

4. Social networks on the internet: the Web 2.0

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Cyberpragmatics: Internet-mediated communication in context

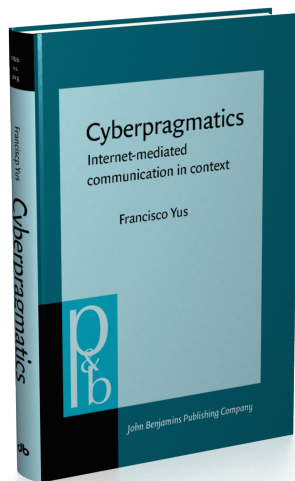
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Social networks on the Internet: The Web 2.0

The Internet is under constant evolution and development. One of the most strikingly successful environments for virtual interactions and information transmission is the popularization of a new form of production and reception of information that avoids the traditional “pyramidal media communication pattern” based on an authority that uni-directionally filters and delivers Internet content to the mass of users. Instead, this new trend of informational dissemination feeds from the users through special interfaces for interactions and content sharing. This phenomenon, now consolidated, has been given different labels, such as *social networks*, Web 2.0 (see O’Reilly 2007), *wiki phenomenon*, *participatory culture* (Jenkins et al. 2006), *user-generated content*, *Me Media* (Garfield 2006), and *social software*, among others. It implies a new form of conceptualizing the Net that is interesting for a pragmatic analysis of the information exchanged in these networks and the way it is interpreted, contextualized and transmitted. Besides, analysts within pragmatics would also be interested in the quality of interactions therein and how these are sustained in these virtual scenarios. Furthermore, it is also worth studying the role that the interface (e.g. blogs, social networking sites, *Twitter*) plays in information transmission, identity shaping and collective actions. For example, Androutsopoulos (2010:208) claims that any analysis in this direction should take into account processes such as *integration* (the co-existence of various communication modes on a single platform), *embedding* (the ability to place digital content, especially videos, on a web page, or combinations of text and multimedia), and *modularity* (the way in which web pages are composed of a number of different elements in terms of origin, authorship, affordances, conditions of production and so on).

A pragmatics-oriented analysis would initially focus on the “addresser users,” i.e. the producers of information, whose task of uploading information has to be compensated for by an offset of cognitive effects that are more related to “contributing to the collectivity” than to obtaining self-oriented cognitive reward, as can be deduced from these two addresser-centred conditions of relevance:

- Condition a. Socially generated information is relevant to an individual to the extent that the social benefit achieved when it is produced is large.
- Condition b. Socially generated information is relevant to an individual to the extent that the effort required to produce it does not threaten the user's satisfaction at being engaged in collectively generated content.

These two conditions are influenced by inherent features of the Net. For example, condition (b) is affected by several factors, as concluded by Li (2011), to the extent that in that study effort was not a significant predictor of the willingness to contribute information to online communities. Specifically, effort is typically minimized by the quality of digital discourse and users' surfing habits:

the regular information contributors are likely to be ritual visitors to the community so, when they take time to visit, the extra time needed to contribute information may not be substantial. [...] The effort needed to contribute could also be significantly reduced by using computer technology. Since information is often stored in digital format, contributing information could require little more than the ability to copy and paste. Considering these factors, it is conceivable that the cost of contributing information to online communities is negligible. (ibid.: 291)

Of course, there is also a recipient-centred estimation of relevance. Addressee users have to make sense of the vast amount of user-generated information on the Net and select the potentially relevant one, often without the aid of an authority that filters out irrelevant content.

In this chapter, I will analyse several forms of Internet communication and networking that clearly emphasize sociality, interactivity and mutuality of information within the generic label of Web 2.0.¹ Firstly, blogs (or weblogs) will be studied from several points of view (author, content, reader and interactivity). Although blogs are a development of the traditional personal web page studied in Chapter 2, they possess an explicit social orientation and a purpose of interaction with other users. Secondly, the trend of social networking sites such as *Facebook* or *MySpace* will be addressed. They are also developments of the personal web page but the new interface allows for a great number of interactions and the management of shared information with friends or acquaintances. Finally, a brief analysis of the *microblog Twitter*, a short-messaging service with an explicit social networking orientation, will be made.

1. Chiang et al. (2009) argue that the qualities of social networks on the Internet are, in fact, scalable, that is, a website exhibits a greater or lesser quality of "Web 2.0ness" depending on how many prototypical parameters of social networks they exhibit.

1. Blogs

In the last few years, web pages have evolved into more interactive forms of Internet-mediated communication. Unlike the static quality of traditional web pages, which only made manifest information to passive readers, the level of interaction that blogs achieve today makes it possible to obtain a mutual manifestness of this information. Besides, one of the reasons why users abandoned the web page and created their blogs is that the latter are easy to use and update (and social networking sites are even easier to manage, thus reducing blog popularity, see Arthur 2009).

Blogs are web pages that have evolved into an identifiable genre (see Yus 2008d, 2008e). Among the many definitions of blogs that can be found in the bibliography, I have selected the following:

A blog is a website that consists of short entries made by a writer, or a blogger. The entries are arranged in a reverse-chronological order (latest entry first) by time and date, much like on a message board or a website guestbook. Usually the entries consist of the entry text itself, a title and a time/date stamp. Only the newest entries are displayed on the main blog page while older entries are usually arranged in archives where they can be accessed on a later date. Many blogs nowadays also allow readers to post comments to individual entries, much as they would do in threads on a discussion forum. (Vuorinen 2005: 5)

A frequently updated web site consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc., typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites. (Oxford English Dictionary, 2002, quoted in boyd 2006a)

Blogs are online publications that are characterised by short entries which are usually written in an expressive and authentic style and are arranged in reverse chronological order. (Fleck et al. 2007: 228)

As was suggested for web pages in a previous chapter, blogs can be studied from three main points of view. Firstly, the author's intention when uploading information on the blog is essential in a pragmatic analysis. Secondly, the qualities of blogs as a stabilized genre can also be studied, insofar as they are evidence of the blogger's intentions. And thirdly, the analyst can use the content of the blog as a tool to predict the quality of readers' interpretations. To these three perspectives a fourth can be added that focusses on the blog as a medium to sustain interactions and as evidence of group or community ties.

1.1 The blogger's intention

Blogs are verbal-visual discourses that work as evidence of the blogger's communicative and informative intentions. These intentions are typically focussed on a desire to filter out and select the information which, on paper, is potentially relevant to the readers (*filter blogs*), or a desire to provide personal information about likes, dislikes, daily events, etc. (*diary blogs*). But other types of blogs have been suggested in the bibliography according to their format or other criteria.² In any of these types, tracing the author's intentionality is important for efficient blog communication. Gibbs (1999: 16) stresses that our interest in sharing other people's intentions is such an important aspect of how people construct meaningful interpretations that sometimes we get the feeling that intention ascription is somehow optional and can be discarded if one wants to do so. However, the explicit search for the intentional foundation of human actions reveals the extreme importance of communicative intentions in many aspects of our experience of meaning.

Initially, blogs appeared as some users' attempts to filter information and select the most interesting content for other users, who had to trust the filtering criterion and the blogger's "authority." The outcome of this filtering tended to be relevant because the negative condition of relevance (mental effort) was minimized through a reduction in the time and effort required to access interesting information. But if the selective criterion was unsatisfactory, the outcome was likely to be irrelevance.³ Over the last few years, however, another type of blog has become popular: *the diary blog*, where users make manifest information about their lives, opinions, beliefs, etc. It is sometimes difficult to understand why certain

2. For example, Andreevskaja et al. (2007) add the *notebook* to *filter* and *diary* blogs. Biz Stone (2004, quoted in Chesher 2005) differentiates between *technology blogs*, *political blogs* and *diaries*. Lankshear & Knobel (2003) propose *links with commentary* (that work as filters), *journalling*, *hybrids* (between the first two types) and *meta-blogs* (blogs about blogs). Fleck et al. (2007: 231) make a format-based classification: *blog*, *photoblog*, *moblog* (entries created from a mobile phone), *audioblog* (mostly audio files) and *videoblog*. Herring et al. (2004) propose a classification based on the purpose of the blog: *filter*, *diary*, *k-log* (knowledge log, highly specialized), *mixed purpose* and *others*. Finally, Holbrook (2006: 7) suggests two types of blog: those which comment on information available on the Net (*epiphytic blogs*) and those which create their own content (*generative blogs*).

3. Umberto Eco (quoted in Origgi 2002) has mentioned the danger of a lack of filtered information on the Internet: "With the Web, everyone is in the situation of having to filter information that is so vast, and so unsustainable, that if it isn't filtered it cannot be absorbed. It is filtered unsystematically, so what is the primary metaphysical risk of this business? That we'll end up with a civilization in which every person has his own system of filters, in other words where every person creates his own encyclopaedia. Now a society with five billion concurrent encyclopaedias is a society in which there is no more communication."

information about bloggers' lives might ever prove relevant, but as we have seen in the previous chapter, on the Internet some combinations of cognitive effects and mental effort are surprisingly beneficial to the readers. Similarly, it does not seem to be worth the effort to trace the exact intentionality underlying these diary blogs (Miller & Shepherd 2004). One source of relevance for users may be what Thompson (2008) calls *ambient awareness*, the feeling of being physically near the blogger with the aid of the information posted about his/her feelings, moods, ordinary activities, etc.

But in general it can be stated that simply uploading vast amounts of information about oneself is counterproductive in terms of cognitive effects and mental effort. This is why several applications have been designed to help users control the flow of information that their blogs generate. For example, Kendall (2007) mentions that one of the portals for blogging, *LiveJournal*, offers the possibility of using "cut tags" that allow users to link part of their blog entries. The hidden part of the entry will not be visible on the screen until the reader clicks on it.

The attempt to understand the phenomenon of diary blogs is even more difficult if we take into account the fact that bloggers are often unable to explain why they uploaded the information about themselves on their blogs. A possible explanation is that, by updating their blogs, the bloggers shape, strengthen and develop their identities, and the blogs acquire a certain corporeal quality for them (boyd 2006a, Efimova et al. 2005). Efimova & Hendrick (2005) note that

what makes weblogs different is not the publication of content *per se*, but the personalities behind them. Weblogs are increasingly becoming the online identities of their authors. Most weblogs are not formal, faceless, corporate sites or news sources: they are authored by individuals (known as bloggers or bloggers), and perceived as 'unedited personal voices' [...] Often a weblog is written as a narration of its author's thoughts and feelings, [...] allowing personality and values to emerge from the words. Even weblogs that are little more than collections of links and short commentaries say something about their authors. The selected content a weblog author finds interesting enough to link to and to comment on functions as a public record of personal interest and engagement.

Holbrook (2006:7) uses Genette's famous terminology on literary narratives in order to look into the bloggers' presence (and identity) on their blogs in more detail. When the *implied blogger* tells a story in which he/she is also the main character, the blog is *homodiegetic*, and when he/she does not participate in the story, then the blog is *heterodiegetic*. A parallel interest lies in determining whether the bloggers are "transparent" in the construction of their identities on the blog or play with some sort of fictitious identity, which has enormous consequences for the extent, intensity and eventual relevance of blog entries.

Other authors have suggested underlying intentions for bloggers when they upload information. A good example is the work of Nardi et al. (2004, 2005), who list the following motivations for blogging: (a) to update others on activities and whereabouts; (b) to express opinions and thus influence others; (c) to seek others' opinions and feedback; (d) to "think by writing"; and (e) to release emotional tension. Efimova (2003), for her part, concludes that, among bloggers' motivations, some stand out, namely curiosity, the will to improve the management of information, and learning, plus an overall interest in content sharing. Bortree (2005: 26) also proposes reasons for blogging, specifically related to self-presentation: *ingratiation* (the goal is to be appreciated by others), *competence* (also called *self-promotion*, where the goal is to be perceived as skilful and qualified), *intimidation* (being seen to exert power), *exemplification* (attempting to be perceived as morally superior or possessing high moral standards) and *supplication* (being seen as requiring nurturance or appearing helpless so that others will come to one's aid).

Diary blogs should be intended for a more restrictive audience in mind, and this is very often the case: such blogs are usually read by an intimate and previously selected audience.⁴ Holbrook (2006: 9) defines a diary blog as "any blog that generates its own content rather than commenting on other content, presents a narrative that is presumed to be reflective of the implied blogger's real experiences, and is tied together by a focus on one or more characters rather than themes."

Another interesting issue is that many bloggers value more the effect that the blog has on themselves than the one it has on its readers, which can be intuitively explained as a complement to the achievement of mutuality of assumptions and the alteration of the readers' cognitive environments, the main reasons for keeping up a blog. In a certain sense, the blogger's subjectivity is in a state of constant updating in parallel to the updating of the blog content and the current state of interactions and comments. Lu & Hsiao (2007) also conclude that personal rewards such as consolidating one's image and obtaining other bloggers' praise play an important part in the blogger's desire to share information on the blog (see Ko et al. 2008, Lenarcic & Sarkar 2008).

An example of the difficulty that tracing bloggers' intentions entails is the *photolog*. Cohen (2005) describes how *photo-bloggers* experience two types of feelings when they upload photos. On the one hand, the picture recalls some aspect of the moment when it was taken. On the other hand, there is a certain feeling of surprise that the *photo-blogger* experiences after some time has elapsed. Indeed, these bloggers are very often unable to explain the intentions that underlay the creation or uploading of the picture. Besides, "the fact that digital photographs are free of cost

4. See, for instance, boyd (2004a), Mortensen & Walker (2002: 209–210), and van Dijck (2004).

allows them to take pictures whenever they want, of whatever they want [...] And this proliferation of photographs and the situations in which photographs are made creates the conditions under which surprise is possible” (ibid.: 889). Although many *photo-bloggers* write texts at the bottom of the pictures to explain what they had in mind at the moment of taking the picture, sometimes they admit that they do not have a clear picture of the motivations. That is, when coming to explain a *photo-log*, instinct seems to play a greater role than explicitly communicative intentions.

1.2 The blog genre

A second pragmatic approach to blogs focuses on the verbal, visual and multi-modal attributes of the blog; it studies the existence (or not) of a stabilized *blog genre*, and analyses the role that blogs and their genre can play in the effective transference of bloggers’ communicative intentions and the (in)correct interpretation of their intentions.

Among the possible approaches to the blog genre, it is important to determine to what extent it has evolved into a clearly identifiable and conventionalized genre that can be differentiated clearly from other competing discourses such as the traditional personal web page⁵ or social networking site profiles. This status of “genre autonomy” is interesting for cognitive pragmatics, since the immediate identification of the blog genre may affect the quantity of effects obtained, the mental effort involved in interpreting the content of the blog, and the relevant conclusions that might be derived from its processing.

In this sense, overlappings with other genres have been mentioned, besides web pages. Herring (2003) points out that blogs have inherited features from personal diaries, from opinion essays in the 17th century, and they also share similarities with newsgroups (see Chapter 6) and chat rooms (see Chapter 5). For Lawley (2004), blogs are unique in the way they blend the temporal quality of e-mail distribution lists and newsgroups with the stability of the web page stored on Google. Furthermore, Herring et al. (2005: 143) conclude that

5. Among the differences, boyd (2006a) points out that blogs are not as complex as web pages. Chesher (2005) finds differences in format and options for navigation. And Karlsson (2006: 10) stresses that the web page does not contain so many interactive elements or the immediacy of instantaneous publication. Besides, Lu & Lee (2010: 22) list a number of clear differences between web pages and blogs: the latter exhibit update frequency, clear ownership, optional links to other blogs, support by tools and freeware that can automate certain functions, entries that are displayed in chronological order, and readers that “are given the option to leave comments, which help them interact with particular bloggers, thus it is more suitable than traditional web sites for online relationship building.”

the blog is neither fundamentally new nor unique, but that it – along with other emergent genres expressed through interactive web technologies – occupies a new position in the internet genre ecology. Specifically, it forms a de facto bridge between multimedia HTML documents and text-based computer-mediated communication, blurring the traditional distinction between these two dominant internet paradigms, and potentially contributing to its future breakdown.

