

## THE REEVALUATION OF THE SOCIAL DISTANCE INTO THE COMPUTER MEDIATED SPACE

Delia Ioana NADOLU, Bogdan NADOLU

University of the West, Timișoara, Romania

**Abstract:** Into the virtual communities developed inside of the Internet the social interactions are based on the simulation of the spatial proximity. The social distances between users have different significations mostly generated by the lack of power resources. In this paper we analyse how the social distance is re-evaluated in the case of participants to the communication flux from the Facebook page of a student group monitored for a period of six months.

**Keywords:** social distance, CMC, virtual interactions, Facebook

### 1. Introduction

The computer mediated communication, virtual interaction, web 2.0, user-generated content, viral posts, share and so on represent already daily expressions and actions for almost one third of the Globe population. In the post-industrial space not being digital or not having a virtual presence has become almost an extravagancy. It is quite unusual to try to be full social and professional integrated, to have a successful career and not having an e-mail address or at least a mobile phone. How deep everyday life is digitalized and what are the main consequences of such a reality represent questions of utmost actuality. This article focuses on the comparison of the configurations of social interactions from effective reality and from computer mediated reality in a group of students.

### 2. Virtual interactions

The term of territory is related to the way in which people use the places and the spaces according to their cultural and psychological significations. A territory is related to a clearly delimited physical space. The territoriality is the base for any stables social organization.

Hall (1966) introduces the term of mobile territoriality and makes the distinction among various kind of distances: (i). intimate distances; (ii). personal distances; (iii). social distances and (iv). public distances. Among the classics of sociology Emile Durkheim has the merit of drawing attention to a problem so far ignored, namely that the existence of a social space does not necessarily dependent on a physical space. The Kantian's apriorism of the space and time was societal legitimated into the Durkheimian theory, which labelled the space as *social fact*.

From this innitial paradigm of the social space, further famous sociologists and psychologist engaged into the theorization of the *space without space*. Thus, Pitirim

Sorokin makes a qualitative distinction between the physical space and the social space. The first one includes the persons and all the material vehicles, and the second one is formed by the universe of significances. Leopold von Wiese and Kurt Lewin approached the space from the relational perspective. Leopold von Wiese considers that the social relations are developed in a social space different from the physical space. Two persons that are very close but that are ignoring each other, share the same physical space but not in the same social space. Complementary, two close friends that are far away continue to share the same social space. Kurt Lewin, from the standpoint of the field theory, makes reference to a topological space that physically surrounds the person, to the living space that can be sensorial covered by a person with its biology and to the living space accessed mentally by the person due to its psychology. The last one is formed and functions according to other rules than the physical ones (Ilie 2004: 11-12).

This distinction between the physical and the socio-cultural space is even stronger manifest in the computer-mediated reality. The virtual social space developed in the Internet is based on the simulation of the spatial proximity. The users interact, communicate, work and play together as if they are face to face, in the same room. But the space between these faces contains a very complex networked technology that covers in real time inter-continental distances almost all over the Globe. Thus, in the virtual social space the only un-real (fictive) component is the physical closeness. Under these circumstances the expression *virtual life* is opposable with the expression *effective life* and not with *real life*. In other words, the virtual and the effective life are both as real as possible, with many people involved and with a large variety of resources. In computer mediate social interactions “*people still meet face-to-face, but under new definition of meet and face*” (Steven Jones).

Following previous research (Nadolu, 2004), we state that the computer mediated social interactions share specific features: (i). the decreasing or even the absence of the power resources; (ii). the self-control of one’s own identity; (iii). the volitional character; (iv). the accessibility. These are generated by the universal configuration of the social interactions inside Internet: user–network-user. In this medium, each user exists as long as he/her engages in communication processes. Even in text based or multimedia based communication, a person that does not participate to any kind of conversation, basically, does not exist into the virtual space. Thus, the “territoriality” of the virtual social space is actually related to the communication process developed by each participant (Ulmanu 2011, McChesney 2013).

Under these circumstances, we elaborated a research design for content analysis over the communication processes of the Facebook student group, during the winter semester of their 1<sup>st</sup> year of study. They were announced, at the beginning of the semester, about the monitoring of the communication fluxes and also they were invited to participate in the analysis. Such a factor has very little influence, since messages of the type “let’s post for recording!” were formulated only several time (during the six month of analysis).

