FACEBOOK: UTOPIA, DYSTOPIA OR HETEROTOPIA?

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook, Friendster, Orkut, Hi5, and MySpace have accelerated and changed the meaning of communication for millions of computer users around the world. The growing number of people joining these SNSs and the ascending rate of their usage hours make this rather somatically taxing experience qualify semiotically as quite a potent field of research. This paper investigates the time-space defying locus provided by one particular SNS, Facebook and its multilateral usage pattern with all its complex dynamics, to bring to light the mechanisms that are vital for its successful functioning. Over the years, the space provided by the SNS or the Internet in general has been considered under different hypothetical frames – as a public sphere, democratic space, private space, virtual community, discursive space, transformative site, or even a non-space. The paper, however, posits that it is not one particular frame, but a fusion of all these frames, forming one alternative space, heterotopic in nature, which can explain why SNSs, particularly Facebook have such escalating popularity among its members from all age groups.

I. INTRODUCTION

If with the advent of TV, the world is said to have been brought inside our living room, and with the Internet, particularly email and messenger services, friends and families only the click of a button away, with the advent of social networking sites (SNSs), any residual physical and temporal distances have been virtually gapped, and the feeling of presence, a prime determinant of space, has become considerably transformed. It is not surprising then, that social networks are now the 4th most popular online activity sites, ahead of personal email, with time spent on SNS growing at 3 times the overall Internet rate, accounting for almost 10% of all Internet time (*Nielsen*, 2009).

SNSs are basically computer-mediated environments that rely on social software application, and are best characterized as dynamic, user driven and participatory as opposed to static or isolated repositories of information. These sites allow people to commune and to establish nodal relationships with each other through shared interests, group affiliations, or mutual social interactions. As Granovetter (1983) posits, SNSs exists to facilitate the formation of social ties, whether strong (familial bonds and good friends) or weak (acquaintances and coworkers one doesn't know very well) – both necessary to provide individuals with a diverse range of information and to facilitate social networking (201-33).

Millions of computer users around the world are now communicating with each other through SNSs like Facebook, MySpace, Linkedin, Tagged, Friendster, Orkut or Hi5. Regardless of how differently they label themselves (Facebook calls itself a social utility website), on the whole, these websites have provided people the luxury of being relaxed observers of the latest happenings in their friends' lives. Hunching over a keyboard and peering at a flat screen – something that the usage of such network sites automatically entails – apparently, is a somatically taxing experience, but with the continuous upsurge of user engagement and more and more mainstream adoption of the social-networking service, the SNSs, semiotically, promises a rich field of research (Donath, 2007). www.facebook.com[1], the SNS under analysis, for example, claims 200 million active users from 170 countries and territories of the world spending more than 5 billion minutes each day on the site (Facebook Press Release, 2009). A comment by Matt Asay (2008), a member of CNET blog on Facebook's immense potential is worth noting here:

> Yesterday I got my haircut, and Valerie, the lady that has cut my hair for the past 20-plus years, started talking to me about how she uses Facebook. Valerie is one of the least technically-adept people I have ever met. If

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[1] Hereafter Facebook.

she's using Facebook, the entire planet is (n.p.).

Asay's realization reflects the findings of a recent study that ranks Facebook as the most used social network by world wide monthly active users, inviting a timely effort to bring this social networking giant under a close reading (As cited in Andy Kazeniac, 2009). Facebook has been the subject of many surveys, and has topped many data charts, but the intricacy behind its multilateral appeal to a cross section of people remains understudied. The broad social network and heavy usage patterns of the site indeed reaffirm it as an appropriate area for investigation. Addressing this fitting need, this paper explores the time-space defying locus Facebook provides, and takes into account the inherent complex dynamics its profoundly potent blend of online and offline interactions ensue, trying to bring to light the mechanisms – both normative and codified – that are vital to the successful functioning of Facebook.

