Facebook interactions and practices

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Abstract

This article discusses the transformations brought about by computer-mediated communication, and more specifically by online social networking services, for subjective expression, journaling and self-writing. Later, based on quantitative results obtained through a survey that reached 810 respondents, this paper discusses the most prevalent uses of Facebook: keep informed on current issues; have fun with funny jokes, videos and photos; participate in awareness campaigns; talk about work and learn about the professional growth of others; and know what friends and enemies are doing.

Keywords

Introduction

Considering the number of active users, Facebook is the largest social networking service on the internet[1]. Therefore, it is natural that this service, created in February 2004, is also the most frequent and intensively studied online service in digital communication research and related areas. Yet, in 2013, Feyter et al. (2013), after a review of the literature on Facebook produced between 2006 and 2012, recognized a demand for greater theoretical and methodological assessments on the practices related to Facebook. The authors found an abundance of academic articles that do not commonly explore the site in its plurality - either because they focus on the practices of a specific user profile, or because they cannot obtain statistical representativeness, or even because they do not dialogue with previous researches. Since then, one can observe the growing attention of researchers from diverse fields that focus on that communication service. But, because of the continual changes in the platform and the permanent transformation of practices, the need for more studies remains. With regard to the interactions of Brazilians with and on Facebook, the demand for discussions based on empirical approximations is even more urgent.

If even the research developed here does not overcome all the limitations raised by Feyer et al. (2013) — it does not investigate a stratified sample representative of the Brazilian population, for example —, one of its greatest merits is to discuss the practices, tastes and uses of people outside the traditionally studied circuit, notably American and European youngsters. Here, we extend our previous work, in which we deal with conversational traffic between different online sociability platforms - that we have called fluid conversations (Primo et al., 2017). In this article, we seek to deepen the discussion about the uses of Facebook. In addition, we believe that looking more closely at such a meaningful platform will contribute to the advancement of the understanding of how Brazilians interact on the internet today.

In this article, we seek to update the understanding of the current uses of Facebook. One aspect that the results allow us to perceive is how self-disclosure practices - whose link with identity construction have been extensively studied - are losing space on Facebook, giving rise to other forms of interaction that will be here discussed.

Methodological procedures

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[1] Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>. Accessed on: August 1st, 2018.

This article seeks to continue the discussion of the results obtained in previous research related to the uses of Internet interaction services (Primo et al., 2017). Although the data presented here were collected through the same survey, in this work we will discuss the results that basically focus on Facebook (and that were not used in the previous article).

As detailed in our previous article (Primo et al., 2017), data collection was performed through an online questionnaire created with Google Forms, which was available online between October 27 and November 24, 2015. The form was composed by 44 questions: 8 multiple choice questions, 19 gradual scales, 15 in which the respondent could select multiple options from a list, and 2 open questions. In total, 1050 responses were obtained from respondents living in 25 different states — 55.7% of these individuals were from the South and 25.6% from the Southeast, demonstrating a discrepancy in the representativeness of these two regions in relation to the other ones in the Brazil. Therefore, due to the low statistical significance of the responses from the underrepresented regions, as well as few responses from younger people (96% of respondents stated that they had at least incomplete higher education), we decided to consider only the 810 responses of persons older than 16 years, residing in the South and Southeast, and with at least incomplete higher education. The demographic data can be observed in Figure 1.[2]

Figure 1 - Demographic data
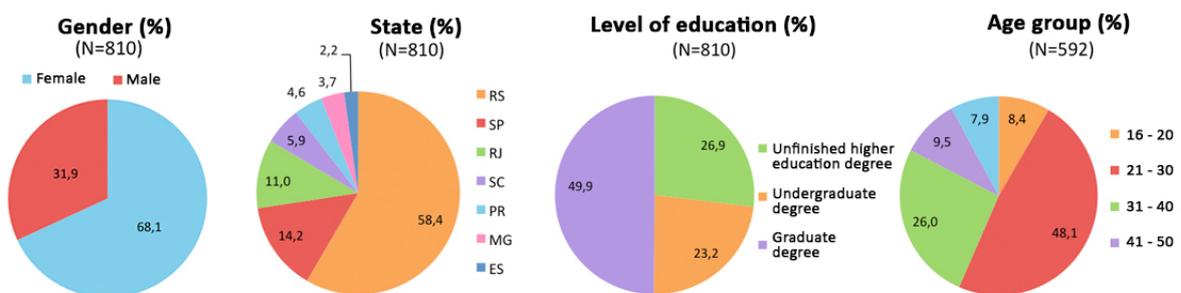
Regarding the specificities of Facebook uses, this research assessed frequency of access, most used devices and a scale of taste. Regarding the number of hours dedicated weekly to the service (Figure 2), most respondents consider their use intense (46.9%), followed by those who consider their Facebook use to be

