

## Facebook as a Finite Province of Meaning?

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# *Facebook as a Finite Province of Meaning?*

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## **Abstract**

Facebook today represents one of the main avenues that people use to create and develop relationships. Indeed, in the 10 years since its birth, Facebook has changed the concept of community, given new meaning to the sense of belonging and even produced a new language. However, what is its meaning? What is the real reason for its spread, which obviously goes beyond superficial and simplistic explanations? This article proposes a reading of Facebook using classical concepts of sociology such as the concepts of sense, action and meaning. Particular attention will be given to the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz and to his idea of finite provinces of meaning in order to discover whether it is a construct applicable to Facebook. To achieve this, we propose a phenomenology of Facebook to understand what kind of reality it represents and what similarities and differences are encountered in the prominent world of everyday life.

Keywords: Facebook, finite province of meaning, understanding

## **Introduction**

Facebook today is known worldwide. Even those who are not members of Facebook know of it and have their own ideas in respect of its usefulness, its positive aspects and the risks associated with it. Numerous studies have attempted to explain the many aspects that are characteristic of Facebook and are responsible for its dissemination and accessibility. Research has demonstrated how and why Facebook has changed and expanded the idea of “*community*” (Wellman et al., 2002); what reasons lead to the use of Facebook

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(Joinson, 2008); what possible consequences it can have on psycho-physical health (Kross et al., 2013); and also the links that can be found between certain behavioural characteristics and the form of use by Facebook (Moore and McElroy, 2011). These are just some of the aspects studied. Others will be discussed later in the article, while still others must be neglected for consideration due to the amplitude and internal coherence of the article.

However, Facebook, in addition to being a new way to connect with others and a platform for meetings and exchanges, represents a “*slice*” of what is important in the lives of those who use it. Users of Facebook access it many times and for a long duration. Data updated as of September 2013 illustrates the Italian situation with regards to the use of Facebook: out of a population of 61,261.000 inhabitants, some 26 million Italians are active on Facebook. Males represents 53.2 % of users and the remaining 46.8 % are females. The age group most active is those between 26 and 35 years old, immediately followed by those between 19 and 25.

The importance of the penetration of Facebook in daily life is captured in other data from 2013, which shows that the Italians on Facebook have an average of 130 friends each and that Italian users have posted more than 300 million photos. When a user enters Facebook, they spend a minimum of 20 minutes on the site, with the addition of connections via smartphone. A million websites are directly connected to Facebook and 80 % of industries use Facebook to advertise.

In light of this data, so pervasive is Facebook in terms of time and money, we are keen to better understand the dimensions of Facebook, the relationships that it has created and the new social patterns that arise in relation to the social network.

Given the importance of looking at the reality of today in an “eclectic way” (Cipolla, 2013) and, therefore, staying in step with the times to keep an academic discipline vital (in this case, sociology), what we propose in this article is a new way to interpret Facebook.

As will be seen, the dimensions of life online and offline intersect and are influenced in continuation. But the subjects are not always virtually connected. There are moments when the PC is off, the smartphone is relegated to the simple functions of a mobile phone, and in these moments everyone lives his daily life, meets people, works, eats and goes shopping. Then comes the moment (for some often, for others more rarely) to connect, to see what others have written, to make their own contribution by commenting on, pressing the “like” button, sharing pictures and thoughts. We want to demonstrate in these pages that access to Facebook is like going to the theatre, it reframes the experience of the moment into a frame that is not that of daily life. To exemplify this possibility, we use classical concepts of

sociology, the phenomenology of reality and the concept of “finite province of meaning” as outlined by Alfred Schutz (1973).

The paradigm of reference and the categories that subtend this proposal are the comprising sociology with particular attention to the idea of “sense”. In fact, as will be seen, everything that will be explained has been traced back to a basic question: What is the sense of Facebook? Sense outline, as stated by Max Weber (1922a), is the substantial reason of human action (in this case of human action on Facebook).

The challenge of this article is to apply categories of classic understanding, perhaps sometimes abandoned, to an extremely modern phenomenon like Facebook, which only reached its “*firs*” ten years of life in February of this year.

## 1. To Begin: The Social Network

Before we penetrate the social network’s world, it is necessary understand what type of world they have developed and so what competing interests form a background to this new social behaviour. It is a society rich in changes that happened thanks to globalization allowing communication to exist irrespective of time and space (Giddens, 1994).

The Internet is the maximum expression of these aspects: it is possible to communicate with people who do not share the same space and time and so presence is not measured simply by one person being opposite to the other. Zygmunt Bauman (2011b) instead concentrated on the point of view of the individual immersed in modernity and stated that the peculiarities of modern man, like solitude and individualization, clash with the cosy sense of community that has disappeared with “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2011).

Using social networks can be a symptom of the need to belong, to have new points of reference in front of a need that has always been the same, but it’s necessary to answer in a modern way.

Before entering into the social networks topic, it’s important to explain that today, when we talk about the Internet, we also talk about Internet 2.0. This is a superior level of technology, multimedia and society thanks to the online and offline implications that influence each other. In short, “Web 2.0 is not based on a specific and radical technological innovation, but rather on following the improvements and technical evolution that allow users to participate directly in the production and consumption of content” (Sartori, 2012: 62).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by the author.

