Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down:
How Facebook Implicates Happy Users in the Activities of Literate Practice

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In this article, Lucy Belomoina analyzes her personal profile on Facebook through the lens of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). Lucy examines how she operates within the activity system of Facebook and, through discussion of her research and personal experience, she defines key CHAT terms such as trajectory and audience.

Today it seems as if everyone I know is registered on Facebook. As of December 2011, a Nielson Media Research study found that Facebook was the second-most accessed website after Google, and by January 2014, it reached 1.23 billion active users (Wikipedia). People use Facebook for different reasons, including socializing with friends, family, and colleagues; selling goods and services; dating; and engaging in professional and business networking. Facebook today has become a very popular communication genre.

Is Facebook Making Us Happy?

According to a 2011 study, Facebook earned its success due to the positive emotional state that users experience after visiting their personal accounts for three minutes (Mehta). Psychologists call this psychophysiological state "Core Flow State," which is a state characterized by highly positive emotions and "high arousal" (Mehta). In other words, Facebook users feel that everything is, well, just flowing, running smoothly in their lives, when they view their profiles. For example, when I go to my profile page, I see great photographs

of me and posts of my achievements, smart ideas, happy moments, and so on. That is, life is shining on Facebook.

Another study conducted in 2011 by Hancock and Gonzales also revealed that Facebook users experience an ego-boost after viewing their own Facebook pages for as long as three minutes as compared with the same amount of time looking at the mirror or just sitting in a room (Hendrick). It seems that the way we self-select the information that we decide to include on our Facebook profiles helps to create a better image of self in our own eyes and confirms that version of ourselves as who we strive to be.

My initial research started out of curiosity about why this particular social networking website is so popular. This led me to research Facebook's popularity, as I thought some explanation should be available online. After reading several articles from such online magazines as *Psychology Today* and *WebMD* as well as reading about Facebook on *Wikipedia*, which is a good website for initial research, I satisfied my hunger for knowledge and had to admit—I definitely fashion a better version of myself on Facebook. After viewing my own profile for three minutes, I do experience that ego-boost researchers are talking about. I certainly can't speak for all Facebook users in the world, but in my case researchers got it right.

But then, as a writing researcher, I started to wonder about the activity system of Facebook. Like, OK, I get it, I represent myself on this website quite successfully, but what is it on Facebook that allows me to do so? That is, how does the activity system of Facebook as a social networking service operate and how do I use this activity system? What is the trajectory of my posts? By the trajectory of my posts, I mean the direction they take as they move through Facebook space and how these posts are taken up by my audience. I usually hope that my audience will give a "like" to my posts, provide a positive comment, and even further share my posts on their pages. I find such feedback to be "cool," as I receive reassurance that my posts are worthy and interesting. I would call such a trajectory a positive one. But let's get back to the prior questions. In order to answer them, I turn to cultural-historical activity theory, or CHAT.

CHAT and Facebook

You might be wondering what CHAT and activity systems are. I will unpack these important concepts as we move along. As Joyce Walker, the Writing Program Director at Illinois State University, explains, thinking about writing in complex ways helps us understand "(how people act and communicate in

the world—specifically through the production of all kinds of texts) that help us look at the how/why/what of writing practices" (74). These three important questions—how, why, and what in relation to writing practices—encourage a researcher to investigate a writing activity from a lot of different perspectives. To be exact, it is necessary "to examine ALL of the possible influences of a text on society and society on a text (including cultural and historical factors as well as the actions and activities of the author and the audience)" (Hercula). CHAT covers all of the activities in writing, from coming up with an idea and writing it down to later discussions of this writing in a café.

Similarly, Facebook is a great example of a writing activity system, which is all of the people, texts, tools, and rules that work together in order for this social website to run. CHAT is certainly at play when we consider factors that influence the making of the text and how it is received by the audience. By taking into account all the conditions that may be affecting me as an author of my profile page and my audience, I can achieve the most effective communication. This is one of the reasons why CHAT is so important. To give a real-life example, I decided to use my personal profile—how I operate within the complex activity system of Facebook, and how I, from the perspective of an author, consider some of the key components of CHAT in order to achieve the most effective communication.

Welcome to My Page

So let's dive into my world. If you look at my cool profile (just kidding), you will see a complex activity system at work. My posts are not the only thing communicating something about me, the author of the page. The images and links that I share as well as the cover, profile pictures, and memberships to certain groups are also communicating something. Even miscellaneous information, such as my favorite movies, TV shows, books, and sports, all communicate something about me. In other words, you can see a complex activity system at work where different genres are all conveying information to my audience, who consciously or not, receives a message from all of these components. For example, my cover picture (Figure 1) is a nature scene of Buryatia, which is the place where I come from. I inform my audience from the very start that I am proud of my hometown as well as of nature in Siberia. Furthermore, I comment on my profile picture "Buryatia, Ulan-Ude," which sends an implicit message about my ethnic background if my audience decides to google where in the world Ulan-Ude is. I am quite clear about who I am, what ethnicity I belong to, what my professional interests are, and my genre preferences in music, movies, and books.

