* (cursive of the author) and one thing only. In other words, context is key. […] Today, saying "the internet" is like saying "the world"[23].

Multidisciplinary approaches were often adopted, with the aim to «contextualize, and seek to offer more complex, more problematized findings»[24]. These researches are «more focused, theoretically driven»[25] and use both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The need of updating continuously the research paradigms is connected with internet's rapid change. As Gauntlett remarked, publishing after only four years an updated edition of his book *Web studies*[26], the result is the mainstreaming phenomenon for which

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[19] Walther, J., 1997. Group and Interpersonal Effects in Interpersonal Computer-Mediate Collaboration. *Human Communication Research*, 23 (3), pp. 323-341.

[20] Turkle, S., 1995. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

[21] Wellman, 2004, pp. 125-126.

[22] See for example *Pew Internet & American Life Project* (http://www.pewinternet.org/) and *World Internet Project* (http://www.worldinternetproject.net/).

[23] Gurak, 2004, p. 28.

[24] Gurak, 2004, p. 24.

[25] Wellman, 2004, p. 127.

[26] Gauntlett& Horsley, eds. 2004.

a variety of media technologies, forms, and contents often lumped under the single (and misleadingly homogenizing) rubric of "the internet", have become a commonplace part of work, education, leisure, culture, and politics. The ubiquity of new media has resulted in their being taken for granted[27].

Blog studies followed a similar path of development. The first stage, circumscribable to the end of Nineties when the first blogs were created, was composed of a huge amount of articles on newspapers, magazines, and posts on websites. One of the main topics, that is recurring nowadays, was the competition between blogger and journalism, especially in USA, where citizen journalism platforms were rapidly diffusing. People divided into optimists and pessimists, the former predicting the end of journalism and the latter exalting the user's empowerment caused by blogs. Books, instead, focused mainly on the explanation of the new phenomenon, showing how to create a blog, or telling first bloggers' experience, as Rebecca Blood did[28].

A second stage emerged around 2003, when internet and social researchers began to be interested in the quantitative dimension of the phenomenon, with blog census, like Perseus[29] and Technorati did with its annual report "State of the Blogosphere"[30]. The aim was also to comprehend blog uses and their social, political and economical consequences, avoiding the commonplaces on the topic.

The third stage started after 2005, when researches became more theoretically driven. Sociological research focused on micro-social aspects of blogging, trying to understand practices of use with both quantitative and qualitative methods, like in the studies about blogging and gender[31]. Quantitative methodologies of research were supported by qualitative data, as Technorati did adding to its quantitative report a panel of interviews aimed to comprehend the socio-demographic composition of blogosphere.

It must be observed that, especially in Italy, there are many overlaps between the three stages andthey are not perfectly distinguishable. Besides newspaper articles (one of the first is dated 4th January 2004), essays appeared reflecting on the relationship between blogging and journalism, but also putting emphasis on bloggers as writers and creating anthologies with their pieces. Field researches and theoretical frames also emerged with this researches on blog as personal diaries, on narrative identity[32] or news making[33]. Other researches focused on the kind of social relationships and interactions developed around a blog[34] or tried to understand the connection degrees and the authority through blogs for marketing purposes[35].

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[27] Lievrouw, L. A., 2004. What's Changed About New Media? Introduction to the Fifth Anniversary Issue of "New Media & Society". *New Media & Society*, 6 (1), p. 10.
[28] Blood, 2002a; Blood, 2002b.
[29] Unfortunately the surveys are not anymore available online and Perseus became Vovici, see http://www.vovici.com/index.aspx.
[30] See http://technorati.com/state-of-the-blogosphere/ [Accessed 21 October 2011].
[31] See for example Tremayne, M. ed., 2007. *Blogging, Citizenship and the Future of Media*. New York: Routledge.
[32] Di Fraia, G., 2004. *Storie confuse. Pensiero narrativo, sociologia e media*. Milano: Franco Angeli; Di Fraia, ed. 2007.
[33] Carelli, E., 2004. *Giornali e giornalisti nella rete*. Milano: Apogeo; Pratellesi, M., 2004. *New journalism. Teorie e tecniche del giornalismo multimediale*. Milano: Mondadori.
[34] Mapelli, M. & Margotta, U. eds., 2008. *Dai blog ai social network. Arti della connessione nel virtuale*. Milano: Mimesis.
[35] See for example Cosenza, V., 2011. *La blogosfera italiana 2011 – prima parte*. (Updated 29 Aug 2011). Available at http://www.vincos.it/2011/08/29/la-blogosfera-italiana-2011-prima-parte/ [Accessed 21 October 2011].

