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## **New Media, Networking and Phatic Culture**

Vincent Miller

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## New Media, Networking and Phatic Culture

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**Abstract** / This article will demonstrate how the notion of 'phatic communion' has become an increasingly significant part of digital media culture alongside the rise of online networking practices. Through a consideration of the new media objects of blogs, social networking profiles and microblogs, along with their associated practices, I will argue, that the social contexts of 'individualization' and 'network sociality', alongside the technological developments associated with pervasive communication and 'connected presence' has led to an online media culture increasingly dominated by phatic communications. That is, communications which have purely social (networking) and not informational or dialogic intents. I conclude with a discussion of the potential nihilistic consequences of such a culture.

**Key Words** / blogging / database culture / microblogging / network sociality / phatic / post-social / social networking

### Introduction

*After the first formula, there comes a flow of language, purpose-less expressions of preference or aversion, accounts of irrelevant happenings, comments on what is perfectly obvious. Such gossip, as found in Primitive Societies, differs only a little from our own. Always the same emphasis of affirmation and consent . . . Or personal accounts of the speakers' views and life history, to which the hearer listens under some restraint and with slightly veiled impatience, waiting till his own turn arrives to speak. (Malinowski, 1923: 314)*

*eating a peanut butter-filled corny dog dipped in queso. mmmmmmm breakfast. 09:48 AM July 19, 2007. ('Twitter' communication from Happywaffle)*

This article is a theoretical discussion of blogs, social networking websites and microblogs. I argue that these new media phenomena are symptomatic and illustrative of both technological affordances and larger socio-cultural trends. In particular, it will link the *content* of two major new media products with certain ongoing cultural and technological processes which arguably can be considered problematic: namely a flattening of

social bonds as we move into 'networked sociality' (Wittel, 2001), and a similar 'flattening' of communication in these networks towards the non-dialogic and non-informational. What I will call here *phatic culture*.

In that sense, this article has a critical element. Blogging (particularly personal journal blogs), social networking websites and microblogs are used to illustrate these processes, not in the sense that they are seen as inherently deleterious or malevolent, but because these new media objects seem to articulate such processes particularly well.

There will be four substantive sections to this article, which will demonstrate the move towards a phatic media culture thematically and chronologically. First I will focus on blogging culture and its relationship to the social contexts of individualization. Second, I will discuss the social networking profile within the contexts of 'network sociality' and the rise of database culture. Then I will examine the most recent phenomenon of micro-blogging within the notion of 'connected presence'. In the fourth section I will briefly discuss the encouragement of phatic communication within the context of marketing.

## Personal Communication as Commodity: Blogging and Individualization

In any examination of the emergence of a cultural object, it is important to examine the context in which such objects have come into existence. Looking at the environment in which blogging emerged, one of the most relevant sociological developments is the concept of *individualization*. Thus, I would like to start with a very brief review of the concept of 'individualization', particularly as popularized by Giddens and Beck, and its potential relevance in the emergence of blogging (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992).

In general, individualization refers to a process in which communities and personal relationships, social forms and commitments are less bound by history, place and tradition. That is, individuals, freed from the contexts of tradition, history and, under globalization, space, are free to, and perhaps forced to, actively construct their own biographies and social bonds. Because of the increasingly disembedded nature of late modern life, a major task of the individual is to continually rebuild and maintain social bonds, making individualization by its nature non-linear, open ended, and highly ambivalent (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Within this context of disembeddedness, consumer society offers up to the subject a range of choices from which to create biographies and narratives of the self, in addition to a set of relationships that can be seen as somewhat ephemeral or tenuous (Bauman, 2001).

Anthony Giddens, in *The Transformation of Intimacy*, discusses individualization particularly within the context of human relationships, where he argues that in a context of disembeddedness, *trust and security* becomes of paramount importance, and, for Giddens, trust, like the 'reflexive project of the self', is something that must be continually worked at.

