

Social (Media) Graces: Making Sense of Norms in Ritual Posts

Abstract

With the emergence of mass-produced paper cards and then electronic cards, debates arose about whether these forms of greetings were deemed appropriate or ‘authentic’ as forms of expressing sincere sentiments. As previous critics have noted, both forms elicit low effort on the part of the sender. In this paper, we describe an interrogative probe that examines how people perceive and exchange Facebook birthday posts, which require perhaps less effort to send than the aforementioned cards. We present patterns of behaviors that reflect social norms around Facebook birthday posts. These include using posts to reconnect with dormant ties and to publicly confirm strong relationships with close friends. The evolution of response behaviors to birthday posts highlights changing practices with very specific rule sets. Finally, we suggest ways to incorporate the changing of norms when designing social media.

Introduction

Social norms and etiquette constantly evolve (Axelrod 1986). In the context of technology use, we sometimes see this change happen in a more rapid and visible manner. New technologies create new opportunities for interacting with strangers, colleagues, friends, and family; existing technologies change features and interface elements that can influence how people use them and indeed interpret their use by others. However, people are not passive consumers of these technologies. They decide how to use them and how to fit them into their lives, and these uses continue to change.

A widespread set of issues in software development requires developers to understand user requirements in order to build useful and usable applications. In developing social technology such as social media, one must consider how the application is used to interact with other people. Such considerations should include how a recipient will interpret the meaning and intent of a message, the forms and conventions of use, and how one ‘should’ act. Some

issues may be evaluated in terms of norms and expectations (Scheff 1960), while others arise from context-dependent language, patterns, accents, conventions and grammar. People may be explicitly aware of them, or only notice them when one is violated (Milgram and Sabini 1978). These norms, rules, and conventions pervade human interaction and garner the interest of academic scholars, most notably in the fields of Communications and Sociology (Scheff 1960; Wadams et al. 1973; Milgram and Sabini 1978). In social media, the design of sites and constant feature changes on the interface could very easily and radically alter these norms, rules, and conventions (Boyd 2008). In this paper, we probe into how these issues should be considered, especially given that they continue to change as we design social media.

We explore these issues in the light of a very small social context – a study of a limited number of people in their reaction to Facebook birthday posts that they have received over a number of years. By exploring birthday greetings, which have a rich history of ritual within and outside of social media, we present rules and patterns of behaviors that signify social norms. We specifically investigate the social norms around birthday posts to uncover how people adopt a new practice by exploring patterns in what they do, why they do it, how they perceive it, and how they think others will perceive them. To accomplish this, we created a Facebook application and a summary visualization as a reflection tool centered on a person's birthday. Inspired by Gaver's cultural probe (Gaver et al. 1999), we probe how people react to birthday posts received on the subject's birthday and the subject's birthday post-sending practices. We believe the behaviors in this microcosm shed light on ritual behavior on social media as a whole.

Birthday Greetings

In the United States, birthdays are important occasions that are recognized through customary rituals. These rituals serve to celebrate the “specialness” of the individual, who

is annually honored on the day of their birth (Mooney and Brabant 1988). Americans expect their family and friends to remember their birthday and to acknowledge the special occasion by, for example, spending time with them and giving birthday gifts (Ruth et al. 1999). By remembering birthdays and giving gifts, one expresses care and love for the birthday person and confirms their strong relationship (Belk 1996; Joy 2001).

Authenticity vs. convenience

One of the most common gifts one can receive on a birthday is a birthday card (Dodson and Belk 1996). As the demand for birthday cards increased, the greeting cards industry started mass-producing cards around 1910 containing pre-written greetings for people who might not come up with appropriate words for the card recipients (West 2010). Even though these pre-written cards save time and facilitate giving a birthday card in a more efficient manner, a significant number of researchers criticized them as a lazy and inauthentic form of expression that substitutes sincere interpersonal communication (Jaffe 1999; West 2010). Card recipients often react negatively to receiving cards that lack personalization and thoughtful messages (Dilnot 1993; Belk 1996; Dodson and Belk 1996).

The first electronic card was introduced by Donath (Donath 1997) in 1994. It quickly became very popular. However, the greatly reduced effort of sending electronic cards caused people to question the social value and appropriateness of electronic cards (West 2002). As a result, people began to perceive pre-written physical cards as having increased social value compared to electronic cards (West 2002).