Social network researches followed a similar path but, despite the huge success of social networks, very limited researches have been done in the European Union in this field. One of the reasons can be the extreme novelty of the phenomenon, as Cachia points out in her report[36], where a significant number of data and studies are collected, making it a valuable starting point for the present analysis.

The researches briefly illustrated here show on the one hand the desire to study blogging uses and practices, and on the other hand the difficulty to map the continuously changing nature of internet and to find a proper methodology, and the connected ethical implications for researchers[37].

The theoretical framework provided for the current analysis, showed the evolutions of internet and blog studies in the attempt to comprehend the complexity of these phenomena, and making clear why blogs can be considered as spaces for online relationships.

Comparing different online spaces for relationship

The present paragraph will now go through the comparison between the kind of sociality developed into blogs and SNSs, based on empirical data taken from a corpus of researches done between 2006 and 2010 with a qualitative and multi-situated methodology that integrated multiple instruments[38].

The first research was conducted between 2006 and 2010 and was aimed to explore the relation between technological innovation and social uses in Italian personal blogs. After an explorative research through the documents (first blogs, books, essays and articles) a participant observation was carried out during three bloggers' conferences. Then, to explore the micro-social context of incorporation into the daily activities and the subjective meaning of the use of blog, 26 semi-structured interviews were conducted to bloggers. The data obtained from the interviews was supported by the semiotic analysis of 50 blog[39].

The second research was conducted in 2010, and was about the social relations developed online by youngsters. For this research, conducting 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted to 50 Italian youngsters (25 boys and 25 girls) distributed nationwide[40]. The interviews were supported by an online observation, though not structured, of the interviewees' online profiles.

A third explorative research was conducted in 2009 and consisted in the ethnographic observation of the online profiles (on Facebook, FriendFeed, and Twitter) of 6 Italian bloggers.

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[36] Cachia, 2008.
[37] Monaci, S., & Scifo, B. eds., 2009. *Sociologia 2.0. Pratiche sociali e metodologie di ricerca sui media partecipativi*. Napoli: ScriptaWeb.
[38] Lievrouw & Livingstone, eds. 2006.
[39] See for a wider description of the research Locatelli, E., 2009. I blog personali da oggetto a strumento di ricerca sociale: un approfondimento metodologico. In: Monaci & Scifo, eds. 2009, pp. 259-282.
[40] See Giaccardi, C. ed., 2010. *Abitanti della rete. Giovani, relazioni e affetti nell'epoca digitale*. Milano: Vita & Pensiero.

Social relations in the blogosphere

A first important note is that in the Italian blogosphere the forms of relationship changed over time, and three phases can be identified. A first stage occurred at the very beginning of Italian blogosphere, when bloggers where few and they were enthusiast of their tool and longed to know other bloggers[41]:

> *there were people to whom to refer, like La Pizia. […] After I met her and other bloggers, a small group of people formed.* (m, 2001, text+photo)

This phenomenon is common also in USA:

> In 1999, when I started blogging, there really were so few weblogs that you could read them all in one day. As a result, we felt a bit of loyalty to one another. […] Because we had been reading each others sites online for so long, we felt we already knew each other. We were, at that time, scattered across the United States, so we hadn't had the opportunity before then. So the feeling then was close, tight-knit. The fact that we were bloggers gave us something significant in common[42].