In the case of intimate relationships, Giddens of course argues that the late modern social milieu has led to a rise of 'pure' relationships: a social relationship entered into for what can be derived from the other. Such relationships are seen as voluntary, and therefore contingent, and have an intimacy based on the trust of mutual reflexivity and self-disclosure.

One aspect which is particularly important here is the assertion that self-disclosure becomes increasingly important as a means to gain trust and achieve authentic (but contingent) relationships with others. Giddens argues that late modern subjects gravitate towards relationships which engender trust through constant communication and reflexive practice. In other words, we crave relationships that allow us to open up to others, and not just in the romantic sense, because in late modernity, the demand for intimacy becomes 'virtually compulsive':

*'A given individual is likely to be involved in several forms of social relation which tend towards the pure type; and pure relationships are typically interconnected, forming specific milieu of intimacy' (Giddens, 1992: 97)*

Clay Calvert (2004) pulls at a similar thread in his discussion of the rise of wider voyeuristic and exhibitionistic tendencies in contemporary media, such as reality TV, tell-all talk shows and tabloid news. He argues that there has been an increasing willingness to 'tell all' or 'expose oneself' in the media, and that this is largely the result of several processes, including an ever increasing need for self-clarification, social validation and relationship development, which are satisfied through acts of self-disclosure.

Similarly, Mestrovic (1997) refers to this more widely as the development of a 'post-emotional society'. A society in which emotion, and more properly the obvious and overt display of emotion, exists as a resource to be manipulated in the effort of self-presentation. He argues that emotion is increasingly detached from genuine moral commitment and/or from meaningful social action. Thus the overt displays of emotion on talk shows, reality television, in politics and blogging are seen as part of a (cynical) strategy of impression management to the outside world.

This easily links to the phenomenon of blogging. The desire to tell one's story to the world, to write about one's personal experiences of, for example, emotional pain, or give one's opinions on world events through a blog sits quite easily in a contemporary society in which compulsive intimacy has become a major way to overcome disembeddedness and the continual reconstruction of social bonds.

Blogging, for the most part, is based on the notion that information is a commodity that is used to build and maintain relationships. In personal journal blogs, it is personal information, created through relationships of mutual self-disclosure, which attains a commodified status. In the case of other types of blogging (political, news, technological and the like), substantive information is the commodity. In both these cases, this exchange is based on the logic of the 'pure' relationship: an exchange of substantive information achieved through dialogue. This exchange creates tenuous, individually-oriented self-defined communities or networks, which revolve around shared interests and dialogic exchange related to those interests.<sup>1</sup>

## Social Networking and Database Culture

For Manuel Castells (1996/2000; Castells et al., 2006), the disembedding and continual deconstruction and reconstruction of social bonds implied by writers such as Giddens, Bauman and Beck is epitomized in the new social morphology of the network society. A morphology that is based less on hierarchical structures and spaces, than on flows across

horizontally structured flexible networks. To belong in networks is to achieve a greater measure of security in the 'space of flows'.

In terms of micro-level social relationships, Andreas Wittel (2001) built upon the network society thesis by charting the emergence of what he called 'network sociality': a disembedded intersubjectivity which contrasts the 'belonging' of 'community' with the concept of 'integration' and 'disintegration' in a network. Instead of gaining security through 'trust' and self-disclosure within the late modern context of mobility and disembeddedness, network sociality is an instrumental or commodified form of social bonding based on the continual construction and reconstruction of personal networks or contacts.

Since the goal of communication becomes the active construction or reconstruction of a social network, one has to 'consistently renew, refresh and revalue the existing contacts' (Wittel, 2001: 66). Such bonds, he argues, were typified in the compressed social acts of 'catching up', networking, the half-hour business meeting, and speed dating. Nowadays, Wittel would have to add the brief blog post or social networking update to that list.

For Wittel, these social relations become primarily 'informational', not 'narrative'. What he means by this is that communications between people become more ephemeral and more akin to an exchange of 'data' than deep, substantive or meaningful communication based on mutual understanding.

