

Live/Life Sharing

The Use of Social Media by Contemporary Theatre Companies in Italy

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13.1 Introduction

In this paper, we investigate the use of social media by Italian contemporary theatre artists and companies. The study represents the exploratory phase of an ongoing research project on how performance artists manage the boundaries between online and offline performativity, and between self-narration and artistic promotion. Through a combination of in-depth interviews and content analysis of Facebook profiles, we want to understand how this artistic scene – which has always experimented on intermedial and participatory possibilities – is making sense of social media. This reflection becomes crucial in the present moment. Firstly, because we are witnessing what some have called an ‘ephemeral turn’ in digital media (Haber, 2019); the shift from content permanence as a default condition to the multiple temporalities of stories and video streams, opens a new strand of possibility for relations between social media and performativity that are to be explored. Secondly, because of the way in which the Covid-19 pandemic centralized relations between theatre organisations and audiences in the online space for more than a year (Gemini et al., 2020); understanding what kinds of communicative practices on social media preceded this migration and how they mutated in the moment of crisis is of paramount relevance for the study of the relationship between theatre, media and the public sphere.

13.2 Theatre and Social Media

For the past decade, the use of social media in the theatre scene has been fueling debates on the possibility of redefining the performer–audience relationship on a wide scale (Loneragan, 2016). In the context of mainstream-mainstage theatre, this possibility has been initially explored through Twitter in particular. For example, with the experimentation of live tweeting during performances with particular ‘tweet seats’ (Ahmed, 2011), or through the cross-media

transfer of classic drama, as in the often-cited case of *Such Tweet Sorrow* by the Royal Shakespeare Company (2010).

These cases represent an initial phase characterized by a ‘fascination’ with the medium. However, as Bree Hadley (2017) has analysed, the relationship between theatre and social media now concerns a much broader spectrum of meaning-making possibilities that arise around performance. In her study, Hadley traces at least six areas in which we can currently observe the impact of social media in the theatrical field:

1) in the use of social media for the construction of intermedial performances, 2) in the dissemination of performances, 3) in the processes of audience development, 4) for the public of critics, 5) for documentation and archiving, and 6) in the performative aspects concerning the daily use of social media. To these areas, Crews and Papagiannouli (2019) also added the use of social media in the training phase. Del Gaudio (2021), expanding on the use of social media in intermedial performances, further distinguishes between: 1) Social media logic embedded in the dramaturgical material, 2) The use of social networks in mixed-reality performances, and 3) The staging of online performances which theatricalize digital space.

One of the main themes framing the debate on theatre and social media is the emphasis on the democratizing potential of these instruments, especially on the possibility that they have to reach marginalised audiences otherwise excluded from the orbit of contemporary theatre (Sant, 2014; Walmsley, 2019). Moreover, the theme of democratizing potential has also been explored looking at the role that social media can have in reconnecting theatre to the public sphere, notably by Butsch (2008), Conner (2013), and Balme (2014). In this regard, social media can amplify the range of debates developed within theatre outside the “closed circuit of subscriber audiences, professional reviewers and theatrical unions” (Balme, 2014: XI). Research on the ‘expansive’ potential that social and digital media could have on theatre have produced contradictory outcomes. The main problem is the actual ability of such media to breach the margins of the canonized networks. For example, O’Neill (2014) noted in his study of Shakespeare’s diffusion on YouTube that non-European adaptations were almost absent from search results without racial appellations such as ‘African’, ‘Asian’ or ‘Pacific’. In analysing the use of digital platforms for dance audience engagement, Walmsley (2016) concluded that these enhance the critical exchange between spectators, but also that such platforms struggle to maintain online engagement over time, especially for non-spectators.

At the same time, we also observe a mutating hierarchy between theatre texts and paratexts (Conner, 2013; Brilli and Gemini, 2022). This process entails the increasing centrality in spectators’ meaning-making operations of all those

elements which are external to the performance (audience conversations, promotional materials, theatrical trailers, artists' profiles on social media, etc.) but which are becoming more persistent and searchable thanks to the affordances of digital contents.

How the daily online presence of performance artists and companies relates to the paratextual corpus of performance is still a theme barely explored by the literature. Following this path becomes of particular interest in the light of the process of aestheticization of everyday life in which social media participate (Gemini, 2009), which places performance as a pivotal tool in the narratives of the digital self (Lavender, 2016). Observing this process solely as a collapse of the boundaries between performance and the mundane proves to be a short-sighted perspective, as it does not account for the way theatre artists work to establish the margins of their role within a media-based environment. As Nancy Baym (2018) observed in her ethnographic study on how musicians manage the artist-fan relationship, the increasing use of social networks by artists entails an increasingly high level of relational work for them. Such a task means a constant and demanding emotional effort to manage the frontiers between artistic work, private life, and personal exposure. Where the interaction with fans can no longer rely only on the boundaries provided by classic rites and infrastructures of performance (such as the stage, a concert situation, etc.), performers must experiment with the most appropriate ways to control the interaction. Defining the relationships with users, spectators and fans, is now likely to become an integral part of the theatre artist's labour routines.