The bond that linked them was the consciousness to be part of an elite of technology experts and enthusiasts towards the new instrument. The desk analysis showed a very strict connection between their blogs, with comments and links, but also the desire to meet off-line and then to tell online what was happening. That group of bloggers can be defined as a virtual community because there are clear boundaries between whose are in and out of them[43] and they have a common memory of that period. Similarity of objectives, use of a common language and a shared experience replaced the features usually attributed to a community (stability, contiguity, and nearness). Blogs seemed to be useful instruments to know new people, but the main objective was to maintain a passion, to share it and to cultivate it. Moreover, with only few exceptions, bloggers did not like close friends to read their blog but rather unknown people, feeling embarrassed when a relative found it.

This strong relationship vanished with the expansion of the blogosphere and it was substituted by different kinds of weak ties[44], although instruments for keeping connected increased. After 2003, when the number of blogs in Italy increased, also thanks to the introduction of Splinder (http://www.splinder.com), the first Italian blogging platform, two different phenomena emerged,

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[41] Each quotation taken from the interviews is followed by identifying initials. The first letter (m, f) refers to the gender, the second to the year of publication of the first blog, the third to the kind of content published (text, photo, video), the fourth to the age at the moment of the interview. All quotations from the interviews are translated by the author.

[42] Blood, R., 2006. *Rif: phd work and information about blog story*. [E-mail] (Personal communication, 25 October 2006).

[43] Sumner, W. G., 1906. *Folkways*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

[44] Granovetter, M., 1983. The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 78 (6), pp. 1360-80.

sometimes overlapping each other: the creation of a stable circle of readers and the attempt to increase the visitors' number:

> *Then frequent readers came, especially the ones who left a comment, and after it you go to read their blog. You knew a lot of people […] and you set up a network of relations.* (m, 2003, text)

Comments, a feature that was not present in the first blogs, became an indispensable tool as a way to know each other and to enhance the blogs' popularity. At the same time *blogstars* were born, (very famous bloggers with a great authority in the blogosphere), and the importance of crosslinking as a synonym of trust, a criterion then used to rank blog authority in charts, emerged:

> *If someone linked you, it meant that he liked your post, and it was especially important who linked you.* (m, 2003, text+photo, 26)

As the blogosphere grew, it became more difficult to be known. Maybe it is for this reason that the bloggers who opened their space in the third phase, after 2006, showed a deep confidence in using new tools to diffuse their contents, such as charts[45], aggregators and ways to engage their audience:

> *At a certain time I realized that if a blog has no comment it doesn't work, so I tried to put into posts questions, feedbacks […] I noticed that since my blog has more comments it lives more, it has more accesses […] I created conversations and I noticed that since that moment my blog grew up in charts.* (m, 2006, text+photo, 42)

Following this direction, blogging platforms increased the number of social tools, adding, for example, private messages or e-mail boxes to avoid users to switch the tool used to communicate at different levels. With the increased diffusion and popularity of blogs, bloggers became less worried of the composition of their public and accepted also relatives and close friends as their readers. As a counterpart, some bloggers, especially those using the blog as a personal diary, developed strategies in maintaining their privacy, avoiding for example to comment private facts in public or imposing different levels of access to the blog. Several forms of relationship were born, from stronger ones that transformed into a true friendship to weaker ones, such as the simple habit to read daily the blog.

If online relationships increased their value, offline meetings changed their importance, becoming just nice occasions to meet someone new, sometimes after a frequent online meeting:

> *There was this web site called Quinto Stato that organized a sort of Conference, called "BlogAge" and it was maybe the first time when there was the chance to meet a certain number of people […] Through this daily interaction at a certain moment you ask by e-mail to go out for a beer, then you know each other and go to meet them.* (m, 2003, text, 41)

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[45] See for example like Blogbabel (http://it.blogbabel.com).