In a syntactic presentation the research has the following dimensions:

- case study: Facebook group pages of students from 1<sup>st</sup> year of study, specialization sociology, West University of Timisoara 2012-2013, winter semester;
- period for recording of the communication: 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 2012 to 31<sup>st</sup> of March, 2013;
- the entire group has 67 members official enrolled but only 45 students have engaged conversations on Facebook;
- sample structure (N=67): 27.9% male and 72.1% female but without significant differentiation (Anova  $F = 1.544$ ,  $p=0.215$ ).
- 616 posts (=new subjects) have generated 7.145 comments (messages) from a minimum of 1 until a maximum of 610 with an average value of 19.93 but a median of 7.5 and standard deviation of 37.4.
- these posts have also had got 2.057 "Likes", from minimum =0 to maximum =29, with an average value of 4.68 and median of 4.
- the most commented posts were: 1 x 610, 1 x 209, 1 x 178 and 1 x 171.
- the post with maximum of comments was: "*BDS: There are 5 books. We have two of them from professor. Until Monday I will scan the other three*". Starting from this neutral post there were generated 610 comments (587 into the some day, during 5 hours and 9 minutes and 23 comments into the days after). The average frequency was 1 comment at each 31 seconds. There were involved only 9 members of the group. In total there was generated 4947 words (about 11 pages with font size of 12 at 1.5). This mean 1 word at every 3.7 seconds.

Firstly, we have made a statistical analysis of the profile of communications during the analyzed six months aiming to identify the peaks of message exchanges on the Facebook group.

The distribution of the posts per month is presented in the following chart:

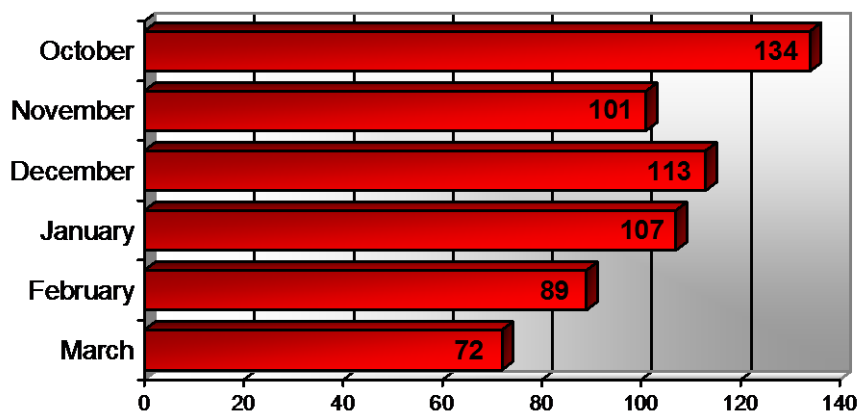


Figure 1 – Distribution of posts by month

We can signal a maximum activity in October (134 of new subjects for discussions) when the group was initiated, in December (with Christmas wishes) and in January with the period of examination. The minimum was reached in March (with 72 posts) due to the inter-semester holiday. The general distribution per days (monthly) is the following:

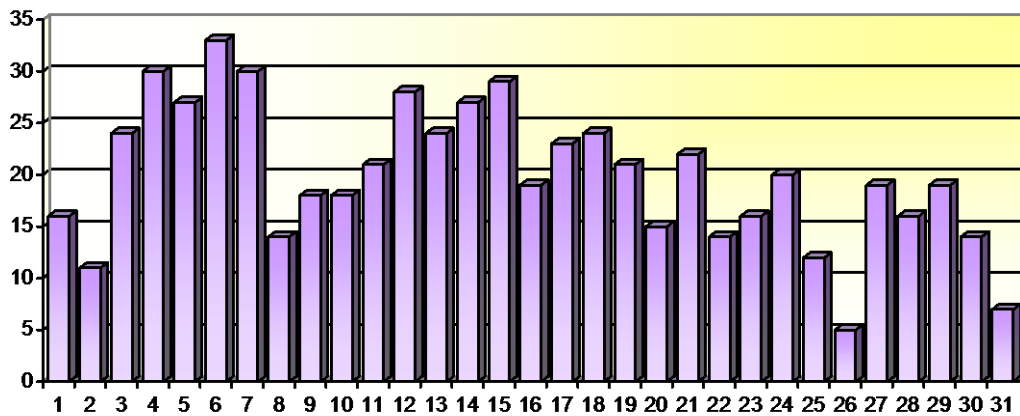


Figure 2 – Distribution of posts by days

Even along only an aggregate indicator, we can observe a general pattern of slowly decrease of the number of posts from the beginning of the month toward the end of the month. The detailed day-by-day distributions for each month are the following:

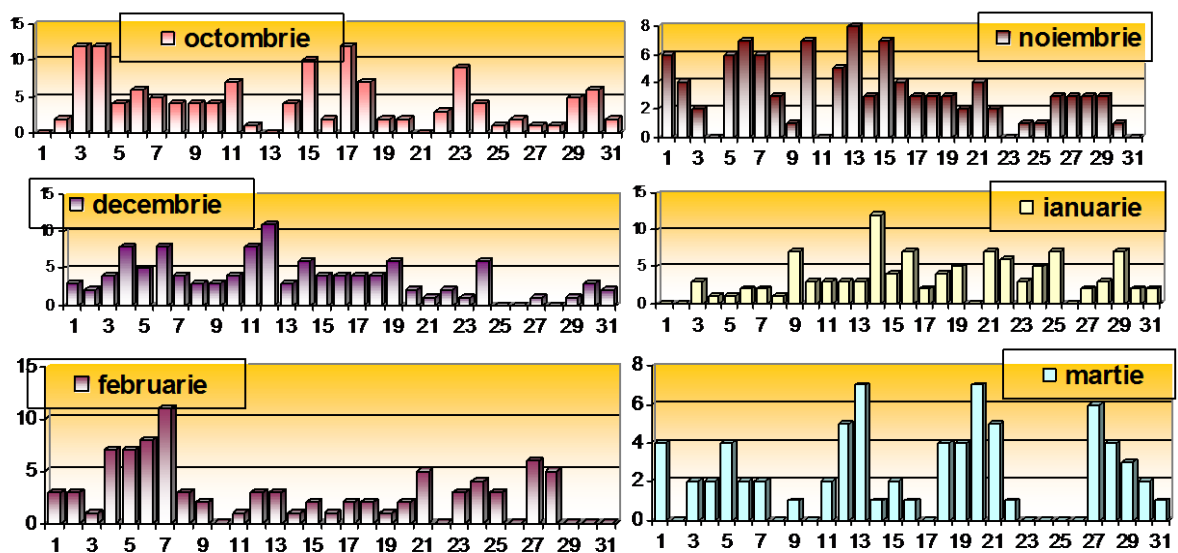


Figure 3 – Monthly distribution of posts by days

Following these distributions we can remark the high level of correspondence between the academic program of the group and their Facebook activity: it is clear the decrease of the number of post during the period of winter holiday (around 20<sup>th</sup> of December until 9 of January) and then the increase during the examination period (15<sup>th</sup> of January – 10 of February). This similarity confirms that the Facebook activity of the group was a natural process and followed the profile of the group everyday activity.

From another perspective the distribution of the post per week days has recorded the following data:

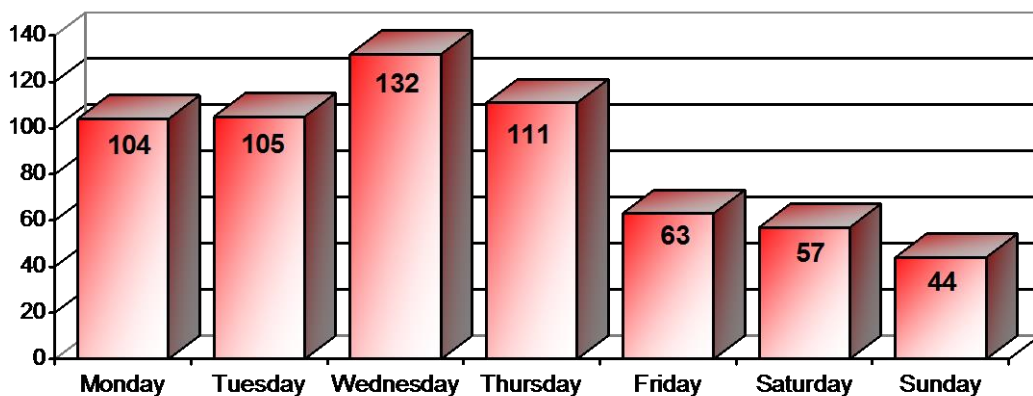


Figure 4 – Weekly distribution of posts by days

Thus, we can encounter a peak on Wednesday that can be associated with the increase of the availability of the group members. The weekend days, when there are many activities outside the Facebook post record a significant decrease.