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[2] It is important to note that the number of valid answers (N = 592) considered for the "age group" question is different from the other questions due to a technical problem that caused 218 age responses to be lost.

high (34.6%) and average (14.2% %)[3].The devices most used to access Facebook are mobile (51.6%), personal notebook (21.2%), work desktop (11.2%) and home desktop (8.3%).

Figure 2 - Access to Facebook
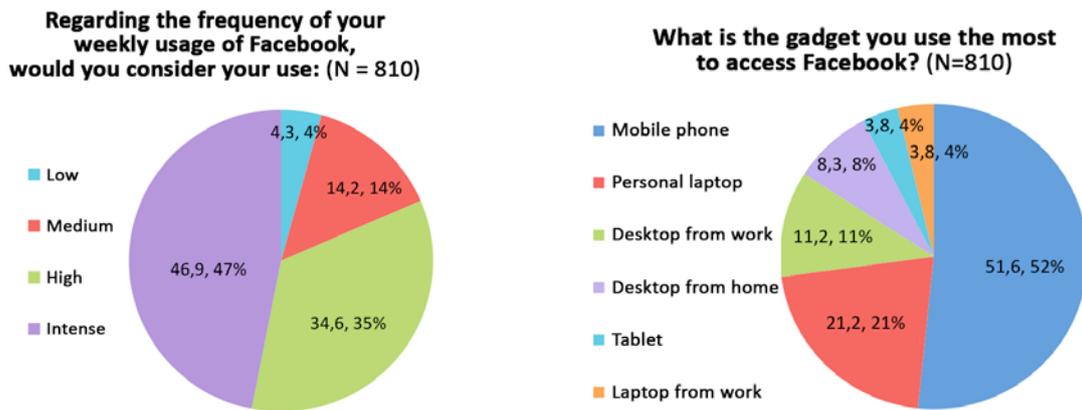
A taste scale (Figure 3) was used to assess how the respondents liked or disliked certain practices in their daily use of Facebook.[4] First, after being presented with a list of possible actions in Facebook, respondents should rate them on a scale ranging from "I like it a lot" to "I hate it."

Figure 3 - Taste scale

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[3] In this question, it was not defined how many hours of use are pertinent to each stratum. The definition of low, medium, high and intense use refers to the respondent's self-perception.

[4] It is important to note that the other five topics in the taste scale are not discussed here because they were presented in a previous article (PRIMO et al., 2017).