Genres have been defined as “instances of conventionalised or institutionalised textual artefacts in the context of specific institutional and disciplinary practices, procedures and cultures” (Bhatia 2001: 5). This is a rather static definition that does not explicitly account for the fact that genres are processed in specific contexts, identified as evidences of communicative intentions and stabilized inside a community of people. A better definition is Swales’ (1990: 58): “a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and therefore constitute the rationale for the genre.”

Besides, genres are typically identified as fulfilling specific goals and demand mutual accessibility (between interlocutors) to their qualities. The goal of a genre is not the personal motivation to communicate, but the need to be constructed and recognized socially by the pertinent community of users, and it is bound to be used in typical situations where the genre is inherent and necessary (Orlikowski & Yates 2002). The interesting part of this function of “recognition” that genres entail is that the mental effort required to process the genre tends to decrease when its features become clearly distinguishable from other discourses and hence become exponents of the specificity of the genre. Starting our processing with the identification of the genre (and the corroboration of our expectations about its conventional features)⁶ allows readers to generate specific interpretive patterns that save mental effort and which would not be created if the genre was not conventionalized. As Santini et al. (2010) stress,

genres can be seen as sets of conventions that transcend individual texts, and create frames of recognition governing document production, recognition and use. Conventions are *regularities* that affect information processing in a repeatable

6. These expectations will tend to be interiorized and the reader will use them by default in the interpretation of a blog, due to their accessibility. Dillon & Gushrowski (2000) have corroborated that adequacy to genre conventions helps to recall discourse and increases the reader’s satisfaction. Moreover, analysts in the area of hypermedia and web page design have concluded that Internet orientation and navigation are influenced by the user’s identification of rules about how information should be presented and, therefore, the absence of genre conventions in the digital world are a source of potential difficulty for user navigation.

manner. Regularities engage *predictions* about the “type of information” contained in the document. Predictions allow humans to identify the *communicative purposes* and the *context* underlying a document.

Therefore, even if it is true that blogs are hybrid genres (or *inter-genre-al*, following Devitt 2009: 44), in my opinion they have acquired a clearly identifiable status within the range of *cyber-media* that allows for their initial effort-saving processing of layout, etc. Lüders et al. (2010:956) add, specifically for “diary blogs,” that

whereas the personal blog differs in significant ways from the paper diary, its resemblance to the paper diary explains how users nevertheless approach this new genre (or any new genre) based on generic knowledge, crucial for making sense of specific texts. New genres never emerge without a context. Hence, whereas users need to internalize conventions, they already possess generic knowledge derived from antecedent or similar genres. This knowledge enables communication, and is thus crucial in the emergence and stabilization of a new genre.

An analysis of 100 blogs was carried out in Yus (2008e) to determine the discursive features that are so conventionalized in the blog genre that users invariably expect to find them every time they read a blog. These features shape the user’s *internalized weblog schema*. This mental schema, based on the establishment of the “blog genre,” has been facilitated by the availability of companies such as *Blogger*,⁷ whose simple, easy-to-use templates make the blog genre even more identifiable, to the extent that other users, faced with the challenge of creating a blog, will tend to use these default templates, spreading the weblog schema to other users in a virus-like way. This picture of a mental schema of blogs fits the view that “genre is not only something manifested in texts, but also a knowledge which users must have to be able to interpret and act in accordance within a given communicative context” (Lomborg 2009).

Initially, the identification of conventions that belong to the store of properties of blogs that the readers possess (and expect to find every time they enter a blog) entails a double analysis of the visual (iconic) and verbal (symbolic) content of the blog (or multimodal combinations). In practice, though, blogs tend to a mixture of iconic and symbolic signs in which, very often, the iconic content acquires a symbolic quality and the verbal content becomes *iconized*. This is a phenomenon

7. Evan Williams, one of the creators of this famous software to create blogs, proposes a definition of blog that is worth quoting because it underlines the qualities of the genre above the importance of the information that the blog contains: “To me, the blog concept is about three things: Frequency, Brevity, and Personality. [...] This clarification has evolved over time, but I realised early on that what was significant about blogs was the format -not the content” (quoted in Mortensen & Walker 2002: 249).

that blogs share with other discourses such as comics, where this blend of iconic and symbolic signs is also typical (see Yus 2008f).⁸ The discursive features of blogs are not, therefore, simply verbal or visual. During the processing of these features, texts and pictures are not processed as purely symbolic or iconic, respectively, but as a mixture of properties that activate the identification of the blog genre. For example, readers use their store of prototypical features of blogs and visually spot the textual elements of the page (categories, entries, comments...) even before these texts are actually processed.

As I pointed out above, the stabilization of the blog genre has been accelerated by the availability on the Net of free software for designing blogs such as *Blogger*, with pre-determined steps to create a blog and a fixed interface layout. And inside the blog it is possible to determine different categories. For example, Lomborg (2009) proposes three axes on which we can place all blogs. The first one, the *content axis*, comprises blogs ranging from personal experiences (*internal*) and events which are external to the user (*topical*). The second one, the *directionality axis*, classifies blogs between *monologism* (user's own stories and little interactivity with readers) and *dialogism* (reader-oriented and filled with interactions). Lastly, the *style axis* can be either *intimate* or *objective*, depending on the style of the text in the entries of the blog.

An analysis of blogs also leads to the conclusion that bloggers are, in general, more interested in the information that they want to communicate (i.e. make manifest or mutually manifest if the interface allows for this level of mutuality) than in a more or less creative design of the blog (see Scheidt & Wright 2004), maybe because most bloggers are not trained in programming or because the range of default options is sufficient for their communicative purposes. Moreover, these default options are easily identifiable, save processing effort and alert readers to the content that they expect to find inside the blog. This was corroborated by Lu & Lee (2010), who concluded that content quality is the most important factor in making users stay longer and revisit the blog. The context quality – how the blog is presented – turned out not to be so important in retaining readers. These authors also mention the list of popular blogs provided by *Blog Look* (<http://look.urs.tw>), and the fact that most of these famous blogs only slightly modify the default options provided by blog service providers.

The *interiorized weblog schema* (Yus 2008e: 125) comprises those features of blogs that have stabilized in the readers' minds and save processing effort because

8. In comics the reader can find highly symbolic visual signs (e.g. lines to show movement, a light bulb that symbolizes an idea, etc.) and highly iconic verbal signs (e.g. text that is deformed to show the character's emotions). This parallelism between visual and verbal attributes also exists in the processing of verbal and visual metaphors, as claimed in Yus (2009d).

of their high accessibility and capacity to generate expectations. The choice of the term “schema” indicates that the information stored about blogs does not include all their possible features, but only those that readers invariably expect and that facilitate blog identification. After all, schemas contain archetypical information and some blog features do exhibit this quality. The idea that underlies this *interiorized schema* is the certainty that the blog genre and its recurrent qualities play a part in the general search for relevance, against opinions such as boyd’s (2006a):

The prototypical blog has many of the features supported by the most popular tools: commenting, links, trackbacks, time stamps, reverse chronological posts, and syndication feeds. While prototypes have communicative efficacy, they should not be the basis upon which analysis is built. The properties of the prototype do not define the boundaries of the medium nor do they convey value or normative practice. As technology changes, the properties of the prototype will also change.

Needless to say, this *interiorized schema* is not fixed, but changes as the blog evolves due to the users’ demands or because companies introduce new options that end up being used massively by bloggers (and expected by readers). The stabilization of the schema is a gradual process of permanent updating of blog features, some of which may disappear from the schema because of a recurrent lack of usage or presence in the blog, while others are incorporated into the blog schema after stabilization.⁹ Devitt (2009: 41–42) correctly writes that “bloggers and their guests do not encounter genre forms in isolation but rather as collections and absences of features in specific blogs [...] neither bloggers nor readers require a single, closed set of unchanging forms to participate in blogging. If we abandon trying to define genres through closed, static sets of forms, we can permit forms to be what they appear to be, multiple, fluid, and yet constructive of generic actions.” Schmidt (2007) adds that “by incorporating shared expectations and routines into their individual ways of handling the format, bloggers not only fulfil their communicative goals, but also reinforce and reproduce the sets of adequacy and procedural rules.” Hence, readers expect, as part of their *interiorized schema*, a number of blog features, but this does not mean that the schema is static, unchangeable, nor does it imply that not comprising *all* of these features prevents successful blog interpretation.

9. See Mariottini (2011a, 2011b, forthcoming) for interesting analyses of the quality of this *interiorized schema* in the context of specialized discourses (blogs for lawyers and blogs of tourism). In her research, several questionnaires were given out that revealed the exact quality and extent of this schema, which users invariably expect to find when entering these specialized blogs.

Several insights into the quality of this blog schema were derived from an analysis¹⁰ of 100 blogs (see Yus 2008e). Among others, the following aspects deserve a few comments:

1. *General blog layout.* Readers expect a layout of a single column of text (normally with the entries) and one or two side columns or frames with other elements. Besides, 66% of blogs contain a rectangle at the top with the title of the blog or a distinctive picture. This rectangle probably belongs to the reader's *interiorized schema*.

2. *Background colour and wallpaper.* It does not seem likely that there is an expectation of a specific background colour, but 50% of blogs have a white background. This suggests an interest in legibility, which is corroborated by the lack of wallpapers (97% do not have one) that also reduce text legibility.

3. *Reference to the blogger.* Most blogs contain references to the blogger, and their readers expect to find this reference when entering the blog. Contrary to my expectations, many bloggers avoid the use of *nicks*, but provide their real names (55%) and pictures or drawings of themselves (27%). Frequently, most of the information that the blogger wants to convey to the readers is found after clicking on "see my complete profile" or "about the author" (63%).

4. *The word "blog."* In theory, a useful means to alert readers to the fact that they have just accessed a blog is to place the word *blog* or *weblog* on the front page. 49% of blogs do contain this word, but in my opinion it does not play a crucial role in the readers' efficiency at identifying the blog, nor is it likely that the word will belong to their *interiorized schema*. The explanation lies in the evidence that, once the blog has stabilized, many bloggers feel that they no longer need to label their pages as "blogs" so that their readers can identify them, since other elements in the blog will perform that function (Yus 2008e: 130).

5. *Blog sections.* Most of the blogs analysed (97%) contain links to sections and these links are placed on a side frame or column (*sidebar*). The reader will invariably expect these "sections as links" on the main page of the blog. Specifically, they will expect a neutral letter font (81% of blogs), in bold (65%) and black colour (56%).

6. *Letter font.* The analysis revealed a great variety of letter fonts in different sections of blogs. The most frequent font type is *Verdana* (in 28% of headings, 39%

10. A similar analysis was carried out by Klamma et al. (2007), who compared sites such as *MSN Space*, *Blogger*, *Squarespace* and *MySpace*. They concluded that only a few features such as comments, the archive of entries, the blogger's profile or permanent links (*permalink*) were found in all blogs. But, in my opinion, being present in *all* the blogs is not a necessary condition for a feature to belong to the *internalized schema*. A high percentage of presence suffices for the reader to expect its presence on the blog.

of entries and in 30% of date and hour of posting), but its usage is not so frequent as to predict that it will be expected by the readers when they enter the blog.

7. *Elements in the entry.* For several analysts, the entries are essential in a blog, together with their reverse chronological order.¹¹ Hourihan (2002) comments that, in fact, entries or posts favour a specific type of reply or comment from readers: “Blog posts are short, informal, sometimes controversial, and sometimes deeply personal, no matter what topic they approach. They can be characterized by their conversational tone and unlike a more formal essay or speech, a blog post is often an opening to a discussion, rather than a full-fledged argument already arrived at.” For boyd (2005), entries are written with a lot of suppositions and expectations incorporated to them. It is assumed that the reader knows the blogger’s motivations and beliefs. There are entries previous to the one being processed and which may have been archived but are essential in order to interpret the latest entry correctly, and the blogger expects their information to belong to the reader’s cognitive environment at the moment of interpreting the latest entry.

If we analyse the posts or entries in detail, we can deduce which of their elements are candidates to belonging to the reader’s *internalized weblog schema*. For example, most of the entries contain the date (97%) and hour (64%) of publication. Showing the number of comments that the entry has received is also common (85%). And more than half of the entries include their location, either by category or by permanent link (*permalink*).

Readers will also expect a specifically devised area in the blog to send comments on an entry. Most of the blogs analysed (88%) offered a blank form to send these comments, often below the text of the entry. This form can also be accessed after clicking on the link “comments.” Additionally, the reader can be offered a list of the most recent comments or related entries (in 55% of blogs).

8. *Links.* They are essential in the blog genre, and readers expect to find them. Links are used in entries, comments, categories, archives, etc. They also create a network of inter-connected blogs by relating one another with the aid of *trackbacks*.¹² In this case, since readers are “invited” to surf through the inter-linked documents, more responsibility is demanded from them when finding a reward in the eventual congruency that they might achieve after processing all the chunks of information that are scattered but link-related on the Net.

Ali-Hasan and Adamic (2007) distinguish different types of links that indicate relationships between blogs: (a) *blogroll links*, typically found on a sidebar,

11. See Mortensen & Walker (2002:249), Blood (2003:61), and Orihuela (2005:18).

12. According to Li (2005:42), *trackbacks* help to fill a page with relevant information by linking entries that share the same topic but are located in different blogs. *Trackbacks* offer an innovative solution to collect entries that are dispersed all over the *blogosphere*.

provide connection to other blogs that the blogger recommends; (b) *citation links*, normally located inside the posts and referring to the entire blog or a particular post on that blog; and (c) *comment links*, which occur when a reader adds a comment to another blogger's post (see also Luzón 2009).

9. *Archive*. The reader's *interiorized weblog schema* also includes an expectation to find some form of archive of past entries and their comments. The most recurrent form of archiving is by month-year (72% of blogs) and more than a half of blogs also contain a search option. Besides, readers are often offered categories where the entries are archived permanently (43% of blogs).

Another perspective of analysis of the blog genre involves its ability to spread across the community of bloggers if this genre has become sufficiently conventionalized and interiorized, to the extent that all users have a more or less faithful version of what the blog genre is like. There is a cumulative process in which bloggers tend to use the basic options that they are offered in the templates and hence the *schema* ends up being increasingly similar in the *blogosphere* and in the readers' minds, thus facilitating the identification of blogs and their content. This would be a kind of *epidemiological stabilization* of the blog genre, but, as pointed out above, this *blog schema* is under constant re-shaping and updating among the community of bloggers depending on which options are discarded and which ones are incorporated to this schema (Yus 2008e: 137; see also Yus 2003c, 2005b, 2007b). Similarly, several discourses under the "blog umbrella" exhibit different levels of conventionalization. This is the case of *vlogs* (video-blogs). Frobenius (2011:816) comments that *vlogs* "constitute a genre so young that the conventions are still in a process of negotiation." He compares *vloggers* to television news presenters ("a vlogger is an independent (usually, but not necessarily) unpaid, private and untrained individual, while a TV news presenter is a journalist representing a broadcast network") and to traditional blogs, but the former are still far from a genre that has become conventionalized within the community.

As Crowston & Williams (2000:203) assert, since the members of a community extract their knowledge from a range of genres in order to interact with one another, these members strengthen the use of these genres, making them more appropriate for a given situation. That is, the group of genres in use (i.e. the repertoire of genres) is both a product and a shaper of communicative practices within a community. Scheidt & Wright (2004) add that new bloggers tend to incorporate fewer new options to their blogs. As they share an increasingly fine-grained picture of what blogs should be like, they avoid innovations that are inconsistent with the stabilized genre. Of course, some users do design innovative blogs and their attributes might end up conventionalized and part of the *interiorized schema* if a substantial number of bloggers incorporate these innovative features into their blogs.