Over the years, the space provided by the SNS or the Internet in general has been considered as different hypothetical frames – as a public sphere, democratic space, private space, virtual community, discursive space, transformative site, or even a non-space. The paper, however, posits that it is not one or the other of the separate frames, but a fusion of all these frames, forming one alternative space, heterotopic in nature, which can explain why SNSs, particularly Facebook have such escalating popularity among its members from all age groups.

II. A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

As Facebook in its entirety cannot be dealt with within the paper's limited scope, it foregrounds one particular aspect of the SNS to attempt an interpretation of the widespread adoption and hiking popularity it enjoys. More than statistics – like the number of users who log onto Facebook at least once each day – what is of prime importance to the present study is to ask and find answer to the following questions: Why such a large number of people from a diverse range of classes, income groups, age brackets and maturity levels find Facebook an engaging space to visit and spend long hours in? Does it serve the same purpose to all? What is behind its deep and wide-ranging appeal that people feel the need to be connected to

it, devoting their free time even on a hectic day, whether they are on the move, at home or at their work places? The paper posits that the answers to these queries lie in the myriad usage patterns of Facebook. The paper uses Foucault's concept of heterotopia as a critical lens to probe Facebook's multilateral appeal. The examples and data used in the paper are observational, collected from primary sources – the author's Facebook community, consisting of both close and distant friends and their engagement pattern with the site. However, as the scope of the paper is limited to Facebook, one must note that all the observations made here may not apply to SNS generically.

III. FACEBOOK: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

In the simplest terms, Facebook enables the user to construct an online profile – including contact and personal information, pictures, interests and groups one joins – accumulate "friends" who can view each other's profiles, be constantly updated on their activities, send messages, perform searches and queries, form virtual groups based on common interests, set up events, add applications, and transmit information through various channels. Commentators have presented Facebook in different lights, including as a public sphere, an online community, an online bulletin board, or a massive blog. However, the original idea for the term Facebook came from the regular school year book, which is used to facilitate the familiarization process between old and new students. Created in 2004 for a limited user group in Harvard, Facebook has seen a staggering growth with its "active users doubling every 6 months" (Owyang, 2008; n.p.). The company's CEO Mark Zuckerberg (2009) was not being complacent when in the Facebook Blog, he claimed, "if Facebook were a country, it would be the eighth most populated in the world, just ahead of Japan, Russia and Nigeria" (n.p.).

"Primarily a feat of social engineering," Face book's appeal is both "obvious and rather subtle" (Grossman, 2007; n.p.). On the surface level, Facebook's core site functions, such as Profile, Friends, Networks and Inbox, together with its applications, such as Photos, Notes, Groups, Events and Posted items help users follow their friends through many job, email, and geographical shifts, making it the most efficacious and seemly means to share information and communicate with friends. The CEO's claim, "[w]e always try to

emphasize the utility component" is justifiably sound (Zuckerberg, 07/2007).

Facebook, indeed has its functional appeal, but there is more to these functions than what meets the eye. It is the diverse usages these basic utilities can be put to that Facebook has been able to addictively insinuate itself into the lives of a diverse population. With their welcome note: "Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life," Facebook has stated clearly that its intention is to be a sort of mirror to the real world social graph (Facebook homepage). However, it is also unavoidably true that new friendships are made on the site – even friendships forged for the sole purpose of playing a game (such as poker) made by a third party developer – and human interactions go beyond simply poking, comparing, rating, and writing on walls. In the following section, the paper offers a critical reading of the core functions and some apparently trivial looking applications that abound in Facebook to read beyond their overt and uniform functionality and to gauge the extent of their significance in making Facebook a heterotopic site – one of the crucial factors contributing greatly to its unprecedented popularity.

IV. HETEROTOPIC FACEBOOK: BETWEEN UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA, BETWEEN REAL AND HYPERREAL

Neurobiologically speaking, heterotopias are "collections of normal neurons in abnormal locations…caused by an arrest of migration of the neurons to the cerebral cortex" (Medcyclopedia; n.p.). They are alarming development, often leading to seizures or developmental anomalies. Re-contextualized, they do provide, as Foucault describes, a means of contesting the "no place" of utopias with real, if dangerous, "other spaces."