The term “Web 2.0” was coined by Dale Dougherty and Tim O’Reilly who, in 2004, stated that “Web 2.0 is network as a platform, through all the connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that allow you to get the most out of the intrinsic benefits of the platform, providing software as a service in continuous update that improves more the more people that use it, by leveraging and by mixing data from multiple sources, including users, which provide their own content and services in a way that allows reuse by other users, by creating a series of effects through an architecture of participation and going beyond the metaphor of the pages of Web 1.0 to produce a more significant user experience” (Prati, 2007).<sup>2</sup> A simpler definition for non-professionals is that proposed by O’Reilly in 2005: “Web 2.0 is a set of economic trends, social and technological, that together form the basis for the next generation of the Internet, a more mature and distinct means characterized by participation of the users, the opening and the effects of the network” (O’Reilly, 2005).<sup>3</sup>

The elements that represent distinctive features of this new configuration of the Internet are: the idea of network as platform, software as a service, the use of data from multiple sources, the production of content by users, and their active participation. The role of the user who participates in and contributes to the growth of the Web becomes central. This new vision of the Internet is, therefore, also a new way to use public data independent of the authors and outside of the website of origin. On the issue of Web 2.0, Giuliano Prati (2007) points out that “there is a debate between those who see in Web 2.0 the beginning of a change in Internet direction as we know it and, on the other hand, those who believe that this is a simple soup heated from elements already known and used for a long time” (Prati, 2007: 27).<sup>4</sup> The sceptics believe that it is a mere publicity stunt to propose ideas that have always existed. The slogan of this “*faction*” is encapsulated in the words of Tim Berners-Lee, one of the creators of the World Wide Web, according to whom “The Web 1.0 wanted to allow people to communicate. An interactive space. I believe that Web 2.0 is rather a form of jargon and nobody knows what it means. If Web 2.0 for you is blogs and wikis, then there are people who connect to other people. But this is exactly how the web was designed from the outset” (Prati, 2007: 28).

Apart from this debate about the concrete existence of Web 2.0, it is clear that the Internet has today become more interactive and so offers a more immersive experience. It is more alive, perhaps. The tools that enable greater

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>4</sup> Translated by the author.

participation are, among others, the social network (of which you will read more later), blogs, wikis, and the new folksonomia. Blogs were born as tools to allow the publication of Web content from a large number of users. There are personal blogs in which the author speaks of himself and tells of his life, thematic blogs that deal with specific topics, topical blogs, and photoblogs to name but a few (Prati, 2007). Wikis, on the other hand, are websites that allow users to add content. The classic example is the free encyclopaedia, Wikipedia. The folksonomia is a neologism “derived from the English word folksonomy, and is the union of the words folk (people) and taxonomy and is used to indicate a form of categorization and classification of non-hierarchical content provided by the people” (Prati, 2007: 87).<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps to ask what Facebook is, is a rhetorical question given its pervasiveness; but it is better to clarify each of the concepts which will be discussed in these pages.

Facebook is included in the social network family, which refers to social platforms or virtual meeting places supported by Internet network. Nicole Ellison and danah boyd define the social network as a “networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site” (Ellison and boyd, 2013). That is to say, it is a communication platform in which participants identify themselves with profiles enriched by content added by the user himself or by other users (or even added by the system). Users participate by creating connections to be seen and shared by other users, and by consuming, producing and interacting with the streams of other users. It is a definition applicable to 2013, which encompasses the changes that have occurred in the Internet since 2007 when the same authors previously suggested such a definition. Specifically, today the social networks of Web 2.0<sup>6</sup> are at a higher level from a technological point of view, and the multimedia and social consequences allow a mutual influence to exist between online and offline: “Web 2.0 is not based on technical and radical innovation, but rather on the succession of improvements and technical developments

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<sup>5</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>6</sup> The first one to speak of Web 2.0 was Tim O'Reilly and a complete explanation of the concept can be found in his essay "What is Web 2.0? Design patterns and business models for the next generation of software" available at <http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>

that have allowed [...] users to directly intervene in the production and addition to the consumption of content” (Sartori, 2012: 62).<sup>7</sup>

Ellison and boyd (2007; 2013) identify and analyse three main characteristics of social networks: the profiles, the list of connections and the relationships between profiles. The online world offers different possibilities for constructing the representations that we want to give. In some contexts, online identity is directly connected to the real or offline presence, while in others this link is less important. The profile asks for a name for the user and a series of further information, more or less personal, as well as for photos and an email address for reference. This information is a symptom of the perennial anchorage of the social network to the everyday life (the importance of this aspect will be seen later in this article). Ellison and boyd (2013) argue that the social network sites are co-constructed by users because “social network site profiles are located within a web of relationships and those relationships are made visible on profile.” The two dominant varieties of social networks, in relation to the use of profiles, are: “profile-centric sites” such as LinkedIn, MySpace, and Facebook (social networks where the exchange rotates around the profile, the presentation that everyone makes for himself) and the “media-centric sites” as LiveJournal, Flickr or YouTube, which rotate around shared content. Additionally, the friends list can serve several functions: it can exhibit and mark relationships, determine who has access to what and act as a filter to find other contacts (Ellison and boyd, 2013). In some social networks, the friends list is mutual (for example on Facebook) while on Twitter we can be followers of a user without that user following back. So, to deal with a social network involves always maintaining two elements: on one hand, the social components and identities of the actor and, on the other hand, the characteristics of the technology, the opportunities it offers, as well as the constraints and future propensities.