13.3 Methods

Given that the use of social media by contemporary theatre artists remains a partly unexplored territory, the research presented here adopts a mixed-method approach. Specifically, two research questions guide this study:

RQ1: How do contemporary theatre companies and artists manage the boundary between promotion and artistic experimentation on social media?

RQ2: How do contemporary theatre companies and artists manage the boundary between self-performativity and artistic performativity?

To approach these questions, we conducted 16 in-depth interviews with some of the most significant companies of the Italian contemporary theatre scene,¹

¹ We conducted the interviews between July 2017 and November 2019. The length of the interviews varied between 50 minutes and two hours and fifteen minutes. The interviews were part of a larger research project aimed at analysing the relationship of Italian contemporary

as well as a content analysis of all Facebook posts published in the year 2019 by 38 companies or individual artists. The choice of the year 2019 stemmed from the need to analyse a timeframe that is recent, but not yet affected by the Covid-19 crisis, which arguably had a profound impact on the role of social media for artists and theatre organizations. The platform we chose to carry out the content analysis was Facebook since it was and is still overwhelmingly the main one in Italy to promote artistic events.

A key methodological problem was the need to adopt an overall view of the contemporary theatre field. We decided to avoid focusing on single case studies, which can be excellent for studying the more experimental side of social media use but are hardly representative of the whole art system. Mapping the field of contemporary theatre, however, leaves us with the long-standing problem of defining those who belong to this scene without falling into the oft-used approach of 'I know it when I see it', which relies on the authority of the researcher's gaze. We, therefore, had to turn to a criterion of self-definition. Our point of departure was the *Coordinamento dei Festival Italiani del Contemporaneo* (Italian Contemporary Performance Network). We collected all the programmes of the 53 festivals that are part of this network and selected the 38 artists who recurred most often in the programmes of the 2019 editions of these festivals, considering them as a sufficient approximation of the contemporary scene. Using the CrowdTangle² monitoring tool, we downloaded and coded all the posts from the year 2019 of the 38 profiles, obtaining 4,118 unique posts. For each post, we coded its prevailing communicative function (promotional, narrative, circulation of appeals etc.), whether it promoted anything, what kind of item it publicized (a performance, a theatre workshop, another type of product), and whether there were any references to other artists and theatre companies.

The choice to focus on contemporary theatre stemmed from the need to deal with artists actively experimenting with media technologies. In this sense, the interviews allowed us to analyse the artists' experiences while benefiting from their theoretical viewpoints, given the premise that contemporary

theatre artists with digital technologies, including promotional videos and social media. The selection of the interviewees used purposive sampling drawing on different generations of artists: five companies founded in the 1990s (Masque Teatro, Motus, Fanny & Alexander, Accademia degli Artefatti and Kinkaleri), five companies founded between 2000 and 2005 (Eva Geatti/Cosmesi, Anagoor, Stefano Questorio, Gruppo Nanou and Menoventi) and six companies founded after 2005 (Sotteraneo, Collettivo Cinetico, Babilonia Teatri, Compagnia Frosini/Timpano, Mara Oscar Cassiani and Ateliersi).

2 CrowdTangle is a tool owned by Facebook which tracks publicly available posts on the platform: <https://apps.crowdtangle.com/search/>.

intermedial performance implies reflexive work on the place of media in society (Gemini, 2003).

13.4 Results and Discussion: Social Media beyond Promotion?

A first issue which emerged from the interviews is that the field of contemporary performance has always paid close attention to the paratextual materials surrounding a theatrical event. Gianni Farina of Menoventi recounts how, before the spread of digital promotional methods, there was a strong commitment to imagining and composing physical folders containing information about the performances which were then sent to theatre organizers. Before the rise of social networks, he says, these became highly elaborate artefacts on which the artistic work on the performance percolated:

When we started our activity, the companies were very careful in making folders for the theatre operators [...] Now they seem much less careful in the construction of folders, because there is more care in the online promotion. For example, Teatro delle Albe, a company that has always taken great care of communication, has now switched to simple cardboard folders. While once they had golden folders with embroidery. I think that at the same time they have taken more and more care of videos, photos, and Facebook communication.