Therefore, to understand Facebook's heterotopic nature one needs to take into account two other kinds of unreal space that Facebook contests, i.e. utopia in both the ambiguous meanings attached to it – as "no place" (ou topos) and "good place" (eu topos) and dystopia – an imaginary place which is completely anti-utopia. As a virtual place, Facebook does not have a geographical site; it exists in cyberspace which is also, basically, no place. It is a good place as its users discover it as a place that gives them individual and social agency, and where the good things that technology brings

to them can be put to satisfactory use. Facebook also offers emancipatory possibilities mainly for the youth who can form a resistant collective ethos, and indulge in a creative, utopian imagination. The utopian and dystopian functions of Facebook are, in the end, allegorical and reflect the best and the worst possibilities the site offers.

Despite its essentially virtual nature, Facebook gives out a strong impression of being real on many levels, much like heterotopias of Michel Foucault that are simultaneously physical and cerebral spaces. Apart from the users playing out their real life roles and sharing interests that are real, many of Facebook's applications simulate physical sensations, be they tactile – poking, hugging, slapping, tickling; gustatory – food, drinks, ice creams; olfactory – perfumed gifts; or auditory – sound bytes, animated emoticons. Facebook is an idea of a place as well as a virtual space, even though the dividing line between virtual and real remains porous.

Like the Foucauldian heterotopia, Facebook is an "other space" which is always valid in relation to a real space. In Faceebook, the locus of interaction may be imagined, but it is predicated on the same sets of normative spatial relations that construct real life space. Thus, interactions in a virtual party follow the conventions of real life party interactions. If space is constructed by discourse, then the binary between 'real life' space and cyberspace collapses. Facebook by allowing one to navigate between reality and hyperreality has become a key marker of the post modern turn that valorizes simulation and spectacular reality and the concomitant effacement of any borderline between reality and hyperreality.

Heterotopias are, thus, intriguing spaces, something that Foucault defines as social spaces, combining different or opposite functions; a "single real place" in which different incompatible "spaces and locations" are juxtaposed ("Of Other Space", 1967; n.p.). Foucault points out five main principles as essential for a space to be considered heterotopic: heterotopias are inherent in all cultures; they can be given different functions in relation to changing society over time, hold different incompatible sites into one, have a temporal dimension, and are isolated through a system of opening and closing (*ibid*). Foucault's examples are: boarding schools, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, cemeteries, museums, libraries,

festival sites, vacation villages, honeymoon hotels. This takes one back to the idea of conceiving space as a network of relations and by extension to the SNSs where the computer, and through it each user, acts as a portal to the virtual space and network, which is again fraught with contradiction of purposes, illusion, imagination, deviancy and so on. With these different sites in operation, SNSs have contracted, compacted and expanded space and allowed one to navigate all these spaces despite their discontinuities and incompatibilities. Therefore, the suggestion for a heterotopian framing for an observation of SNSs – particulary Facebook – can be valuable. Recontextualizing Sherman Young's (1998) analysis of cyber space we can see that Facebook, which is a rich, polyvalent site of "different social and individual constructs" makes us "reflect upon the other spaces that exist in our societies. The nature of the new spaces gives us overt clues as to the construction of our existing societies" (n.p.).

Without holding Facebook up to each heterotopic principle in detail, it is obvious that it contradicts none of the Foucauldian principles described above. The paper argues that it is this heterotopic nature of Facebook that accounts for its suitability as a medium of communication in this epoch that Foucault, long before the onset of what can be termed the *Facebook Age* described as the "epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (Foucault, 1967; n.p.).

The following section analyzes some applications and utilities Facebook offers in detail to bring to light its heterotopic potential.