The social network that you configure, therefore, can be seen as the maximum expression of an information society (Castells, 1996), that is a society where information is the raw material and the technologies are very important because they act directly on that information.

The changes to the base of the information society and that relate closely to the media are the protagonists of what Roger Fidler (2000) defines as “*mediamorphosis*”, that is the transformation of the media caused by the interaction between the perceived needs, political and competitive pressures, and social and technological innovations. It is a new way to look at the media, according to which the new media do not arise suddenly and spontaneously but instead derive from the metamorphosis of the old media. Moreover, new

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<sup>7</sup> Translated by the author.



and old media continue to evolve and to adapt. This idea of coexistence between new and old media is similar to the idea of “*convergence*” proposed by Henry Jenkins (2006). The convergence is the flow of content on multiple platforms, the cooperation between several sectors of industry and the migration of the public in the continuous search for new entertainment experiences. The active role of consumers becomes central as they produce new flows of information using different platforms. Some examples offered by Jenkins are spoilers for the programme “*Survivor*” or the public voting in “*American Idol*” that contributes to the vitality of the programme. There are many further examples in which the old media (television, print, and telephone) interact with the new media (reality shows, social network, and mobile phones).

Jenkins identifies eight characteristics of the landscape within which new media and social networks developed:

- 1) Innovative: technological changes are profound and rapid;
- 2) Convergent: information may develop on different media channels;
- 3) Daily: the technologies are integrated into daily life;
- 4) Interactive: the image of itself is constructed through many technologies;
- 5) Participatory: messages flow from one place to another and from one person to another many levels (can be intimate, public, one-to-many or many-to-many);
- 6) Overall: new communication networks allow interactions throughout the world, beyond national boundaries;
- 7) Generational: young people have had more opportunity to free themselves from the past and from previous cultures;
- 8) Unequal: globally, not everyone has the ability to use the new media and therefore be in communication with the world.

This article focuses on Facebook, but social networks are many and various: “Facebook invites us to show our face, our history while the virtual worlds and the file sharing tend to hide the identity behind a puppet with a false name (Second Life), or behind multimedia products that we allegedly own or collected (YouTube, Flickr) and that precede and somehow hide the collector-author” (Menduini et al., 2011: 9).<sup>8</sup>

As regards relations/connections on social networks, Ellison and boyd (2013) argue that “the ability to cross one's own connections and those of others was a critical and defining component of social network sites [...]”.

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<sup>8</sup> Translated by the author.

From a social perspective, it allowed people to easily see the relationships between others, to reconnect with old friends and acquaintances, and to travel through the network in a way that enhanced social interactions.”

### *1.1 Facebook: From University Yearbook to Social Phenomenon*

Facebook was conceived in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, a student at Harvard, with the objective of creating a sort of online yearbook for the university. Currently, outside of the university borders of his creation, Facebook has more than one thousand million users worldwide<sup>9</sup>. Registration is simple and free and it allows users to add photos and videos. Its success is linked to the fact that it appears as a multipurpose platform: in addition to photos and videos, on Facebook we can find advertising space, chat, groups of mutual aid associations and also the possibility to send messages directly to a member's mobile phone. Nadkarni and Hofmann (2011) thus have summarized the main features of Facebook as: “features that facilitated interaction include the friends list, the wall, pokes, status, events, photos, video, messages, chat, groups and like. The friends list is a crucial component of FB, because it allows the end user to create a public display of links to their connections which viewers can in turn click through, to traverse the network. The wall is a term given to the FB feature that functions as a bulletin board and allows other users to post personal messages directed toward the end user. The poke feature allows users to offer initial greetings to other users. Status allows users to inform their friends of their whereabouts and actions.”

Some Italian authors (Riva, 2010; Menduini et al., 2011) have explained the factors that contribute to the increasing diffusion of Facebook in respect of other social networks: Facebook appears to be a producer of social capital, it allows users to maintain a constant relationship with other people but also allows them to reconstruct a form of pre-existing social capital (the classic example being that of old school friends who have been lost and found again thanks to Facebook). Still, Facebook is based on the economy of the gift: we use it to exchange free information and content, for the simple pleasure of doing so. Finally, Facebook is the social network that most of all asks us to display our identity and our self. In this regard, we can say that it has a “dramaturgic” dimension because it can be seen as a big stage where we build our character with a wealth of detail. However inherent this feature, explains Giuseppe Riva (2010), there are also risks: the other person is not physically in front of the subject and then the subject becomes disembodied. What other

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<sup>9</sup> [www.nielsen.com](http://www.nielsen.com)

people see are pictures, posts, and phrases. These are “pieces” that the person chooses to show to virtual friends. The risk of this fragmentation is the “part for the whole”, that is the identification of the subject with the individual aspects of its presentation. A recent article (Kross et al., 2013) even identifies the possibility that Facebook adversely affect users’ psychophysical health (understood as mood and satisfaction with our lives).