What do you enjoy doing on Facebook? (%) (N=810)
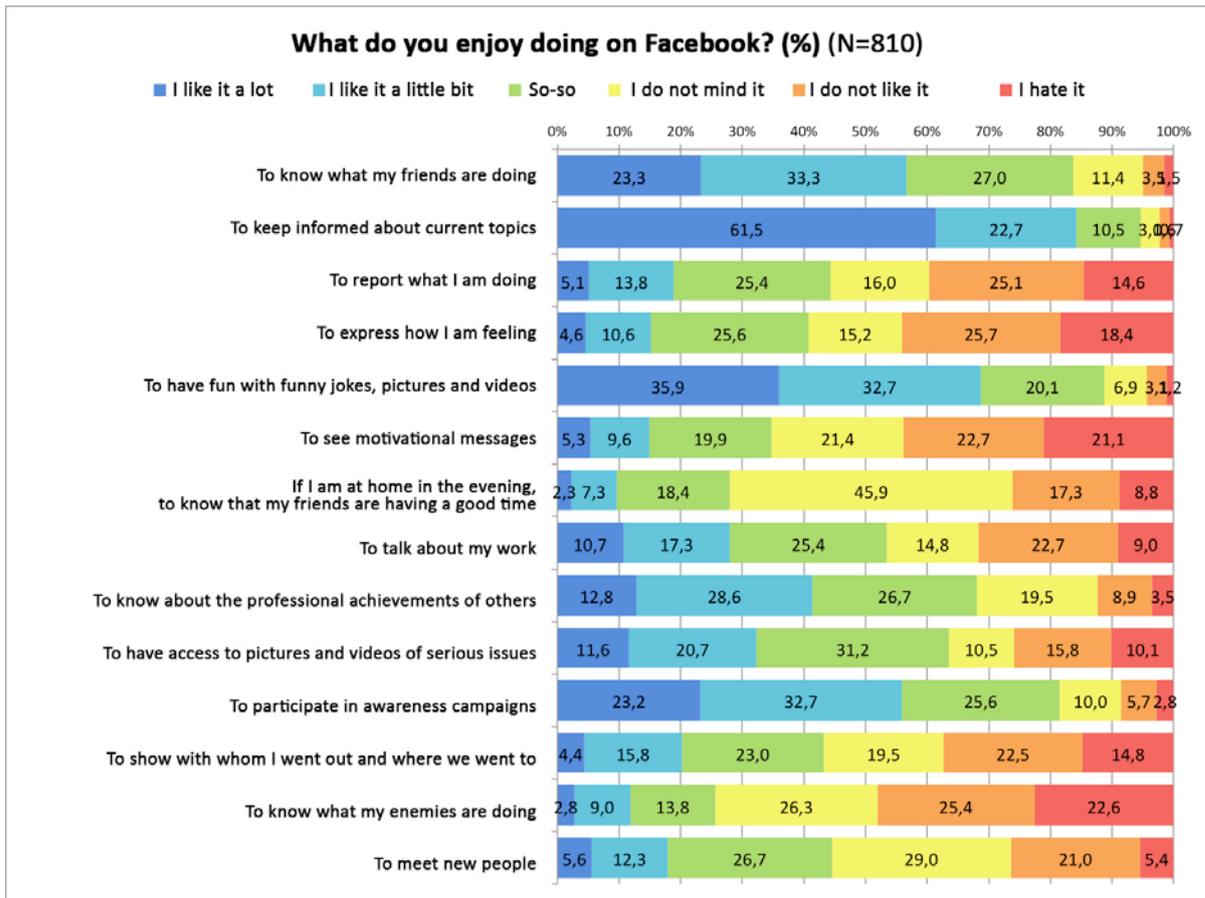
During the following sections, results obtained from the scale will be analyzed in parallel with the theoretical discussion related to the main aspects of each practice. First, however, some considerations need to be made about self-disclosure in the context of online communication.

Computer-mediated communication and self-exposure

In the pioneering works on computer-mediated communication, the quality of interactions was questioned in face of limiting non-verbal cues. Walther (1996), however, recognized the potential of online communication as a facilitator for relationship development. While studying the pre-web era, the author identified *self-disclosure* as a strategic action that seeks to create intimacy.

In current settings, according to Jiang, Bazarova, and Hancock (2013), the higher levels of self-exposure observed in online environments are primarily a matter of reciprocity — when someone speaks of himself, his partner would feel impelled to do the same. On the other hand, the authors reject the idea that the mere use of a digital medium would necessarily foster intimacy exposure. Dick (2012) argues that Facebook does interfere in the sharing of private information as it requests information on kinship, relationships, preferences, etc. That is, self-

disclosure itself is not at all spontaneous, because the platform makes people do things (Latour, 2012).

Thus, exposing oneself to social networking services cannot be interpreted only as a trivial and carefree practice. Considering the experience accumulated after so many years and through different online communication services, users are now more concerned with privacy. Georgalou (2016) notes that people have come to understand which audience they should publish to, and which content content is appropriate to which situation. It is important to consider the phenomenon of "collapse of contexts", as described by Marwick and Boyd (2011), which occurs when publications directed at certain people are also seen by those who do not belong to the intended audience.

The following sections discuss the results obtained through our survey. Each section, whose titles reproduce the question shown to the respondents, will also bring a brief review of the theoretical background on the themes under study. That is, the theoretical discussion and presentation of data will not be split into separate sections. Based on these discussions, we will show how Facebook uses have been updated. As self-reports no longer prevail in comparison to the early years of social networking sites, other uses have captured greater user interest.

"To Report What I am Doing"

Far from being a practice inaugurated in social networks, self-writing has always served as a way for subjects to shape their ethics, values, beliefs and understandings, and reflect on their subjectivities (Sauer, 2014). Throughout the history of humanity, self-writing has been undertaken in letters, autobiographies, journals, and has always been aligned with identity construction. According to Foucault (1984), writing is a technique of the self, in which the subject engages with him/herself and with others, and that reveals him/herself and presents him/herself to an audience. For Lejeune (2008), self-writing is intrinsically a mundane practice that satisfies spontaneous wills of expression. When a subject writes about herself, she constructs a self-representation from her view of herself, or how she aspires to be.