After a long time of comments you feel to know each other no? You share with that person a moment every day, and so I said "why don't we chat on Messenger?" and after with someone I discovered that we read the same books and had a lot in common and so […] We met in Milan. (f, 2006, text, 28)

In the third phase, a new phenomenon of social intertwining between online and off-line appeared with creation of the BarCamp network (http://barcamp.org/). BarCamp are highly informal meetings for blogger or internet experts organised by a group of volunteers. Born in USA, they found in Italy a fecund soil to grow up with a strong linking with the territory (for example city BarCarps like RomeCamp or MateraCamp were organised). Thanks to these occasions, bloggers that know each other online can have a chance to meet also off-line in a collective (and sometimes perceived as safer) occasion, but can also create new links that change the online networking between blogs.

It is clear now that the nature of social relationships born around blogs allowed the creation of both strong and weak ties, varying from the creation of a journal with an audience of readers to a diary for keeping in touch with close friends. Clearly everyone decides what to do in relation to the function chosen for ones' blog, and online and off-line acquaintances are intertwined but not necessarily connected. In both cases there is a bond between the author and his/her reader because of the public nature of the blog in which the contents published are the trigger of the relationships.

Social networking in SNSs

In the last three years, and especially in Italy since 2008, the blogosphere had to face with the new rising phenomenon of SNSs, that are

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, and (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[46].

Both blogs and SNSs have been defined as "social media", «a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content»[47].

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[46] Boyd, D. & Ellison, N.B., 2007. Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13 (1). Available at http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html [Accessed 21 October 2011].
[47] Kaplan, A. M. & Haenlein, M., 2010. Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, 53 (1), pp. 59-68.

A first effect of social network diffusion was the decreased number of blogs opened, but also the chance to expand blogging activities on other spaces, for example spreading news and contents using social networks such as Facebook or Twitter.

FriendFeed (http://friendfeed.com) brought an interesting extension of blogging activities because it is both a social network and a feed aggregator. By subscribing to it, users can collect in a single place all the updates of the people they follow online, with the possibility to comment them and to create autonomous text posts. While contents were still published on blogs (or on other platforms), comments can migrate on FriendFeed thanks to a wider space, and thanks to the opportunity of collecting all the updates together, thus avoiding the users to surf the net to find them. The limited diffusion of this social network in Italy made it a space where early adopters (as regard to internet) and early bloggers meet, avoiding the crowd of other social networks like Facebook. FriendFeed can be labelled as a meta-social network because it allows to follow the digital life of people and to maintain digital relationship through comments and likes on the contents published. The core of the online interaction is, as in blogs, the content published online by users which becomes object of conversation.

Twitter instead, seems very useful for news aggregation and for diffusing quick updates, while it is less suitable for contacts management due to the lack of tools for this purpose.

Finally, Facebook has the objective to recreate off-line relationships online as its (apparently) simple claim says: "Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life"[48]. As to date, Facebook counts more than 20 million of users in Italy of which 53.3% are male and 44.8% are female[49].

As Cachia[50] remarks, Facebook success may be explained through the simplicity of its interface, where it is easy to find contents, but also to the novelty represented by the "wall", a message board comparable to a micro-blog, where users can post not only texts but also pictures, videos, links and questions[51]. A third feature is the list of friends that, like a blogroll, makes ones contacts visible and allows to customise the privacy options. This feature is very far from the public visibility of blogs, where authors can decide to make contents public or private, protecting the blog with a password (even if some platforms allow to build different levels of privacy). A last point of strength is that Facebook incorporates different instruments of computer-mediated communication, such as status update, comments, likes, private messages, and chat.

By analysing the data taken from the interviews it can be said, first of all, that Facebook is used to organise, improve, monitor, and maintain social relations.

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[48] See Facebook home page at http://www.facebook.com [Accessed 21 October 2011].
[49] See http://www.vincos.it/osservatorio-facebook/. Data are taken from Facebook Advertising Platform. This source has some methodological problems not examinable here.
[50] Cachia, 2008.
[51] Recently Facebook introduced also the "Subscription" option letting users to see also updates of users that are not friends.