1.3 The reader's interpretation

One of the main objectives of cognitive pragmatics is to predict the addressees' inferential steps and accessibility to contextual information when they interpret utterances (or texts). Specifically, cognitive pragmatics is interested in determining why readers select (or not), among the range of possible interpretations of a coded utterance or text in a specific context, the one that the speaker or writer intended to communicate. In the case of blogs, there is a huge amount of information available to readers (made manifest by the bloggers) and lots of links to click on.

One problem that blog readers face is the initial lack of *mutual manifestness* with the blogger (although options for interactivity in blogs do facilitate mutuality of assumptions). In addition, bloggers expect in their readers the desired context accessibility and thus leave all the information that they expect to be already manifest to these readers implicit (not coded). In this way, a sort of *scale of readers* is created depending on the level of mutuality with the bloggers and their greater or lesser ability to fill in the information blanks of blog discourse and reach relevant interpretations. For example, some blogs contain jargons or specialized vocabulary that only certain readers can understand.¹³ As Hanley (2005) states, "surely the idea of blogging – that is, writing about things you're interested in without the tiresome presence of an editor or censor – is to communicate; but when you're making up words without explaining what they mean, aren't you immediately alienating most of your audience?" Tony Thorne (in Hanley *ibid.*) thinks that part of the appeal of blogs lies in the fact that they are "geeky, anoraky and self-referential. All slang and jargon is essentially about exclusivity." A good example is found in Myers (2010: 91). He mentions *Sepia Mutiny*, a blog for people of South Asian origin (desis) living in North America. In one of the posts, a user is commenting on a previous post about dating:

for some vague unexplainable reason, I tend to do much better with the dbd grls... I do better with DBD Mallus of any religion, than ABDs. I've decided that I will only marry someone fobulous. Yeah, I said it. But I'm going to marry one so I can totally do that.;

13. Jargons are essential in identity formation and group identification. As is argued in Yus (2002a: 3729), jargons provide a feeling of belonging and entail the use of discursive features that are sources of *intra*-group identity, as much as sources of *inter*-group differentiation. Typical examples would be scientific discourse and specialized languages (see Yus 2007d, Alcaraz et al. 2007, Mateo & Yus 2009).

The “outsider reader” of this post will have to devote additional cognitive resources to understanding it and concluding that ABDs are “American Born Desis” and thus DBDs are “Desi Born Desis.” The phrase FOB (Fresh Off the Boat), used by many immigrant communities, is here made into “fobulous.” And “mallu” is a colloquial term for someone from Kerala, the writer’s home state.

Another interesting reader-centred trend of blog research is to study the ways in which readers influence authors and vice versa, especially in discourses such as blogs, where the traditional passive role of readers has become more active and participatory (see Baumer et al. 2008, Karlsson 2006:2, Kendall 2007). Hollenbaugh (2010:1659) stresses that “regardless of whether or not a blog is private, bloggers’ perceptions of who their audiences are may also impact their choices of what information to disclose. If bloggers believe that it is predominantly their close friends who are reading their blogs, they may disclose more intimate information than bloggers that believe their readers are relative strangers.”

Readers may also feel overwhelmed by their role as commentators and readers of blog entries, whose relevant information is often scattered across fragmented link-mediated texts (and it is the reader that has to make sense of them). For instance, Mishne & Glance (2006) point out that readers often get annoyed when they realize that a discussion is fragmented in many entries and their related comments.

1.4 An emphasis on interaction

Other analysts prefer a more interaction-oriented approach to blogs, particularly how they foster and sustain dialogues between bloggers and readers. These interactions are often fragmentary and additional cognitive resources have to be devoted to making sense of the (intra- and inter-blog) interactions and to determining the portion of bloggers’ and readers’ cognitive environments that is mutual. De Moor & Efimova (2004) add that the multimodal quality of blog conversations is a supplementary source of fragmentation in blog interactions. Certainly, it should be borne in mind that nowadays several alternative channels of Internet communication are used to complement blog-based interactions, such as e-mail or chat rooms or even Internet-supported phone calls (e.g. *Skype*). Interactions on blogs have become multi-channel, rather than text-based. But this multiplicity may also aid blog interlocutors to achieve a more fine-grained sense of mutuality (see Efimova & Ben Lassoued 2008: 137).

Therefore, the interactive attribute of blogs is becoming a rather complex phenomenon with multiple links and threads, and sometimes with online and offline overlapping and the complementation of other *cyber-media*. Besides, interactions in blogs depend on entries whose connection is the blogger’s responsibility (Yus

2008d: 29). As a consequence, the eventual relevance of the reading paths chosen by the readers is constrained by the authors' choices of what content is to be uploaded and how different entries are to be linked. In this sense, Efimova (2004, quoted in Luzón 2009: 77) proposes the term *distributed weblog conversations* for these conversations that are scattered across many blogs. Moreover, Lin et al. (2006) list the following aspects of blogs that are oriented towards interactivity: (a) *Temporal dynamics*. Entries can be created, edited and commented upon in a very dynamic way. (b) *Event locality*. The information provided by entries is dependent on the moment when they are created, and these have to be interpreted within a specific time-span beyond which they are no longer relevant. (c) *Link semantics*. Some link-related blog elements (*blogrolls*, *trackbacks*) are much more than simple links to other pages, but exhibit interactivity. And (d) *Community centric*. The purpose of a blog is to share information, and this purpose normally leads to community bonding. It should be noted that this fourth aspect illustrates the capacity of blogs to create and foster social gatherings and is, therefore, an indicator of the suitability of studying blogs and social networking sites in the same chapter (see Furukawa et al. 2007).

Several elements of blogs facilitate interactions and aid in obtaining a relevant degree of mutuality between bloggers and readers, whose cognitive environments are enlarged as a consequence of satisfactory interactions.¹⁴ This mutuality is also necessary for an adequate feeling of (blog) community membership (see 1.5 below).

Among the elements of blogs that are oriented towards interactivity, the following deserve some attention:

1. *Entries or posts*. Inside each entry there is a clear indicator of interactivity in the attached comments. Other aspects that suggest the presence of interaction are the inclusion of links inside the text of the entries (which indicates inter-relation among them). For Estalella (2006: 26), "multi-situated" interactions, built up by links between blogs, are able to generate a space for shared communication.

2. *Trackbacks*. They make it possible for a blog to notify bloggers if their entries have been discussed, mentioned or commented upon. This is a very useful tool for readers, who can follow several threads of conversations and obtain a more fine-grained mutual manifestness of information.

14. Interactions would be one of the main purposes of blogs. However, several authors minimize the role of interactivity in blogs. As is summarized in Lenhart (2005: 37), for these authors bloggers only expect a sufficient level of interactivity so as to be aware of the readers' presence. In a similar fashion, instead of being an opportunity for mutual manifestness, readers' comments are often taken as a "threat" to the blogger's control over the quantity and quality of communication.

3. *Blogrolls*. These are links placed on one sidebar of the blog and refer to other blogs that the blogger either visits regularly or recommends, creating a feeling of inter-blog interactivity.

4. *Permalinks*. They make sharing of information easier, as they create stable links to a web page or blog. This link may be shared between users via e-mail or instant messaging, facilitating the spread of information.

5. *Tagboards*. They are defined as “little messages attached to your blog, where your readers can leave you notes. They differ from comments, which are attached to individual posts, in that you just have one tagboard for your whole site, and visitors can read the messages right on your homepage” (by *Blogger*, quoted in Lenhart 2005:76). In this way, tagboards can foster feelings of interactivity around a blog.

6. *E-mail*. Probably the oldest means to foster virtual interactions, and also incorporated into blogs.

1.5 Communal bonding through blogs

Blogs can also create and sustain feelings of community membership arising from the imbrication of social networks and blogs. To understand how blogs may foster communities it is necessary to relax the rigid criteria that are often applied to the definition of communities in offline scenarios. If we do that, we will discover that there are elements in blogs that indicate the presence of communal groupings that have this genre as the main foundation. For example, in a study by Kervin et al. (2010), the comments posted in response to other blog entries provided evidence of the growing rapport and sense of community felt by bloggers and readers, with exchanges of comments such as ‘I have had exactly the same bad experience!’, ‘I can definitely relate to what you say...’, or ‘Nice point, I hadn’t thought about [that] before’.

Efimova et al. (2005) propose the following symptoms of blogging communities: (a) a *meme*-like dissemination (or, as proposed in Yus 2007b, an *epidemic*-like dissemination) of information among blogs; (b) the patterns of blog processing, which can be analysed with the aid of *blogrolls*, subscriptions to *RSS feeds*, etc.; (c) link patterns, which reflect to what extent blogs are positively valued (e.g. recommended); (d) “blog conversations,” when a blog provokes the feedback of other blogs; (e) event indicators, in the sense that mentioning online or offline meetings of bloggers indicates the communal relationships among them; and (f) “tribal” marks, group spaces, blog directories.

As was mentioned in Chapter 2, nowadays there is a tendency to a hybridization of offline and online sources of community, with the user as an intersecting

“node” of all the personal networks in which he/she participates (Yus 2005b, 2007b, Willson 2010:494). Blog communities would fit this hybridization where users can obtain feelings of interactivity, reciprocity, belonging, etc. that compete in intensity with traditional sources of communal satisfaction in physical settings. Of course, relationships initiated and maintained in blogs may, in theory, “jump” from the Net to physical scenarios as a complement to communication on the blogs, although several studies indicate that few blog communities have a counterpart in offline gatherings (Furukawa et al. 2007). For example, Nardi et al. (2004) concluded that blogs are more like a refuge from the intense interactions that users carry out through other forms of Internet-mediated communication. Blogs allow for the expression of identities without the requirement of immediate feedback. The picture of blogs is that of diffusion, rather than reiterative communal interactions.

2. Social networking sites on the Internet

In the last few years there has been a revolution in Internet-mediated communication with the popularisation of portals such as *Facebook*, *MySpace* and, in Spain, *Tuenti*. These portals include “the profile” as the basic unit for content sharing and communication with other users. To this profile, applications such as chat rooms or RSS feeds (from “Really Simple Syndication”) have recently been incorporated.

Although in the bibliography these sites are usually labelled as *social networks*, I think it is necessary to distinguish between social networks on the Internet, which can be developed and sustained in different ways and in different environments (not necessarily in these portals) and what from now on will be called *social networking sites* (henceforth SNSs), which undoubtedly offer a user-friendly interface for interactions, uploading content, etc., but which are only a sub-group of all the possible scenarios available for Internet-sustained social networks.

2.1 Definition, attributes and types

SNSs have been defined in several ways. Many of the definitions tend to equate them to the more general term of Web 2.0, as Beer (2008:519) criticizes, among others. Possible definitions include the following:

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. (boyd & Ellison 2007)

Web-based services that allow users to interact, share information, coordinate actions and, in general, keep in touch. These applications are the new way in which our social network is represented, but also the place where our online identity is constructed and the means by which our activity on the Net is created and shared. (Orihuela 2008: 58)

On-line environments in which people create a self-descriptive profile and then make links to other people they know on the site, creating a network of personal connections. Participants in social network sites are usually identified by their real names and often include photographs; their network of connections is displayed as an integral piece of their self-presentation. (Donath & boyd 2004: 72)

There are also studies that delimit the features or attributes of these SNSs. All of them seem to share the assumption that one of their inherent qualities is the role that profiles play as the “basic nucleus of social networking,” where users make a self-presentation of themselves and make manifest potentially relevant information. As will be analysed in 2.3 below, the profile, the information it makes manifest and the possibility of making this information mutually manifest play a major part in the users’ identity shaping, and provide some clues about the socio-cultural context in which these SNSs are inscribed (boyd & Heer 2006). Being relevant on SNSs means capturing the other users’ attention in an environment where readers can focus on multiple sources of satisfaction. As can be observed in the prototypical schema of a profile on SNSs (adapted from Joly et al. 2009, see Figure 4.1), these profiles typically contain a photo, a short description and general information about the user, a list of friends, a number of applications and a wide area for entries and comments (both by the owner of the profile and by other users). SNSs users are, hence, *producers*, a term coined by Bruns (1998b, 2006) as a blend of *producer* and *user* that describes this kind of user who, far from being the classic passive consumer of content, plays now an active role both in the production and consumption of information. An analogous term is *prosumer*, coined back in the 70s by McLuhan & Nevitt, who anticipated the advent of a new kind of media consumer, able to assume the roles of *producer* and *consumer* of content (see Islas 2008).

A number of authors have suggested the following elements or qualities of SNSs:

It has been proposed by boyd (2007a) that SNSs are characterised as having: (a) *persistence* (communication between users can be stored indefinitely); (b) *searchability* (with a “search form” we can find information inside these sites); (c) *replicability* (we can copy and paste content from one area to another); and (d) *invisible audiences* (many strangers can access the content of the profile, although the software can filter out information that is intended only for pre-selected friends).

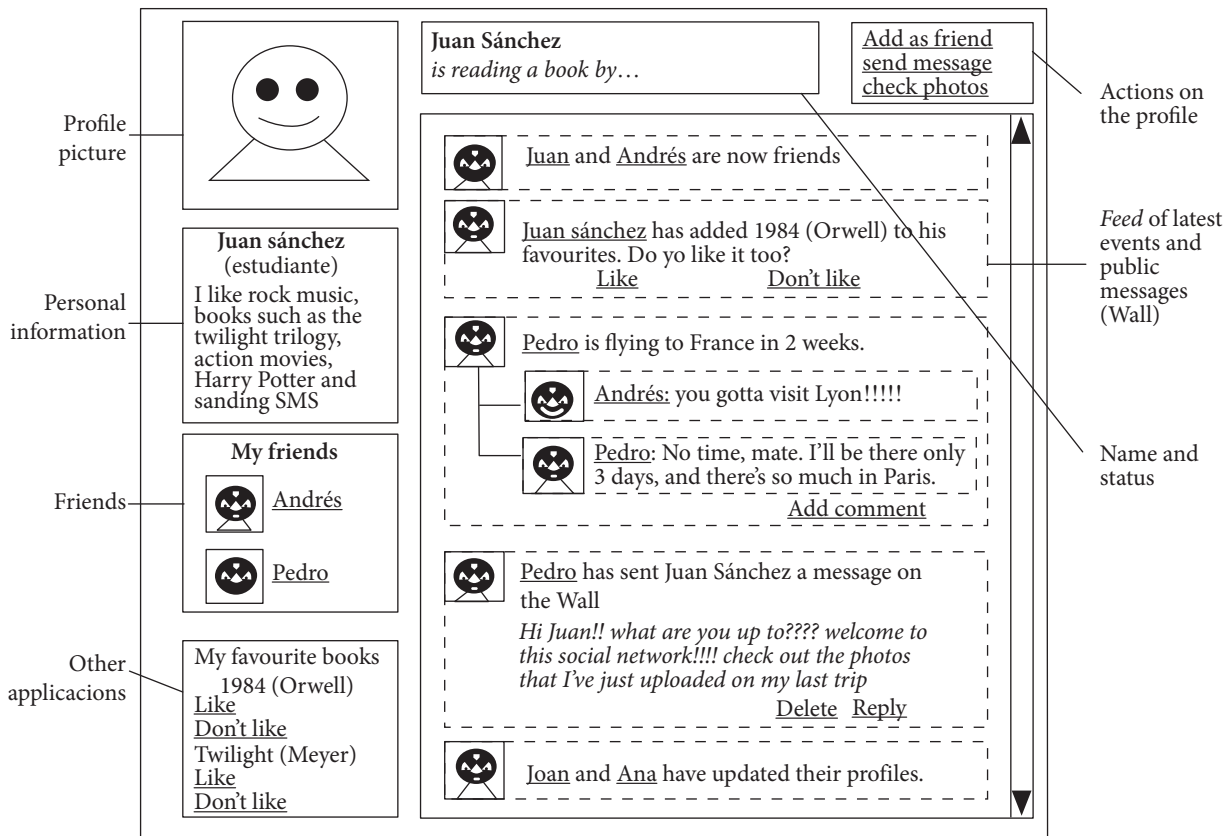


Figure 4.1 Prototypical SNS profile (adapted from Joly et al. 2009)

Cormode & Krishnamurthy (2008) propose, as distinctive features of SNSs, (a) that the users are the key element in the whole system; (b) that they exhibit a great capacity to generate connections among users; (c) that they offer the possibility of uploading content of multiple formats; and (d) that they make it possible to integrate other technologies and applications into the system.