V. THE INCOMPATIBLE SPACES IN FACEBOOK

The greatest appeal of Facebook is in its being many places in one: It is at once a communication channel: a tool to enhance real life, much like a telephone, a community of a blend of strong-tie and weak-tie relationships (different circles of friend, top friends application) among people who have a mixture of motives and ephemeral affiliations, a platform that allows the formation of a new, active subjectivity or an aspirational self (user profile), which is not necessarily unreal; it is also a mode that we can call the new-confessional that acts more like a public diary (the "status messages"). It's a place for social surveillance,

where everybody is under a 'friendly' gaze but never out of a technological bondage and watchfulness (shades of Foucault's panopticon). It is both a festival ground and a private space; it is an interior space away from the public domain but is a public domain itself. It thrives on intimate relationships (Friends) yet is a hub of global consumer communication and the market place; it is a communication channel that brings people together yet excludes those whose friend requests are ignored.

To untangle the startling knot of combinations, let us take a closer look at a few of these contesting sites.

VI. FACEBOOK AS A COMMUNICATION CHANNEL

Facebook has become a communication channel par excellence to the extent that it has almost become the second best thing to face to face communication. In terms of dissemination of information too, it has taken the promises of telecommunication to greater heights. A good example of this would be the function of invitation to causes or events. An event invitation in a student circle may look like the following:

> "Emily plans to attend The Sociology Graduate Seminar Series - Session 1."[2]
> It's hosted by STU Sociology Grad Students.
> So far 47 people have been invited.
> Venue: Sociology Seminar room 2
> Time: 11:0 am
> Date: Wednesday, 23nd July, 2009
> RSVP to this event"

As Facebook official website affirms, more than 2.5 million events are created each month on the site (Facebook Press Release, 2009). It is by far the quickest way to reach a wide range of potential audience for an event. Events catering to a specific locality are often notified thruogh Facebook to ensure that the widest possible audience comes to know about it.

Addressing those who are not on Facebook, Manjoo (2009) quite convincingly makes a case

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[2] Even though the details, conversation, postings etc. used in this paper are directly quoted from Facebook, the author has used pseudo names in order to protect the privacy of the user.

for the SNS's appropriateness as a communication channel:

> True, you might not want people to be able to follow your life—it's no great loss to you if your long-lost college frenemy can't find you. But what about your old fling, your new fling, your next employer, or that friend-of-a-friend you just met at a party who says he can give you some great tips on your golf swing? . . . By being on Facebook, you're facilitating such ties; without it, you're missing them and making life difficult for those who went looking for you there (n.p.).

An average Facebook user has 120 friends on the site (Facebook Press Release, 2009). The more friends one has the better informed he/she is. It's not surprising that despite the ubiquitous mass media, personal networks like Facebook remain an important source of information about subjects people care about that are too personal and too local to be a part of a central repository. Granovetter (1973, 1983) aptly demonstrates that a key strength of weak-ties is their ability to provide a wide range of information (as cited in Donath, J. 2007, 231-251). By increasing the number of weak ties, users have the potential to expand their range of information sources, while maintaining a socially local context of personal acquaintanceship.

Consider for example, the following set of information gleaned from a cursory glance over the status updates of friends on a rainy day in Dhaka, Bangladesh:

Maruf: Our basement parking under 15 feet water! Our car and 17 others completely submerged!
Ashutosh: Three pumps are on full throttle for the last few hours in *Golf Heights* and the water is only half way down!
Samina: 338 mm rain in 12 hours! But let it come. We need rain
Nahin: For those who are romantically inclined: Please don't ask for more rain!! Go out in the street and judge for yourself! Wishing for rain without making arrangements for the development of Dhaka drainage system is not fair!!
Shaheen: braved a journey from home to the hostel to home again, but the water

height remained the same through out. God save us!

Before the heavy downpour can hit the newspaper head line the following day, one's network of friends can be a good source for information about what's happening where, without being physically present in those places.

VII. STAUS MESSAGES OR NEW CONFESSIONAL?

More frequently used than any other applications, the status updates inform others of one's most recent actions. Prompted by the question, "What are you doing right now?" more than 30 million users update their status at least once each day (Facebook Press Release, 2009). In the hands of the users, this updating can function as diversely as augmented reality, creating a hierarchy based on linguistic capital, or in the mode of a "new-confessional." The status update question was recently refashioned from the old "declarative" mode to a more "introspective" one that reads: What's on your mind? (Suddath, 2009; n.p.). The resultant ambiguity is indicative of Facebook's attempt to add depth to its social and individual mapping.

