Examining the Real 2.0: Community, Linguistics and Facebook Rape

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   Refresh. Refresh. Refresh. It may the single most consistent factor of our human existence; that we seek social affirmation from those other humans around us. And so we sit, hour after hour, reloading a single web-page, hoping for that little world symbol to light up with our prize: social acknowledgment. 'Welcome to Facebook – Log in, sign up or learn more'.[1]

   Facebook is an underused ethnographic resource.   It involves close to the sum-total of interactions by Westerners of a certain age-range, and even if not done directly through the-social-media-network, the life of a technologically connected individual is forever bound up in its considerations. It is these ties-that-bind, these rules, that interest me here; is it not the anthropologist's job to find the rules that bind a culture, to inscribe them, interpret them? In the case of Facebook the rules should be easy to spot: where they are not written into user-agreements, the very structures and limitations of the thing are its rules. But this does not seem to be the whole truth: within these structures people have constructed their own rules. To examine from the ground up the creation of a new social-co-operative endeavour is beyond the scope of this work, so I will inevitably have to focus upon certain aspects of the rule structure of this society.

   Facebook's main medium of communication is textual, and one of its main purposes is textual communication. Therefore a logical endeavour for an ethnography of Facebook is to examine its linguistic characteristics, and the societal rule structures of communicative-framing that come with it. To turn to an old maxim, there is an exception that proves these rules: fraping. Fraping, a

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[1] Facebook's front-page title http://www.facebook.com/ Accessed 8/5/12.

combination of the words Facebook and rape,[2] is the process of changing another person's

Facebook in any way without their consent. Even given the transgressive nature of this act it was a

common occurrence amongst my informants and therefore sparked my interest as a social

phenomenon. What constitutes a frape? And, most important of all, why did all my informants

'know' when a frape had occurred? To answer this I will analyse Facebook as a community, which

has created frames of interaction for the individuals within it, and subsequently that frapes are not

a transgression of this community, but merely a frame-shift within it.

What is Facebook? Individuals, a Community or a Community of Individuals?

Facebook is, in essence, an engagement with social projection: how one places oneself in society

and how one is viewed in return. Thus it is prescient to see how Facebook in general is viewed.[3]

There are two distinct patterns that have emerged from my research – that of the 'community' and

that of extension. The community aspect is easy to see, as outwith your own circle of Facebook

'friends'[4], Facebook makes it easy to find those with similar interests, for 'interaction'[5] or as a

'mutual community' of likeminded individuals, because Facebook is the 'fastest way yet of

communicating as a community'. Early virtual community theorist Rheingold (1993) substantiates

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[2] Urbandictionary.com, an online etymological resource, most useful definition of 'frape' is thus:
'Conjunction of the words Facebook and rape. When a person leaves their laptop/PC unattended
whilst signed into Facebook and other people change various parts of their personal page to
humiliating or undesirable material' <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Frape>
Accessed 4/5/12.

[3] How Facebook defines itself: 'Founded in 2004, Facebook's mission is to make the world more open
and connected. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's
going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them'
(http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22 Accessed 8/5/12.

[4] Mutually confirmed acquaintances, who have equal access to view each other's profiles.

[5] One example of a niche interest "interaction" was given by Anu: 'here are loads of groups filed with
strangers to gain insight into new music, mainly house of course'.

this notion of community as being the centre of online interaction (Delanty 2010: 139-141; Rheingold 1993)

Others refer to Facebook as a part, an extension, of themselves; one example, 'You poked me', is interesting linguistically, the affective phrase referring to a virtual 'poking (a certain type of notification) on Facebook, which has a different social connotation to real poking and is almost exclusively expressed in terms of actual individuals: 'You poked Ewan', 'I poked Sarah'. Additional examples include 'I chatted to Laurence' (online, not in person) and 'Post it to me' (post it on my profiles so everyone can see our mutual interest). Further to this is the notion of social 'work' expressed by Viola, one of my informants, in an informal conversation while walking in Edinburgh. Logging on means doing 'work', as in replying to notifications, posting for birthdays and other social obligations. It is her real social standing, not merely her virtual standing that suffers if she does not reply.