Figure 1. Facebook birthday reminder as of Sep. 2011

In 2006, following in the ancestral greeting card lineage, Facebook introduced birthday posts. As shown in Figure 1, Facebook birthday reminder has been deliberately designed to make the remembering of and sending of birthday greetings an extremely low effort process—especially easier than having to remember a birthday and then sending an electronic birthday card. In this study, we investigate how people perceive practicing the birthday ritual in social media. We also explore how social norms evolve by revealing rules and patterns of participants' behaviors.

Evolving Norms in Social Media

Social norm is just something that has evolved over time. We view it as our role in the system to

constantly be innovating and be updating what our system is to reflect what the current social norms are... (Zuckerberg 2010)

Social norms are defined as rules and patterns that guide behaviors that a group of people collectively decides to be appropriate or inappropriate under specific situations (Axelrod 1986). The offline social norms tend to be well established, but norms in online settings often evolve with the design of technology. In social media, design of sites influences users' behaviors and thus promotes the development of different social norms (Donath 2007). For sites where users can create a connection easily, many users often have thousands of 'friends' or connections — numbers that would be hard to sustain in offline, real-world settings.

Also, small changes to the interface in social media can easily alter the previously understood social norms and disrupt existing social dynamics (Boyd 2008). For example, in 2006 when Facebook launched the 'news feed', which immediately broadcasted every public activity undertaken by users in a highly visible place (e.g., who commented on whose status, changes in relationship status, etc.), users expressed outrage because they viewed this as a violation of their privacy, a violation which has traditionally been regulated by social norms (Boyd 2008). Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg finally apologized and added a privacy feature in the 'news feed' (Zuckerberg 2006). Despite the outcry in 2006, the 'news feed' is now the most representative feature in Facebook. Since users embraced the 'news feed', they have established new practices such as facilitating social gatherings and asking questions to Facebook friends through the 'news feed'.

We use a case study of Facebook birthday posts to probe for social norms that may have emerged around Facebook birthday posts by exploring rules and patterns of behavior that our participants display. Specifically, we investigate aspects of design and features on Facebook that have influenced emerging norms. To accomplish this, we created a Facebook application that gathered public birthday posts the day before, the day of, and the day after a person's birthday. This tool served to highlight received posts from people in diverse communities and to elicit discussion around sending, receiving, and responding practices with respect to public birthday posts.

Methods

We recruited 17 participants (10 female, 7 male; aged 19 to 49, $M = 24$) from seven departments in a large Midwestern university. All participants had experience sending and receiving birthday posts on Facebook. Combined, the subjects received a total of 5,439 Facebook birthday posts and 65 posts per person on average per year.

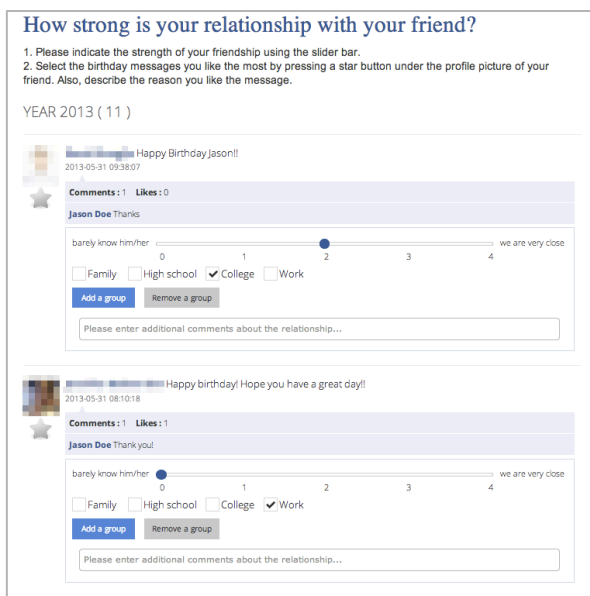


Figure 2. The Facebook web application

Inspired by Gaver’s cultural probe (Gaver et al. 1999), we developed a Facebook web application (Figure 2) and summary visualization (Figure 3) to support reflection on behaviors related to birthday posts to probe participants’ behaviors around Facebook birthday posts. The application gathers up to one hundred recent Facebook birthday posts from the participant’s wall. We displayed the content of the birthday posts, comments surrounding them and ‘likes’. In one space, participants could see who had written Facebook birthday posts on their wall, the types of birthday posts they received, and the responses they or others had written. We asked participants to rate the strength of their relationship with the sender of each birthday post and to place the friend in a personally labeled community group of their choice. Commonly selected groups were family, high school, college, and work. Participants rated the strength of each relationship on a scale from 0 (barely know him/her) to 4 (we are very close) in answer to the question “How strong is your relationship with this person?” In order to clarify “strong relationship”, we told participants to rate a friend a “4 (we are very close)” if they could ask this person to loan them \$100 or more. After reviewing their birthday posts, participants saw a visualization of posts framed around groups that sent them birthday posts and connection strength over the past few years (Figure 3).