Here is an example of what a user writes daily (often time a few times a day), in response to the automatically generated query: "What are you doing right now?"[3]

Arman:
> Bought new running shoes this morning (12/10/08)
> Went for a run in new running shoes this evening (12/10/08)
> Arman's phone is about to die, and he left his charger at home (15/10/08)
> Is a million different people from one day to the next... (23/10/08)
> Cooked a nice dinner and is enjoying a quiet night at home. (26/10/08)
> Is still thinking about the amaretto biscuit chocolate pudding from last night. (27/10/08)
> Is digging in for a late night at the shop (02/11/08).

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[3] The author has retained this earlier version of the question in this segment as the data collected were generated under this particular order of words.

The updates above are largely focused on the individual but they often blur the distinction between the private and the public. Paying attention to personal details is ameliorated by the overtly confessional tone of many regular status updates. Confession, we recall, is foundational to Foucault's *History of Sexuality,* where he depicts confession as:

> a ritual discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor, but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile. (61-62)

While the author/speaker may feel that he or she has exercised power through confessing and laying bare intimate life details for others to examine, Foucault points out that the agency of domination resides in the one who listens and says nothing – not in the one who knows and answers – in the one who questions and is not supposed to know (*ibid*, 62).

The highly individual personal space of the profile incites many users to provide intimate details about their lives for their friends. If any one, who is not supposed to know about such intimate details, comes across these, that person is then placed into a position of power by virtue of the information confessed indirectly to him/her. For example, the last update, cited above is a mere declaration of what the user is doing at that moment, but it also lets others make use of this privy information should they intend to do so against the user's wish. But as similar personal and intimate details flood the Facebook homepage of any user at any given moment on a daily basis, it seems that the Facebook age is resilient to, if not in denial of, any such threat to privacy. In fact, in this network of friends, privacy is not a privilege but candour and openness is. This openness is what counts for the up market feel, so frequently attached to Facebook.

Besides, "the act of surreptitiously viewing personal information can be pleasurable; there is an undeniable desire for many people to read another's diary or snoop-in someone's e-mails" (Vie, 2007, 33). The popularity of this exercise, expressed by the frequency of people writing them and the number of people reading and commenting on them shows the society's obsession with the "voyeuristic gaze and exploits the desire to watch others confess" (*ibid*, 34). Above all, these confessors strive to present the truth and the status updates provide the viewers pleasure because they believe that in viewing these, they are somehow "privy to a heretofore hidden truth" (*ibid*, 34).

Foucault observes in *History of Sexuality* that we have since become a singularly confessing society . . . one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illness and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell (59). Take for example the following set of status updates by different users on a given day:

> **Amreen:**
> Is moving for the thousandth time in her life. Looking for a small house near Dhanmondi residential area. Any suggestions folks?.
> **Fayaaz:**
> I got promoted guys: now I am a permanent teacher of junior section of my school.
> **Raisa:**
> Will be on an official trip to Cox's Bazar tomorrow.
> **Nabin:**
> Just realized that my almost 8 year old is smarter than me!
> **Michel:**
> Can't believe that I'm leaving for Nottingham in 3 days time. [4]

Reconsidered, this constant stream of data also makes Facebook function like a public diary, replete with inane yet intimate details that add up to life, forming a digital form of closeness, and filling temporal and spatial gaps.

VIII. FACEBOOK, THE CARNIVALESQUE

Another very common use of Facebook is as a carnival space, where normally dominant constraints and hierarchies are temporarily lifted and denied. It is a place where, according to Stamm (1989), "everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people is suspended" (21). In the original application of the term in Mikhail Bakhtin (1965), carnival's key features include eccentricity, laughter, parody, decrowning activity, profanation and doubling. All these are present in

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[4] Retrieved from www.facebook.com. On 30.07.09

Facebook, which similarly empowers users with a critical, subversive power making them find equivalence in everything. Moreover, to live behind constraints of time, age and social norms, is a compulsion inherent in human being, and something that the indeterminacy and porousness of applications in Facebook allow users to nurture.