Gere (2008) reconciles the notion of Facebook as an online community and the individual nature of its participants by claiming that it is the media itself that creates the community of individuals - 'Facebook…offer[s] a glimpse of a new kind of community, one no longer bound up with physical location, but created through shared interest in and self-definition by media…. There is a strong incitement narcissism in much of what the new media are offering… [they] seem to offer a means to literally realise Andy Warhol's much quoted prediction of the coming celebrity culture that "in the future everybody will be famous for fifteen minutes"…'(Gere 2008: 221). This could even be called a virtual neo-Weberian idea of community or culture, constituted by the individual's interpretations of social facts within a said community[6]. This notion is backed up by later virtual community

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[6] Of necessity my research-methodology was Weberian, given my inability, as a mere user of Facebook, to ascertain the direction of the entire culture (à la Durkheim) from the limited scope that

theorist Castells (1996), who claims the community is a 'real virtuality', 'It is a system in which reality itself (that is, people's material/symbolic) existence is entirely captured… not just on the screen through which the experience is communicated…[it] become[s] the experience' (Castells 1996: 373). Even though Castells (2001) later recants this utter separation of reality in favour of a view more like Calhoun (1998), that virtual communities are reifications of existing social-networks and relationships, it is still the individuals' consideration of and sense of 'social belonging' in the community that dominates the discourse (Delanty 2010: 142-146). There are rules and frames of discourse that you follow, in order to belong and feel the sense of community. Equally you expect others to do the same, abide by the same rules and communicate in the same way, just as in any other non-chaotic society.

Therefore, what makes Facebook so fundamentally different to other forms of Internet communication, such as forums, internet relay chat, randomised encounter systems[7] and even email, is Facebook's status as a social network[8], where all actions have the individual's face and name attached to them. The promotion and use of name and face is at the forefront of the mind of the social-network user and this leads to very specific ethnographic methodological problems.

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my Facebook 'friends' group affords (as compared to the 901 million active users of Facebook as of March 2012 (http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22 Accessed 9/5/12.

[7] www.chatroulette.com being a good example.

[8] Social networking must be related to the notion of Web 2.0, whereby content-creation and content-consumption are done by the same people, as Gere (2008) does '…'Web 2.0' [is] the name given to the conception of the World Wide Web as a space for collaboration and reciprocal communication. Among these developments are 'social network' software…' (Gere 2008: 212).

Ethnographic Method: Structure Online versus Ease Offline

When discussing Facebook with my informants, I found communicating via Facebook to be the least natural method for carrying out research. My contention would be that discussing the constitution of a structure within the structure itself is difficult in any ethnographic situation, especially, as in the Facebook case, when the structure regulates communication. It was much easier to engage with people about their attitudes to Facebook outwith the website itself. There are two ethnographically precedential points to be made here. Primarily, people find it easier (or just different) discussing things when not having to type. Some informants expressed the notion that typing changes thought processes from speaking, even when done quickly or colloquially, as the process of submitting (hitting the return key) allows the split-second decision to change or not submit at all. Privately, this is especially prevalent in what were called 'laboured' or 'structured' chats, with talks to potential romantic-partners and interviews with prying ethnographers being two examples.[9]

Secondly, in terms of ethnographic methods, talking about any thing is easier to do when not engaged in that thing in question. The jilted nature of typed conversation only adds to the feeling of 'unease' that one informant reported when having to discuss something serious over Facebook chat. Compared to actual discussion, Facebook chat and texting are 'light' mediums, not for serious or academic conversation; conversely when speaking, informants opinions flowed easily. Facebook and its social ramifications are something that all my informants were eager to talk and share their knowledge about, given that they[10] all enter the field, as I do, every morning when logging on to peruse their 'Newsfeed' and any new 'Notifications'. Interestingly the structure of this 'field' does

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[9] Publically, the decision to publish is inherently also distinct from speech, as it is a single instant in time, as opposed to the utterance of a sentence, which in terms of temporality must be committed to, and finished in the moments it is uttered in order for it to be understood.