Certainly, one can see these actions played out in the rise of social networking websites such as Friendster, MySpace and Facebook since 2003, which really epitomize this 'network sociality' exchange, and in the last three years, the phenomenon of social networking websites has, to a certain extent, surpassed blogging in youth and techno culture.

Social networking profiles push the networking practice to the forefront by placing more prominence on friends and links to others than the text being produced by the author. Where the blog had links to others either on a fairly anonymous list of hyperlinks on one side of the front page, or on a separate profile page (see Figure 1), MySpace, Facebook and other networking sites give much more space to friends (including pictures) and thereby much more visual prominence on the profile at the expense of textual material (see Figure 2). The overriding point of the networking profile is to reach out and sustain a network through the maintenance of links to others. Thus it is not the text of the author, but the network of friends that takes pride of place on the social networking profile.

Lev Manovich (2001) among others argues that we are in the process of a shift from *narrative* forms (as epitomized by the novel or the cinematic film) as the key form of cultural expression in the modern age, to the *database* as the prominent cultural logic of the digital age. Narratives are presented as finite works with beginnings and endings that follow a linear path establishing cause and effect thematic development determined by an author. Databases are defined by Manovich as: 'Structured collections of data organized for fast search and retrieval by a computer' (Manovich, 2001: 218). In contrast to narratives, the database form, as the foregoing passage suggests, is presented as a collection of somewhat separate, yet relational elements. Because databases are in essence collections or 'lists', they are theoretically endless and always 'in progress'. In addition, since databases consist of relational elements, their order or combination in terms of

FIGURE 1

Typical 'Livejournal' Blog Front Page and Profile (accessed 5 September 2007)

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Frank shops for pants to eat.  
What do you shop for?  
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## rambling on and on



**randomness**

Sep. 13th, 2007 | 09:05 pm

disposition:  drained

so I'm basically sitting here looking at the pile of homework next to me just to give you an idea of what I still have to do:

- Study for my chem quiz tomorrow
- work on the wiki project on organic foods for health
- work on my digital story for american literature (subject: to what extent do you consider yourself american?)
- start reading 'Of Mice and Men' by John Steinbeck (also for lit)
- study my french vocab.
- call my best friend to give her the info on the aids walk on sunday, because I can't go and she is going but her internet is down so I can't send it to her by email.....
- work on my art project

as you might be able to tell I won't go to bed in the near future... although that might be caused by the fact that I'm sitting here typing an entry for livejournal instead of starting to work... I guess it's the LA curse: PROCRASTINATION gr.... I'm just too easily distracted

argh... tomorrow I have piano ... my teacher will kill me I haven't practiced all week  
X\_X  
I'm SO dead  
bleh... I better get started

[Link](#) | [leave a comment](#) | [Add to Memories](#) | [Tell a Friend](#)



What Do You Have To Say? - Music: My First Favorite Band



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### Profile

User: [linlaisui](#) (13812185)



[View all updates](#)

**Name:** Sui

**Bio:** well... there isn't much to tell XD but ok... I'll give it a try I'm german, but I live in the US I love languages ( I'm learning French, Chinese and Japanese at the moment (and a bit of Malay, but only when I have time) and I already speak english and german...)  
I'm a geek, and proud of it :D reason being that I go to IA which is populated by geeks. I'm a sophomore in high school and even though IB doesn't start until next year I'm already swamped in work because I'm in all honors classes (there aren't any other classes at my school) and our teachers are trying to get us ready for next year which is impossible. You just can't be ready for IB. Considering that, I have decided that learning how to live without sleep is the best way to prepare for the upcoming horror. :D well... I still have the entire year.  
But don't worry... I still have a life... despite it all... XD

**Interests:** 16: anime, cheries, chinese, daydreaming, drawing, fashion, germany, happiness, hello kitty, japanese, music, my friendzz, painting, piano... although i suck, quirky things, taiwanese and chinese drama