We then conducted an hour-long, semi-structured interview with each participant in our lab. During the interview, we showed them a visualization generated from our application and asked them to discern patterns in the visualization. We probed further by asking them to describe their perceptions about the Facebook birthday posts that they received, their response styles, and how

their perceptions and interactions about the birthday posts changed over time. Finally, we asked them about their experience sending birthday posts and the reasons they chose Facebook to send birthday posts compared to other media. We recorded all interviews, and gave each participant \$10 in cash upon completion.

Three researchers coded the transcribed data using open coding. Each researcher read through the data, extracted statements of interest, and grouped them according to a theme. Then, they met as a group over a period of 2 months to evaluate and refine the themes. We discuss these themes in the “Findings” section.

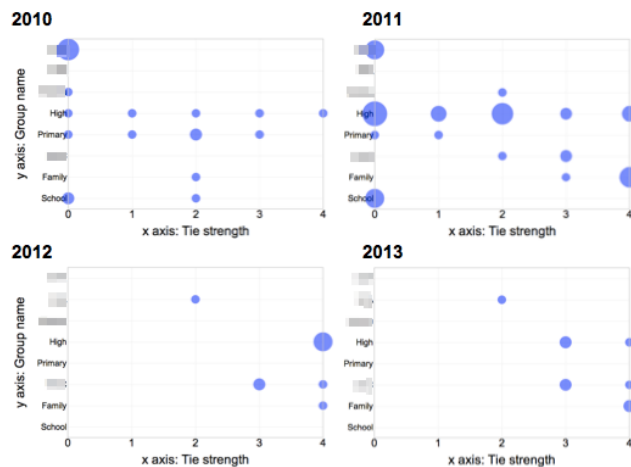


Figure 3. The Facebook birthday posts visualization. X-axis is tie strength; y-axis is names of groups that the participant created; size of circles represents number of friends. This image is from a participant (P14) who hid his birthday information in 2012. He seemed amused observing the drastic change and explained why he hid his birthday “I hid my birthday information on Facebook [in 2012]. Before hiding my birthday, I had a lot of friends and people posting, but after hiding my birthday people who I actually know post birthday greetings. (P14)”

Findings

Sending birthday greetings through mass-produced paper cards without personal messages and through electronic cards was once considered an inauthentic form of communication (West 2002). However, today, participants in our study perceived receiving the aforementioned cards more valuable compared to Facebook birthday posts. Within the changing norms, we first describe why and what makes participants perceive Facebook birthday posts cheap compared to paper and electronic greetings. Then, we explore how participants find ways to add cost to birthday posts to make them more meaningful. We first investigate motivations for practicing the birthday rituals in

social media and then examine how and why their responding practices change over time.

Lowered efforts can degrade authenticity

As we expected, the primary reason that Facebook birthday posts are perceived as cheap is due to the birthday reminder. Just as cultural ambivalence existed when electronic cards first appeared (West 2002), participants also felt uncomfortable about Facebook birthday posts that require low effort and time. Even though the Facebook birthday reminder was a small addition to the Facebook interface, it radically altered the existing norms surrounding birthday greetings. Norms around birthday greetings are intended to express care and love for the birthday person by ‘remembering’ and recognizing their birthday (Dodson and Belk 1996). However, on Facebook people write Facebook birthday posts not because they ‘remembered’ the birthday but were reminded by the birthday reminder. They also did not normally spend a significant amount of time writing a long or personal message. For example, almost fifty percent of birthday posts our participants received merely stated “Happy Birthday” or “Happy birthday, (participant’s name)” without any personal message. Even though participants received many birthday posts on average, 88 posts in 2012 (the three participants who hid their birthdays received 28, on average), receiving many less personalized and similar styles of messages only made our participants think that the posts were written out of ‘obligation’ rather than ‘care’ for the recipient.