An English study by Adam Joinson (2008) at the School of Management, University of Bath, investigated the motives that lead to the use of Facebook. The basic idea that supports this study is that the social networks represent a type of online network and so it can satisfy the same requirements as offline networks (for example, provide emotional support or give information about other people). In addition to these functions, social network sites also serve other needs: “Lampe et al. draw a distinction between the uses of Facebook for social searching (finding out information about offline contacts) and social browsing (the use of the site to develop new connections, sometimes with the aim of offline interaction)” (Joinson, 2008). Another feature that Facebook seems to fulfil is the “surveillance” of interests and beliefs of the macro group, to which the individual belongs. The study of Joinson, structured with an exploratory part and an analytical part, shows that the most common activities on Facebook are, in descending order: keeping in touch (remaining in contact with people who are far away from home and to chat with people who, without Facebook, would be lost as contacts); passive contact and social surveillance (see what the others write and share); re-acquiring lost contacts (resume contact with people who had lost sight of); communication (sending private messages or writing on the wall); photographs (tagging, post and share photos); design related (create relationships); perpetual contact (always be in contact with the “friends”, looking at their status updates, by moving in continuation and seeing what they are doing with other users); and making new contacts (speak with single persons, find new friends and join the groups).

Inside all of these features, there is a form of gratification that develops on two levels: “the first is a surveillance function [...]. Facebook is used to see what old contacts and friends are up to, how they look and how they behave. In keeping with this use, there is evidence that Facebook profiles serves an important self-presentation tools. Associated with this use is the social capital building gratification, where Facebook is used to build, invest in and maintain ties with distant friends and contacts” (Joinson, 2008).

All of Facebook’s features, all of the needs that it responds to, can be summarized into two main categories, as identified by Nadkarni and Hofmann (2011): the need to belong and the need for self-presentation, which returns to the dramaturgical dimension already mentioned.

Being connected in a virtual network is an ordinary condition. Indeed, scholars such as Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (Wellman et al., 2002; Rainie and Wellman, 2012), have proposed the concept of “networked individualism” that indicates the new and highly connected way in which people enter into a relationship. The main feature is that the networked subject relies on a weakly interconnected network and compounds from diversified contacts but that answer to their social, emotional and economics needs. The forms of belonging are therefore partial and multiple but this determines, at the same time, social networks as extensive and diversified. The result is being a networked subject and living in a network, bypassing the important dimension of the group, represents the morphology of the modern society, also called “network society” (Castells, 1996).

Briefly, networked individuals are characterized by forms of partial membership and less reliance on the membership of stable groups; it seems that the contacts established, at least initially, are weak bonds. However, these bonds prove crucial with regard to the retrieval of information, sociability, and support in work-related research, in the management of health problems and in addressing the bureaucracy. The connections that the networked subject produces have different routes of spread, at least as many as the social network. Certainly, worthy of note is the question of trust: the environment is networked and less hierarchical, less circumscribed, the skills are challenged, and the reports seem to be more subtle, then there is greater uncertainty about people and information sources that are worthy of trust.

The concept of “networked individualism” was born as a response to the debate about the influence of the Internet in changing the community. Using this term we usually refer to the idea of community espoused by Ferdinand Tonnies (1887), but also to the later definition of Barry Wellman (2002) who notes: “community usually connotes people socially and cognitively encapsulated by homogenous, breadly embracing groups.” Characteristics of community are therefore neighbourhood and employment membership and voluntary organizations. These groups have precise borders, rules of inclusion and have a hierarchal structure. The debate about the nature of the community after the advent of Internet moves on three different ideas (Wellman et al., 2002): (1) The Internet has broken the community: Internet, in this context, represents an immersive reality experience that moves the individual away from family, friends, relatives and neighbours; (2) Internet increases the community: people use the Internet to remain in contact with the other members of the community; and (3) Internet transforms the community: here we find the concept of networked individualism.

Essentially, as Wellman demonstrates with the Netville experiment (Wellman et al., 2002) but also with more recent research and thanks to a substantial body of literature,<sup>10</sup> “rather than increasing or destroying community, the Internet can best be seen as integrated into the rhythms of daily life, with life online intertwined with offline activities. Changes in transportation and communication have already allowed for a new concept of community in which relationships need not be limited to spatial boundaries” (Wellman et al., 2002).

In this section, we have tried to contextualize Facebook, to understand what it is, how it impacts on relationships, on the concept of community, and how it draws a new map of relational and communicative possibility. We have seen how Facebook is the social network that most calls upon the subject to present himself (if it does in a sincere way or not is another of the many aspects still requiring further study) and how the sense of belonging is one of the main reasons that lead to the use of Facebook. Clearly, talk about Facebook is also talk about relationships, socializing, networking and social support. When we want to understand a phenomenon so articulated and multidimensional, the most useful paradigm is that of comprising sociology which, as will be seen, is totally focused on reason and on the interpretation of the act. It could be useful to try to explain a new phenomenon, such as social networks, with sociological categories that have the weight of years behind them.