**Schools:** International Academy High School - Bloomfield Hills, MI

**Friends:**  3: [linlaisui](#), [losprestatamos](#), [theoretic31](#)  
 8: [boring people](#), [doraemon fans](#), [happy news](#), [kawaii nushi](#), [li maintenance](#), [li spotlight](#), [news](#), [ubergeeks](#)

**Friend of:** 1: [linlaisui](#)

**Member of:** 5: [boring people](#), [doraemon fans](#), [happy news](#), [kawaii nushi](#), [ubergeeks](#)

**Account type:** Plus Account

[\(more details...\)](#)

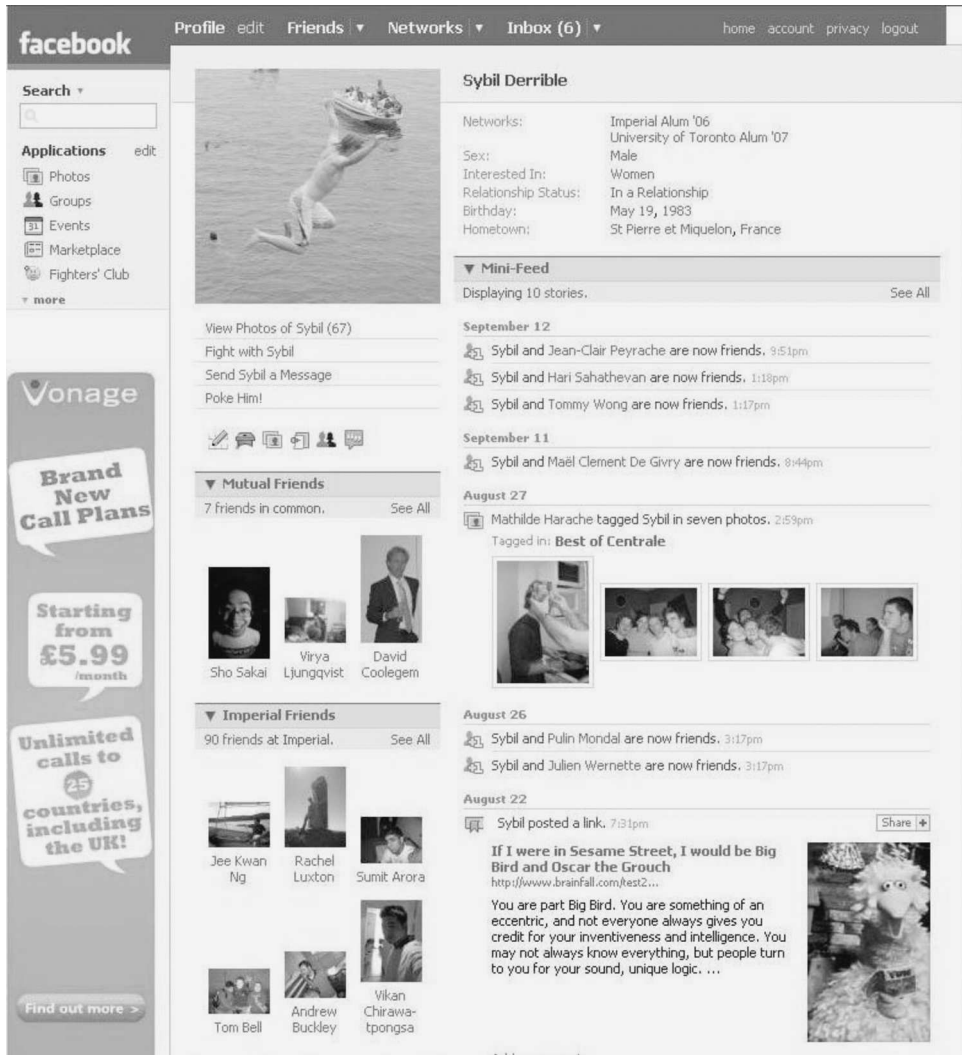
**yes... what the heck?**  
*yes. I am confuzzled XD*

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FIGURE 2  
Typical Facebook Profile (accessed 5 September 2007)



consumption or use is determined by the user as a co-author, rather than rigidly designed by one author. Therefore, databases are (potentially) infinitely combinable in their use.

