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Facebook - a Document Without Borders?

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1. Introduction

When we read that the theme of DOCAM 14 was “documents without borders”, we immediately thought of Facebook (FB), being a kind of worldwide document. In the paper we will discuss if FB is without borders and if it is at all possible to be a document without borders.

2. Research on FB

In 2011 about 850 million people were on FB in 70 languages (Wilson 2012: 207). They have in average 130 friends and contributing in different ways 90 times per month.

In a general review of FB research conducted until 2012, one can identify five main topics for this research as the following (Wilson 2012: 205):

1. Who is using FB and what are users doing while on Facebook?
2. Why do people use FB?
3. How are people presenting themselves on FB?
4. How is FB affecting relationships among groups and individuals?
5. Why are people disclosing personal information on FB despite potential risks?

The overall dominating reason for using FB is to connect to friends, to keep in touch no matter where you are in the world. In addition to this, social grooming and loneliness are also reasons for using FB as well as an increasingly motivation from all kinds of organisations, commercial, governmental, academic, subcultural etc. to promote themselves on FB.

The way people are portraying themselves is “fairly accurate” (Wilson 2012: 210) in contrast to other online networking sites. It may be caused by the fact that it is often off-line friendships that lead to FB friendship and not the other way around.

In relation to how FB affects relationship among groups and individuals, studies tell that it may affect relationship in the same way as emailing, talking in public etc. do for good and bad always with a risk for crossing borders between different parts of peoples life.

While many social scientists have studied and discussed FB, very little research has been done from a more humanistic perspective. If we try to take FB on face value, we suppose it must be a **book** and what is a book?

In his study, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (which appeared in French with the title *Seuils* in 1987), Gerard Genette is talking about books, defining “the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered to its readers and, more generally, to the public” (1997: 1). Genette uses numerous examples to show what role the title, subtitle, forewords and cover blurbs play in interpreting a text, as well as the degree of an author’s celebrity, his age and gender, awards, honorary degrees, on so on. Genette divides the paratext into a peritext and an epitext: the former being aspects that are relatively closely associated with the book itself, such as the dustcover, the title, genre indication, foreword and epilogue or even various themes, while the latter consists of statements about the book beyond the boundaries of the book, such as interviews, correspondences and journals. In doing so, Genette also explores non-textual elements such as format and cover design, but before studying that we need to discuss whether there is a “text” in FB to talk about just like texts in novels and scientific monographs etc.? The immediate answer must be no. You cannot find “the core text” in FB of which you can make an interpretation. The original inspiration for FB comes from the tradition on American Universities of making a printed book or electronic book with faces of administrative staff members, faculty and students as well and the profile photo is still a main feature on FB.¹ That means it is closer to a telephone directory or a biographical dictionary than a literary text. At the same time, you have verbal texts in the posts, mostly short texts only loosely connected to each other. That makes FB close to the newspapers. Throughout the history of newspapers, it has by its very name been defined by making news for an audience, all the way from the very local newspapers to the global news. To tell the local audience about who is visiting whom and who is ill etc. is not anything new. Many local newspapers like this from Olds in Alberta, Canada (Figure 1) from February 1930 had a lot of very local and personal news.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Face_book

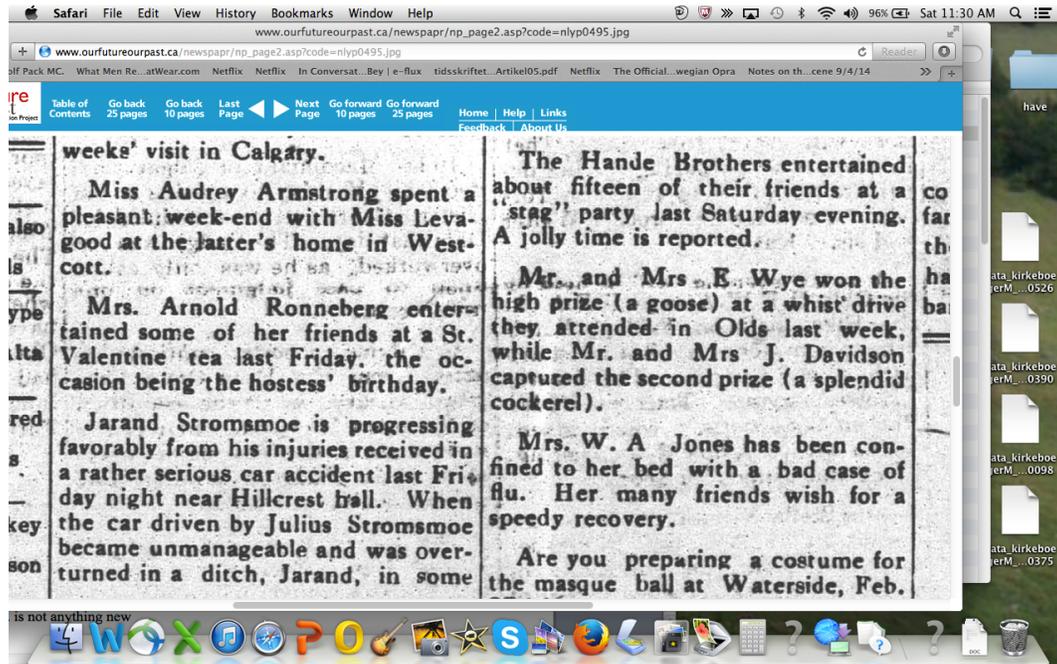


Figure 1
http://www.ourfutureourpast.ca/newspr/np_page2.asp?code=nlyp0495.jpg

One of the new things is that there is neither a central author nor a central editor. Are the texts, photos, links etc. provided for free by the users almost unlimited without any borders?