Even with its low-cost, we should acknowledge that the senders also had a choice not to write Facebook birthday posts even when reminded. Our participants were also aware of this, as one said “It is cheaper but better than nothing. (P16)” In other words, even though Facebook birthday post is cheap, it still signals attention to the recipient:

If you send some birthday greetings on Facebook, they at least think that it’s because you got the birthday reminder. It makes receiving the greeting more cheap. If you are sending that on Facebook, people think that the reminder is the only reason you remember. It is cheaper but better than nothing. (P16)

The low-cost birthday posts that result from the Facebook birthday reminder sometimes influenced participants’ behavior. For example, three of our participants who did not like receiving too many insincere birthday posts, hid their birthday information in their profile. In this way, only those who remember the user’s birthday on their own will post a birthday greeting on the user’s wall, perhaps making these greetings more meaningful than those prompted by a reminder. After the participants removed their birthday

information, they actually received fewer and longer birthday posts, which were sent from closer friends:

[Before hiding birthday information] I had a lot of friends and people posting so I would just write, “Thank you,” even though I didn’t know them. But for the recent one, [after hiding my birthday information] people post really long messages and I actually know those people. So those people who post, it is because they know it’s my birthday and not because Facebook told them it’s my birthday. (P14)

Because of this low-cost associated with Facebook birthday posts, nowadays participants perceive paper and electronic forms of cards as having more value. With this in mind, the change in norms makes us wonder about the emergence of new technology that might one day make birthday greetings even cheaper than Facebook’s, and thus, upon reflection, elevate the ‘authenticity’ of Facebook birthday posts.

Sometimes I do get greeting messages via e-mail or e-card. For that, you actually need to spend a little more time, right? Yeah, so they are the very close ones. They don’t send me greetings on Facebook. (P9)

I remember that back in the days that I used to get emails, postcards, and birthday cards. I haven’t gotten them much. [...] Facebook is not a very personal medium. If you get a letter, then you get the handwriting of somebody. But in Facebook there is no personal touch in that message, I think. It’s not like this person takes a time to buy a stamp and go to the post office. (P5)

In the next section, we describe motivations for sending birthday posts on Facebook and design aspects of Facebook that influence the motivation around birthday posts.

Motivations for sending Facebook Birthday Posts

Sending and receiving birthday posts via Facebook has become a social norm for exchanging birthday greetings. As one participant said, “Honestly, a Facebook birthday greeting feels like the standard, the thing that everybody does. (P2)” We found two motivations that highlight how our participants embrace Facebook birthday posts: 1) a reconnection with dormant ties and 2) a public confirmation of their close relationship with close friends. These motivations were heavily influenced by design aspects of Facebook that vastly differ from paper and electronic cards by 1) connecting to many and a wide range of friends and 2) appearing in a public space. Below, we describe each motivation and how the design aspects influence them.

Reconnection with dormant ties

Facebook is designed to make it easy to connect with many people spanning diverse relationships (e.g., from close friends to people who have not met in person). Because the birthday reminder announces users' birthdays to all of their Facebook friends, it creates the opportunity to connect with the distant relationships who might not have remembered or even known a participant's birthday if not for the Facebook reminder. As shown in figure 4, our participants received 45% of their Facebook birthday posts from distant relationships, people whom they barely know. The numeric value of tie strength participants placed on these weak relationships were '0' and '1', describing them as: "Friend from a club I quit freshman year. Not much of friends any more (P7)" and "Friend of a friend. Not close at all (P8)". In other words, without Facebook, participants may not have received the 45% of birthday posts from distant relationships. Facebook birthday posts created a new opportunity to make contact and reconnect with distant friends. Ellison classifies birthday posts on Facebook as a relationship maintenance behavior (Ellison et al. 2013). A form of social grooming on social media, it occurs through interactions between "connected members, with the content, frequency, and length of messages serving as signals of the strength and context of the relationship" (Ellison et al. 2013, p9). She suggests people may send birthday posts in the off chance they need something from that person in the future.

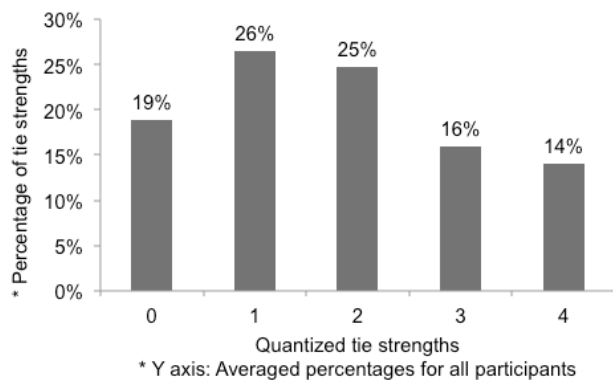


Figure 4. Percentage of the Facebook birthday posts from the different corresponding tie strengths.