One of the most powerful causes of a rise in database culture is obvious: a plethora of information brought about not only by the Web, but the parallel process of the convergence of all media to digital format. As a result, the Web has become an endless and unrestricted collection of text, images, data records and sound-bites. It would seem that such a plethora of information makes it inevitable that the database, whose purpose it is to efficiently store, retrieve and provide an interface with data, should ascend in cultural importance. Thus new media is, in particular, dominated by cultural objects and products which:



*do not tell stories, they do not have a beginning or end, in fact, they do not have any development thematically that would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other [my emphasis]. (Manovich, 2001: 213)*

In effect, with the database, there is no context. Instead individual items are connected to each other, in an ad-hoc manner, by specific linkages or elements useful at particular times.

Similarly, the cultural form of the network struggles with context. The foregoing discussion demonstrated that network sociality is similarly ad-hoc and non-narrative in assemblage. This view has, of course, been put forward by Castells (1996/2000: Wittel, 2001) and many others.

In this respect, social networking websites in particular can be seen as part of the database culture and network sociality. Profile building, while on the one hand enmeshing the profile/self in a network, is essentially the creation of a series of lists; markers which can be called up by others searching for people with similar interests. And of course, in social networking websites, the most important list is the list of 'friends'.

However, social networking websites tend to complicate this notion of 'friend'. For example, Danah Boyd (2006) and Boyd and Heer (2006) discuss the notion of 'friending' and how the concept of a 'friend' on something like MySpace becomes horizontally flattened. Close members of one's inner circle sit alongside strangers under the same banner in an endlessly expanding horizontal network, thus compressing social relations and eliminating context. The only context present is the egocentric nature of the network itself. In other words, friends as a whole create the context in which one's profile sits and from which identity emerges (Boyd, in press).

One step further, the practice of promiscuous 'friending', collecting or 'whoring' on social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook, (in which users try and indiscriminately collect as many friends as possible)<sup>2</sup> demonstrates the logic of network sociality and the database: endless growth. The larger the network, the more secure the individual.

While the appeal of the blog essentially revolves around a (diary-like) narrative of user-generated content (usually text) and the practices of mutual self-disclosure, sites such as MySpace and Facebook encourage networking and generic 'updates' on status. Blogging features are present on these sites, but are usually marginalized and seldom used, and most text is now generated through passing comments, quiz results, or 'wall' facilities. One can see this type of communicative practice as largely motivated less by having something in particular to say (i.e. communicating some kind of information), as it is by the obligation or encouragement to say 'something' to maintain connections or audiences, to let one's network know that one is still 'there'.

The point of the social networking profile is blatantly to establish (and demonstrate) linkages and connections, rather than dialogic communication. Thus, what is seen here is 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, thus shifting digital culture one step further from the substantive text and dialogue of the blog further into a realm of new media culture which I refer to as the phatic.

Phatic exchange is a term first used by Malinowski to describe a communicative gesture that does not inform or exchange any meaningful information or facts about the

world. Its purpose is a social one, to express sociability and maintain connections or bonds.

*Are words in Phatic Communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not! They fulfil a social function, and that is their principal aim, but they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener. Once again we may say that language does not function here as a means of transmission of thought. (Malinowski, 1923: 315)*

Thus, phatic messages are not intended to carry information or substance for the receiver, but instead concern the *process* of communication. These interactions essentially maintain and strengthen existing relationships in order to facilitate further communication (Vetere et al., 2005).<sup>3</sup> In the next section, I will elaborate on the rise of phatic media culture in more detail.

## Microblogging, Connected Presence and the Ascendancy of Phatic Culture

A fundamental aspect of network sociality is its dependency on technological objects to spread networks and to maintain social contacts. An ever-growing network of contacts would not be maintainable without the use of email lists, mobile phones, text messages, business cards, blogrolls and friends lists not only to store and retrieve these contacts, but to maintain 'live' connections to them.