Now let us step inside comprising sociology and let us see if gambling can lead to the blossoming of a new interpretive key.

## **2. A Step Back: The Comprising Sociology**

When we think about comprising sociology, we think of Max Weber. First, to deepen his contribution, we will focus on the word “understanding” which rotates within the comprising paradigm. To speak of understanding, we must remember that sociology (as have most of the human sciences) has been at the centre of an epistemological and methodological debate about his scientific statute for a long time. The paradigms central to this debate are

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<sup>10</sup> See the bibliography of *Networked: The new social operating system* by Wellman and Rainie (2012) Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT Press.

essentially two: positivism and interpretative. The three points of differences between these two paradigms are:<sup>11</sup>

- 1) Ontological question: does the social world exist? Is it real and objective?
- 2) Epistemological question: is the social world knowable?
- 3) Methodological question: how can we know the world?

Positivism is the first of these two paradigms and has dominated since the period of the enlightenment. For the positivist, there is a social reality outside individuals. This reality is objectively knowable with the same methods as the natural sciences. According to this approach, therefore, sociology and other humanistic disciplines are considered sciences only if using scientific methods of the natural sciences. Standing opposite to positivism is the interpretative. Here the discourse expands: the social world is knowable linked to the meaning that the individual give it. The knowledge is never certain and scientific but always probabilistic and the scholar plays a central role in knowledge because he constructed that knowledge. The interpretative argues, therefore, a social and relativist constructivism.

Having said that, it follows that beginning to speak of understanding is in opposition to the positivist paradigm. After this debate concerning the so-called science of the spirit, as classified by Wilhelm Dilthey (in Izzo, 1974), we arrive at a debate between “explanation” and “understanding”.

For Gustav Droysen (1971), the purpose of the natural sciences is explanation, while history (and all the sciences of the spirit) have the purpose of understanding. Georg Simmel (1908) believed that the understanding, like the peculiar method of human sciences, was a form of empathy. Moreover, in the term “*understanding*”, in addition to this form of empathy, we can find also a form of intentionality: the scholar who wants to understand has the desire to go beyond what is apparent. An example that Georg Henrik Von Wright (1971) proposed to clarify the idea of understanding in relation to intentionality and empathy is this: a subject sees, on the street, a crowd that moves in the same direction and shout something stirring about flags. He may ask what they are doing but in that case the answer would be simple: a group of people walk together on the street, shout and wave flags. This is a simple

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<sup>11</sup> Paradigm here meant “*a theoretical perspective shared and recognized by the community of scientists of a given discipline, founded on previous acquisitions of the discipline itself, which operates by focusing the research both in terms of identification and selection of facts relevant to study both of assumptions within which place the explanation of the observed phenomenon, both in preparation of techniques of empirical research necessary*” (Corbetta, 1999: 18, translated by the author).

explanation. Understanding provides a leap further and implies the answer to more complex questions: because those people exhibit that behaviour? Where are they going? What do those flags represent? Von Wright explains that the answer to all these questions is not a teleological explanation, but rather a new act of a second order understanding.

Max Weber develops his ideas by starting from the issues just explained. Weber speaks of sense, as well as understanding. In his book, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (1922a)<sup>12</sup>, Weber introduces the idea of sociology as a discipline which has the aim of understanding human action through a process of interpretation. With word “*action*”, he understands human behaviour, which we can assign a subjective sense. Therefore, for Weber, sociology is a comprising science that has as its main objective understanding social action. Comprise here means grasping the sense that moves the human action and so action is worthy of comprise and becomes the object of the sociology if and only if it is connected to a sense and if it is oriented to the acts of other individuals. Weber (1922b) locates his famous four types of social action: the rational act oriented to the purpose (the subject calculates the way in which to reach an object), the rational action relative to value (the action has a subjective value for those who carry it out), affective action (the meaning of the action resides in an intimate state of mind of the actor) and, finally, the traditional act (which is linked established habits). In the text *Gesammelte aufsatze zur wissenschaftslehre* (1922b),<sup>13</sup> Weber explains the steps that the sociologist must take in order to understand. First, is necessary that he should take an interest in social life and to choose which specific part of reality he wants consider. Then he must locate the laws that have an influence on the act and he must sort them into generic categories, and make them clear and evident. These steps represent the method par excellence of the social sciences: the construction of ideal types. The last item guiding understanding is the “not valuation”<sup>14</sup> of sciences: if sociology wishes to assert itself as a science, its results must refrain from giving value judgments and instead be readily generalizable, objective and comparable.

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<sup>12</sup> Economy and society (translated by the author).

<sup>13</sup> The method of social-historical sciences.

<sup>14</sup> Translated by the author.

## 2. Alfred Schutz: The Sense

With Alfred Schutz, we move from the action toward the concept of sense. For Schutz (1932, 1973), the social sciences have to do with a world of sense, that is a world understandable only thanks to individual interpretations of the social actors. Schutz also believed that the creation of ideal types proposed by Weber is an activity that subjects perform every day because understanding always involves placing something within a type. According to Schutz, the subject of sociology is the behaviour, which is manifested in actions equipped with sense.