When it comes to online social networking services, the production of content about oneself (be it texts, images or videos) is affected by the awareness that there is scrutiny of a public eye. In this regard, people are constantly encouraged to work on themselves and adapt their discourse to represent what they aim to represent, considering the imagined audience (Sauer, 2014).

Through Spearman's Correlation Coefficient[5], we observed that the practice of "To report what I am doing" correlates directly and significantly (at a significance level of 1%) with "To express what I am feeling" ($p=0.710$), "To know the opinion of others about what I publish" ($p=0.512$), "To talk about my work" ($p=0.403$) and "To show what I left and where we went" $p = 0.526$). That is, people who report on their everyday life on Facebook also talk about themselves and express an interest in others' opinions about their practices and feelings.

On the other hand, exposing personal questions on Facebook is not a unanimous preference among respondents: the highest percentages of responses to "To express what I am feeling" and "To report what I am doing" are located between "I do not like it" and "so-so" (around 25% each), which represents more than half of the answers in both questions. These results contradict the common sense that people who are on Facebook expose their privacy carefree.

Given the quantitative nature of this research, it is not possible to assess whether a lower interest in self-exposure on Facebook is justified by greater awareness of risks or by previous stressful experiences. In any case though it is necessary to consider the diversity of digital social platforms that have emerged in recent years to meet the different types and preferences of the interacting agents. Considering the concept of polymedia (Madianou and Miller, 2012), Facebook is one among many other opportunities for communication that is part of an environment of affordances. Thus, it cannot be studied in isolation. The expansion and diversification of social networking services and their appropriations by users can interfere with users' interactions with Facebook. An example is the emergence of the Stories feature in apps like Snapchat and Instagram, which value images and the ephemeral (at the expense of text, the main format of Facebook narratives), which has been highlighted by the everyday and mundane character of narratives (Barros, 2017). Facebook has been implementing features that favor this kind of interactions with the introduction of Facebook Stories and Facebook Live.

"To know what my friends and enemies are doing"

Whereas we have previously dealt with the public exhibition of oneself on the Internet, this section will deal with the "other side of the coin": information seeking. If the acquisition of information about other people in the past was slow and few options were available, today blogs and social media have multiplied ways of getting to know each other (Tokunaga and Gustafson, 2014). Stefanone, Hurley, and Yang (2013) argue that the affordances of social networking services and the

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[5] The closer p is to 1, the stronger the correlation

lower transaction costs (compared to face-to-face engagement) offer innovative opportunities for retrieving personal information available online. According to the authors, the main reasons for users to search information online are: creation and maintenance of social relationships, search for social support, reduction of uncertainties and social influence.

Ramirez et al. (2002) describe four information-seeking strategies in computer-mediated communication: passive, active, interactive and extractive. As at the time of the proposal of this typology social network services were not yet available, we will make an approximation of those categories with current practices on Facebook. The passive search for information refers to discrete observation, such as viewing posts that appear on the timeline. Active strategies involve collecting information about others through exchanges with a third party (such as a conversation with a common acquaintance in Facebook Messenger in order to know what happened to that person). The interactive form occurs when people dialogue through comments in a post or debate in a group. Finally, when someone uses Facebook's search engine to find someone's profile, in order to get to know him better, to find a person's posts, or when an employer searches for more information about someone, an extraction strategy is undertaken. In our previous article, "keeping in touch with friends" — Facebook's original purpose — was found to be the most popular practice (Primo et al., 2017). This is not to say that people use Facebook merely to talk (interactive strategy). The service affordances also facilitate following the life of others in a passive and active way.

According to our data, "knowing what friends are doing" pleases more than half the respondents (56.6%). This scenario changes when it comes to "knowing what the enemies are doing": most respondents answered that they hate (22.6%) or dislike (25.4%) this type of surveillance. And 45.9% of the respondents say that they "do not care" when they learn on Facebook that their friends are having fun at night while they are at home.