This connection to relationships of varying strengths can be likened to the exchange of Christmas cards. People use Christmas cards to connect to others with whom they used to be close but have drifted apart, to mere acquaintances, and to closer friends and family (Fingerman, Karen and Griffiths 1999). The greeting in the card may be brief, slightly personalized, or may include a summary of the year's news to catch up. The low-cost of this annual ritual and the socially acceptable act of receiving greetings from friends who have grown distant reduce the barriers to contact between people who are not close friends (Jaffe

1999). These occasions create the opportunity to re-strengthen a relationship or just to keep it cordial and occasional. Likewise, Facebook birthday posts, which afford a possibility and an excuse to reconnect, permit lightweight connections that can be just as desirable:

Sometimes I feel like it's very similar to my mom's generation's Christmas card thing. For my mom, she has a list of people that she sent Christmas cards to every year. And, for a chunk of people on that list, that's the only contact that they have every year. I feel like Facebook birthday posts are similar to that for me. I am not going to talk to you otherwise, but I am going to say 'hi' on your birthday. (P2)

There are people I don't necessarily talk to that much who wish me happy birthday, and it's a good chance to have a brief conversation. Just to know they remembered who I was. (P16)

Here, we particularly discovered the value of using the Facebook birthday posts to reconnect with dormant ties (Lim et al. 2013), especially those who were once close and still long to be but have not been in contact for a while. If a person loses touch with someone, they may not have an up-to-date address, phone number or even email address. On Facebook, it is easy to find a lost contact and be a 'friend' on Facebook (Joinson 2008). Also, the Facebook birthday reminder provides an excuse to contact others. It becomes a social catalyst (Karahalios 2004). Direct contact from people with whom one has not contacted in a while via phone calls or text messages may be awkward. Email contact is perhaps less awkward but requires a search for accurate contact information. With Facebook, however, dormant ties could initiate conversation easily without fuss. Participants universally felt that within the norms of Facebook, such a post would be appropriate:

I think it's nice because sometimes you want to contact the person but you don't really have other ways of doing it so when you see it's their birthday, it's like an opportunity to ask how are you. (P10)

You may not have his current email address that he checks. From Facebook you can check if he has been active or not. It's a more reliable way of making sure that the other guy does get the message. The barrier of losing the contact information gets eliminated if you use just Facebook. (P9)

Writing birthday posts on Facebook turns out to be a fairly reliable way of contacting a lapsed connection in a low-cost manner.

Public confirmation of their close relationship with close friends

The low effort involved in sending birthday posts can be a great motivator to contact distant relationships; however,

for close friends, while the effort is low, the expectations are higher. Because Facebook lowers the effort required to remember and send birthday posts, close friends feel a social obligation to do more, and they make an extra effort to express their closeness.

Additionally, because Facebook is public, participants are aware of an audience and write messages that are crafted to publicly convey a degree of closeness. Examples that participants gave included writing longer or more personalized and unique messages, using inside jokes, sharing memories, adding photographs, sending private messages, and carefully timing the sending of the message so it arrives early on the recipient's birthday (just after midnight):

Because this year was my twenty-first birthday, some people posted 21 pictures of me. (P14)

Even if participants had greeted a close friend face-to-face on their birthday, they also acknowledged their friend's birthday as a public performance on Facebook. More than half of our participants said, for close friends, they are willing to send a public Facebook birthday post as well as a birthday greetings via private media such as a phone call, SMS, email etc.:

It sort of gives other people a chance to see that they are wishing you a happy birthday. I know friends do it because they want other people to see this person is still such a great friend. (P6)

I think part of it is the publicized aspect of it because people see you wishing them a happy birthday and then people, they're like, "Oh, they're so close. They're such close friends." (P8)

So there can be a sense that a person should not only wish someone a happy birthday, but also they should do so publicly – even if that means doing it twice. This specific case does not support media substitution theory (Kaye and Johnson 2003). Friends use multiple media to show their efforts to the recipient. For some people, Facebook's labor-saving technology thus becomes a labor-making technology (Cowan 1985).

Participants were also concerned about their friends' public presence. They wanted to make others aware of their friend's birthday so that the friend would receive more birthday posts on Facebook. Essentially, they wanted others to see their friend as popular:

I want people to have something public on their wall and want other people to say, "Oh, look at how many birthday wishes this friend got". (P6)

This public performance and thinking about the presentation of others are behaviors that were not the norm when exchanging paper and electronic cards. Sending an electronic and a paper card can be a semi-private ritual.

Typically, the sender intends for the card to be viewed only by the recipient, but a few others may see the card as well. Recipients may display the cards in their homes for a few days where they may be viewed and examined at a birthday party, for example. Recipients may share cards with a small group of intimate friends and family. It would be unlikely that all senders would be able to see all the cards sent by others. Facebook birthday posts, however, are public and Facebook friends can see them unless users explicitly make them private. As a result, users become aware of third-party observers and new behaviors emerge - public performance.