Karin Knorr-Cetina (1997) has used the term 'postsocial' to describe not only the phenomenon of the disembedding of modern selves (and the flattened, thinned out social forms that have resulted), but also the current expansion of object-centred environments. In what amounts to a merging of individualization theory and actor-network theory, Knorr-Cetina argues that with individualization we have not experienced a 'desocialization', but a shift in late modern social relations to ones that are increasingly sifted through, or mediated, by objects. This serves to increase the distance of the concept of 'the social' from a focus on human groups to something that takes into account our increasing engagements with a variety of objects, tools and technologies (such as mobile phones, computers, blogs and social networking profiles), which not only allow us, but encourage us, to engage with others through them. Human relationships become increasingly dependent on, and even displaced by, objects. Thus, the technical means available has contributed to a postsocial situation where we use objects (whether it be phones, or MySpace profiles, or blogs) as communicative bodies to be in constant conversation with other represented bodies or postsocial objects. In the process, such relationships, and the 'work' needed to maintain them, become transformed.

Licoppe and Smoreda (2005) note that one way in which these transformations take place is through a change in the notions of 'presence' and 'absence', which occur in an age where many people are continually 'in touch' through networking technologies. These technologies essentially 'stand in' for them, making one almost continually contactable. Licoppe and Smoreda refer to this blurring of presence and absence as 'connected presence'. Their argument is that a new sociability pattern of the constantly contactable, one which blurs presence and absence, has resulted in relationships becoming webs of quasi-continuous exchanges.<sup>4</sup> The phone, the mobile phone, emails,

blogs, text messaging and wireless technologies create a milieu in which, obviously, people are in almost constant communication with others.

With the enlargement of social networks, and the technical means available to communicate with them, this encourages communication that retains a general sociability without the exchange of real information. For example, a growing amount of research into ubiquitous computing, done by, for example, Vetere, Howard and Gibbs (2005), has started to shift away from systems which support personal and informational issues (i.e. capturing and communicating information), and towards what are being called 'phatic technologies': technologies which build relationships and sustain social interaction through pervasive (but non-informational) contact and intimacy.

Licoppe and Smoreda (2005), argue that the technological affordance of connected presence leads to a rise of compressed expressions of intimacy. Non-dialogic means of communication signal recognition and a demand for attention, but allow for the looser commitment of non-intrusive sending of data, and deferred or asynchronous response. Simply put, their findings suggest that there has indeed been a rise of small communicative gestures whose purpose is not to exchange meaningful information, but to express sociability, and maintain social connections. The kinds of communication that Malinowski described as phatic communion.

One should not assume that these phatic communications are 'meaningless', in fact, in many ways they are very meaningful, and imply the recognition, intimacy and sociability in which a strong sense of community is founded. Phatic messages potentially carry a lot more weight to them than the content itself suggests. However, although they may not always be 'meaningless', they are almost always content-less in any substantive sense.

The overall result is that in phatic media culture, content is not king, but 'keeping in touch' is. More important than anything said, it is the *connection* to the other that becomes significant, and the *exchange* of words becomes superfluous. Thus the text message, the short call, the brief email, the short blog update or comment, becomes part of a mediated phatic sociability necessary to maintain a connected presence in an ever-expanding social network.

Indeed, research done by Grinter and Eldridge (2001) on the phenomenal growth of text messaging among UK teens showed that one of the perceived advantages of text messaging was the avoidance of dialogue and conversation when all that is really wanted is a brief exchange of data:

*Like if you're phoning someone up you can't avoid that they might want to talk to you about something else, where as when I am texting someone then it's just what you want to say, and you don't have to commit yourself to a whole other discussion or whatever. (Interview data from Grinter and Eldridge, 2001)*

With the demands of ever expanding networks and of connected presence, dialogue becomes a hindrance pragmatically and the time-saving role of compressed phatic communications increases in importance. This is becoming one of the most interesting features of digital culture: the rise in prominence of phatic media and communication as a way to achieve some form of intimacy and connection with the ever increasing amount of contacts, connections and networks in which we are increasingly embedded.