Figure 1: Background image of Buryatia, Ulan-Ude, on my Facebook profile page.

When I communicate information on my Facebook page, I am considering aspects of CHAT whether I realize it or not. I, as the author of my profile, make active choices about the content I post and consider the effects these choices have on the components of my Facebook page as well as the effects that these components have on my audience. For example, the content of my profile is informal, as I use Facebook not for work or commercial purposes, but to connect with my family, friends, and colleagues both outside and within the US for chatting online, being in the know of each other's personal and professional lives, and even receiving mutual emotional support on various kinds of matters. For these reasons, the content I share includes interesting articles, anecdotes, funny pictures, and family pictures as well as comments on professional matters that can be discussed in a relaxed atmosphere. This approach allows the layout of my profile to be casual and the language and sentence structure to be informal as well. This representation of myself through the components of my profile is part of CHAT that, as has been mentioned before, explains the "influences of a text on society and society on a text" (Hercula).

An Author (To an Extent)

Social websites, however, allow their users to be in control of their profiles only to an extent. Similarly, I act within a bigger activity system of Facebook and represent myself through a personal Facebook page, but I have to consider Facebook page layout. For example, I can't make my cover and profile pictures

visible only to my friends because this option is not available on Facebook. Thus, a public audience can still view these pictures and learn something about me. As I don't really think about them seeing my cover and profile pictures, these viewers are what I would consider an unintended audience. Furthermore, if I share a certain article, a thread of suggested articles shows up underneath my article, even though those articles are not necessarily related to the one I found important to share with my audience. The same works for my friends on Facebook. For instance, one of my friends recently shared an article, "What BuzzFeed Would Look Like If It Only Featured One Baby Named Ben" (Figure 2), which is about a mom who created a Tumblr parody of BuzzFeed where she shares monthly images of her baby son, Ben, on a quilt designed to look like an article from this popular Internet news media website. Underneath this article, a suggested article about Uber, a ridesharing service, popped up, which is completely unrelated to the article my friend shared. The article is suggested, however, because it also includes the words "Ben" and "BuzzFeed." As we can see, it is programmed into the activity system of Facebook to suggest new information for us based on what we shared or liked, even if we do not intend to share that suggested information with our audience. This unrelated article shared by Facebook results in my friend's post having an unexpected trajectory.
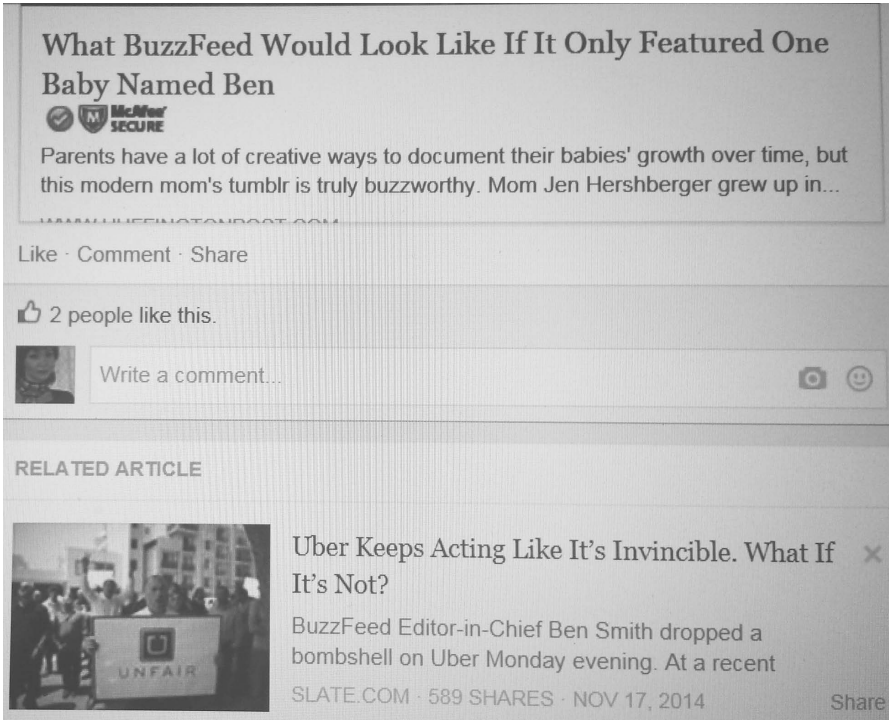

Figure 2: Shared and related articles in my Facebook news feed.