Diverse and Evolving Responding Practices

Participants receive a lot of Facebook birthday posts spanning diverse relationships. Messages that are crafted publicly convey varying degrees of closeness. In reflecting on the posts they had received, participants revealed rules they followed or had created for themselves when responding to the posts. When writing responses, they were conscious of their Facebook audience. Also, they often modified the way they responded to birthday posts in response to new interface features on Facebook. For example, the initial response behavior that our participants practiced most often involved writing on the sender's wall. However, when Facebook launched the 'comment' feature in June 2008 and the 'like' feature in February 2009, participants quickly began to use them. As a result of the changing interface and public nature of Facebook, participants practice diverse responding behaviors and the behaviors often change over time.

Even though there are several response channels available on Facebook, it doesn't mean users take advantage of all of them. Each participant had their own reasons for choosing one method of response practice over others. One of our participants said that she thinks clicking 'Like' is "still a nice way for you to acknowledge [...] replacement for saying thank you. At the same time, it's not the same thing as thank you. (P6)" Participants also explained in great detail who and what posts they would comment on and what posts they would only "like" without comment. They valued personalized birthday posts (e.g., posting more than "happy birthday!") and birthday posts from close friends. This expression echoed previous findings about birthday cards, which recipients valued more if they felt cards were chosen specifically for them and included a handwritten personalized note (Belk 1976; Dilnot 1993; Dodson and Belk 1996):

I only comment on the people that I care about. If it's just a "Happy Birthday!" there's nothing I can really say except "thanks." I don't really want to write "thanks" that many times. I just "like" it. If they write

more messages, "I miss Spanish class," or something, I'll be like, "Oh, yeah," and I'll respond. (P8)

On the other hand, three of our participants considered the 'like' button insufficient for recognizing their friends' efforts. They felt obligated to 'comment' on all of the birthday posts regardless of the quantity. However, they were aware that some people use the 'like' button and they respected that. One of our participants described his consistent response practice in the following way:

I comment on the posts. I generally don't like the like button. I think they deserve more. That's just me. (P5)

The large quantity of messages and sense of obligation to acknowledge receiving the birthday posts were one of the primary reasons participants changed their response style. Because no response on social media can be considered a lack of interest or ignorance, users leave visible traces such as 'comment' or 'like' to indicate they have seen the post (Ellison et al. 2013). However, for Facebook birthday posts, it took a lot of time to 'comment' or 'like' every post. Thus, participants decided to acknowledge them all with one status message response such as "thank you for your wishes" or even by not responding at all:

I used to at least 'like' most of them [birthday greetings], acknowledging that I saw it. But it gets to be too many; so I usually don't even finish liking everyone. (P17)

Facebook birthday posts are public, and as such, they vastly differ from paper and electronic cards. Not only the sender but also other friends can see how the recipient replied to each and every birthday post publicly written on the recipient's wall. Presumably, the transparency of communication can be useful for getting rid of any room for misunderstanding, particularly when participants do not decide to respond to all of the birthday posts. In the more private case of electronic cards and physical cards, the senders might feel hurt if no response is received from a recipient; the sender would not be privy to the recipient's response style. However, on Facebook, because the sender can verify that the recipient did not reply to all birthday posts, it could be perceived as less of an affront. Of course, the sender might get offended if he or she were the only one who did not get a response from the recipient. In this way, participants in our study stated they keep the same response style for all of their posts (i.e., the 'like' button to all of the birthday posts or one status update for all of the birthday posts) or send private messages. They were concerned about how they can protect the senders as well as themselves from the public stage:

It [Facebook] is public. I just keep it [the response] the same unless they ask a specific question. (P10)

I reply individually to each one via the Facebook inbox. I wanted to reply with more than just thank you. And, for some I wanted to reply with more personal messages. So I didn't think it belonged on the wall. (P1)

Participants' response behaviors are diverse and change over time. While some keep their responding practices the same, others alter them according to interface changes or message quantity. Within this diversity, we found that participants value personal messages and messages from close friends. Participants easily adapted to changing interfaces and quickly integrated evolving features to fit their responding behaviors.

Discussion

Even with a small group of seventeen participants we could identify many different reactions to sending, receiving, and replying to Facebook birthday posts. Using the set of provided birthday posts and visualization as an artifact common to the participants and the researchers, participants found it easy to discuss what they and other did and to describe their own specific rules and patterns. Use of Facebook birthday posts is tightly linked to related non-social media activities (e.g., sending physical cards, electronic cards, face-to-face greetings, telephone calls etc.). Thus, we need to think about how these interactions relate to each other. When investigating social norms, we found Facebook birthday posts to be a very rich and easy medium for obtaining a set of inspirational examples for exploring patterns in norm formation and flux.