Although these two last aspects show low preference indices, when these practices are maintained they correlate with people who say that they like to follow the lives of their friends. Through Spearman's Coefficient of Correlation we found that "To know what my friends are doing" is directly and significantly correlated (at the significance level of 1%) with "If I am at home in the evening, to know that my friends are having a good time" (p=0.329), "To know about the professional achievements of others" (p=0.382), and "To know what my foes are doing" (p=0.373). In other words, there is a statistically relevant relationship between two forms of Internet surveillance (called stalking): looking not only at what friends do, but also at what people they dislike are doing.

"To talk about my work" and "To know about the professional achievements of others"

The use of Facebook to talk about work is a practice that displeases 31.7% of respondents (22.7% "do not like it" and 9.0% "hate it"), while 28% liked it (10.7% "like it a lot" and 17.3% "like it a little bit"). As for "To know about the professional achievements of others" through Facebook, 28.6% of respondents "like it a little", 12.8% "like it a lot" and 26.7% "so-so". There is a low number of respondents who dislike this use (8.9% answered "I do not like it", and only 3.5% "hate it").

Regarding the use of social networking services to talk and learn about professional issues, Sardá (2015) analyzes the similarities, complementarities and differences of the simultaneous use of various online services. According to her, there are at least 15 strategies that govern the management of the combined uses of platforms, such as maintaining different attitudes in each site, developing different contact networks, and evaluating how much to expose about themselves depending on the service being used. Although the promotional discourse presented by different platforms already provides some clues about positioning (in Facebook´s case, for example, as a space for connection and sharing), interfaces and features influence uses and practices, as well as the subject's perception of what he believes his or her imagined audience will think about what is published, shared, or enjoyed (Sardá, 2015). Facebook is usually understood, at least as far as personal profiles are concerned, as an environment in which career themes are not the priority, which is reflected in the results obtained in our questionnaire. However, it is necessary to consider the existence of platform-specific functionalities for the sharing of information regarding professional life. This is the case of the so-called Facebook "pages", whose professional nature differentiates them from Facebook's profiles. This means that practices and even roles (the friend, the consultant) can vary within Facebook because of the features (quotes, "friends" lists, closed groups) and "regions" (personal profile or page) in use.

"Identity management", referred by Sardá (2015), occurs precisely when subjects actively seek to define which audiences will have access to which information, and in what form. Still, it should be recalled that Facebook often employs resources to try to persuade users to provide more information about their private lives, including links and professional developments. The effort also involves sending notifications that are intended to alert the subject that he has not updated fields in his profile for a certain period of time. In this regard, job-related changes

are treated as important events, gaining relative prominence in the timeline as soon as they are shared.

"To have fun with funny jokes, pictures, and videos"

According to our results, one of the uses of Facebook that respondents most appreciate is "to have fun with funny jokes, pictures, and videos": 68.6% say they like (35.9% like it a lot, 32.7% like it a little it), against only 1.2% that "hate it". It should be noted that the consumption and sharing of humorous content has, in recent years, dominated several communication platforms. Actually, the circulation of comic content was already popular before the web, via email, discussion forums, and instant messengers. What the development and popularization of social media platforms did was to broaden the scope and visibility of these practices. As Barbosa (2015) points out, some of the peculiarities that make digital platforms prone to entertainment are the potential velocity in publishing and sharing, the immediacy of the network, and the existence of increasingly simple and intuitive editing software, which allows even the most unskilled user to make his own interventions with comic intentions (the so-called memes are a good example of this).

It is now important to recall the concept of spreadability, explored by Jenkins, Ford and Green (2015), which refers to the set of properties that make certain types of content more prone to circulation than others. According to the authors, one of the characteristics that drives the circulation of the media material is precisely humor. To post this type of content is, therefore, to take advantage (consciously or not) of comedy's affective power to attract greater visibility (Mckay, 2008).

This article does not aim to conduct an extensive survey on the history of laughter and its significance. What we would like to highlight though is the fact that humour is notoriously a social and collective process that is created within communities, societies and cultures, that depends strongly on sharing (Bergson, 1980; Saliba, 2002; Santos, 2012; Barbosa, 2015).

It is possible to understand that during these processes of consumption and circulation of funny jokes, photos, and videos users often end up using these contents to get closer to each other. An obvious example is the popularity of Facebook pages dedicated to funny content. Similarly, groups are another resource in Facebook where humorous content is circulated. Hence, groups and pages serve as aggregators of people who have common interests, and who gather to consume and share funny content.