We think that FB has similarities with many classical documentation forms like literary books, telephone directories, annual Academic Face books, newspapers etc. and at the same time it is something completely new challenging hitherto used analytical conceptual tools.

3. Does FB have borders at all?

Discussing FB as a document without borders could be about a range of borders like the border between private and public, the border between you and your "friends" and other people not included in your network, but it is also about the border between inside and outside, about what documents the document complex of FB is made up of and what documents might be considered outside of FB. Although Gerard Genette's main focus is on literary books, we would like to investigate if the concept of paratext could be useful to discuss the borders of FB.

Genette is talking about the border between the inside of the text and the outside, and the paratext as a kind of threshold the potential reader has to pass in order to

step inside the text. Let's have a look on the front page (Figure 2), the first page we enter into when writing the URL for FB into our browser gives us the possibility to sign up or to log in if we are already a member. We will not discuss the appearance of the pages in different browsers or FB on other platforms like smart phones or reading devices.

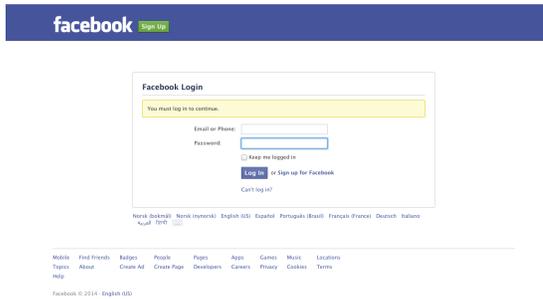


Figure 2

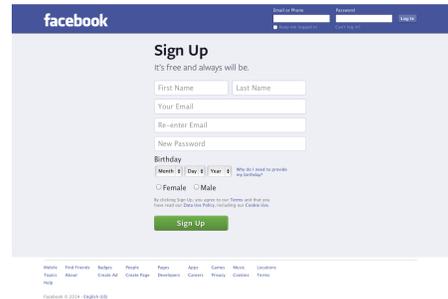


Figure 3

So, actually we have two different front pages (Figure 2 and 3). Both include the URL facebook.com, the typical blue colour, the FB logo with its use of a specific font as important elements for us to recognize that we are on the right place if we want to enter into FB. We can also choose language, and of course we can choose if we register with our real name and birthday or if we want to invent a new identity for our appearance on FB. Being familiar to FB we recognize the front page immediately as the page where to enter. We might ask ourselves how we would react if one or several of these elements are changed suddenly without any announcing or explanation. We suppose we would be sceptical at once, trying to figure out if we are on the right page or a fake one. Our screen shot is not showing the URL, but as you know we can choose between http:// and the more secure https://.

This front or home pages of FB can be compared to a book's cover page where the URL, the FB logo and the colour might have a similar function as the name of an author and a publisher – making the page trustworthy for you or not. It is also a kind of threshold that the user has to pass in order to get inside. But what about the page we see when we have logged into our personal account (Figure 4)? Here the border between the inside and the outside gets much more blurred.



Figure 4

We still have the URL, the logo and the colour telling us that we are inside a platform that presents different contents under a well-known and established brand. And we have different choices for what content we would like to see: our own page, friend's pages, pages of different groups we are members of, but also our wall with a collection of the latest news/posts by people we are friend with or pages of institutions or organizations etc. we like. These might be both commercial and non-commercial products/pages. What we get presented is a combination of user generated content and content created by professional producers; content can also emerge from unknown sources or can be advertisement. The ranging of posts on our wall depends on if we choose most recent or top stories, but also on our activities like the number of likes, comments and sharing will also be important for our attention to a post, not only will the post with the most comments etc. get high up at our wall, it will also signal the interest of others and therefore make it more attractive for us. It also includes services that alert us about events, birthdays and messages.

What is inside and what is outside, what is part of the primary or core text and what not, is much harder to answer in the digital world than it was in the case of the book. Depending on what links we choose to open, we are only one mouse click away from leaving FB. Nevertheless this is obvious for us because we no longer can see the same URL, the logo, the page upset etc. So there is a border and yes, we can cross it, but we will not do so without recognizing it. A little bit trickier are links that keep us inside of FB and that might be pages that our friends recommend or like or if one of our friends comment a person's status not our

friend. That extends the range of documents we are able to access which makes FB a huge document complex consisting of billions of pages.