But what does it mean to give a sense of an action? The answer of Schutz is that there are action only actions in the presence of a project and the project is the bearer of sense. In his text, *Der sinnhafte aufbau der sozialen welt* (1932),<sup>15</sup> (1932), he distinguished between “subjective sense” (when we know the lived producers of significance of the actor) and “objective sense” (when the production process of the actor is not known). From objective sense is born “directly understanding”. This is where you can immediately grasp the meaning simply by looking at the other while the subjective sense is the source of that understanding that Schutz defines as “explanatory understanding”, which presupposes a certain knowledge of the past of the actor.

Schutz (1932) identifies other factors to be considered for the understanding: the understanding of action occurs only once the behaviour has already happened, with an act of reflection; and there are also action understood and needs no clarification. The understanding of others is always relative and for us to be understanding of others we must share the same world environment. Finally, a tool that helps in understanding is the system of signs that the subject produces with his behaviour.

The theories explained above are stimulated and continued by other authors such as Thomas Berger, Peter Luckman (1966) and William James (1950). Berger and Luckman are considered pupils of Schutz because they have brought forward his theories with the assumption that human behaviour is understandable since it is a construction of man. We can say that, while Schutz moved on to a phenomenological and interior plane, Berger and Luckman have concretely analysed the construction of daily life. The two authors have chosen to deal with daily life because that is the one in which all actors are immersed, the one that is most taken for granted, but which in reality is that precisely because it is known and reworked.

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<sup>15</sup> The phenomenology of the social world (translated by the author).



William James instead took one cue from Schutz. The German author, in continuation of his work, argues that in addition to daily life there are also other different realities in which the subject lives and in which it is always possible to understand the specific sense. Moreover, they have in common the same starting point that Schutz takes for talking about these realities that he call “finite provinces of meaning”<sup>16</sup> and that James called “sub-universes”. However it is called, the idea relates to different and various orders of reality.

### 3. For a Phenomenology of Facebook

According to the phenomenology of everyday life proposed by Schutz, we can now consider Facebook to discover what is similar and what diverges between the everyday life and the “*life on the screen*” (Turkle, 1995).

First, Schutz argues that the main medium for the knowledge of another is the observation of his body. This is not the case for Facebook: if you are in front of a person, you can see his movement, blushes, trembles and all these attitudes that contribute to the understanding of an act. With Facebook, all that can be seen is a static picture or a sentence and so looking at the body of others is not the right means of understanding on Facebook. But understanding itself is not a word completely alien to the social network: the method that Schutz defines as “explanatory understanding” (1932) requires knowledge of the past behaviour of the actor and by scrolling back and forth the virtual pages of the diary of Facebook we can read what the actor has written in the months and in the days preceding and so we can understand what he has written today and discover his reasons. For example, on the wall we can read “my big day has arrived...” and scrolling back a few months, we shall discover that the person had written the date of today and added the phrase “Finally I am getting married.” It is now clear what great day the actor was talking about. This is the process that Schutz has defined as the “retrospective look” (1932), effectively a result of a reflection.

The author argues, then, that is necessary to separate the act as conscious behaviour from reactive (unaware) behaviour. Here there is no need to add another if what we write and post on Facebook is the result of planning behaviour. There is always a project that precedes what we have written and so we are “*within*” the sense much more than it may seem. Continuing in its phenomenology, Schutz says that man is inserted in a social world that it’s not in doubt. Even the actor who is logged into Facebook is surrounded by other men who are virtual because they are not actually present but their presence is

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<sup>16</sup> Translated by the author.

constituted in photos, videos and posts. Realising that what we see of other Facebook users is only what the others want show therefore builds on what Schutz says about the understanding of others being always and only fragmented and in perspective.

Schutz also makes a distinction between the “world environment”<sup>17</sup> that surrounds the subject and the “contemporary world” that surrounds him from afar. Facebook represents a world foreign to this dichotomy: it is a world that does not surround but is on the screen so does not even appear as far away. It is a sort of “pressurized world”, which shortens the distance and encounters the actor only when he wants it to.

To conclude, we see the sphere of relations: those that are born on Facebook may be defined relations. It may seem strange to say this, given the absence of those social and psychological dynamics that create social relations (for example being face-to-face and non-verbal communication), but Schutz simplifies the question by taking up the definition of “social relation” of Weber (1922a). According to this, as we have seen earlier, human action is oriented to the acts of other social actors. On Facebook, much of what an actor writes is related to what others have written, or seeks to obtain a reaction from others. However, Schutz defines this relation as a “social relation of attitudes” (1932),<sup>18</sup> in respect of the social relations of effectiveness where the action influences the other. It is not, of course, what Schutz defines as “socio-environmental relations” because, in this, ego is physically present.