A more recent, and perhaps the most striking example of the rise of the phatic, and perhaps the next step in this shift, is the increasing popularity of microblogging, and

particularly 'Twitter', a microblogging service started in 2006 (Twitter.com, see Figure 3). In essence, Twitter is a kind of cross between social networking, blogging, and text messaging. It allows people to keep in touch with friends through the internet as well as mobile devices. Thus it is a good example both visually and textually of 'connected presence'. These communications are designed to be read as soon as they are sent; essentially they are 'up to date' updates.

The central theme is 'what are you doing?' One is expected to answer this in a maximum of 140 characters. In comparison to both blogs and social networking profiles, Twitter profiles are stripped down to the minimum (see Figure 3). There is much more visual prominence on text, however the text produced, due to the 140 character limitation and the nature of the medium, are stripped down as well. The result is an almost ghostly series of brief texts conveying random thoughts, current activities, or brief greetings (see Figure 4). Births of babies are announced alongside random musings and lunch menus, and these messages are sent out to real-time networks of mobile phones, emails and instant messaging, as well as to the 'public timeline' on the twitter main page.

The point of twitter is the maintenance of connected presence, and to sustain this presence, it is necessarily almost completely devoid of substantive content. Thus twitter is currently the best example of 'connected presence' and the phatic culture that results

**FIGURE 3**  
Typical Twitter Profile (accessed 5 September 2007)



FIGURE 4

## Typical Twitter Communications (accessed 5 September 2007)

Hmmm...now what shall I have for dinner? [09:00 PM August 25, 2007](#) from im

---

Just starting. [12:10 AM August 22, 2007](#) from im

---

Back online. [10:34 PM August 16, 2007](#) from im

---

Harry Potter, tonight (Friday) meet at pub next to ODEON cinema, Bish, all invited. [09:09 AM August 10, 2007](#) from web

---

Wallowing in mud. [12:23 PM August 09, 2007](#) from im

---

Meet bossa at 3pm for caribbean carnival. D [01:49 PM August 04, 2007](#) from bt

---

Directing narrative flow. [01:45 PM August 03, 2007](#) from im

---

Just rediscovered Twitter [12:48 AM August 02, 2007](#) from im

---

Back in the UK! Hooray! [06:41 PM July 28, 2007](#) from im

---

Vacationing in southern France. [11:00 PM July 20, 2007](#) from web

---

Dinner [07:52 PM July 16, 2007](#) from im

---

w00T! Just sold a story to Transmission magazine. <http://damiengwalter.wordpress.com>, [07:45 PM July 15, 2007](#) from im

---

Writing SWOT analysis. Surprisingly interesting. I'm such a nerd! [02:17 PM July 09, 2007](#) from im

---

Working on a short story called MUD. Taking the weekend off the novel. [10:02 AM July 07, 2007](#) from im

---

1545 words. None of the haddock. [12:13 AM June 24, 2007](#) from web

---

Ill, ILL, ILLLL!!!! Horrible hallucinatory flu bug. Can do no writing. [10:55 PM June 01, 2007](#) from im

---

Just describing a dead body. Joy. [04:40 PM May 31, 2007](#) from im

---

I'm thinking I might be needing an omniscient narrator. [01:58 PM May 27, 2007](#) from im

---

Mission accomplished. For week one anyway! <http://damiengwalter.wordpress.com>, [02:13 AM May 21, 2007](#) from im

---

[RSS Feed](#) [Older >](#)

from it. In that way, Twitter is a glimpse into a future media/communications world of connection over content. Even among users, there is a certain amount of trepidation as to the general 'pointlessness' of the messages circulated,<sup>5</sup> at the same time as an appreciation of an overall feeling of intimacy by being connected in real time to many others outside one's geographical location.