Finally, Golbeck (2007) lists a number of requirements for SNS labelling: (a) they are accessible from the Net without the need of a special software; (b) inside them, users express the links that bind them with other users clearly; (c) the software has to foster the creation, maintenance and development of interactive connections among users; and (d) these connections need to be visible.

One attribute that is rarely listed in the bibliography is the capacity of these environments to alter or blur the neat dividing line that, in the past, separated interactions and networks in physical scenarios from the ones sustained in cyberspace. Within the picture proposed in Chapter 2 of a current process of hybridization between physical and virtual interactions with the user as an intersecting node (Yus 2007b), SNSs play an important part in the management, development and perdurability of these hybrid networks. Willson (2010:498) points in the same direction when she writes that

People (as nodes) are seen as able to access their social networks largely according to their own individual temporal, spatial and material needs and desires. These are constrained only by proximate and embodied demands and by the particular spatial and temporal rhythms of the various social networks in which they are involved. According to this understanding, the individual experiences her/himself as largely in control of her/his sociability through the possibilities of the technology.

In this scenario, it is possible to devise a scale or continuum of SNSs depending on whether the site is mainly an extension of the users' physical interactions and, therefore, their contacts are people that the users already know in physical environments and communicate with on an ordinary basis, or these sites are settings that favour virtual interactions with users that will never meet face-to-face, and with mixed options in between.

In any case, the combinatory possibilities for online/offline interactions on SNSs are rather limited. For example, Antheunis et al. (2008) only picture three possibilities: (a) *online friendships*, initiated on the SNS and always kept within the boundaries of virtual communication; (b) *mixed-mode friendships*, which start on the SNS and extend to physical settings; and (c) *physical friendships*, initiated outside the Net but transferred, at a later stage, to the virtual scenario. For Jarrett (2008), this third possibility is the most frequent one and qualifies SNSs with its most inherent function: namely, the maintenance of interpersonal

relationships that already exist in physical settings, that is, a role of “extension” of physical relationships into the virtual realm (see Martín 2009: 29, Marwick 2005, Ellison et al. 2011).¹⁵ Furthermore, Lampe et al. (2006) make an interesting distinction between the use of SNSs, specifically *Facebook*, for *social searching* (finding out information about offline contacts) and for *social browsing* (the use of the site to develop new connections, sometimes with the aim of offline interactions and perhaps hybrid ones). The former is the primary use of this site, according to this study.

Of course, this does not mean that SNSs cannot create ties and interactions whose strength may even compete with the ones we can obtain and foster in physical settings. The picture of increasing hybridization that I proposed in Chapter 2 makes this levelling of ties not only possible but predictable. Research by McKenna et al. (2002) and Tidwell & Walther (2002), among others, concluded that SNS interactions possess a surprising strength and inside these sites users tend to display more personal and intimate information and develop friendships that may even become more solid than offline ones. For example, a teenager describes in Holland & Harpin (2008: 123) how his relationship with a friend he has never met offline is more intense than the ones he has with people he sees on a daily basis:

She used to be friends with a mate... so at least she is not entirely random. Me and [my friend] talk a lot, and I think she's a really good friend – she knows more about me than other people I see everyday and she knows how to cheer me up... she['s] a real friend (Charlie).

Finally, several researchers have proposed typologies of SNSs that can shed light on the attributes of these sites. One of them is by Fraser & Dutta (2008: 4–5), who distinguish between (a) *egocentric networks*, platforms for massive networks of friends based on inter-connected profiles and, as will be analysed in 2.3 below, important sources for users' identity shaping; (b) *community networks*, whose members share very tight identity linkages based on nation, race, religion, class, etc.; (c) *opportunistic networks*, whose members join for “rational” reasons, for example to look for professional connections; (d) *passion-centric networks*, that bring together users who share interests, hobbies, etc., also called “communities of interest”; and (e) *media-sharing sites*, defined not by their membership, but

15. However, Golder et al. (2007, quoted in Joinson 2008: 1028) report that, while the vast majority of messages are sent to friends (90.6%), a large proportion (41.6%) is sent to friends outside one's local network. This suggests that messaging is used to maintain and create social ties across distances. And it further confirms today's tendency to a hybrid physical-virtual quality of social networking, as proposed in Yus (2007b).

rather by their content (as in *YouTube* or *Flickr*). Another proposal is made by Thelwall & Stuart (2010: 265–266), who divide SNSs into (a) *socializing* SNSs, which support informal social interaction between members (e.g. *Facebook* and *MySpace*); (b) *networking* SNSs, which support non-social interpersonal communication (e.g. the business networking site *LinkedIn*); and (social) *navigation* SNSs, which support finding resources via interpersonal connections (e.g. *Flickr* and *YouTube*).

2.2 Some theoretical approaches

Although SNSs have been popular for just a few years, a lot of literature on the subject is already available. Nevertheless, this bibliography basically tends to apply pre-existing theoretical models (or models already applied to other media) to interactions and communication on these SNSs. Before providing my own approach to the subject, some of them will be reviewed below.

Firstly, one of the theories offering a direct applicability to SNSs is the *Social Network Theory*. According to this theory, both social behaviour and interpersonal communication are influenced by the qualities of the ties that bind people. In general, it is stressed that the more people get connected with one another, the more likely it is that these people will intensify their connections by using different forms of communication, including the Net. Therefore, Internet-mediated communication complements and extends traditional interactive networking behaviour carried out in physical contexts (Birnie & Horvath 2002). From this approach, what interests most is the interactions and strength of the ties that are achieved by means of SNSs, rather than what the user individually does inside these sites.¹⁶

A second theory that has been applied to SNSs is the *Technology Acceptance Model*. It is based on two variables: the user's perception of how easy it is to use some technology and the parallel perception of its usability, both regarded as key elements that affect the regular use of this technology (see de Souza & Dick 2007). This theory has mainly been applied to e-commerce and general uses of the Internet, but it can also be applied to SNSs, especially if we also include in the typology of variables the concept of "social pressure" to use a certain technology. In terms of SNSs research, social pressure would be conceptualized as the pressure and influence of friends and contacts of a user to create a profile on these SNSs.

16. See Haythorntwhaite (2009: 127), Hinduja & Patchin (2008: 127) and Papacharissi (2009: 201 ff), among others.

Thirdly, there is the *Signalling Theory*, used initially in biology and economics and centred upon the hypothesis that part of the information that we collect from others is not directly observable, but comes from signals that they *exude*, that is, “more or less reliably correlated with an underlying quality” (Donath & boyd 2004: 72); “we cannot directly observe others’ beliefs, experiences, or what they really think of us; instead we rely on signals such as facial expressions, consumption patterns, or the statements they make on their profiles in order to infer these qualities” (Donath 2007). In the case of SNS profiles, this theory would explain why, for example, *Facebook* users tend to be more realistic when they describe themselves: since this is a SNS made up of users who, to a large extent, also know one another in physical settings, it is easier to extract signals that corroborate that what the user is writing on the profile is true.

Fourthly, the *Social Identity Theory* explains SNS behaviour from the premise that human beings have an inherent necessity to label themselves inside a group with which they feel some form of connection or identification. Indeed, people label themselves according to similarities with the archetypical features of the social group to which they want to belong. According to this theory, everybody needs both a feeling of being unique and a feeling of group membership. In other words, users shift between *independent self-construal* (constructing one’s self by reference to one’s personality, beliefs, etc., regardless of what others think) and *interdependent self-construal* (emphasis on blending with the group and mimicking its qualities, regardless of what one thinks) (DeAndrea et al. 2010: 427).

This double source of self- and group-connoted identity would explain why certain users prefer to belong to one SNS and not to another (Ferebee & Davis 2009). And it would complement more socially connoted theories such as the *Social Capital Theory*, which focusses on the value – or capital – that is obtained from interpersonal interactions inside a collectivity and which is also produced inside SNSs (see Ellison et al. 2007, Valenzuela et al. 2009).

A fifth theory, *Uses & Gratifications*, has already been mentioned in this book. It justifies the use of a certain technology depending on the benefit or reward that its use provides and depending on its capacity to satisfy the needs that motivate this use. Taken to the field of SNS research, it is easy to conclude that the application of this theory is directed towards the extent to which these sites are used regularly for the gratification or satisfaction of personal needs (see Shao 2009: 8–18). Joinson (2008: 1035) also applies this theory to SNSs and concludes that “the different uses and gratifications relate differentially to patterns of usage, with social connection gratifications tending to lead to increased frequency of use, and content gratifications to increased time spent on the site.” Besides, the typical function of SNSs, namely “keeping in touch,” comprises two main functions according to him:

The first is a surveillance function [...] *Facebook* is used to see what old contacts and friends are ‘up to’, how they look and how they behave. In keeping with this use, there is evidence that *Facebook* profiles serve an important self-presentation tool [...] Associated with this use is the social capital building gratification, where *Facebook* is used to build, invest in and maintain ties with distant friends and contacts (ibid.).

2.3 Profiles, entries and (mutually) manifest information

SNSs share some properties with instant messaging (see Chapter 5) and e-mail (see Chapter 6): all of them include some form of “call of attention” that is oriented towards the identification of the user’s communicative intention and leads to the satisfaction of the informative intention. Instant messaging alerts the addressee user (with an emergent window that invades the screen and also with a sound) to the fact that another user has a communicative intention, and invites the user to engage in a relevance-seeking processing of this user’s informative intention (often through a typed dialogue). Similarly, e-mail programs alert the addressee user with an icon (of an envelope, of a mailbox, etc. and with sounds) to the arrival of a message that might provide relevant information (i.e. carries a presumption of its eventual relevance). And the same applies to SNSs. The system sends e-mails to the users alerting them that a relevant comment has been typed on the profile, that some reply to one’s comments has been posted, etc. (see Alandete 2009b).

From a cognitive pragmatics and relevance-theoretic point of view, SNSs are interesting because both profiles and the information made manifest therein are evidences of underlying communicative intentions and, ultimately, indices of the attributes of the user’s identity. This information on the profile and on the site entries is interpreted by the readers with the aid of context, so that they can recover the information explicitly communicated and derive implications, that is, so that the intended interpretation(s) are correctly selected and inferred.

At the same time, the different options for interactivity that these sites offer (direct comments on entries, on pictures and videos, instant messaging, e-mail, *Twitter* messages...) favour a certain level of mutuality among the users. This mutuality also presupposes a command of the techniques for oralizing text that will be analysed in Chapter 5 and which signal user membership through their correct use and interpretation. Indeed, as we can see in (1) (from *Facebook*, January 2011) interactions inside SNSs exhibit a high oral quality that is coded by means of repetitions of letters, capitalization and creative use of punctuation marks, as well as the use of emoticons:

(1) [comments on a photo depicting User 1 and User 2].

User 1. YES!! Created by myself. im such a professional when it comes to hair!! WOOPWOOP

User 2. look how happy I am with the result! hehehe
I asked for Demi Moore! Thanks User 1 !

User 3. heehee! loving the friends quote reference there User 2 ! ;)

User 2. Thank User 3! glad u got it ;) hehehe

User 1. see User 2..... defo not in User 3's room..... :p xx

User 2. ah yes, how could I forget ahahaha :D

Ultimately, all of these forms of interaction provide users with an invaluable feedback for their identity shaping in a kind of circular process with a number of phases. Figure 4.2 reproduces my proposal of the steps of interaction, mutuality and information transmission on SNSs that play a part in the user's adjustments of identity (see also Georgalou 2010: 41–42).

1. The figure starts with what, in Chapter 2, I proposed as the sources of identity in physical contexts, which were represented as an inverted triangle with three layers: macro-social aspects such as race, sex, etc. (wide top part of the triangle), groups to which the person chooses to belong (middle area) and the person's self-identity as idiolect (narrow bottom part of triangle). I also argued that on the Internet this inverted triangle is *re-inverted*, as it were, since on the Net the wide top area is minimized due to the cues-filtered quality of cyberspace (attributes such as race or sex are no longer essential), the middle area is maintained but replaced with virtual groups, and the narrow bottom part is fragmented or amplified due to the possibilities of playing with multiple personalities and identities that Internet allows for, many of which fit the quality of *disembodied identities* suggested by Baym (2010: 105).

2. This picture of discursive sources of identity as triangles clashes with the picture, also described in Chapter 2, of today's tendency to hybridization of personal networks in physical and virtual settings and with the user as a node in intersecting networks. Therefore, it would not be a picture of "either" physical "or" virtual sources of identity, as can be deduced from two triangles that do not touch, but a picture of several sources of identity that get mixed and imbricated in a time when the dividing line between physical and virtual realms is increasingly blurred.

3. This blurring also happens on SNSs, which often sustain relationships that are created and developed exclusively on the Net, but which also help users to maintain ties that were created offline and connections that are created virtually and "jump" to physical scenarios at a subsequent stage. In all of these cases, the user's identity is shaped and adapted to the different networks and to

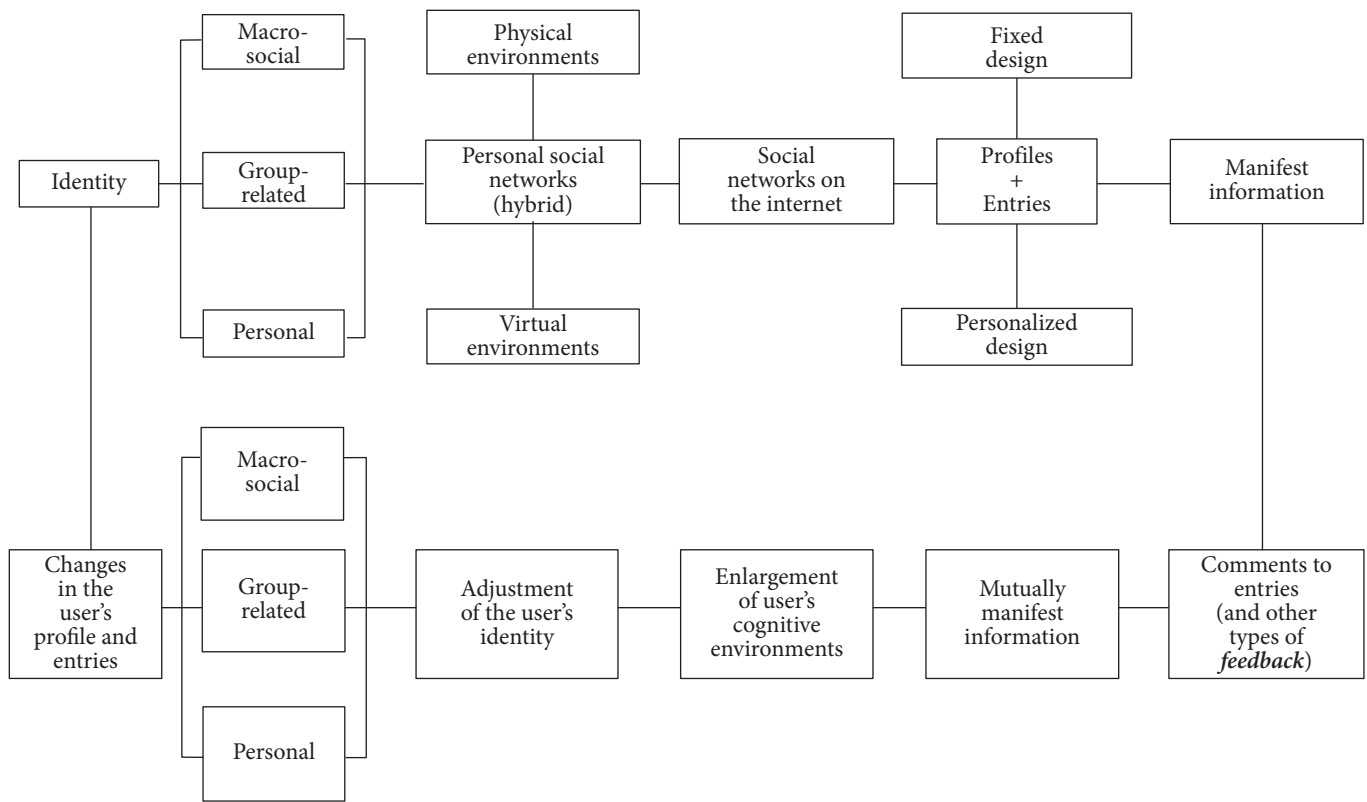


Figure 4.2 Profiles and (mutually) manifest information on SNSs and their influence on identity

the different intensities of ties and relationships with other users. And, of course, interactions with other users and the information made manifest in these interactions (through comments, etc.) is also an important source for the adjustment of identity. Notice, for example, how the interaction quoted in (2) (from *Facebook*, January 2011), where all the users make mutually manifest their opinions, helps User 1 to be more confident about her physical shape:

(2) [*replies to an initial comment by User 1 on her profile*].