#### **4. Assuming a New Perspective: Facebook as a Finite Province of Meaning**

An essay by David Bennato (2007) which traces Anglophone literature on the question of sociality mediated on the Internet (where the social network is the maximum emblem) to focus then on chat, comes to the conclusion that “it cannot be regarded as a sustainable approach that sees a separation between the sociality online and offline. These two modes of interaction represent the extremes of a continuum within which the person who freely fits and decides the technological strategies and relational with which govern its social identity.”<sup>19</sup> This has been argued other authors such as Barry Wellman (1999) and Maria Bakardjieva (2003) before him, with all of the authors noting that there are different ways to achieve “virtual togetherness”. Depending on these different ways, the social network also assumes a difference level of

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<sup>17</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>18</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>19</sup> Translated by the author.

importance for different users and this causes different interpretive modes and understanding. The study by Maria Bakardjieva involved 21 Internet users. Based on the findings of her study, Bakardjieva (2003) identified four types of users-consumers of the Internet: (1) The infosumer: uses the Internet only as a sort of virtual encyclopaedia to find information they need, without being bound to any virtual community. Even when interviewed, people who belong to this group say that “there are always people who just have their mouth hanging out and they are just talking, and talking, and talking, and just creating a lot of babble.” Therefore, the infosumer doesn’t believe in virtual sociality and so the Internet is a tool like so many, functional for the need to collect information; (2) Instrumental relations: here the possibility to enter into a relationship is evaluated and used, but is always aimed at an instrumental objective, namely to chat and exchange information in relation to a specific interest. Relationships are born and end around the exchange of information: “After that question is solved, we may talk a little bit about how old we are, what we did. But once the problem is solved this fades away” said one respondent; (3) Sociability unbound: here creating relationships and staying in contact is the main reason for using the Internet. One interviewee explained that his/her purpose in accessing the Internet is “meeting people and having a great time talking to them.” In addition, here the initial stimulus may be the exchange of information, but the perspective of sociality transcends all other aspects; (4) The communitarian: here the creation of online relationships is predominant and links to the need to participate in a support group online. People who belong to this model are looking for security, a family atmosphere and compassion. Bakardjieva shows how this model is primarily identified in people with disabilities or disease.

What is important is that the size online and offline are always interpenetrate and related to each other. Bakardjieva (2003) states that what is “common for all the modalities of virtual togetherness described here is the fact that actions and interactions in online forums were intertwined with participants’ projects and pursuits in their offline lives.” Graziella Mazzoli and Giovanni Boccia Artieri (1997) considered the boundary between real and virtual and, while not referring specifically to the social network as it did not exist then, they highlighted the nature of this ambiguous boundary between online and offline that unites and at the same time separates: “These virtual spaces in which the subjects are implementing innovative strategies of sociality, stimulations of meaning from communicative ties traditionally defined as weak but of great intensity, represent concretely the dissolution (virtualization) of boundaries between the social and the technological,

between the biological and the machined” (Mazzoli and Boccia Artieri, 1997).<sup>20</sup>

Having said that, can it not seem contradictory to read Facebook as a finite province of meaning? What we want to show, with relativity, which is always necessary when we talk about human behaviour, is that although Facebook is inextricably linked to the daily life of users and so is influenced and influences it, individuals are not always connected. There are moments in which, by choice or necessity, we do not log into Facebook. In these moments, we live an offline life, without thinking about what we do, publish and share when we click on Facebook or any other social network.

We have seen that Facebook does not possess all the characteristics that Schutz attaches to everyday life. Yet, it maintains close ties with it and certain aspects unite it to what is happening daily. We can say that Facebook is another plane of reality not preeminent in everyday life, but to which daily life is linked. Therefore, it is for this reason that we want to try to read Facebook as a finite province of meaning. Or better, we want try to apply some of the parameters of this concept, which has matured for several years, to a modern phenomenon such as Facebook.

What we intend with the concept of “finite province of meaning”? Both William James and Schutz argued that the emphasis is on different contexts in which we are from time to time immersed. We intend that the subjects’ life, their experience, is not limited only to their daily lives. On the contrary, their attention is directed toward other planes of reality: the world of television, the world of science, the theatre, dreams and, why not, the world of Facebook. Schutz speaks of finite provinces meaning to indicate that each of these realities has boundaries defined and delimited thanks to the attention that is oriented on them. James’ idea of sub universes echoes this. However, he puts the emphasis on the meaning because it is completely the meaning that builds the reality.

We want to highlight that the finite provinces of meaning are never isolated from reality but merely represent another level. This statement introduces the final which we want to consider: the theory of “queue of the eye”.<sup>21</sup> “When we immerse ourselves in a universe of meaning we don’t abandon the other universes: it is as if we saw them with the queue of the eye [...]. We give meaning to a universe of meaning within which we live, we must always perceive with the queue of the eye at least another universe of meaning that is next to the first and that this is united and, at the same time, separated by a frame” (Iacono in Possenti, 2006: 110). In other words, when a

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<sup>20</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>21</sup> Translated by the author.

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subject enters into another reality, he/she remains aware that there is a reality other than the one that he/she is currently experiencing.