In this section, we discuss how our findings can help designers of social media address issues around norms when they incorporate offline rituals in social media. We explore how thinking about very problematic design ideas (anti-implications) may be a productive way of exploring social technology use (Dix et al. 2006). One approach as typified in the Zuckerberg quotation at the start of our paper is to be more reactive – to monitor evolving norms and then redesign to align with them. Designing to nudge or to support certain kinds of behavior can be problematic – particularly if people find it too different from the existing practice, or if it is seen as unacceptable or inauthentic in other settings. Over time, people's opinions on these issues can change, leading to the galling discovery that an innovative design can be reviled at one time and then be considered unremarkable when introduced a short time later by a competitor.

Authenticity vs. Convenience

As designers, if we see our design objective as improving efficiency by minimizing bother from the user, having technology do everything for us is good. But if the bother

has actual value, what does minimizing bother really mean? We suspect this issue is not unique to sending greetings. Designers often create features that focus on making communication easier and more efficient (Facebook 2008). We rarely question the worth of making something easier to do. Automating a task can be really difficult to achieve and we may despair, or we may be caught in an invidious tradeoff of simplicity versus power and sophistication. But, of course, we all agree that all things being equal, easier is better. Here, however, we have at least one case where making something too easy degraded its value. The whole point was its cost. Fortunately (or ironically), people ingeniously create ways to make the sending of greetings more effortful, such as adding more personalized messages, in order to restore its value.

As Greenberg and Buxton argue, it is the designers' role to expect positive and negative consequences of designs that they develop and make the design such that the balance is more weighted on the positive than the negative (Greenberg and Buxton 2008). In the case of the Facebook birthday reminder, however, Facebook focus solely on providing easier ways to write and send birthday greetings. For example, they enabled text fields adjacent to the reminder to allow users to directly post on a birthday person's wall without having to actually visit his/her wall as was the prior avenue. Facebook recently started showing birthday reminders on the newsfeed as well as birthday posts that have been written on the recipient's wall.

From the perspective of a corporation that wants to promote active interactions among users, developing a birthday reminder seems to be reasonable design decision to spur communication among friends on Facebook. However, we argue making communication easier is not always the right way to go. Yet again, as problem-solving designers, we might imagine designing features into Facebook to help people add value to birthday posts – although that raises the question of whether the act of designing to support authenticity necessarily destroys it.

The Social Secretary

Our participants often found Facebook to be a very reliable up to date contact book to look up people with whom they have lost contact or those for whom they have no phone number. The norms of Facebook birthday practice allow easy contact to people who are not close without the awkwardness associated with similar face-to-face encounters. Additionally, Facebook birthday reminders give the users an excuse to contact weak connections once a year and an opportunity to reconnect with people who used to be close.

Effectively, Facebook becomes our social secretary, reminding us of a friend's birthday and delivering a card

too. All we have to do is type a message and the rest is done for us. This sounds very convenient, low-cost and highly desirable. But this very lowering of effort can make people feel a little uncomfortable. It may feel less authentic if we don't do all the work ourselves. We may have seen TV shows where a male executive has a secretary who reminds him about the birthdays of both close friends and business acquaintances and buys and sends the cards, or even the gifts, on the boss's behalf, generally minimizing the bother of these social exchanges. However, most of us do not have a (human) social secretary; so we have to figure out what that means in our day-to-day lives and how others may interpret our actions. Because we are not used to it, it can feel a little weird or even lacking in some kind of authenticity. It is strange when we realize that technologies can now do similar things for many us that were previously only available to the privileged.

Bad Idea Design and Anti-Recommendations

We have referred to social norms, and yet our examples show that people have a very fluid and nuanced sense of what they and others do and how they understand different posts depending on their particular relationship with the other person. In this context, there do not seem to be rigid, universal rules of social etiquette. One participant explained his detailed behaviors this way: "That's just me." However, that does not mean that people act randomly. There are patterns and there do seem to be norms; they just may not be visible or explicit. One way to uncover norms is by breaking them (Milgram and Sabini 1978) – even in thought experiments. Below we consider some Bad Idea (Dix et al. 2006) design anti-recommendations as a way to help to explore views about this kind of interaction. Imagine if Facebook provided an option to...