GIANNI FARINA, MENOVENTI

Another example of this aesthetic extension of the company's artistic work to performance paratexts is the production of video reductions of a play (Brilli and Gemini, 2022). These were meant to function as promotional trailers for the performance, but they often remained useless in the absence of a circulation infrastructure such as that of the social networks. Nevertheless, theatre artists continued to put much effort into their creation during the nineties:

It's important to clarify one thing. We had a strong fascination for video because it was something that does not disappear like theatre, but which remains impressed. But in those days, since there was no social media platform at that time, video was a residual object. Either you circulated it in situations like festivals, such as TTV in Riccione, or you didn't really know what to do with it. There was no possibility to use it in a real promotional sense.

ENRICO CASAGRANDE, MOTUS

Therefore, although digital platforms have redefined the role of media and performing arts paratexts (Gray, 2010; Conner, 2013), theatre artists demonstrate a particular awareness of their role that precedes the digital technological leap.

Looking at the way in which the interviewees conceive their use of social media, what stands out is a predominantly 'broadcast-like' or 'one-way' approach. There is little disposition among the interviewees to enter into a conversational mode or to stimulate user involvement.

Our communication on social networks is not looking for comments. We would like to stimulate shares more than comments. [...] Conversation is not something we have ever sought much.

MARCO VALERIO AMICO, GRUPPO NANOU

The expression of such an attitude does not mean that companies reject the interaction with their followers, but that the content they produce on digital platforms is framed in a *pull logic* rather than a *push* one.

The philosophy of our communication can be summarized as follows: *if you look for us you will find us*. We do everything we can to be there and to be found, but the drive must come from your interest in us or in the themes that lead you to us. I'd rather not come ringing your doorbell every day.

FABRIZIO ARCURI, Accademia degli Artefatti

In this sense, social media platforms are seen more as destinations for the artists' contents than as areas of relational work; their management, in other words, is not very dissimilar to that of a website. For example, Daniela Nicolò of Motus argues that the Facebook fan page settings allow a certain 'closure' to external interventions which is necessary to maintain control over communication of their artistic identity:

We are also quite satisfied with the Facebook page setting where others can't put things on your page [...] I understand that personal pages may have other functions, but in order to show the identity of an artistic reality you need a fan page.

DANIELA NICOLÒ, MOTUS

Another point that the interviewees strongly emphasize is the tendency to question the very concept of 'promotional'. They prefer to speak of 'presentation',

'seduction', 'anticipation', and 'invitation' when it comes to describing their use of social media. The rejection of a purely promotional logic is not merely the reflection of an anti-commercial or snobbish prejudice. It comes firstly from companies' doubts about the effectiveness of social media in broadening the company's visibility and, even less so, in bringing people to the theatre.

In my opinion, the increase in followers never comes from the work on the Facebook page itself, but from offline things, like people coming to see the performance or from an event you participated in.

CLAUDIO CIRRI, SOTTERRANEO

Secondly, this rejection comes from the realization that presentation has become a widespread (almost unconscious) habitus, and that it is no longer necessarily a commercial behaviour.

The moment this idea of publishing material becomes a habitus, it changes what we are and what we do, then it bypasses this strictly commercial idea to become a representation of what one is doing at that moment.

MASSIMO CONTI, KINKALERI

Thirdly, it also comes from companies' conceptions of their relationship with spectators. What is considered incompatible with the promotional angle is the pretension that they anticipate and satisfy the spectators' tastes. As Fabrizio Arcuri of Accademia degli Artefatti states:

To me, 'promotional' seems to suggest meeting people's tastes, which is a problematic logic for me. When you're preparing a performance, you're not thinking about the audience's tastes or what they expect. It's a bit presumptuous to think you're able to anticipate people's choices.

FABRIZIO ARCURI, Accademia degli Artefatti

This quest for artistic autonomy does not seek to sacralize contemporary theatre in opposition to more popular expressions, but rather to recognize and preserve the mutual independence between the artist's labour and that of the spectator (Gemini et al., 2018).

In place of a promotional logic, more than one interviewee opposed the logic of the 'aura'. This term refers to the way in which the online presence is not just a way to promote performances, but to construct a continuous

existence of the company, an aura, indeed, which makes the artistic identity persist even outside the ephemeral performance event:

It seems to me that our online hyperactivity works quite a bit, however mostly on people you've *already entered into a relationship* with, even a minimal relationship. Even at a distance, because you do not wind up in the province of Mantua every day, if it goes well you may find yourself there once every three years, but you give them an element of continuity. [...] Because all in all, be it big or small, *it's the artistic aura that we try to build, but that corresponds to how we are.*

DANIELE TIMPANO, COMPAGNIA FROSINI/TIMPANO

There is a *third function* in addition to promoting to organizers and audiences. Namely the function of *building your artistic identity in the social space, with people who may never come to see your play but somehow follow you.* [...] It creates that famous *aura* on which every artist works and then you do not know exactly when you will have the return and in what terms. [...] When you don't tour as much as you would like, the fact of saying 'that dimension exists' also makes you feel more alive. Because we all need people to acknowledge our work in some way.