User 1. I am still pissed! Tomorrow on the wagon, but am 7 pounds heavier! Why does it take months to lose half a stone but only a week to put it on??

User 2. You are a Piss Pot :) xxx

User 3. he he lol! xx

User 4. Bless ya honey.... Managed to keep it to 2lb but only because I was down the gym most days over xmas..... Don't 4get the planner on tues x x x

User 5. Keep drinking and find yourself a nice young man to work off the calories :) it works for me x

User 6. I lost 4 due to being ill, but reckon I've put 7 on in the last 2 days

User 1. Its shit isn't it! But have had a good time, well I think I have!!

User 7. Don't go on the wagon Hun, just stick with the workouts and it will fall off :) xx

User 8. that's all that gets me through my workouts, the thought of having a beer as soon as I'm done :))

User 1. I think if I have a month off the wine it will come off quicker! Feel like a little teletubby

User 7. Good luck x

4. Inside SNSs, identity is shaped basically at the users' profile, which contains the content that they upload plus comments by other users, the list of friends, etc. Although the picture or opinion that we can obtain from these profiles is always partial and, to a certain extent, schematic (boyd 2004b), at the same time it provides us with valuable clues about the identity of the user who owns the profile.

5. In the process of profile creation, there are several levels of personalization (*customization*) within a range between the extreme "zero personalization," when users have to follow strictly the rules and the default interfaces for profile creation by entering personal data on successive forms, to the extent that everybody on the SNS has identical designs of profiles; to the extreme "full personalization," for example providing freedom to integrate personal applications inside the profile.

As happens with blogs, owning a fixed standard profile or a highly personalized one has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the repetition of a unique interface for profiles generates a conventionalization of the SNS genre that

reduces, at least initially, the reader's effort (to locate information, etc.). Besides, these conventionalized profiles are a source for user identity shaping, because the user mimics other users' profiles and feels part of the community. The homogeneity of profiles produces a "group mark" of identity; or, as van Doorn (2010:585) calls it, "a shared social reality":

Instead of deriving social norms from other people's embodied presence, users have to create and interpret the semiotic resources (i.e. text, images, videos) that make up their profiles, which effectively constitute a digital infrastructure [...] These interactions dialogically produce a shared social reality through the distribution and interpretation of these artefacts.

This quality is also applicable to the kind of information that is uploaded on the profile. As boyd (2007b) correctly concludes from an analysis of SNSs for adolescents, when browsing and checking what information other adolescents upload on their profiles, they obtain a general idea of what they can or cannot provide about themselves on their own profiles. In such a way, a homogeneity is also generated in the content of these SNSs, besides homogeneity of design.

On the other hand, being given the chance to personalize the profile offers the user an alternative source of identity shaping based on individuation against the group. The readers will value, as additional cognitive effects, this personalization. But these effects should offset the additional effort that is involved in locating sources and types of information in non-conventionalized areas of the profile and which cannot be expected to be found in the same way as in fixed profiles. Nowadays, most SNSs offer users the possibility of personalizing, to a certain extent, their profiles by adding applications, changing colours, etc.

6. The next stage in Figure 4.2 indicates that one of the main reasons why profiles and entries are created is to provide other users (normally the ones labelled as "friends," see 2.4 below) with certain information about the users' lives, events, etc. That is, they want to make manifest information, in relevance-theoretic terms. Immediately, we ask ourselves the reason for this choice of content, the underlying intentionality. For Lin & Lu (2011:1159), "enjoyment is the most important factor affecting the behavior of SNS users [...] [and] the number of peers and perceived complementarity effectively reinforce SNS usefulness and enjoyment." Making information manifest to other users aims at getting comments by other users, which makes them aware of the size and quality of their networks, while producing enjoyable effects.

Needless to say, by uploading information on the SNS, the user *exudes* several attitudes, beliefs, values, etc. that readers can infer without the user making them explicitly manifest on the profile, that is, beyond the user's intention. In fact, a mere tagging of information or choosing which words are going to be turned into

links that bind chunks of text together influences the way in which this information will be subsequently located and processed, and regardless of whether the author had consciously assessed the interpretive consequences of this tagging or link design (see Lampe et al. 2007).

Tagging is usually referred to as *folksonomy* (see Ribes 2007), a term that reflects the intuition of many users making an effort to label and link discourses and influencing the quantity and quality of information that other users obtain and process, and hence of eventual relevance. Something similar happens to “RSS feeds,” designed to satisfy specific informational needs of users. But they also influence the kind of information that users access and process, and therefore they also affect the eventual relevance (Daugherty et al. 2008).

The information made manifest on SNSs is distributed over the different areas that a profile is made of. A prototypical profile such as the one in *Facebook* contains typical areas of information such as the self-introductory text, personal interests, user’s picture, and a wide area for entries and comments. Although these areas constitute valid sources of information, they do not provide the whole image of what the user is really like but, rather, the reader is faced with partial chunks of information and has to undertake the task of inferring implicit and implicated information by means of repeated interactions with the profile. These interactions lead to adjustments in the information that the reader has about the owner of the profile, and this information is a valuable preliminary context upon which subsequent interactions can be sustained.

However, although users can upload huge quantities of information on their profiles, the processing of this information as preliminary context for interactions differs substantially from the cumulative process which, in oral interactions, produces a gradual mutuality of assumptions (the “getting to know each other”). On SNSs information is often “simply there” and offered to the reader as a whole archive of the owner’s life (see Lenhart & Madden 2007), including intimate details. A term has even been coined for this exposition of personal details: *extimacy*, the public exhibition of *intimacy* that often abounds on SNSs (Pérez-Lanzac & Rincón 2009). Besides, on SNSs this “foundation” for future interactions does not necessarily have to be verbal. Pictures, for example have an important role on SNSs: “they establish communication paths between nodes, producing and reproducing social networks. More than being mere promotionalist self-advertisements, they are conversation pieces, necessary starters for the exchange of compliments-qua-gifts, which enable not only the formation of relations, but also their maintenance” (Schwarz 2010: 174).

Moreover, there is no unique pattern of information revelation or presentation. It is the readers who have to infer the information from the different options

available on the profile.¹⁷ As Gross & Acquisti (2005) argue, not all SNSs share the same options or content, but differ in significant aspects: (a) in the user's identification. On some SNSs users are encouraged to use their real names and pictures,¹⁸ while on others the use of *nicks* is expected, especially in "love portals" such as *Meetic* or *Match*); (b) in the kind of information provided by the users. Frequently, it is about hobbies and interests, but it can be very different on other SNSs, for example on those centred upon a shared specialized topic that entails the use of jargons. (c) Finally, the visibility of information on these SNSs also varies, this time depending on whether all the users can access other users' uploaded information or there are filters so that only the intended audience interprets it.

There are multiple reasons for uploading (and making manifest) information on SNS profiles and these go beyond the basic desire to publicize the user's life, and there is an expectation of (relevant) reward in the effort of uploading information. In the case of adolescents the reward is obvious: the information on the profile can lead to a positive judgement by friends and contacts, as illustrated in this comment by an adolescent user (from boyd 2007b):

- (3) I'm not the most popular girl in my class. I'm just a kid. I'm a little shy. And it's really hard in this school to impress people enough to be your friend... But I go on these really great vacations with my parents... And I take pictures of places we go. And I write about those places. And I post this on my Xanga. Because I think if kids in school read what I have to say and how I say it, they'll want to be my friend.

Self-disclosure is, perhaps, one of the most important reasons for uploading information on SNSs and part of the overall human tendency to obtain social benefits from interactions with other members of the site community, even if some users are obsessed with controlling the information that others can obtain from their profiles (see Peterson & Siek 2009). The eventual benefit will affect the

17. In this sense, Zhao et al. (2008:1824–1826), in a study of *Facebook*, conclude that users resort to three basic forms of identity disclosure on the profile: (a) *visual identity claims* (the user as a social actor in the sense of "look at me and see how I am"), basically the publication of photos and videos with comments (one's or other users') on the SNS wall; (b) *enumerative identity claims* (the user as provider of hobbies, interests, etc.); and (c) *narrative identity claims*, when the user self-describes and claims an individual identity to the other users.

18. The user's main picture displayed on the profile plays a part in the initiation of relationships within the SNS. Wang et al. (2010) demonstrated that it had "a significant main effect on willingness to initiate friendships with the profile owners. Physical attractiveness was most salient as a visual cue when choosing whom to befriend when other verbal or non-verbal cues were limited. [...] The results suggest that both male and female subjects were more willing to initiate friendships with opposite-sex profile owners with attractive photos."

user's self-identity and his/her role and placement on a scale of popularity on the SNS. These adjustments of the self may also lead to multiple selves with different intensities in the user's life, as was suggested in Chapter 2. As Turkle (2011: 160) acknowledges, "we use social networking to be 'ourselves,' but our online performances take on lives of their own. Our online selves develop distinct personalities. Sometimes we see them as our 'better selves.' As we invest in them, we want to take credit for them."

One drawback of this accessibility to other users' information is that it reminds users not only of their place and identity on the SNS, but also of their adaptability to an inherently social environment:

Facebook is not a good place for a lonely person, and not just because of how precisely it quantifies your isolation. The news feed, the default point of entry to the site, is a constantly updated stream of your every friend's every activity, opinion and photograph [...] you know exactly how much more popular everyone else is [...] It can be, to say the least, disheartening. Without a real-world social network with which to interact, social networking sites act as proof of the old cliché: you're never so alone as when you're in a crowd. (Meltzer 2010:26)

Other reasons for participating on SNSs are listed by Gangadharbatla (2008): (a) *need for cognition* (already cited in Chapter 3, it is the individual's tendency to get involved in certain tasks, even if they entail much mental effort); (b) *need to belong* (that is, of meaningful and positive interpersonal interactions); and (c) *collective self-esteem* (arising from feelings associated with belonging to a social group and its attributes). More predictable reasons are listed in Brandtzæg & Heim (2009): to establish new relationships, maintain contacts, socialize, get information on topics, chat with friends, kill time, surf profiles, etc. These reasons also vary depending on the "culture" of the users who interact on the SNS (i.e. prototypical habits, beliefs, etc. shared and taken for granted within a community). For example, a study that compared the broad cultures of the USA and Korea (cited in Kim et al. 2011: 367) concluded that Internet users from Hong Kong, a *collectivistic culture*, tended to view the Internet primarily for social interaction, whereas Americans, a typically *individualistic culture*, were more likely to use the Internet as a means of seeking and gaining information. "Individualistic" and "collectivistic" are taken here as the classic terms proposed by Hall: in a collectivistic culture, people value group identity, and tend to foster lifetime relationships, whereas in individualistic cultures independence is highly valued, which results in fragmented and short-term relationships with one another.

7. However, and following the chart in Figure 4.2, although it is important to make information about oneself manifest to other users, what is very significant is to get some level of mutuality of this information, to reach a *mutual manifestness*

and enlarge one's *mutual cognitive environment*. This is an optimal level at which users can extend and overlap their personal cognitive environments and fine-grain the specificity and extent of information that is really mutual and can be used as a preliminary context in subsequent interactions. Ellison et al. (2011: 133) claim that mutuality lies in the heart of all the SNS activity: users seek cues about each other to create common ground, and profile fields reduce the cost of finding these commonalities among users. This suggests that *Facebook* users may be more likely to use online information to find others with whom they share some kind of offline connection, as opposed to finding others whose connection is based on common interests like music or movies.

This mutually manifest information is essential for effective communication, since the presumption of this mutuality leads users to leave much information implicit, non-coded, taken for granted, and addressee users have to fill in the blanks by resorting to this overlapping space of their cognitive environments, as in (4a), which demands from readers the answer to questions such as the ones provided in (4b):

- (4) a. Hey! The idea of a party in the dunes sounds great. We'll have to get everyone to go to the office to get some booze and we can meet at the usual place on Saturday to pick up Tom's car.
- b. Hey! The idea of a party [*organizing it? go to it? what party? what kind of party? whose idea was it?*] in the dunes [*which dunes?*] sounds great! We'll have to get everyone [*get whom?*] to go to the office [*which office?*] to get some booze [*which kind of drink? which brand?*] and we can meet [*who? all the mates?*] at the usual place [*which place?*] on Saturday [*which Saturday?*] to pick up Tom's car [*which Tom?*].

In everyday interactions, very often the only communicative purpose of utterances is to reveal areas of mutuality between the interlocutors' cognitive environments. This is the case of Ann's irony in (5) about a pub, whose objective is mainly to determine if the information in (6) about her preferences is or not shared by her partner, and it is used as an interpretive premise for the derivation of the implication (*implicature*) in (7). The successful outcome of dialogue (5) makes Ann and Peter aware, at that precise moment, that the information in (6) is mutually manifest to both of them, which produces an enlargement of their mutual cognitive environment (see Yus 2009a):

- (5) [*Peter and Ann enter a pub. It is filled with people singing and dancing.*]
- Ann: [*smiling ostensively*] There's nothing like a lively pub!
- Peter: Indeed! Shall we go to another pub?
- Ann: Please!

- (6) Ann hates overcrowded places. She prefers a quiet atmosphere where she can have a chat without loud background noise.
- (7) Ann is being ironic and, in fact, she does not like the atmosphere of the pub we have just entered. She'd rather leave the pub.

In a similar fashion, part of the information made manifest on SNSs can reach an adequate level of mutuality and serve as a preliminary context for future interactions. This interactive mutuality would be complemented by some “*ex post facto* mutuality,” achieved when the interactions do not presuppose mutuality of information, but *reveal* aspects that overlap in the users’ cognitive environments. This happens, for instance, if during an interaction on a SNS two users discover that they have been on holiday at the same place and they can, from then on, assume that certain information about this place will be mutually manifest (even if they are not sure of that). And again, this is a useful preliminary context from which to build up subsequent interactions.¹⁹ It is not surprising, then, that many searches on SNSs are intended to find people with similar interests, beliefs, or hobbies that can serve as foundations for future interactions.