[10] All my informants were students, ages 19-24, from a myriad of international backgrounds.

not lend itself to immediate study; the sheer volume of social information scrolled on the Newsfeed makes it hard to sift for relevant material. To functionally analyse all the actions and interactions of even one friend would be near impossible, and perhaps useless. Facebook may be the frame of interaction, but the symbols and social relevancies within it are hidden in the mire of information. 'Virtual ethnography is necessarily partial. A holistic description… is impossible' (Hine 2000: 65). Therefore it is necessary to focus on a certain aspect, 'fraping', and what this tells us about Facebook as a whole.

Fraping

   Why is a frape 'known'? Some 'instantly know', like a gut reaction - but why? Why, also, is there an oft-cited distinction between a 'good' and 'bad' frape? What can this tell us more generally about Facebook as a social phenomena, and the rules that govern it? The second question is the more easily answered, and will tell us something about the more interesting first. Informants have defined many 'good' frapes to me, usually as a matter of pride in their handy-work, or in reverence of another's good work. Examples have included posting a sonogram on a friend's profile, with the caption 'going to be a father!'; a fake lesbian love-message that was believed by the recipient for several days; and the complete change of a male friend's profile into that of an Indian grandmother. All these have been expressed as 'good' frapes; related to the amount of work that goes into them, their believability and, therefore, their ability to generate humour. 'Bad' frapes, conversely, are lazy, derivative or inherently unbelievable. Examples I have been told include single words, ('penis'); unbelievable statements ('is gay'); repetition, an informant example being the repetition of scatological statements. Bad frapes create little humour as they are not effective frame-shifts and contravene the community-linguistic rules too easily.

The intellectual effort and time that goes into changing a profile completely qualifies as a 'good' frape, but, because of its inherent un-believability is less interesting than others qualified as 'good' because of their believability: this implies the social dimension to having the name of the 'frapee' attached to the frape. Thus the efficacy of frapes can be garnered from comments on them by the acquaintances of the frapee. A 'good' frape, it can be ascertained, must be 'for fun' and mustn't go on too long, or have any serious social ramifications affecting the real person that is linked to the virtual profile. Crucially, as I was told twice, 'a frape must be undoable', ostensibly in the sense that a person can edit their profile back to its original state, but also, subtly, so that there are no serious social reactions to it, other than perhaps the stigma of being fraped. Interestingly, the expressions, used by all and seemingly moral notions of 'good' and 'bad' do not refer to the transgressiveness of the frape, but merely to its quality. Therefore a third category of frape can be defined which has true social ramifications, such as the altering of a relationship status (anecdotally this has been known to cause breakups) and contacting of parents. 'There is a line' and transgressing that line is breaking the social convention of the frape, fully breaking the community sanction.

This analysis lends itself to another important aspect of fraping, that of targeting. As was pointed out by Rupert, and subsequently by Lily, all statuses and all frapes, all actions on Facebook are done for target audiences. The sheer variety of people that are known to each individual through Facebook means that no public broadcast is intended for all 'friends'; and the filter algorithm of Facebook itself limits most statuses to those who you interact with most often, those in your geographical area and those whose 'acquaintance list' you aren't on (public communication by 'acquaintances' is filtered out, but they are still a 'friend').

So your 'community' on Facebook is limited, and your statuses are for a target section within that community, as are frapes. With statuses this is easier to see: congratulations on completion of an endeavour, like a finished run of a play or a birthday. A claim could be made that frapes are equally targeted to be enjoyed by a section of the community, as only certain people will be 'in' on the joke, the 'frapers', the 'frapee', and a certain section of their 'community' of friends. Sometimes only those who are in the same physical space as the fraper at the time of the act can appreciate it, let alone the rest of the virtual community. **Mary thought that frapes must be a 'mutual joke' or experience within the 'public…mutual experience community' that is the public aspect of Facebook, and interestingly, if done in jest, not a transgression of the community, even though, if a believable "good" frape, a form of identity theft.** The frame-shift is such that it merely creates humour, has no lasting implications, and re-affirms the community of individuals, the friends, by showing the assumptions, and frames, that underlie it.