Genette shows that the name of an author is one important element of the paratext. We would like to argue that the same is true for FB: the name or identity of an author behind a post is important for our choice to read the content of a post or not. But there is one important difference to books: on FB we can have texts/posts by many different authors, but as described by Genette who is the author might be important for the question if we read/look at the post and how trustworthy we might find its content (can also be a combination of who/what is the original source like a newspaper or a broadcasting station and who posted/forwarded the post). And we have as Volker Eisenlauer argues FB as an author:

Above all, a member's 'automatic activity records' [for instance that person X commented on your link or liked your activity, R.S.] clearly mirror the impacts of the electronic environment on a member's text actions – here the choice as well as the alignment of the respective texts is exclusively performed by the software (Eisenlauer 2013: 39)

The layout and functionality of FB have been changed and updated during the years. Almost every time this happens people demand to get back the old pages, a reaction that might indicate that people prefer to see the pages as they are used to and that changes interrupt their activities. Only 4 years back in time, in 2010 the like button was launched. We would like to argue that the like button is an important paratextual element that not only indicates the popularity of a post, but also has consequences for its visibility. Especially young users delete posts without comments or likes, to get likes is an important part of our self-esteem. In addition, the fact that we do not have a similar dislike function makes it hard for people to like posts about death, illness or other negative content.² Fuchs is talking about FB's "'happy-go-like' ideology" that makes it "more profitable for FB, by design, to make people like companies" (Fuchs 2014: 160). But the design of FB not only prevents the expression of negative emotions, posts with content difficult to like will soon 'disappear' from the wall because other, more 'popular' posts will be more visible.

Finally we would like to mention applications like "My year in Photos" or "My Year in Status" that combines different photos or status updates to a new document, keeping and showing old posts to you and your friends. Others than FB

² Fuchs mentions a post on the Facebook page of the Auschwitz Memorial page that was liked by 171 people, not meaning that these likes came from people who did like the facts stated in the posts, "but rather wanted to express their dismay about what had happened" (Fuchs 2014: 160).

develop those applications; again another author than the person owning the FB-account creates a new document that will be posted on your wall and visible for others according to your privacy settings. Again the number of likes or comments will be essential for the sample combined by an algorithm, but you get the possibility to edit by selecting other statuses and a different layout.

4. Is FB a document with borders as well as no borders?

If we sum up what we know about FB, we know there are many users. It has an impact on many social relationships worldwide. It is commercial and explores the information it gets from its members. It is being used in endless amount of contexts and it challenges the privacy of many peoples life.

If we go back to the question about whether FB is a document without borders, the answer is both yes and no, in relation to which degree is it open or closed.

The answer is yes because there are more or less no limits for how many people it can connect and include in the community. It is also very open in relation to what kind of topics and activities it may deal with. In this way it may go across a lot of cultural, social, political, geographical and generational borders, even in surprising directions we have never thought of. In this way FB may be even more digital born in relation to blogs and homepages, but also many other social platforms like professional media like LinkedIN or Academia.edu and dating media. They are all a part of what Luke Goode calls “a culture of unfinish” (2005: 111) referring to Peter Lunenfelds discussion of the digital mediascape (Lunenfeld 2000).

As FB is invading the world as a whole, more and more risks are emerging for abuse of FB, dissolving the borders between private and public (Wilson 2012: 212). One may ask whether this dissolving tendency is in any case a bad thing for democracy. Luke Goode discusses the potential effects of the latest digital development, the mobile devices. They may actually make the distinction meaningless since you have the private phone in public spaces most of the time (Goode 2005: 114f). In contrast to blogs and homepages, FB has the same quality as the other new media, Twitter, has, that it is very easy to use on a small mobile device and share it worldwide. One can tell immediately what is going on at demonstration in Cairo, New York and Paris or in smaller places and initiate a worldwide action. In this way FB may actually turn out to be a critical and relatively free medium for political activism like the Arabian Spring using FB as a medium for telling about political events being censored in other media controlled by governments (Wilson 2012: 213).

On FB, you may not as such have long discussions, but every second you can have a new “co-author” creating a new profile with new stories about life, inviting people to new events in any place on earth in principle across any culture or subculture. You can also connect blogs as well as homepages to a FB profile or classical media like newspapers, radio and television. In this way it is indeed a “hyper-text” where other “texts” or documents produced independently of FB become a part of FB by linking the texts/documents in a FB post on your wall. In this way, one may talk about an open document with almost no borders and never finished.

At the same time, you may claim that the very digital format of FB may limit the possibilities like any format does. All the way from the papyrus rolls, printing to electronic documents, there has been a certain format giving you a blank “writing space” to use. FB can be characterized as a relatively open “writing space” (Bolter 2001) providing some possibilities like using multiple media, text, photo and video, but also setting some limitations for what you can do like the “likes” and not “don’t like”.

This paper is indeed a “work in progress” in which we have tried to get a better understanding of the new widespread phenomenon Facebook, by approaching it by a number of analytical concepts derived from analyses of older media/documentation forms. Much more work needs to be done and maybe we will need to reconceptualise our analytical tools in order to grasp Facebook and new emerging documentation forms crossing the borders of the old ones.

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