Mutuality of information is possible because SNSs exhibit many forms of interaction (comments on posts, dialogues on a picture, instant messaging facilities...) and users code their messages assuming the existence of this mutuality, unlike traditional web pages. Furthermore, mutuality takes place in an environment that, according to Miller (2008: 393–395), values interactivity over information:

we see a shift in emphasis from blogging technology which encouraged the creation of substantive text along with networking, to social networking profiles which emphasize networking over substantive text [...] communication that retains a general sociability without the exchange of real information [...] towards what are being called ‘phatic technologies’: technologies which build relationships and sustain social interaction through pervasive (but non-informational) contact and intimacy.

It is undeniable that interactions on SNSs differ from the ones in physical contexts. However, although in the past it was easy to dismiss Internet interactions for being plain-text-based, nowadays, the increase of bandwidth and the use of pictures, videos and applications play a part in these interactions, creating a

19. Feld (1981) proposed the term *focus* to describe all the situations, hobbies, interests, etc. that reveal connections among people and shape or allow for the formation of social networks. These *foci* vary from those which favour frequent interactions and tight links (such as belonging to a family, for example) to more relaxed ones that generate more occasional interactions and weaker ties. This scale would also be found on SNSs.

communicative platform, rather than a unique source of interaction.²⁰ Besides, on these SNSs the users often do not know the extent of their readers' cognitive environments and how much information they can assume to belong to their mutual cognitive environments, and interpretations may differ from the intended ones. Finally, interactions on SNSs can be performed in different ways and formats with varying degrees of "visibility" for the readers, as can be seen in Table 4.1 (slightly adapted from Joly et al. 2009: 55). To this table, it would be necessary to add some information about the intensity of these possibilities of interaction. As van Dijck (2009: 45) comments, the concept of "participation" on a SNS is vague, ambiguous and imprecise. There are degrees both in the production of content, in the quality of users' feedback and in the intensity of interactions.

Also related to this issue is the fact that mutual manifestness may be intended for a specific user, for example when posting a comment on the user's "wall," but in fact this comment may also be read by other users who share the label of "friends," and who may also aim at mutual manifestness. Walther et al. (2011: 33) correctly stress the importance of this issue when they state that a comment on the user's profile "is, by definition, a public message, bordering on being broadcasted (or at least, narrowcasted within the social network) for others to see. Facebook users have noted that one of the main uses for social networking technology is relational maintenance [...] Are such wall posts 'mass' messages or 'interpersonal' messages?" And from our perspective, which mutual manifestness is intended? Is this "collectively achieved mutuality" beyond the intention of the author of that comment on the user's profile? And, incidentally, is this mutuality possible in the first place?

8. This mutuality of information favoured by interactions on the SNS leads to a number of adjustments affecting the identity of the users, who will obtain from other users' comments and dialogues a valuable source for their positioning in the group or network and personal introspection.²¹ These comments are also

20. The most paradigmatic case is the re-design of *Facebook* profiles, which now include spaces for personal applications and has integrated an instant messaging service, a wide set of options for interaction within the same interface (see Keenan & Shiri 2009: 444).

21. For Jones et al. (2008), a problem is that these SNS users not only have to adjust the revelation of their identities on the profile and its entries, but are often forced to make a coherent identity display for multiple potential readers. For example, the same profile can be read by intimate friends and occasional acquaintances, workmates and relatives, a reality that has been labelled "context collapse" (see boyd 2008, Marwick & boyd 2010), and the identity that the user has shaped online may be adequate for intimate friends but not for workmates, for instance. One of the problems that is arousing media attention is, precisely, that many adolescents own profiles that are adequate for their peers but these profiles might be problematic and even dangerous if accessed by unknown readers.

Table 4.1 Different possibilities of interaction on a SNS
(adapted from Joly et al. 2009: 55)

Interaction	Recipient(s)	Visibility	Intention
Profile message	Contact / own profile	Public (all contacts)	– To introduce a newly added user. – To show publicly one's opinions, hobbies, etc. or recommend something to other users. – To let the recipient's contacts know what is going on between them.
Bulletin, posted item	Contacts / own profile	Public (all contacts)	– To share interesting content with contacts. – To announce an important event to contacts. – To ask contacts for their feedback.
Gift	Contacts	Public (all contacts)	– Public display of interests, hobbies, etc with more impact on the profile than a message, because gifts are usually not free.
Events (invitation)	Contacts	Public or private	– To invite (some) contacts to an event. – To facilitate communication between those who intend to attend an event (e.g. for arranging a common gift, adding contacts). – To share information related to the event (e.g. photos, videos, links).
Groups (invitation)	Contacts	Public or private	– To gather users around a common interest or facilitate a dialogue about it. – Opportunity to add contacts.
Poke	Any person	Private	– To say “hello, check out my profile” to someone that the user has probably just met offline. – To include the recipient in the sender's contacts temporarily, allowing visibility of his/her profile and rich communication.
Private message	Any person	Private	– To have private interpersonal discussions (no particular interest for social networking)

visible for other users, who can derive conclusions and a more accurate picture of the owner of the profile. For example, one of the conclusions drawn by Walther et al. (2008) referred to the comments that friends make on the user's profile, which have an impact on the impression that other users form about the user whose profile contains these comments, specifically on the assessment of social attractiveness and credibility. And Toma (2010) adds that the most prominent feature is that SNSs allow users to 'collect' information from friends and their contributions to the SNS. Since friendships and personal relationships are the most widely used sources of self-affirmation, she predictably concludes that "SNS profiles appear to restore users' sense of self-worth by reminding them of the important aspects of their lives: their connections with friends, their identities and group membership. As such, a surreptitious effect of the selective self-presentation and social connectedness afforded by SNS profiles can be a boost in morale and feelings of self-worth" (ibid.: 1752).

9. Therefore, as Figure 4.2 reflects, the information uploaded on the profile, the comments on entries and pictures and other users' access to this information may generate important adjustments in the user's identity, not only as an individual, but also in other sources of identity shaping such as group identity and macro-social identity. These three sources (individual, group and society) would be related to the three modes of social influence proposed by Kelman (1974, quoted in Cheung & Lee 2010: 25): *compliance* (subjective norm), *internalization* (group norm), and *identification* (social identity).²² Although "subjective norm" is important at the moment of choosing to belong to a SNS, once the user is part of the collectivity of users the "social" sources of identity are essential in an environment such as the SNS, where the "feeling of belonging" is prominent. As Cheung & Lee (ibid.) stress,

unlike the traditional individual-based approach (personal intention to perform an individual act), social interaction and connection is the objective in Web 2.0 technologies, including online social networks. Associated with these new phenomena in human communication and interaction patterns, we believe that We-Intention, encapsulating social behaviors by the collectivity, is a more appropriate approach to study user participation in online social networks.

22. Social identity has three major components, all of which are clearly applicable to identity shaping on SNSs: (a) *cognitive social identity* (the self-categorization process blends the users into the group but, at the same time, differentiates them from other groups); (b) *evaluative social identity* (the evaluation of self-worth on the basis of belonging to a particular group); and (c) *affective social identity* (a sense of emotional involvement with the group, which is characterized by identification with, involvement in, and emotional attachment to the group) (Cheung & Lee ibid.: 26).

Similarly, boyd (2011: 43) acknowledges this social side of identity shaping when she stresses that, in fact, the design of SNS profiles creates an environment in which self-presentation is often beyond the user's control: "profiles are a place where people gather to converse and share. Conversations happen on profiles and a person's profile reflects their engagement with the site. As a result, participants do not have complete control over their self-representation."

These adjustments of identity and self-presentation on SNSs will eventually affect what (and the type of) information is uploaded on the profile and its entries, forming a new preliminary context from which the whole process depicted in Figure 4.2 would start all over again.

2.4 Adjusting the concepts of "friend" and "friendship" on SNSs

When we interpret an utterance, we have to answer three basic questions: (a) What does the speaker intend to communicate explicitly?, (b) what does the speaker intend to communicate implicitly (i.e. what does he/she intend to implicate)?, and (c) what contextual information does the speaker expect us to access in order to obtain (a) and (b) correctly? To illustrate these questions, we can analyse Ann's reply in the dialogue (8) below (Yus 2010c):

- (8) Tom: By the way... Did you buy that table I told you about?
Ann: It's too wide and uneven.

If Tom wants to interpret Ann correctly, he has to turn what she has said (the logical form, what she has literally coded) into a contextualized, meaningful interpretation. He will use his inferential ability to obtain the propositional form that Ann intends to communicate explicitly (the *explicature*, question (a)) and will use it plus contextual information (question (c)) to derive an implicated conclusion (question (b)), and all that in a mutual parallel adjustment of explicit proposition, context and implications. Among the inferential procedures that Tom has to apply to answer question (a), the following can be listed: *disambiguation* (a table can be "uneven" because its surface is not smooth or because its legs are not properly levelled), and the *free enrichment* of the content that Ann's utterance lacks in order to really make sense ("too wide and uneven [*for what?*]"). The inferred outcome as an answer to question (a) would be a proposition similar to the one in (9):

- (9) Explicature: The table that Tom told Ann about is too wide to go through the bedroom door and its surface is irregular.

Since (9) is not really the answer to Tom's question, he will have to combine (9) with contextual information (*implicated premises*) to yield the intended interpretation as an implicature (*implicated conclusion*). In this example, the contextual information would be some encyclopaedic commonsense assumptions about how unlikely it is that someone would buy a table that is too wide and uneven (in the senses already inferred), and this contextual information allows for the derivation of the implicature in (10):

(10) Implicature: Ann didn't buy the table I told her about.

Among the inferential operations required to turn the zero-context schematic logical form into a fully contextualized proposition and also important for the derivation of implicatures is the so-called *adjustment* of the prototypical concepts that underlie the words uttered by the speaker. In other words, to turn the conventional meaning of the words (coded concepts), as one would find in dictionaries, for instance, into more specific, contextualized *ad hoc concepts* adjusted to the speaker's intentions and the hearer's interpretive needs in a specific communicative situation (i.e. these *ad hoc concepts* may not be valid in a different situation).²³ For example, someone who interprets the concept coded by the word *tired* in (11) will have to adjust it inferentially so that the resulting *ad hoc concepts* fit the type of tiredness that the speaker intends to communicate in each case:

- (11) a. I've been running for three hours. I'm very *tired*.
(*ad hoc concept*: physical exhaustion).
b. When a person is *tired* of London, he is tired of life.
(*ad hoc concept*: vital boredom).
c. I want to split up. I'm *tired* of this relationship.
(*ad hoc concept*: dissatisfaction with a relationship).
d. I can't type anymore. I'm *tired*.
(*ad hoc concept*: mental exhaustion).

The analysis of SNSs reveals that something similar happens to the coded concepts of "friend" and "friendship," which have a prototypical meaning that has to be adjusted correctly by users to make them fit the specific qualities of relationships, ties and contacts that they establish and foster within these SNSs. As Cambra González (2009) correctly points out,

23. Similarly, in Example (8) above Tom will have to adjust the coded concept "uneven" (once disambiguated) in order to obtain a more relevant *ad hoc concept* that fits Ann's intended interpretation.

different types of interpersonal relationship are reduced to the ambiguous label (raised to the status of category) of “friend,” reducing part of the distinctive character of each particular case (one can simply be an acquaintance, and we even know that there are different types of friendships related to different types or degrees of ties). This biased effect that is created when everybody linked [to a user] in *Facebook* is reduced to the same category is the first step towards the upcoming of certain distorting effects that socialization within this medium introduces in interpersonal relationships.

This adjustment operates on two concepts that are difficult to define and delimit. These are inherently ambiguous terms both *intra-* and *inter-*culturally and involve variations that depend on how people feel the intensity of their ties with others. As Adams & Allan (1999, quoted in boyd 2006b), point out, friendship must be analysed in context because context influences the forms that these friendships adopt. Even in the bibliography there is little consensus on what model of friendship should be applied to SNSs. In this book I have claimed that friendships on SNSs, even those that are created and sustained online, can reach a surprising level of intensity, whereas for other authors such as Stefanone et al. (2011),

while a subset of these online networks may be composed of traditional close friends, the majority are likely characterized by much lower levels of emotional closeness and intensity placing them on the far end of the weak tie spectrum. In other words, weak tie relationships on sites like Facebook.com may not represent meaningful connections because generally people invest comparatively little in these relationships.

Moreover, each SNS seems to have its own conceptualization of the kind of “friend” and “friendship” that can be developed inside it, with a danger of misunderstanding if several users do not share the same *ad hoc concepts* from the processing of the coded “friend” and “friendship.” One of the SNSs, *Friendster*, encourages users to attract people and even coined the term *friending* for that task. But there are great differences among users when it comes to weighing the reasons for *friending*. On another SNS, *LiveJournal*, the concept of friendship is very unspecific and does not require reciprocity. Anybody can add others to the contact list without the presumption of a minimal relationship. Since messages in *LiveJournal* have to be labelled as public, private, only for friends or available for sub-group of friends, misunderstandings abound due to dissimilar adjustments of the concept “friend,” to the extent that analysts such as Fono & Raynes-Goldie (2006) suggest the term *hyperfriending* to describe the variability of concepts that underlie what users conceptualize as “friendship.”

This lack of agreement about the meaning of this term is also transferred to the realm of types of comment on the SNS. To choose between a mere comment

and a private message entails parallel decisions about the level of friendship that binds users together. In boyd (2008: 126) there is an interesting quote by an adolescent user that indicates differences in the conceptualization of message types and message purposes: “a message is like if you want to like to a person like talk and talk and the comment is just like to just drop by and say ‘how are you’ and stuff.” Hence, the type of message is connoted according to shared implicit rules. The same applies to the channel chosen for communication. For adolescents, e-mail is too formal and only useful for student-teacher interactions and homework assignments (see Chapter 6). The SNS is used for more informal, humorous and “flirtatious” goals. And instant messaging is for intimate conversations with peers. Not all *cyber-media* possess the same function and the fact that most users exhibit similar choices of channels and for similar purposes indicates the existence of collective negotiations about these qualities and communicative goals, and a prediction of mutual manifestness of this information.

Fono & Raynes-Goldie (2006) also suggest a typology of senses of “friendship” in *LiveJournal* that can be re-interpreted in terms of “conceptual adjustment” and “ad hoc concept,” as proposed by relevance theory:

1. *Friendship as content.* Some contacts appear especially as mere lists of users and other users access this list as part of a search for content.
2. *Friendship as offline facilitator.* The use of this SNS can facilitate the creation of ties outside the Net, and part of the friendship on this SNS entails listing offline friends who also have profiles there.
3. *Friendship as online community.* For others, friendship is mainly focussed on users that will never meet face-to-face, but only inside the SNS.
4. *Friendship as trust.* For some users, to be on a restricted-access list of friends is the foundation of true friendship.
5. *Friendship as courtesy.* Although *LiveJournal* does not require reciprocity, the lack of it is often considered rude, asymmetrical and devoid of the true qualities of friendship.
6. *Friendship as declaration.* Most of the users of this SNS consider friendship to be a kind of “declaration of intentions.” By publicly listing a user as friend in the profile, it is understood that a relationship is publicized.
7. *Friendship as nothing.* For some users, *friending* is nothing more than putting a person on a list, without further connotations or implications, that is, it is not a signal of an underlying friendship. This also happens on *MySpace*, where adding someone to the contact list does not indicate any kind of feelings for this person (see Jones et al. 2008).