Often, these practices are considered as a "waste of time". Yet, the may also become a form of expression and encourage social and relational life (Fontanella, 2009). As noted by Primo (2007), the relevance of content that essentially seeks laughter is in large part justified by the collective sensibilities that are motivated by the pleasure of sharing emotions, tastes and values, even if they are not long lasting.

"To keep informed about current topics"

According to our results, the preferred use of Facebook is to "keep informed on current topics." Information consumption on Facebook pleases more than 80% of the respondents: 61.5% "like it a lot" while 22.7% "like it a little bit". These significant values confirm the data collected by the Brazilian Media Survey (2015)[6], which shows information consumption as one of the main motivations for Facebook access (67%). Our result is also aligned with the *Reuters Digital News Report* (2017)[7]on the digital consumption of news. According to the publication, Latin Americans receive more news through social media and chat applications than in other parts of the world — in Brazil, 57% of consumers use Facebook to consume news, followed by WhatsApp (46%)[8] and YouTube (36%).

The consumption of information on Facebook happens in the newsfeed. According to Araújo (2017), the *feed* represents a flow of publications from friends, content producers and companies, among others, that are part of a large ecosystem. The flow created is personalized: "Based on the data generated by users' actions and by the number of clicks and interactions (likes and comments) that each publication receives, posts are selected and organized according to their relevance" (Araújo, 2017, p.17). Thus, through algorithms that analyze the contents that are mostly accessed by users, as well as their habits and tastes, Facebook is able to increase the visibility and motivate the consumption of certain information.

It is important to note that, while this process helps the organization and delivery of content, it can lead to the creation of information bubbles that can reduce the diversity of news, showing only the content in line with users' interests

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[6] In the 2016 report (Brazil, 2016) no results are presented regarding motivations for the use of social networking sites, neither about the services most used.

[7] The survey was conducted with 70,000 online news consumers in 36 countries. Available at: <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2017/overview-key-findings-2017/>. Accessed on June 23, 2017.

[8] The report points out that WhatsApp has been gradually gaining ground and is now competing with Facebook for user preference because of its greater privacy, absence of algorithmic filtering, and special data packages offered by telecommunications operators. The document draws attention to the fact that this growth should be understood as an extra layer regarding the use of social networking sites and not as a substitute, since Facebook is the owner of WhatsApp.

(Beam et al., 2017; Zago e Silva, 2014; Pariser, 2012). On the other hand, recent studies (Garret, 2009) based on the selective exposure perspective[9] show that, although users tend to select and focus on information that is aligned with their interests, there is no significant evidence that individuals totally abandon news that contain information that they do not agree with (Beam et al., 2017).

It is also important to consider that because speed in publishing, updating and sharing has become so important, the understanding of content may be impaired. Zago and Silva (2014) argue that not all information circulating on social networking sites is actually consumed[10]. On many occasions, content is shared without being visited and read. Furthermore, according to the authors, social networking sites such as Facebook often cease to be just complementary channels for information and become the main source of news. This aspect may also be related to the proliferation of fake news. Yet, our results, while not specifying the origin of the content consumed, show that the preference for Facebook to get news and share information has been consolidated among the respondents.

"To participate in awareness campaigns"

Finally, regarding the use of Facebook as a way to "participate in awareness campaigns", more than half of the respondents express a positive opinion — 32.7% say that they "like a little bit", while 23,2% like it very much. Furthermore, 63.5% of the respondents say that they like "to have access to images and videos of serious issues" at different intensities ("a lot", 11.6%; "a little bit", 20.7%; and "so-so", 31,2%). This aspect relates directly to the potential of civic and political engagement facilitated by social networking sites, in a collaborative and horizontal way (Castells, 2013; Malini and Antoun, 2013).

According to Peruzzo (2013), in general, social networking services are environments that facilitate relationships, the articulation between people and collective actions, as well as being spaces for diffusion, access, debate, and exchange of information. Therefore, this potential has been increasingly used for social mobilizations and collective actions (Zago and Batista, 2009). In this regard, Zuñiga, Jung and Valenzuela (2012) reinforce the idea that social networking services on the Internet can help the construction of personal identity, allowing multiple channels for interpersonal contact and the acceptance of others. At the same time, the increasing exchange of information among the participants of

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[9] According to this perspective, people prefer news that align with their own interests and perspectives (Beam et al., 2017).