The frequency with which numerous protest groups surface in Facebook, challenging a Facebook policy or being sarcastic about the pervasiveness of Facebook can be a good example of how Facebook functions as a self-reflexive, carnivalesque site. Examples could be:

> "We Hate the New Facebook, So STOP CHANGING It!!!" (1,546,060 members) as well as "Vote on the New Facebook" (73,763 members), "I was Doing Homework, then I ended up on Facebook" (907,142 members) and so on.[5] However, carnival with all its emancipatory potential is transient. The time spent in carnivalesque fervor in Facebook, as the formation of the above groups demonstrates, also is transient, but just like a carnival, with its lack of material constraints and the resultant "ease with which rules can be changed [here], alters ideas of existing social mores" (Young, 199; n.p.).

Having started from a status message, the following thread, among three users – A and C, Bangladeshis, and B, an American, about the recent US presidential election – can demonstrate the carnivalesque use of Facebook:

> **A:**
> Wants post-election Survivor: Palin, Hassleback, Bay Buchanan, Michele Bachmann, Cindy McCain with William Ayers and Rev Wright! Fun, fun!
> **B:**
> Can we throw in Ann Coulter and Michelle Milken just for a little drama? Where would the location be? A liberal bastion like San Francisco or should they learn how "real" Americans live in the Heartland somewhere?
> **A:**
> Of course we can…about the location, I was thinking of either Iran or Waziristan in Pakistan...with either Zardari or Ahmedinejad can be the host or they can be forced to live in

Amsterdam and work in gay bars/clubs in the red light district!
> **C:**
> I love it! They could earn points for every foreign name they pronounce right, like "Manmohan Singh" or "Kim Kong Il". There could be a making clothes on a $15 budget challenge for Cindy McCain (which she would fail) and a "how many houses do I own?" for john . . . The possibilities are endless.[6]

In this particular instant, Facebook doubles as a heterotopia and a carnival space. An important aspect of heterotopia, as Foucault says, is its changing function within a single society. Status updates in Facebook, by its fluid nature, assumes a heterotopic nature. "Status update" has a given function – it is a place dedicated to let the world know what one is doing/thinking at a specific point of time – but as seen here, it can be used in many other ways too. Moreover, predominantly non-American audiences following the US election, and making a mockery of it, using a conceptual frame of a popular US reality TV show, also project Facebook as a counter-site that contests the real order and arrangement of things and reverses the normative media flow. Facebook, thus, provides a locus for the affirmation of difference, as well as a means to go beyond repression and material constraints.

IX. FACEBOOK: A MARKETPLACE FOR CULTURAL CAPITAL

In this information age, new emphases on taste and cultural consumption free identity from some of its traditional socioeconomic limitations like profession and class (Grodin and Lindlof, 1996). More importantly, the milieu of cultural interests one creates for oneself not only "echoes" but also actively "reinforces" who one can be (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; n.p.). Facebook provides many ways for users to express their tastes, one being the ironically named, "status update." More than one's whereabouts, they are signals of social position, as well as a taste performance where users can display their status and distinction to an audience. Thornton (1997) suggests, this can create a "virtual wall," allowing those in the know to recognize others within their subculture via their common

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[5] The number of members for each group mentioned in this section was retrieved on 12th July, 2009

[6] Retrieved from www.facebook.com on 30.10.08.

understanding of jokes and references that have not yet spread to the mainstream (1-7). On the other hand, as Pierre Bourdieu (1999) in his "Language and Symbolic Power" postulates, linguistic exchange is also:

> economic exchange which is established within a particular symbolic relation of power between a producer, endowed with a certain linguistic capital, and a consumer (or a market), and which is capable of procuring a certain, material or symbolic profit" (503).