Apart from misunderstandings due to differing adjustments of the concepts of “friend” and “friendship,” problems may also arise if these concepts are mixed with the concepts that we usually employ in physical scenarios and we try to transfer

them to the Net (Thelwall 2009a, 2009b). Although I do not claim that offline interactions are necessarily better than their virtual counterparts (see Chapter 2), it is true that there is an idealized concept of friendship for physical interactions in specific spaces (bars, streets, parks...) and this idealization is not directly applicable to the “friendship” that arises on the Internet or in mixed physical-virtual interactions. Therefore, the users will continuously have to make adjustments to determine the intensity and labels of all the relationships that they foster on SNSs, which range from intimate friendship, to occasional contacts and ties with people that will never be met offline, and all that with an increasing number of interactions in hybrid personal networks, as proposed in Chapter 2 (see Antheunis et al. 2008). Perhaps a solution would be to dismiss the notion of “friend” altogether, as Isidro Maya (quoted in Gosálvez 2010: 28) suggests: “Friend” is “an inadequate use of the term. Contacts is more adequate. Facebook is a peculiar context for socialization, like a square or a bar, and in this context these contacts from the past simply turn up because the software facilitates and promotes the re-activation of latent relationships.”

3. The microblog *Twitter*

3.1 Introduction

At present, a number of *microblogging* technologies are being developed, with *Twitter* as the most popular example. This is a short-message service (normally of less than 200 characters, *Twitter* messages are up to 140) that allows users to post “in real time” what they are doing, either through the Net or through mobile phones or PC tablets. Although some analysts claim that this is an ephemeral means of virtual communication,²⁴ in my opinion it is an interesting option for interactions and for transferring everyday information to other users. As Johnson (2009) corroborates, *Twitter* may have disappeared in a few years’ time, but what will be perpetuated are the structure and communicative essence of *microblogs* (live micro-messages, access from multiple devices, communication centred upon ordinary life, etc.).

Definitions of *Twitter* include the following:

24. Beckett (quoted in Hughes 2009) says that “*Twitter* is definitely an important tool but it’s also important to note how fast this technology can change. In five years’ time, sites such as *Twitter* or *Facebook* may not exist at all -something else will have replaced them.” For Jones (2007), the most evident danger for *Twitter* is its imbrication within SNSs, which would make its existence as an independent technology unnecessary.

online service you can use to send out short (140 characters or less) notes to the world via the Web, IM and text-messaging. People use it to issue updates about what they're doing, eating, seeing, feeling, etc., to their family, friends and whoever else might be following them ("following" is *Twitterspeak* for signing up to receive somebody's "tweets," which is what the individual updates are, adorably, called). (Grossman 2009)

A service that connects you with your friends, that answers questions about what you are doing through a mobile phone, a web page, instant messaging and e-mail. It allows you to keep in touch with people in real time.

(Jack Dorsey, creator and president of *Twitter*, in Reventós 2008)

Although *Twitter* can be accessed from multiple devices and, in fact, more users do it from mobile devices than from computers (Lenhart 2009), *Twitter* also includes a personal web page for the user which resembles SNS profiles. This page is divided into two main areas, a wide one with the user's picture (a photo or an icon) and the list of messages or *tweets* that are published in real time. On the right there is a second area, a frame with personal information about the user, and a list of contacts with micro-icons, as on SNSs.

There are various reasons for using this *microblog* service, but most of them are related to a human need for "permanent connection" with other users and the desire to be constantly updated about what others are doing. As Chen (2011: 760) concluded, "people who actively seek out *Twitter* are doing so out of a basic human need to connect with others that they can then gratify by using this computer medium." Specifically, Zhao & Rosson (2009) list the following reasons for using *Twitter*: (1) you can inform people about your most ordinary activities at the same time as they are taking place; (2) it is easy to provide information in real time; (3) messages are short; (4) you can send updates on your activities very easily; and (5) messages can be sent from many kinds of devices. On their part, Java et al. (2007: 62) list the following reasons: (1) to comment on ordinary topics; (2) to engage in interactions (answer each other's *tweets*); (3) to share information and Internet addresses; (4) to comment on news; (5) to use it as a source of interesting information; (6) to meet new people; and (7) to search for information.

Reasons (2), (3) and (4) in Java et al. (ibid.) are indicative of a typical phenomenon of information and communication technologies (ICTs): that they are re-designed by users according to patterns and needs that were not predicted by the original designers of these technologies.²⁵ This happened with mobile phone

25. The theory of *The Social Construction of Technology*, proposed in the 80s by Bijker & Pinch (quoted in Mischaud 2007: 10) affirms that technologies possess a certain degree of *interpretative flexibility*, since different social groups may have non-predicted ideas and generate different interpretations of the technology, beyond its initial design.

texting, a marginal service by design, but whose massive usage surprised mobile manufacturers. In the case of *Twitter*, it was initially designed to answer the question “what are you doing?” (reason (1) in Java et al. *ibid.*). But users have re-designed this service in order to be able to engage in short-message conversations by using the *ad hoc* nomenclature “@username”²⁶ at the beginning of the typed message. Actually, 480 messages out of my corpus of 1.000 *tweets* are conversational.²⁷ Some of the *tweets* are also intended to provide interesting information (85 in the corpus). Both uses are exemplified in (12a–b) and (12c–d), respectively:

- (12) a. @usuario Ohhhh... me acabas de destrozar... Melendi no, porfa! (T1).
 [@username Ohhhh... you've just destroyed me... Melendi no, please!].
- b. @usuario desde siempre desde siempre, pero las fotos que ha subido ahora ya no dejan lugar a dudas eeh? xDDDDDDDD (T4).
 [@username Always, always, but the photos he has uploaded now leave little room for doubt huh?].
- c. Simplemente maravilloso: las transmisiones de radio de las misiones Apollo sobre música ambiental/electrónica/chillout <http://bit.ly/bBU9r> (T1).
 [Simply marvellous: radio transmissions from Apollo Missions about ambient / electronic / chillout music].
- d. Nuevo Post: Un breve resumen del podcasting en España (o como lo recuerdo yo) <http://is.gd/20tR> (T10).
 [New post: A short summary of podcasting in Spain (or as I remember it)].

3.2 Cognitive effects vs. processing effort

From a pragmatic relevance-theoretic perspective, it is necessary to analyse the communicative and interactive qualities of *Twitter* and check the extent to which these qualities, together with the design of *Twitter* web interface, influence positively or negatively the user's estimation of the eventual positive or negative relevance of *tweets*.

If we focus on the initial purpose of *Twitter*, namely to answer the question “what are you doing?”, the immediate intuition is that most of these messages

26. From now on, I will use the neutral nomenclature “@username” when quoting *tweets*, instead of the real name or *nick* of the user, so as to preserve anonymity.

27. Collected in August 2009 from 10 users that will be generically labelled “T” (*Twitterers*). Five of the users are male (T1, T2, T3, T6 and T10) and five are female (T4, T5, T7, T8 and T9). The *tweets* are in Spanish but, where necessary, a translation will be provided.

will tend to be, on most occasions, utterly irrelevant. Indeed, it is very unlikely that users will find any relevance in interpreting *tweets* whose content deals with “interesting” issues such as “making a sandwich” or “switching on the TV.” This intuition explains some negative comments that *Twitter* has raised:

Twitter is a massive waste of time [...] Twitter has turned distraction into an art form.
(S. Karp, in Edemariam 2009)

Twitter breeds a false sense of intimacy. Much of the communication that occurs on Twitter is the type of thing you normally say only to people you’re very close to.
(Govella 2008)

Twitter [...] is too much... I think, because in my community there are all of those exhibitionists and I can’t manage hundreds of messages each day. If they wrote less and more directly to a reduced group of friends I would feel more in contact with them.
(M. Hodder, in Pisani 2007)

This intuition of irrelevance seems to be corroborated in the corpus of *tweets*, in which *tweets* abound that provide few or no cognitive effects that offset the mental effort required to process them:

- (13) a. Hora de comer... hay que pensar en ir preparando algo (T3).
[Time to eat... I’d better think about preparing something].
- b. Voy a cenar, ahora vuelvo (T4).
[Off for supper, back soon].
- c. Intentando recuperarme de una resaca importante (T9).
[Trying to recover from a heavy hangover].
- d. Mi mama me ha hecho cocretas... [sic] xD Desde que me fui de casa no las probaba (T10).
[My mother has cooked croquettes. I haven’t eaten any since I left home].

This feeling of irrelevance is accentuated in the case of sequences of *tweets*, very close to one another, that provide redundant information about an event that is, in itself, of little relevance, as in Example (14) from the corpus:

- (14) a. Voy a hacer un wallpaper-collage chachi de los mios (T4, 10:43 am).
[I’m going to make one of my nice wallpaper-collages].
- b. Vale, no, me voy to the shower y ahora vengo a hacer el wall (T4, 10:47 am).
[ok, no, I’m going to the shower and I’ll come back in a while to make the wallpaper].
- c. Horas después... me pongo a hacer el wallpaper (T4, 12:34 pm).
[Several hours later, I start making the wallpaper].

- d. Vale pues que le den al collage ò.ó me estreso con tanta foto. Pero ahora que me pongo yo de wallpaper?! QUÉ!?! (T4, 1:49 pm).
 [ok, fuck the collage... I get stressed out with so many photos. But what shall I put in the wallpaper now? WHAT!?!].

However, beyond an analysis centred upon cognitive effects and mental effort, there may be other sources of user satisfaction in *Twitter* interactions and messages that provide a certain cognitive reward which is not constrained by excess effort, as will be commented upon below.²⁸

Firstly, a possible interest in these trivial *tweets* may lie in what Thompson (2008) called *ambient awareness*, a term that has already been mentioned in this book. It refers to a non-stop updating on other users' daily activities, which provides a feeling of closeness. Indeed, instead of inferring certain information and deriving conclusions about other people from the information they *exude*, with *Twitter* it is the users that intentionally inform their followers about these activities. This creates a different kind of "proximity in the virtual" or at least an awareness of its existence. For Richmond (2009), *Twitter* brings us the ordinariness of life in all its fascinating, beautiful and often tedious details. For Zhao & Rosson (2009), *Twitter* users obtain a high level of *cyberspatial presence*, a feeling of "being there" and they can get an additional level of connection with other users.

Secondly, knowing all these ordinary details, even if trivial, generates a cumulative background knowledge that can be recovered later as part of the (supposedly) mutual cognitive environment between users, and as a preliminary context for building up subsequent interactions. As a *Twitter* user acknowledges (in Zhao & Rosson 2009: 246):

By reading someone's updates, you get more present understanding of what's on that person's mind, what he or she has been interested, so that it's more easily to get a conversation started and flow.

Thompson (2008) finds it a paradox, considering the irrelevant and trivial components of messages as an update on the individual; but if we take all the messages globally and in a time span, they turn into a detailed portrait of the user's life, like many dots that, together, form an identifiable image.

So far, I have addressed the initial intuition that *tweets* are trivial and produce few cognitive effects. Let us now consider that other condition for relevance: mental effort. On paper, these short trivial messages should posit no challenge for their

28. Interest from the point of view of the reader. But from the sender's point of view there is also a cognitive gratification, this time in the constant desire to send trivial messages about ordinary life as part of a general human tendency to feel close to other individuals and share information about the most immediate (physical/virtual) environment (Muñoz & Riveiro 2009).

interpretation. However, users code very little text (there is a 140-character limit) and leave implicit as much information as they can. As a consequence, the reader faces short texts, often sub-sentential ones, for whose interpretation they have to fill in many implicit blanks in order to turn the schematic *tweets* into meaningful contextualized interpretations. Besides, the design of the *Twitter* interface may also increase processing effort, in a similar way to the chat rooms interfaces that will be analysed in Chapter 5.

An additional source of mental effort is the fact that *tweets* can either be open (for all users) or conversational (for a specific user). Both options co-exist on the list of messages that arrive at the user's personal *Twitter* page and the system publishes them in strict order of arrival (as in chat rooms and instant messaging, see Chapter 5) and it is often difficult to follow the conversational threads. Moreover, on the user's page we can only see half of the turns in the conversation, which entails additional processing effort, since most *tweets* are meaningless without the contextualized information provided by the other turns, as can be seen in (15):

- (15) a. lo reconozco... pero que nos quiten lo “comido” ;-) (T3).
[*I admit it, but I enjoyed what I “ate”*].
- b. y eso que es? xD (T4).
[*and what is that?*].
- c. pero yo pensaba que tu ibas a seguir! xD (T4).
[*But I thought you were going to continue!*].
- d. Cómo se llama? Yo a veces tengo suerte para esas cosas (T5).
[*What is it called? Sometimes I'm lucky with these things*].

Twitter users have devised two strategies in order to reduce the processing effort of their *tweets*. One of them has already been mentioned: to type “@username”²⁹ at the beginning of the *tweet*, so that only the intended user reads it and replies to it, as in (16):

- (16) a. @usuario A mí me pasó eso con Michael Jackson ;) (T1).
[*@username The same happened to me with Michael Jackson*].
- b. @usuario la noche es sexi y peligrosa y bueno me siento acompañado con tantos twittfriends jejeje (T2).
[*@username the night is sexy and dangerous and well I feel that I'm in the company of so many twittfriends hehehe*].

29. When the *Twitter* company discovered the massive use of @username, it re-designed the program and now, every time a user types this nomenclature, this stretch of text turns automatically into a link that leads to the main page of the user whose name or *nick* appears after the @ sign.

- c. @usuario igual para ti amigo mio! (T6).
[*@username same to you my friend!*].
- d. @usuario pal calor no sé, pero igual pa la resaca sí, no? (T9).
[*@username for the heat I don't know, but maybe it works for hangovers, doesn't it?*].

The problem is, as Honeycutt & Herring (2009) qualify, that not all of these “@username” are typed with a conversational purpose, nor are they a requisite for dialogues between users, as can be observed in (17), where T4 prefers to type the name of the addressee in the *tweet* without the @ sign. Therefore, without a higher conventionalization of this nomenclature, it will not be truly effective for reducing processing effort.

- (17) a. Irene: “el msn causa estragos en la autografía” HOSTIA, NI QUE LO DIGAS xDDDDDDDDDDDD (T4).
[*Irene: “MSN devastates autobiography” SHIT, DON’T TELL ME ABOUT IT*].
- b. Nat: “ays q calores me estan entrando” Ro: “eso es x apellidarte infernal” LOLAZO xDDDDDD (T4).
[*Nat: “ays I’m getting really hot” Ro: “that is cos you’re named infernal” BIG LOLA*].
- c. Lu: “preveo que me voy a cargar un vaso proximamente” (T4).
[*Lu: “I predict that I am going to smash a glass soon”*].

The second strategy to alleviate mental effort is to insert a message that the server automatically copies under each *tweet* indicating which user is being replied to, as in (18):

- (18) a. @usuario Nah, lo tuyo es mal de vacaciones. Seguro. Debes dormir de lado. Izquierdo. Seguramente ese es el lado de la cama del Tweet-Deck. (T1).
10:47 AM Aug 18th from TweetDeck in reply to user.³⁰
[*Nah, you suffer from holiday disease. Sure. You must sleep on your side. The left side. Maybe this is the side of the bed of TweetDeck*].
- b. @usuario Siento cortarte el rollo, pero la vieja de los Goonies lleva tiempo muerta (T3).
about 7 hours ago from web in reply to user.
[*I am sorry to disappoint you, but that old woman of the Goonies has been dead for some time*].

30. The real name or *nick* of the user has been deleted and instead the word “user” is quoted in order to preserve anonymity.

- c. @usuario jajajajaja xDD nah mas vale tarde que nunca (T4).
 3:27 AM Aug 20th from TwitterFox in reply to user.
 [hahahaha xDD nah better late than never].