## The Usefulness of Phatic Media

One question remains . . . why is phatic communication and media useful? Apart from the demands of connected presence in an increasingly networked world, one has to wonder why phatic communication is being supported, indeed encouraged, by new social media enterprises.

Facebook, for example, encourages phatic communication through sociable add-ons like 'vampire bites', 'zombies', 'hot potatoes' and automating messages encouraging participation between friends in quizzes, film taste reviews and the like.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Facebook's new 'beacon' technology creates an environment where one's online purchases and interests get relayed to one's network of friends through automated communication. Twitter encourages phatic communication through the imposed limits of the medium itself. The 160 character limit for messages creates brevity in communication. The lack of a private messaging facility, promotes generic 'announcements' over dialogue or targeted conversation.

To answer this 'why?' question, one has to return to the concept of information as a commodity. In blogging, personal information was used as a commodity to build relationships. Within social networking and microblogging, the value of information is based more on the generation of large amounts of small bits of data, which can be analysed easily in the marketing process. Strategies such as data mining, consumer profiling, 'buzz' monitoring, and reading brand relationships are much more compatible with the small bits of 'data' exchanged in brief phatic exchanges than the narratives and dialogue associated with, for example, blogging. Phatic communication is much easier to put in a database, and much easier to package and sell to those looking to market products or gain consumer insights.

Marketers can scan the search clouds of the twittersphere for example, to gauge consumer behaviours, activities and trends, as well as the impact of their products or campaigns in the marketplace. In that respect, we see a shift in how personal information is being commodified, from the exchange of substantive and narrative personal disclosure in relationship building, to the commodification of communicative gestures within database influenced market research.

## Conclusion

We are seeing how in many ways the internet has become as much about interaction with others as it has about accessing information. This situation echoes Marshall McLuhan's assertion in the 1970s that the 'the user is content' in electronic media. This has only become more true as we have switched to interactive ICTs and pervasive communication. The massive popularity of blogging, social networking and microblogging on the net and other communication technologies has indeed demonstrated that it is the other *people* in these environments, and the connections to them made in a postsocial world<sup>7</sup> that is increasingly being consumed.

In the drift from blogging, to social networking, to microblogging we see a shift from dialogue and communication between actors in a network, where the point of the network was to facilitate an exchange of substantive content, to a situation where the maintenance of a network itself has become the primary focus. Here communication has been subordinated to the role of the simple maintenance of ever expanding networks and the notion of a connected presence. This has resulted in a rise of what I have called 'phatic media' in which communication without content has taken precedence.

The movement from blogging, to social networking, to microblogging demonstrates the simultaneous movements away from communities, narratives, substantive communication, and towards networks, databases and phatic communion. This is an environment

that obliges us to write, speak, link and text others on an almost continual basis to maintain some sense of connection to an ever-expanding social network, while remaining fairly oblivious as to the consumption (and production) of information.

## Notes

- 1 Hodkinson (2007) provides a good example of such network formation and specialist exchange in his discussion of goth-oriented online journals.
- 2 Discussed for example in *The Times* article 'Online networkers who click with 1,000 "friends"', Smith (2007).
- 3 Some classic examples of phatic exchange include 'how's it going?', 'nice day', 'you're welcome', or even nods and winks.
- 4 They suggest that in these circumstances two dimensions of the social may be transformed. First, the inner disposition to experience and sustain commitment towards relationships, and secondly, the actual work undertaken to accomplish relationships.
- 5 'Friends Swap Twitters, and Frustration: New Real-Time Messaging Services Overwhelm Some Users with Mundane Updates From Friends', *New York Times* (Lavallee, A. 2007).
- 6 For example, a typical automated message such as "'Mr X" has challenged you to a movie quiz' suggests a personal invitation to compete. However, it is usually the case that if 'Mr X' has participated in a movie quiz, you will, by default, be automatically 'challenged' to the quiz, by virtue of being friends with 'Mr X'.
- 7 Given McLuhan's tendency to put people in a subordinate position to the technology they use, he might not be impressed.

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