The following table compares the features<sup>22</sup> that Schutz identifies in finite provinces of meaning with the same parameters as applicable to Facebook:

TABLE 1: *Comparison of finite provinces of meaning and Facebook*

Characteristics of finite provinces of meaning	Features of Facebook
Level of reality	
They represent a different level of reality than that prominently featured in everyday life.	Represents an experience that we live in daily life, but at a different level. Is not a prominent reality and taken for granted.
Internal coherence	
The consistency and compatibility of inner experiences to the provinces with respect to their specific cognitive style exist only within the boundaries of the particular province of meaning to which these experiences belong. In this way, what is compatible within the province of significance P will be compatible within the province of meaning Q. On the contrary, viewed from P that is assumed true, the province Q and all the experiences that belong to it will appear as purely fictitious, inconsistent and incompatible, and vice versa.	The image and the actions that each user builds on Facebook can be consistent with real ones but they may also have one of their internal consistencies completely released from the real identity.
Interference between provinces	
The finiteness of the provinces implies that there is no possibility to report one of these provinces to the other by introducing a transformation formula.	That which is told and commences on Facebook does not interfere and is not interfered with by other spheres of reality. The only "conflict" we may have is with the everyday life thanks to preponderance. (Here is the idea of a theory of the "fringe or the tail of the eye" <sup>23</sup> : certain spheres of reality are inserted in reality more prominently).
Access Mode	
We have access to the provinces of meaning with a precise jump or shock (for example the rise of the curtain at the theatre).	We login to Facebook with a passage, marked by mouse click on the Facebook icon on our computer or smartphone.
Relationship with the other reality	
The provinces are marked with a precise "epochè" respecting the existence of other realities.	The actions that take place on Facebook are dictated by the rules of the social network and, in acting, the actor puts in brackets the other realities in which they live.
Type of experience whether	
The provinces are marked by a precise form of experience of self.	Each man's experience on Facebook is calibrated at a mainly subjective level and it plays on the type of experience you want to have.

<sup>22</sup> All of the characteristics of finite provinces of meaning indicated in the table are taken from Schutz, A. (1979) *Sociological Essays*. (Turin: UTET) pp. 181-232.

<sup>23</sup> Translated by the author.

Seen in this way, Facebook may actually represent a new and modern form of finite province of meaning.

## **Conclusions**

This article initially considered the importance that has been assumed by social networks in recent years. They are not only technological innovations that led toward Web 2.0. They are something else: a new way to create connections and to remain in contact, a new way to respond to the needs that have always existed and to which each epoch has given different answers. The advent of social networking has impacted globally, although the digital divide has unfortunately hampered its spread. What is clear is that more than 750 million people in the world use Facebook. This means that there are new ways open for production and reproduction of social capital and that there has been an evolution as regards the idea of community. Today, to borrow a concept from Barry Wellman (2002; 2012), the operating system that organizes people and their relationships is networked individualism.

The challenge proposed in this article was to apply to a new concept like Facebook categories of explanation and understanding from classical sociology, such as those of comprising sociology. The main concepts utilized are those of action and meaning. The article wanted to answer the question: “What is the meaning of Facebook?”

More specifically, we wanted to apply to Facebook the idea of the finite province of meaning, as proposed by Alfred Schutz. In Table 1, we have tried to parallel the characteristics of finite provinces of meaning and Facebook in order to see if they correspond.

By reading the table, it appears that Facebook represents an experience that we live in daily life, but at a different level because it does not represent a prominent and taken for granted reality. The image and the actions that each user portrays on Facebook may be consistent with reality but can also have an internal coherence completely separate from their real identity. What is discussed and commences on Facebook can be influenced and can affect daily life, but may be in part off-hook. If Schutz spoke of “*shock*” (1973) to indicate the passage from one sphere of reality to another, this step seemingly takes place by clicking on the F in Facebook. One of the most important elements is that the actions that take place on Facebook are dictated by the rules of the social network and so the actors put in brackets the other realities in which they live. Finally, the experience of each user on a social network is subjective and it plays on the type of experience each user wants to have. Obviously, this attempt still merits insight and reflections. It is obvious that Alfred Schutz did not talk about social networks because they did not exist when he was writing.

However, there is no reason to think (perhaps a little ambitiously) that, if he were writing today, he would have used Facebook in his examples of finite provinces of meaning.

Currently, the tendency is to think that the border between online and offline is elusive, that personal identity is constructed when moving between these two realities, but we cannot generalise this idea. As several studies have indicated, individuals are not always plugged in, they do not always live on the border. If Facebook suddenly disappeared, no one would seriously suffer. Perhaps it would be difficult to break the habit of tapping the much loved F on your smartphone that keeps you company while you are waiting for the umpteenth late train. Perhaps we would lose some contacts, but certainly not fundamental contacts because those go beyond Facebook and do not require a social network to maintain them. But nothing else. Life is mainly offline and it is sometimes interrupted or enriched by the online world, which we decide when and whether to access. It is true that when a person turns to Facebook he goes behind the load of experiences, dreams, hopes, disappointments and desires to share his moods. Perhaps, romantically, we can venture to suggest that Facebook is just this: a great puzzle that is built every day, sometimes with honesty and coherence, other times using dreams that build up to create an alter ego that resembles its creator, who he truly is, and a little of how he wants to be, a friend who listens, who offers his help and his support and that, once the PC is switched off, remains asleep until you decide to initiate contact again.

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