Finally, following the hourly distribution we have recorded the following distribution:

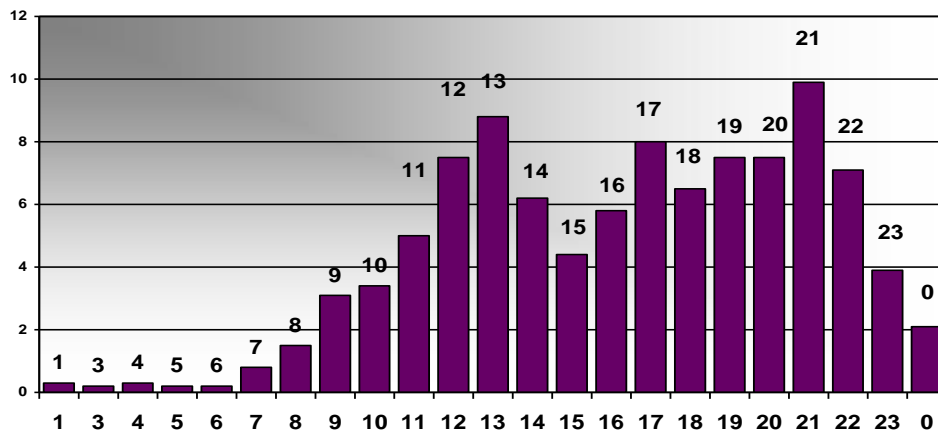


Figure 5 – Hourly distribution of posts

At this general level we can observe two peaks, at 13.00 and at 21.00. These two moments can be also correlated with the decrease in the daily effective activity (after the morning courses and in the evening).

For a specific analysis we focus on the most viral post that have generated 610 comments. They involved only 9 members of the group, but these students kept talking for over 5 hours starting from a neutral message. The distribution of these members into the sociogram can be observed into the following picture:

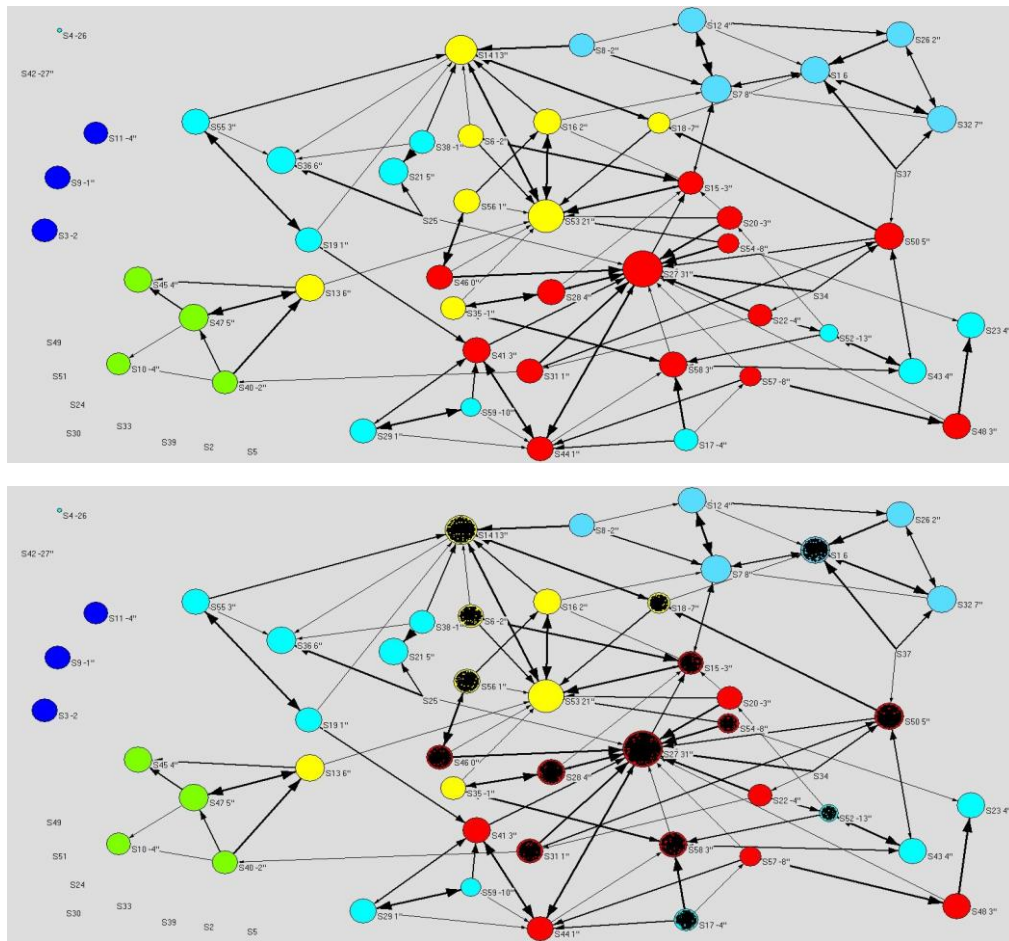


Figure 6 – Group sociogram (above) and the marked point (with black) of the 9 participant from the most viral post (below)

The sociogram was designed on January 2013, at the end of the first semester and in the same period (January 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup>), when the most viral post were encountered. We can clearly observe that the 9 students involved in the very consistent communication are coming from various *nuclei* of the main group. The communication

in this case had a natural flow, it was self-moderated, without any intervention toward the amplification of the effects. The topics of discussion kept a positive pro-group profile, without strong contradictions or conflicting trends.

Starting from these analyses we can draw the first conclusion: in the virtual social space the *territoriality* is transferred to the dynamics of communication. In other words, two persons are socially closed in virtual space only if they engage in an extended process of computer mediated communication. Otherwise, if they have only a minimal communication in the virtual space, the social distance increases significantly. Following the Durkheim paradigm we can add a third dimension to the model: the virtual social space. We propose a three-fold analysis of the space: physical space, social space and virtual social space, without having a direct conditioning among these spaces. As a direct consequence, the following situations can occur:

|   | Close in physical space | Close in social space | Close in virtual space | Explication   |
|---|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|---|
| 1 | No                      | No                    | No                     | persons that does not interact at all   |
| 2 | No                      | No                    | Yes                    | persons that interact only on virtual space without to know directly each-other   |
| 3 | No                      | Yes                   | No                     | persons that are friends, family, colleagues but are at large distance and not interact via computer mediated   |
| 4 | No                      | Yes                   | Yes                    | persons that are related (as above) but keep in contact via computer mediated   |
| 5 | Yes                     | No                    | No                     | persons that are physically closely (on the street, into the some bus, in the some public place etc.) but does not know each other and does not interact into the virtual space |
| 6 | Yes                     | No                    | Yes                    | persons that physically closely and interact into the virtual space but without to know effectively each other (i.e. only by nicknames)   |
| 7 | Yes                     | Yes                   | No                     | persons that are closely both, in physical and social space but without computer mediated interactions  |
| 8 | Yes                     | Yes                   | Yes                    | persons that are close on all three spaces  |

**Table 1.** Types of interactions in physical, social and virtual spaces

We can distribute the types of interaction onto a continuum from total absence of interaction (in physical, social and virtual spaces) to a total interaction (in all three spaces). There can be a discussion concerning how to arrange the only social vs. only virtual (3 vs. 4 and 6 vs. 7) but we preferred this order because the virtual interaction is less committing (as emotional and cultural implications) than the social interactions. Otherwise one can discuss in what way the virtual interaction is different from the social interaction. However, in such a case we should use the classical, consecrated terms: the virtual or the computer mediated interaction is a distinct type of social interaction.

### 3. Conclusions

The above presented results indicate that the social distance in the virtual space does not keep the models from the effective reality. The simulation of the physical presence and the quasi-control over the self identity allow the users to engage more easily in interactions with unknown persons. The computer mediated social interactions are conditioned mostly by the approached subjects than the common experience from the effective reality. In our case study the group members mirror the difference between the configuration of effective interactions and the “short-cuts” engaged in the virtual space.

### References

1. Ilie, Delia 2004. *Socio-antropologia spatiului* [*The Socio-Anthropology of the Space*], Timisoara: Eurostampa.
2. McChesney R. 2013 *Digital disconnect*, New York: New Press.
3. Nadolu B. 2004. *Sociologia spatiilor virtuale* [*The Sociology of the Virtual Space*], Timisoara, Eurostampa.
4. Ulmanu B. 2011 *Cartea fețelor* [*The Facebook*] Bucuresti: Humanitas.
5. \*\*\* Internet World Stats available at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/facebook.htm> last [accessed June 2013].