- Not only remind you of a birthday but also composed a draft message for you so all you had to do was click.
- Select from a list of carefully crafted, more 'personalized' birthday messages.
- Buy a personalized message from a professional writer
- Automatically send happy birthday messages to your friends every year so you didn't have to bother.
- Automatically send happy birthday messages to your friends with carefully chosen phrases (different each year) so they look like you bothered to compose them.
- Integrate a gift list with the reminder so you could see what the recipient might like.

In all these cases we suspect that most of our readers' reactions would be extremely negative. They reveal norms being violated – norms we may not have made explicit before. They are currently unacceptable, but will that change? Are they too similar to the stereotypical 1960s male executive deputizing his secretary to buy an

anniversary present for his wife? Activities can be violations of social norms for one group just as they are acceptable or even expected in another.

A good example comes from a study of the sending of physical greetings cards. West notes how various commentators have been rather critical of their use (West 2010). In particular, they complain about the use of pre-written texts in the card as “lazy and less authentic substitute for the best form of interpersonal communication, which would be a handwritten note or face-to-face talk.” We see allusions to this view of authenticity in some of our participants’ comments although in a far less pejorative manner.

West explores the idea of authenticity as a classed concept (West 2010). For some, a pre-printed greeting card sentiment is artificial, while for others it is about carefully selecting a professionally written phrasing that exactly expresses what the sender would like to say. West examines this difference using the concepts of high and low cultural capital, as assessed mainly by formal education. Those with high cultural capital prefer short messages or even a blank card, and then personalize it by writing their own message. Those with low cultural capital may be less comfortable composing their own unique message, or don’t consider their own words as adding much value, but are happy to invest considerable effort into finding and selecting a message that exactly conveys the sentiment they wish to express. For them a blank card is meaningless and a brief message is overly terse and implies a lack of selective care.

Facebook posts have to be composed, but our participants made similar distinctions between the more formulaic messages and those more carefully crafted and personal. Our participants clearly fit into West’s high cultural capital category, and so it is important to think about other kinds of Facebook users as we extend this work.

These issues create a design challenge for social media technology designers. It is certainly possible to create these features such as those outlined above. But do they meet a need? Do they potentially cheapen or pollute the activity? Judith Donath mentioned that she received many requests for an automated birthday-postcard-sender feature for her electronic postcard system (Donath 2013). But, while it would have been easy to include, she didn’t do it because that wasn’t the etiquette she wanted around the system. She felt it was a bad design decision to automate a birthday or holiday greeting.

Hallmark manages very different needs for greetings cards (blank or terse for those wishing to personalize and carefully crafted messages for those wishing to select a phrasing that exactly captures what they would like to say) by creating different sub-brands (Jaffe 1999). In a social media technology setting it is possible that creating useful

options for some may immediately devalue the experience for others, so what is to be done? One approach may be to begin with less divisive norm-breaking options.

Another norm challenging thought experiment is to consider inappropriate metaphors. We already have Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software that contains details about contacts including personal details like interests, children, birthdays etc. When a salesperson has to deal with many clients it can be too much to keep all this information memorized, so the software can serve as a handy reminder to enable a more personalized resumption of a conversation months later. All well and good – what if we think of certain Facebook features as a Personal Relationship Management (PRM) doing essentially the same thing for our less close friends? Does even talking about PRM software seem to violate certain norms and expectations? Will our relations feel less valued if Facebook is acting like a social secretary whispering our personal details into the ear of the Important Person who feigns to remember the last time we shook her hand? Speculations about possible Google Glass applications are already raising such scenarios. Or, will our discomfort change as we get used to the idea of lots of people having robotic social secretaries?

Limitations

We collected Facebook birthday posts received by seventeen participants in a university setting. A wider demographic of subjects would highlight greater variance in norm adoption and changes in practice. While we asked participants about their sending practices, our probe collected greeting posts received on and around their birthday. An analogous probe highlighting sent posts would provide a symmetrical reflection tool for analysis.

Conclusion

In using the relatively simple case of Facebook birthday posts, we have the opportunity to get a better understanding of how people make sense of their use of this feature in the context of their larger social interactions. Much work is involved in deciding what messages mean and how they will be interpreted both by the message recipients and, because the messages are public, the other people who see them. Participants seem to make sense of what to do in part by comparing this particular activity with others that seem related. The evolution of response behaviors to birthday posts highlights one of the faster changing practices with very specific rule sets. New technologies and features create opportunities to use particular media and media combinations in different ways. Understanding how norms about particular uses of social

media evolve may help in making sense of why certain technologies get used in certain ways and why the usage changes over time. We don't claim that etiquette determines use any more than technology determines use. But we do believe it has an effect.

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