As regard to the first function, social networks are a tool for organising off-line activities such as mobile phone or MSN Messenger and for keeping updated with events of a local area[52]:

> *I use Facebook mainly for organizing.* (m, 23, w)

Facebook is then used to maintain social relationships, to chat with close friends (as an alternative of MSN Messenger) or to comment the contents published:

> *The first thing I do <when I enter Facebook> is to check my profile, then home and e-mail. Then I see if there is some friend of mine, if I have new e-mails or if there's some friend of mine in chat. Otherwise I logout.* (f, 24, w)

Some users instead, tend to monitor what is happening, lurking profiles without leaving comments:

> *I like <Facebook> because I can see a lot of things, what others are doing.* (m, 21, w)

Facebook is used also to get to know better people that offline are only acquaintances:

> *I like to watch what others are doing, of people I know but also of people that are friends on Facebook because I met them once at the discotheque, maybe I can understand better how they are…* (f, 19, s)

A last function is to maintain social relations just by keeping "open" the contact (paraphrasing Jakobson it is the *fatic* function of communication), just greeting friends or using Facebook applications like *pokes* and *likes,* that have no meaning other of the intention to keep in touch or to be nice with someone:

> *<I open Facebook> also if I have just two seconds, just to greet someone or to see something.* (m, 23, w)

For some interviewees Facebook is useful just to keep in touch because the relationships that matter are off-line:

> *Facebook is a good way to start something, but then you must know people offline, otherwise true communication has no sense, Facebook is a virtual relationship.* (m, 20, s)

A last distinction can be made in the way new people are "friended", which can be mediated or unmediated. A mediated extension of the number of friends means that a new friend is added only if there is a common friend:

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[52] Each quotation taken from an interview is followed by identifying initials: the first letter (m, f) is referred to the gender, the number to the age of the interviewee and the second letter indicates students (s) or workers (w).

I add only people I know, otherwise it doesn't make sense. (m, 20, s)

An unmediated extension means instead that everyone is accepted as a new friend, even if there are no common friends:

I accept anyone who sends me a request […] at least to see who he/she is. (m, 24, s)

SNSs like Facebook let users to manage their contacts, making them visible and sharable with others. Strong and weak ties are, consequently, put together and managed on different levels. This contacts overlap create a "social capital bridging"[53], it is to say that each weak contact can be activated when needed, like it happens off-line with acquaintances and colleagues. Weak ties are encouraged by SNSs by keeping in contact with old friends that are potential connections that may be reactivated at any time. A second consequence is the attention to the online reputation that the interviewee puts in its profile, cleaning periodically the profile or avoiding to write in public about delicate themes. This is a core issue about the future and about the education of youngsters to SNSs.

At the end of this analysis we can observe that for monitoring and fatic uses of a social network like Facebook, the contents published on the wall are a compulsory point of passage because they are a way to see what friends do, while for maintaining and improving social relations it is necessary to integrate the contents with other tools that help to keep the relation, such as chat or private messages. With its flexibility Facebook replaced other instruments, like MSN Messenger or the e-mail, because it let users manage their social relationships at different levels of privacy and intimacy through a unique platform.

Conclusions

Based on the research described above, further conclusions can be drawn. The progressive process of embedment of social media in everyday life and the mainstreaming of social networks and blog use has been confirmed. Digital uses and practices are more and more frequently intertwined with off-line activities, showing that there are very thin boundaries between the them. According to this process, online identities and relationships tend to reproduce what happens in life, finding more tools to manage contacts and to be in touch with already known people.

In blogs, contents seem to be the core of all actions: if a blog is used as a diary for already known friends, they come to read what is published, but the same happens even if readers are not known and the posts are what create the loyalty. Paraphrasing Jankowsky[54], it can be said that they form a "community of discourses", that is to say that the connection is kept alive by what is published. In Facebook instead,

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[53] Cachia, 2008. See also Ellison, N. B., Steifield, C. & Lampe, C., 2011. Connection strategies: Social capital implications of Facebook-enabled communication practices. *New Media & Society*, 13 (6), pp. 873-892.
[54] Jankowski, N. W., 1991. Qualitative Research Community Media. In: K. B. Jensen & N. W. Jankowski, eds. 1991. *A handbook of Qualitative Methodologies for Mass Communication Research*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 163 -174.

because the core of the space is the social relationship itself, each user can create different kind of links, strong and weak, focusing on contents or on relationships according to his/her need. Paradoxically, SNSs can be used without publishing anything, but just to collect and monitor contacts.