Facebook can very well be a source and display of what Bourdieu calls "linguistic capital," and those who use it better are more powerful. Take for example the following set of status updates by a frequent status updater:

Shormi:
> Is loving the continuing stretch of drenchedness: a macerated world under lachrymose skies. (10/10/08)
> Hates how the developers' corrugated steel marks some sumptuous plot with a lawn, before swallowing it up and regurgitating it into a tasteless apartment. (12/10/08)
> Wonders how human society can condemn suicide yet condone capital punishment. When you can't take your own life, how can you justify taking someone else's? (20/10/08)
> Is thrilled to hear President Elect Obama's victory speech at the gala today. *Obama MuBarack! Obama Mubarock!* (5/11/08)

In the example above, the user establishes herself as "the legitimate speaker of the legitimate language" (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 504). Once the claims to linguistic legitimacy is established, she reverts to and makes a subtle use of a less-legitimate or in Bourdieu's terms "stigmatized language" (non-English in this case), when in the last update she plays with Barack Obama's name by injecting an Arabic word "Mubarak", meaning greetings. In the second interjection in the same sentence, she takes it further by fusing it with another English qualifier that in a proper sentence structure would have looked like, "Congratulations to Barack Obama; You rock". These occasional regression to a non-legitimate language and subverting the rules of English sentence structures, in this case, are seen as intensification of emotion, a strong qualifier than a regressive act due to lack of capital. In line with Bourdieu (1999), once one establishes one's habitus imbued with linguistic

capital, one becomes powerful enough to use "strategies of condescension" and make malleable use of language, without the risk of downgrading oneself (503). In Facebook, too, elegantly presented knowledge, use of language and wit is a valuable currency. And the frequent updaters do foster good impression and are aware of their power. No wonder that the comments (often appreciating the user's usage of the language) these status messages draw sometimes outnumber any popular postings.

X. A PLATFORM FOR ASPIRATIONAL SELF

Based on the way people participate in online communities, online community architect, Amy Jo Kim, makes a clear distinction between online communities that augment reality and the fantasy communities that help escape from reality: "the kind where you're yourself and the kind where you are playing out a fantasy role" (Amy Jo Kim, 4/99). Following Kim's classification, Facebook falls under the type she calls "augmented reality," which is a kind of a community, "where you're "you," and you're there to integrate with your life [and to] deal with the issues in your life" (*ibid*).

Facebook is a suitable platform for identity formation or more appropriately, identity extension. Perhaps the basic pleasure that social network sites provide is the knowledge that someone is paying attention, which even though, renders users vulnerable to public gaze, also calls forth a lot of self attention and performance. It can also make schizophrenic identity possible. The Facebook barometers of sociability – popularity score, the number of pending friend request, the range of virtual gifts, nick names given etc – can easily belie the true personality of a user. In real life this virtually sociable and popular user can very well be a socially cloistered person.

As Liu's (2007) research finding on MySpace suggests, the informative paraphernalia that go into the making of a profile in Facebook "are cultural signs—a user's self-described favorite books, music, movies, television interests, and so forth—composed together into a *taste statement* that is 'performed' through the profile" (252-275). Boyd's (2006) argument on friend connection is also significant in this regard: "the act of 'friending' others, and choosing the subset of these friends to display in the so-called "Top 8,"

constitute identity performances, because they are willful acts of context creation (n.p.).

In his discussion of heteotopia and utopia, Foucault (1967) cites the example of mirror as a unique space that combines both. The profile of a Facebook user functions like a utopian mirror, a "placeless place," enabling the user to be there s/he is absent, projecting his/her aspirational self (n.p.). Yet, pertaining to its heterotopic potential, it "exerts a sort of counteraction on the position" that the user occupies. "Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward [the user], from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, [s/he comes] back toward [his/her own selves]; directing their eyes toward themselves and to reconstitute themselves there where they are" (*ibid, n.p.*).

In this age that hails pluralism and diversity, such context-setting is not necessarily deceptive or unreal, but is rather an extension of a self, which an SNS like Facebook has made accessible and exercisable without sacrificing one's dominant self or being stigmatized as a deceiver. Thus, a user's identity as displayed in his/her profile, despite its occasional wax and wane remains quite an orderly fact on Facebook.