[10] According to Zago and Silva (2014), consumption refers to the meaning given by the reader/user to the media product. Thus, a quick read would not be considered effective content consumption.

specific groups helps to create trust among members. This can be seen in civic engagement campaigns and social manifestations on Facebook. By publicly linking to a cause, users can engage with that movement in its most varied forms (tagging, sharing, confirming presence at events, etc.). And by letting their audiences know their preferences (such as the event they attend and the causes with which they agree), they express and build their identity.

The results of this research confirm the importance of Facebook in expanding the number of potential activists, facilitating the dissemination of information (Christensen, 2011). When we add to this analysis the answers reported in our previous article (Primo et al., 2017), such as "to discuss politics" (9% "like it a lot", 16% "like it a little bit") and "to discuss topics of interest" (27,3% said they "like it a little", 25,1% "like it a lot"), it is possible to verify the trend of using Facebook as a space for expression and sharing of opinions capable of stimulating civic and political engagement.

Conclusions

Facemash, the site created in 2003 by Mark Zuckerberg, was the embryo of Facebook. Originally developed for the judgment of how seductive were pictures of Harvard students, the project almost resulted in Zuckerberg being expelled from the university[11]. Since then, Facebook has been expanded to a communication service of great complexity, which can be accessed from different devices. By selling user data, collected within Facebook´s site and applications, and externally on every digital media using Facebook´s login (Primo, 2014), Zuckerberg's company has become an advertising powerhouse.

Facebook invaded people's daily lives, being consulted several times throughout the day. According to the results of our research, the great majority of interviewees believe that their use of the platform is heavy (46.9%) or high (34.6%). With this empirical assessment, it was possible to confirm the importance of this social network service for users to socialize and to know more about their friends and foes. The incentive to sociability is in fact a Facebook flag, always mentioned by the company in times of criticism to the platform. On the other hand, even recognizing the importance of digital spaces for the construction of identity, we could observe a greater concern with privacy. The data resulting from the query on personal expression and daily reports revealed a certain reserve in sharing intimate information. Of course, this cannot be understood as an abandonment of

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[11] Available at: <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2003/11/19/facemash-creator-survives-ad-board-the/>. Accessed on: August 1, 2018.

the publication of photos and reports of trips, dinners, etc. But recognizing the sociocultural and age specificities of the interviewees, we presume that the preoccupation on which facts and opinions should be published may be a result of a greater accumulation of experiences on the Internet. That is, unlike the incessant sharing of selfies and opinions, typical of younger users, it is possible that the our data reveals a greater knowledge about the risks present in social networking services and, perhaps, the result of previous problems. However, future qualitative research is necessary to better understand this behavior.

Another factor previously mentioned, that is significant for the discussion on self-writing on Facebook, is the plethora of digital services available nowadays. Although Facebook indicates that it intends to be the single space for all forms of publication (texts, photos, videos) and interaction (personal and professional), it is possible to observe a movement from users to diversify the places where they publish each information and maintain different forms of interaction.

Aware of the surveillance forms on social networks on the internet (practice also maintained by them!), several subjects practice what is called "identity management." Through this procedure, publications are shaped to achieve certain goals (such as conveying an image of professional success). Having faced problems with the "collapse of contexts" (Marwick and Boyd, 2011), and recognizing that it is not possible to foresee exactly who has access to each information on Facebook, many subjects choose certain services especially for certain opinions, photos, etc. The use of WhatsApp groups for private discussions, for example, and Facebook to share photos of professional events. In this polymediatic scenario (Madianou and Miller, 2012), it is worth pointing out that the effects of the collapse between identity-building processes and the careful image management on Facebook also demand further studies.

In addition to the interaction between friends, family and colleagues, Facebook was singled out by respondents as a source of news and entertainment. The amount of news and humorous publications guarantees content that is always new in the *timeline* and potentially interesting to users, filtered by the system's algorithm in face of previously expressed interests. This information, added to the personal publications of friends, can encourage the ongoing consultation of Facebook during the day. On the one hand, one could welcome the users' greater interest in news and public debates. However, the practice of sharing links to news stories that have not even been read cannot be ignored. It is also important to note that research shows the relationship between the intense use of Facebook with problems of procrastination (during study time, at work and in interpersonal encounters) and anxiety (Barry et al., 2008).

Finally, it is necessary to recognize the limitations of our sample, since it is not representative of the Brazilian population. Nevertheless, because our Brazilian respondents are older and show a higher educational level, new questions can now be thought of in a scenario dominated by statistics on the use of social media by young Americans.

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