On the other hand, *Twitter* users have devised another nomenclature to forward *tweets* by other users, the so-called *re-tweeting*. It also entails challenges for a correct comprehension. The nomenclature is to write “RT” before the text of the *tweet*, as in (19):

- (19) RT @usuario: El DNI electrónico en manos de 11.5 millones de españoles y la mayoría no sabe usarlo <http://bit.ly/3l7oo> (T3).
 [RT @username: 11.5 million Spaniards have the electronic ID card and most of them do not know how to use it].

From a pragmatic perspective, this “RT” nomenclature is particularly interesting because it entails alterations both in the way *tweets* are coded and in their interpretation (see 3.3 below). In the first case, there are coding alterations because the user who *re-tweets* tends to summarize the message so as not to exceed the 140-character limit and the user inevitably alters the content of the initial *tweet* that is being forwarded. Therefore, its propositional form and eventual interpretation are also affected. This alteration may arise because the users change the initial text of the *tweet* or because the users simply erase words that they consider unnecessary. These alterations may also increase due to the multiple platforms and services from which *tweets* can be forwarded. As Marwick & boyd (2010: 117) summarize, “it is not uncommon for people to forward tweets via email or by copying and pasting them into new communication channels. Furthermore, various tools allow users to repost tweets to Facebook, MySpace, and blogs.”

The comprehension of this “RT” nomenclature is also altered by the lack of agreement on how this *re-tweeting* has to be typed, that is, by the lack of a proper conventionalization of this strategy. Although the “RT” is very frequent, there are alternative ways of showing *re-tweeting*. In boyd et al. (2010) some possibilities are quoted:

- (20) RT: @ retweeting @ retweet @ (via @)
 RT (via @) thx @ HT @ r @

An additional challenge for readers of *re-tweeted* messages is that very often these messages form a chain of forwarded messages and this makes the *tweets* difficult to interpret correctly and it is also difficult to locate the initial author of the message, as can be seen in (21):

- (21) a. RT @usuario: RT @usuario: Desde Cuando Hay Que pedir permiso para Circular Libremente por la Ciudad? #venezuela #freemediave (T6).
[RT @username: RT @username: Since when do we have to ask for permission to circulate freely in the town?].
- b. RT @usuario @usuario @usuario El Geek Errante tiene que volver! Mañana traigo el equipo de grabación a @usuario (T10).
[RT @username @username @username The Wandering Geek has to return! Tomorrow I'll bring the recording equipment for @username].

It is interesting to comment on the use of “#” in (21a). The “#” sign is another nomenclature in *Twitter* that refers to a specific topic of interest that the user labels as such, so that other users can locate the *tweets* that deal with this topic. It is, therefore, a kind of *thematic labelling*. It is also a sign that favours collective action on the Net: “users may be very widely dispersed and usually unknown to each other. Twitter provides a structure for them to act together as if in an organised way, for example through the use of hashtags – the # symbol – and keywords that signpost topics and issues. This provides a mechanism to aggregate, archive and analyse the individual tweets as a whole” (Hermida 2010). De Moor (2010) adds: “Tracking the tweets involved in conversations is relatively easy through searching on both replies and hash tagged-topics. However, the resulting linear list of contributions is sometimes difficult to interpret due to the immediacy, sheer number, and lack of thread structure.”

3.3 Interpreting *tweets*

In this book, I have previously commented on the intuition that *tweets* should be easy to process due to their short length. But a more exhaustive analysis reveals that these short messages demand the whole range of inferential steps that are applied to the schematic logical form of the message in order to turn them into relevant interpretations. One of the most interesting contributions of relevance theory has been to demonstrate that obtaining the explicit interpretation of utterances demands as much contextualization and inferential activity as deriving implicated conclusions (implicatures). And *tweets* demand inferential activity similar to the one we apply to the interpretation of other utterances, with the additional task of turning schematic 140-character messages into meaningful interpretations.

Among the range of inferential strategies that we normally apply to the interpretation of utterances, *reference assignment* is pervasive because it has to be performed in the processing of almost any *tweet*, either because the reader has to find a referent for the name or *nick* of the author or because the *tweet* contains a number of indexicals (pronouns, time adverbs, etc.) for which a referent has to be

found. In (22), for example, the readers have to find referents for the pronouns in the *tweets* or they will reach no interpretation:

- (22) a. Wow, yo de eso no sé nada. Pero eso es lo tuyo. Te irá muy bien. :) (T5).
[Wow, I know nothing about that. But that's your stuff. You'll be alright].
- b. a mi me gustó, debes verla ^^ (T6).
[I liked it. You must see it].

Other inferential strategies include disambiguation, conceptual adjustment, free enrichment, the compensation of elided content in sub-sentential utterances and the ascription of propositional attitude in the author. These are briefly commented upon below.

1. *Disambiguation*. Sometimes *tweets* contain polysemous words whose intended sense has to be inferred, as in “banco” (that can either mean “financial institution” or “bench” in Spanish) in (23) below:

- (23) #FAIL veo la pagina del banco (T6).
[#FAIL I see the page of the bank/bench].

2. *Conceptual adjustment*. As has already been mentioned in this chapter, very often the prototypical concepts coded by the words, as we would find in a dictionary, for instance, are inadequate in the specific context in which these words are uttered and have to be adjusted inferentially to meet the speaker's intended *ad hoc concept*. Sometimes the speaker intends a broader, less exact *ad hoc concept* than the one coded by the word, as in (24a–b). On other occasions, though, the speaker intends a narrower, more exact *ad hoc concept* than the one coded by the word, as in (24c–d):

- (24) a. We entered a pub, but we left because it was *empty*.
[not literally empty; there was surely a waiter, a few non-interesting people, etc.].
- b. I've got a *thousand things* to do this morning.
[not literally a thousand; rather, a lot of things].
- c. Tony *drinks* too much.
[specifically, he drinks too much alcohol].
- d. I've got *nothing* to wear for the party.
[specifically, nothing nice, nothing classy].

In the same way, the readers of *tweets* have to adjust the concepts coded in these messages and infer the (broader or narrower) *ad hoc concepts* that the author intends to communicate. Some examples are quoted in (25), where the concepts coded by the words in italics have to be adjusted for a relevant interpretation:

- (25) a. Senderos de Traición es el mejor... pero El Espíritu del Vino es *bestial* y Avalancha el más “*pesado*”... son 3 *joyas* en realidad (T1).
[Senderos de Traicion is the best... but El Espíritu del vino is huge and Avalancha is the “heaviest”... They are three jewels in reality].
- b. Listo bañado vestido y ready pal party jejeje ya *activado* esperando que se vistan pa salir a buscar la *gasolina* ;) (T2).
[Ready, had a bath, got dressed and ready for the party hehehe already activated waiting for them to get dressed and go for petrol].
- c. jejeje, q honor, gracias por el #FollowFriday y #TwitterAdicto total, muchas gracias por considerme [sic] *amigo*, es mutuo, un abrazo! (T6).
[hehehe what an honour thanks for #FollowFriday and #TwitterAdicto great, many thanks for considering me a friend, it's mutual, hugs!].
- d. Hala, pues ya estoy más *tranquila*. Qué mar más *malo* había hoy! (T9).
[Well, I am more relaxed now. What a bad sea there was today!].

In (25a) the reader has to infer the *ad hoc* concepts that underlie the concepts coded by the words “bestial” (huge), “pesado” (heavy) and “joya” (jewel), which are used metaphorically. The reader will have to select features associated with these concepts and adjust metaphorically the ones that might be applicable to the referents in question. Something similar happens in (25b), where “activado” (activated) and “gasolina” (petrol) are again used metaphorically (meaning “ready” and “alcoholic drink” respectively). (25c) demands the adjustment of the coded concept “friend” in a similar way to the one already commented upon for SNSs in this chapter. Finally, the reader of (25d) has to adjust the concept coded by “malo” (bad) to fit the context in which it is used. “Tranquila” (relaxed, calm) also demands adjustment since the coded concept covers a whole range of states of mind, most of which are not intended.

3. *Free enrichment*. It takes place when the utterance demands from the hearer the “inferential filling” of some elided part. Despite being a grammatical utterance, it makes no sense unless this non-coded part is inferred correctly, as in (26), where the square brackets suggest this inferential compensation:

- (26) a. This girl is too small [*for what?*].
b. The other medicine is better [*than what? for what?*].

Similarly, readers of *tweets* often complete their non-coded parts inferentially:

- (27) a. Pobrecica Pero ya te queda menos, ya te queda menos!! (T4).
[Poor girl But there is not much left (for what?)].
- b. Jajajajaja! Te hacía falta un babero? (T5).
[hahaha Did you need a bib? (for what?)].

- c. jejeje, si, es cierto, el dolor es grande, el primer año me la pasaba a punto de motrin, q fino q ya estás cerca de terminar (T6).
[hehehe yes, it's true, the pain is huge, the first year I was on Motrin all the time, it's nice you are about to finish (what?)].

4. *Sub-sentential utterances*. Utterances can be arranged on a scale from the most explicit to the least explicit depending on how much information is actually coded by the speaker. On paper, the more information is left implicit, non-coded, the higher the interpretive challenge for the interlocutor, who has to fill these information gaps inferentially, as happens in the strategy of “free enrichment.” For example, utterance (28a) is the most explicit one, while (28b-d) are increasingly less explicit, thus demanding more inferential activity by the interlocutor with the aid of context:³¹

- (28) a. John has left the book by Larsson on the dining room table.
- b. John has left the book on the table.
- c. He has left the book there.
- d. On the table.

Tweets are, in essence, prone to being sub-sentential utterances due to the 140-character limit, and users tend to suppress all the coded content that they expect their readers will be able to recover by themselves, as in (29):

- (29) a. Gran juego ;-) (T3).
 [Great game].
- b. Bueno, va (T4).
 [Well, ok then].
- c. Cuándo vuelves, para hacerte uno? :P (T5).
 [When are you coming back, to make you one?].
- d. no se, y no creo, pero de que vuelan vuelan (T6).
 [I don't know, and I don't think so, but they do fly].

5. *Propositional attitude ascription*. To enrich the coded message with the aforementioned inferential strategies is not enough to yield a fully relevant interpretation. It is also necessary to ascribe the user's propositional attitude (or the speech

31. This does not mean that the hearer invariably expects the most explicit utterance on every occasion. As a matter of fact, leaving information implicit (non-coded) is the norm, rather than the exception. For example, a person would sound strange if, to the question “where has John left the book?” the hearer replied (28a). Rather, (28d) would be more appropriate. But if where the table is located is not mutually manifest to both interlocutors, the speaker will have to be more specific (i.e. explicit) and rephrase the utterance by adding “on the dining room table.”

act schema of the *tweet*) that underlies its production plus an estimation of the feelings and emotions that the user holds when typing the message. Propositional attitude is essential in human communication, because the same utterance can communicate a wide range of attitudinal intentions. Certainly, it is not enough to interpret utterance (30a) as the neutral (30b), but hearers normally aim at obtaining a correct underlying attitude, as in (30c–e):

- (30) a. Boss to employee: “you’re leaving this project.”
- b. My boss is informing me that I am leaving the project.
- c. My boss is *asking* whether I am leaving this project or not.
- d. My boss is *ordering* me to leave this project.
- e. My boss is *advising* me to leave this project.

The corpus of *tweets* provides us with examples in which propositional attitude ascription has to be inferred with the aid of context. Occasionally, it is the users that make this attitude explicit, as in (31):

- (31) Quiero, necesito ir al FNAC... qué digo, EXIJO ir al FNAC Ò.Ó (T4).
 [I want, I need to go to FNAC... I mean, I DEMAND to go to FNAC].

As far as the ascription of feelings and emotions is concerned, users tend to colour their *tweets* with words that indicate their feelings or emotions. An even more interesting strategy is to resort to the techniques for oralization of text, which will be analysed in Chapter 5 for chat rooms and instant messaging. Certainly, these techniques for oralization (repetition of letters, playing with capitalization, creative use of punctuation marks...) offer a good repertoire of written means for the communication of feelings and emotions, as in (32):

- (32) a. ayyyyyy dolorrrrrrrrrrr!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (T7).
 [pain].
- b. QUÉ HA PASADO?!?!?!?! (T4).
 [what’s happened?].
- c. TE ODIOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (T7).
 [I hate you].
- d. Por fin juevesssssssssssss!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (T9).
 [Thanks God it’s Thursday].
- e. Quéeeeeeeeeee????? En Lisboa????? qué fuerte me parece (T9).
 [What? In Lisboa? This looks heavy to me].

Besides, visual nonverbal behaviour is communicated with the aid of emoticons (again, as in chat rooms and instant messaging and even SNSs), combinations of punctuation marks to yield iconic compositions. Among them, the ones most

frequently used are the emoticon of happiness [:-) or :-D], of sadness [:(-] and of winking [;-)]. The corpus of *tweets* contains many of these emoticons, some of them with innovative combinations of punctuation marks and letters [Ò.Ó]:

- (33) a. Ya ves Ò.Ó Es que encima sigue a Brendon, Gerard y Danny. TOCATE LOS *****!!! ¬¬ (T4).
 b. como que ugh!?!?!? xD lo que ha dicho! ò.ó (T4).
 c. RT @usuario: la cancion mas hermosa de este mundo => <3 (T6).

There are also instances of what Poyatos (1975, 2002) called *alternants*, sounds that, as the name indicates, may “alternate” with speech, facilitating their transcription in the *tweet*.³² In (34) there are some examples of laughter (34a–b), surprise (34c) and admiration (34d):

- (34) a. jajajajaja xDD nah mas vale tarde que nunca (T4).
 [better late than never].
 b. M VOY A FLICKR MWAHAHAHAHAHHAH (T4).
 [I am off to Flickr].
 c. uuuffff, ok ok, considero seriamente irrumpir en tu casa para jugarlo! (T6).
 [I am seriously considering popping round to your place to play it!].
 d. wow pana, muchas gracias, que honor, un abrazo y feliz viernes! (T6).
 [pana thanks, what an honour, hugs and happy Friday!].

All of these strategies for oralizing typed text will be analysed in more detail in the next chapter, devoted to virtual conversations.

3.4 Twitter conversations

The introduction of new interactive capabilities with nomenclatures such as “@username”, “RT” and “#topic” allow for authentic micro-blogging 140-character conversations among disperse users all over the world.

The hashtag (#) is convenient in its ability to sustain dense interactions under the same label or tag and with an explicit wide audience. De Moor (2010) compares this capability with SNS conversations and concludes that in *Twitter*

32. Defined as “nonverbal, marginal and nonspeech sounds or clusters of sounds, articulated or not [...] which do not affect the verbal utterance [...] Alternants occur either isolated or alternating with the verbal utterance and with the kinesic behaviour” (Poyatos 1975:294).

it is very easy to join a conversation with complete strangers purely based on interest, instead of being limited to talking to people currently in one's circle of friends. As the effort of reading and replying is minimal, over time a deep conversation web with strands to a large group of relevant people can develop, both on an ad hoc basis (joining conversations based on a search) and permanently (by being their followers and joining in when an interesting topic passes by).

Besides, what de Moor (ibid.) calls "tangential conversations" are also inherent in this *microblogging* service. *Tweets* are short, provide little information, and therefore the thread of the conversation builds up on the micro accumulation of many *tweets* that are incorporated to the discussion.

Finally, as pointed out above, *tweets* can either be open (for all users) or conversational (for a specific user). But they can also be "self-oriented" and "other-oriented," the latter being more typical, because the system invites users to follow *twitterers*. It seems that *Twitter* might mesh all of these possibilities into an effort-producing mixture of messages with different intended audiences, but Marwick & boyd (2010: 120) claim that this is not really the case: "users write different tweets to target different people (e.g. audiences). This approach acknowledges multiplicity, but rather than creating entirely separate, discrete audiences through the use of multiple identities or accounts, users address multiple audiences through a single account, conscious of potential overlapping among their audiences."