XI. FACEBOOK PRIVACY: HOLDING THE FORT

Along with all the other core functions and applications, Facebook's privacy setting – with scope for restricting an acquaintance's access to one's private details, without jeopardizing the friendliness with "Limited profile" – helps keep up its user base despite some misgivings about its fallibility. Members may assume that the available privacy settings protect their profile from surveillance. There are, however, many ways that someone's profiles can be exposed even with restricted privacy settings (Read and Young, 2006). Tagging feature in Facebook makes people vulnerable to other users' discretion in uploading photos – users can be tagged in embarrassing photos. So, users have little control over pictures that they have not uploaded themselves. Pictures of people who don't even have a Facebook account also abound in association of shared moments with friends and thereby, being tagged they also become part of Facebook, even though without their knowledge or consent.

Another privacy issue can be raised about the wall-to-wall feature that easily allows an individual to see the back and forth conversation between two users in the same network and potentially watch over them. Even though Facebook allows individuals to restrict their wall in different ways, users tend not to do so as comments on the wall reac many users at once.

As Vie (2007) suggests, the design of Facebook invites a false sense of safety, leading users into overlooking the pervasiveness of a constant and watchful public gaze. Ostensibly, friendship in Facebook functions under explicitly laid out social rules and a real world connection between users is almost a prerequisite for befriending others. Facebook friend requests are phrased to encourage reciprocal friendship between users who already know each other. When accepting a friend request, the site prompts an individual to clarify how he or she knows the other user using a list of suggested connections, such as, they went to school together, they worked together etc.

It is necessary to note how in Foucault's discussion of the panoptic gaze in *Discipline and Punish*, an individual first has to know that he is being watched to self regulate his behaviour: One who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power (202). The crucial factor is the knowledge of being watched. In this regard Mark Poster (2006) argues users do not necessarily feel threatened by a watchful presence of those in positions of power over them – employers, parents, instructors, administrators – and self-regulate their behaviour. Members may assume that the available privacy settings protect their profile from surveillance. This false sense of security leads these individuals to neglect the same sort of self regulation they would use in offline situations.

These threats to privacy apparently do not create a dent in the morale of the Facebookers, nor do these avert them from engaging with Facebook as a never ceasing machinery of surveillance. The interactional applications coupled with such laid out privacy setting, rather, create a make-believe world of invincibility, giving active agency to its users, which in turn makes them feel empowered. Seen in such light, Facebook with all its applications and malleable usages crosses the boundary of mere trivia and emerges as a tool for gratification of many needs in one riveting space.

XII. CONCLUSION

There can be little doubt that Facebook provides a rich site of a heterotopic conglomeration, where fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the same dimension, allowing one to do anything and everything – from communication to sharing knowledge, to expand one's self, to subvert repressive traditions, or merely throw virtual snowballs or test one's trivia skills – so much so that it has become "a routine aide to social interaction, like e-mail and antiperspirant" (Manjoo, 2009; n.p.). A cursory examination of the thousands of diverse activities taking place everyday on Facebook indicates numerous loose webs of rational-critical discourses that expand, contract, reshape the space in which we live. Being a heterotopia or a heterotopic set, Facebook confers an agency to its users to challenge the very notion of the ordering of space as arbitrary, and reconceptualize space as always a transient, polysemous and contested terrain. Therefore, extending to Facebook, what Sherman Young (1998) suggested in relation to cyberspace, we can say that going beyond mere categorising, heterotopic sites can be a way of "examining social spaces," as "they give rise to new discourses about what those spaces are, how they arise and what they may mean. . . new discourses about knowledge, power and society, which ultimately are reflected in the constitution of our human relationships" (n.p.).

To conclude, Facebook is both a fascinating and problematic social site, and akin to a Foucauldian heterotopia – a sort of counter-arrangement, of effectively realized utopia, in which, all the other real arrangements, found within society are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned. This polysemous site, thus, offers its users endless possibilities of connecting, interacting and socializing. No wonder that people continue to gravitate in droves towards social networking in Facebook, making it "the stickiest social networking site" (Inside Facebook, 2009).

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