When discussing with my informants the nature of fraping, I presented different examples to them[11] to which the prevalent answer was 'frape'.   The subsequent question 'Why?' however, presented many more and differing answers. Some focused on the actuality of the example involving me, as Anita said, online:

'I assumed that it was a frape because it usually is…you normally don't write that… so it's more because I know you, so I can distinguish a frape… so yeah, about frapes I think you have to know the person.'

 Others still, focussed, as above, on the intended target as distinguishing the frape from reality; if they understand the joke then they tend to know it to be a frape, and there are situations in which

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[11] The most common, if vulgar, being 'If you saw that I had posted 'I like pussy', what would you instantly assume?'

you know enough of the social situation that might have engendered the joke to perhaps understand it, but not find it overly humorous. Others still told me that the 'ridiculousness' of such statuses made it obvious, even without understanding the genesis of the joke/frape. For example, the gender of my profile is female because of a frape, and I still receive comments about it every-so-often, expressing that it must be frape, or reminding me of the fact of the frape: the ridiculousness of the situation is in part what creates the reactions, as well as the fact that people know I am male, and even though the joke is long ago dead, it is easy to understand. But this small typography of reactions is still inadequate in explaining why exactly the reality obscurification of frapes can be cut through so easily by those who see them, exactly why it is that they 'know'. The answer, I believe lies in linguistic anthropology and frame shifting.

Framing: How Do You Know I Don't Post About My Penis Length?

   To collate the information and assumptions I have made when presenting frapes as a social phenomena: they are done without consent, they represent material the person would not otherwise post; they are public, but targeted to a certain audience; they are done in jest, with little malicious intent, other than 'undoable' humiliation; and they are almost instantly 'known' by those viewing them. Most crucially, however, they are in a certain linguistic frame within the community structure of Facebook. Facebook becomes the 'cognitive frame', therefore any 'incongruity' created between this frame and a second unknown frame leads to audience tension and the release of that tension as humour. Assumptions that must be made for the joke to be 'got' or 'known': the audience understand the setup, the rules of the first frame; that the second frame is incongruous and the frame-shift between them is great enough to cause tension and release (Beeman 1999: 103). In a frape: the community-structure of Facebook is understood and, as such, the medium of public status is known to be used for certain purposes by certain individuals; the individual, and

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their habits, are known, as framing inherently utilises the notion and 'power of expectation' (Tannen 1993: 14). Fraping contradicts this by shifting the frame from the person's normal postings, to a thing they would not say, or is not said within the context of the societal mores created by the individuals present in a person's 'friend' community. Thus it is possible to see why frapes are so instantly 'known' by users; they are an obvious frame-shift from the normal discourse the individual indulges in on Facebook.

Log off

The word 'cyber' derives from Ancient Greek meaning 'pilot' or 'helmsman' (Delanty 2010: 148); using a single example to pilot through the cyber-morass of Facebook has been my goal. Drawing general conclusions: in terms of Facebook ethnography, difficulty lies in the very nature of the beast itself, as I found it much easier to question people about Facebook offline rather than online. Perhaps this is a function of its role within culture, not as a distinct culture itself; when something can be accessed in 70 different languages, it will not be a homogenous mass: it becomes a community of individuals, with rules and frames of reference. With analysis of one example, fraping, and its associated community-framing and humour creating aspects, I hope to have proven that Facebook can be an effective ethnographic object of study, in-and-of itself. Web 2.0, as the site of mass inter-societal reciprocal communication, is awash with useful anthropological information, and, like all other users, anthropologists will have to access it through portals that categorise and contain the raw information stream. To stretch a metaphor: anthropologically piloting the modern information ocean of the Internet will require a sturdy, structured vessel; I believe Facebook can be that craft.

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