Thus, the system of Facebook shapes the choices I (as an identity-building author) make and the trajectories of my texts—how they appear, who sees and interacts with them, and how this process works to help reinforce that identity-building. In other words, it is not enough to say that it is the author and his or her audience that interact, but rather we should look into that in-between space where these interactions happen.

Certainly, my friends on Facebook also have a huge effect on the content of my Facebook profile by commenting on my posts, shares, or pictures, or by further sharing them on their Facebook pages. The specific affordances of the Facebook interface shape the way they comment, re-post, or like my posts, shares, or images. For example, if my friends like a certain image on my profile page, they have to push the "like" button and an image of hand with the thumb up will appear with their names under the image.

This is how the Facebook interface allows users to show their satisfaction and agreement with something posted on this site. Now if my friends on vk.com, which is a Russian social network website, like an image on my profile page, the "Like" button has a heart (Figure 3). The heart will not appear unless you push the button. Moreover, on the vk.com site, no names appear under the image, so you'd have to hover over the "like" button in order to see who liked the image. So, ultimately, the interface and the audience interconnect with my own choices within the activity system of Facebook, and all have an impact on how I represent my personal profile on this website.

Figure 3: An image of Russian cuisine liked by three friends of mine on vk.com.

Visual Rhetoric

One of the important factors of my representation on Facebook is visual rhetoric. By "visual rhetoric," I mean any images and pictures that I share with the audience. This component plays a crucial role in the creation of the content of my profile. I agree with Lee Odell and Christina Lynn Prell that composing is not only words, but also "interanimation of words, visual images, and page (or screen) design" (qtd. in Shipka 22). Sean Williams further explains that composition is not "linear, print-based texts," but rather "meanings are made, distributed, received, interpreted and remade . . . through many representational and communicative modes—not just through language" (qtd. in Shipka 21–22). So in my case, images and pictures are also texts that contribute to the creation of my image on Facebook. By choosing what visual and written rhetoric to post on my web page, I contribute to the creation of an image of who I want to be, and by doing so, I hope that the genre of my Facebook profile will have a positive trajectory.

Trajectory

As I mentioned earlier, I hope that my audience will "like" or give me a positive or informative comment on my post, be it a statement on a professional matter or a spur-of-the-moment shared thought about how much I like living in Normal, Illinois. Come to think of it, the ego-boost that users on Facebook experience due to the ideal image that they purposefully create on their Facebook profiles is also one positive trajectory of our selected information we choose to post. As Ryan Edel explains, trajectory consists of two components, which are "the direction a work goes in physical space [and] the way people take in a work, the way they adapt and adopt it as part of their lives" (98). The latter might also be called an uptake.

Indeed, when I post a message on my profile, the text sometimes has an unexpected uptake. For example, on my post: "Driving around in Bloomington-Normal. I'm loving it!" I received a comment from one of my friends, Olya Cochran: "Leah says Thank you for the biky ☺ she had a blast!" I did not live in Bloomington-Normal at that time and was driving around in search of apartments that day. While I was in Bloomington-Normal, I happened to drop off a bike for my friend's kid. While my post was actually related to my admiration of the town, Olya gave my post a totally new trajectory, and her uptake of my post was influenced by the positive changes that happened in her life because of my trip to Bloomington-Normal that day. Indeed, trajectory is one of the key aspects of CHAT, as trajectory demonstrates that the actual act of writing is only the tip of an iceberg.

Conclusion

Ultimately, as a Facebook user, all of my interactions with the site illustrate the way that CHAT plays out online: everything from the physical activity of posting a message to my page to the digital interactions that happen as that post is read, commented on, and used by others. The importance of using CHAT comes in its ability to help us understand that texts are social entities—cultural-historical communications. They are human/tool interactions that take place at particular historical moments and are influenced by concrete cultural values. For example, selfies are appreciated in this particular historical period we live in (and I chose a selfie for my author bio photo for this article), but in the 1950s, self photographs weren't even possible because of limitations of the technologies available for taking photographs.

Another important takeaway about CHAT is that I have to consider the activity system of Facebook that influences the way I represent myself on this website. My audience contributes to my identity-building as well by actively interacting with the content of my web page and giving the information and images I post new trajectories. Finally, the way my audience and I interact is conditioned by the layout of Facebook interface, that in-between place that has agency of its own. Thus, the way communication takes place on Facebook is affected by culture, history, and the activity system of this website. By considering the implications of CHAT, we can ensure our communication on Facebook—or anywhere, for that matter—is as effective as possible.

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