Although using different instruments, what is considerable is the stability of the network of relationships, which are not liquid but rather structured, often in concentric circles. Already existing offline networks have effects on digital ones, which are reproduced and improved by online activities. Another interesting aspect is that people who tend to have a lot of off-line contacts show the same tendency online, while those who have less off-line friends have a more limited online activity. Weak ties have an important role, because they form, with stronger ties, the "social capital" of users. The forms of interaction then, also depend on the features of each SNS. It would be interesting to analyse the differences of a person's profile which uses different SNSs, on and the weight of the same contacts in these different SNS.

The researchers conducted also suggest that usage is not entirely determined by the technical features of the platforms but also by what users do. A blog can be defined as a "configurational technology"[55], that is a technology in which the different elements are defined according to the context of use. Blogs and SNSs are then subject to a process of "interpretive flexibility"[56], insofar as the author decides to give a peculiar organisation to his/her space according to his/her expressive needs starting form a "script"[57] that offers a series of fixed opportunities to realise and other user-introduced elements. Blogging platforms leave to users wider spaces of action, while SNSs are usually more limited, especially in relation to graphic layout and applications. In this process, both material and symbolic-semantic means have a decisive role. First of all, the users' material and cognitive resources play an important role as the ensemble of knowledge, abilities, and skills that a user may have. The immaterial resources include all the places and times required for the daily management of the platforms, but also motivations and goals of action. As regard to blogs, a second area of elements is identified in the dynamics of knowledge circulation. The individual resources actually provide only a part of the knowledge required to be progressively integrated by other users in the socialization spaces. Two flows of circulation can be outlined: a horizontal one between peers, and a vertical one that starts from those users who are the "opinion leaders" of the blogosphere. In this way, the process of innovation is not linear but follows a spiral path that can be defined as "innofusion"[58]: innovation doesn't cease with the design and creation moment of the artefact, but continues during its diffusion process. The shaping of a blog is made by a progressive "infiltration" of elements that do not create a new product, but gradually reform the existing ones. The shared meaning of the artefact is not closed, but rather stabilised

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[55] Fleck, J., 1988. Innfusion or Diffusation? The Nature of Technological Development in Robotics. *Edinburgh University Department of Business Studies Working Paper Series*, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 87 (1).

[56] Bijker, W. E. Pinch, T. & Hughes, T. P., 1989.*The Social Construction of Technological Systems*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press.

[57]Akrich, M., 1992. The De-Scription of Technical Objects. In: W. E. Bijker & J. Law, eds. 1992. *Shaping technology/Building Society. Studies in sociotechnical change*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, pp. 205-224.

[58] Fleck, 1988.

starting from a central core and modulated like a variation on a theme. Moreover, during time, the "relevant social groups"[59] involved in this process vary, bringing again attention on the macro social dimensions of the shaping of a technology. This may be a field of further research complementary to the one outlined in this paper. It is clear than that not only blogs and social networks are important for social relationships, but also that social interactions matter in the definition of the configuration of these spaces.

To date, the aspect of social networks is still changing. New phenomena are emerging, like geo-social networks, and also new issues, such as the relation between their use and the socio-cultural context. This complexity recalls once again the need to contextualise the users' practices and without forgetting to keep up to date the research[60] tools, integrating different methodologies with the aim to better fit the researches' goal.

[59] Bijker, Pinch & Hughes, 1989.
[60] Dicks, B., Soyinka, B. & Coffey, A., 2006. Multimodal Ethnography. *Qualitative Research*, 6 (1), pp. 77-96.