ANDREA MOCHI SISMONDI, ATELIERSI

We find an aspiration to use social media as spaces for communicative and artistic experimentation, at least for some of the artists. The interviewees do not seem to rule out the possibility of using such platforms to implement a communication that goes beyond the dichotomy between advertising and performance. However, this kind of use requires financial, temporal, and human resources that companies cannot always invest in.

In the second phase of the research, we therefore attempted to closely analyse which communicative styles the main Italian contemporary theatre companies were using on Facebook.

Figure 13.1 shows the number of posts published on Facebook in 2019 by the 38 companies or artists we brought together. As one can easily notice, there are substantial differences between the companies' posting frequency. A third of the profiles in the 'tail' of the graph make episodic use of Facebook, publishing less than once a week; the group in the middle of the graph publishes 1–3 posts a week; then, at the head of the graph, we find a few companies who generate a daily flow of content, to the point of producing a sort of digital live presence. In one specific case, that of the Compagnia Frosini/Timpano, this frequency

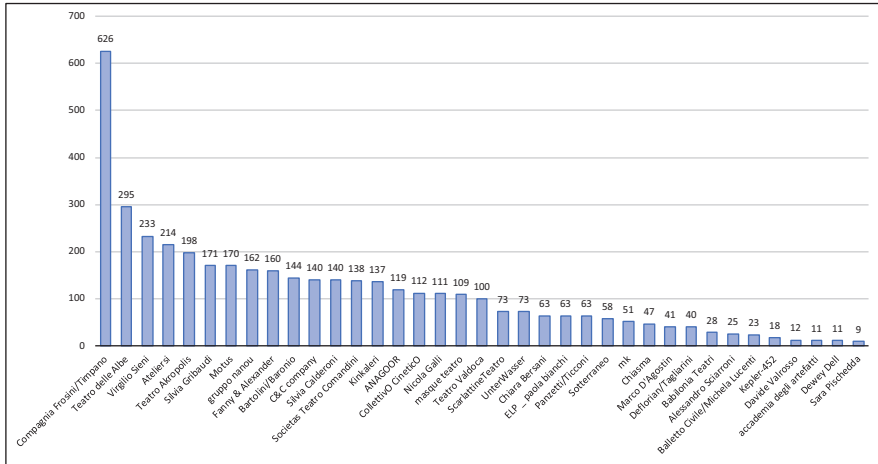


FIGURE 13.1 Number of Facebook posts published in the year 2019 by the 38 profiles we examined (via CrowdTangle)

reaches almost two posts per day, creating what we have named a strategy of ‘social logorrhoea’ (Gemini and Brilli, 2020).

The results of the content analysis show a somewhat unexpected situation (Table 13.1). Posts with a promotional function – by which we mean posts that communicate the date of a performance or a workshop – are the vast majority (63.6%). Theatre performances are the core of the promotional effort (Table 13.2). Less than a quarter of the posts refer to something outside a specific performance. Most companies follow a fairly standard posting style, which follows the performance life-cycle: posts about the preparation of the play, promotion of the date, gratitude to the audience and organisers, sharing of review article, and back to the beginning. The second most frequent function is a narration of the company’s activities – sharing of tour photos, stories about the rehearsals, etc. – and posts sharing reviews. In line with usual social media trends, narrative posts receive significantly higher engagement than purely promotional posts (Table 13.1): if a post that promotes the company’s activity has a mean number of 29.2 interactions (calculated from the sum of likes, shares, and comments), a post narrating the company’s life gathers a mean of 43.5 interactions.

Contrary to our initial assumptions, self-narration is hardly present and online performances on social media are almost completely absent. Furthermore, we expected to find a dense network of cross-promotion, but despite the communal ethos that animates the scene, there is little reference to other artists or companies (Table 13.3). Only 2.4% of the posts are made to

TABLE 13.1 Results of coding a Facebook post's function and mean number of interactions (like + shares + comments) per function

Main function of the Facebook post	%	N	Mean interactions
Promotion of company's activities	63.6%	2,665	29.2
Narrating the company's life	17.8%	747	43.5
Sharing reviews/articles	9.9%	413	30.2
Curating cultural and news contents	3.5%	146	50.9
Promoting other artists' activities	2.4%	101	21.0
Personal narration	1.2%	52	62.4
Circulation of appeals/requests	1.1%	45	44.9
Commemoration/celebration	0.3%	14	38.8
Online performance	0.1%	5	60.6
Total	100.0%	4,188	33.1

TABLE 13.2 Coding of an object promoted in a Facebook post

Promoted object	%
Performance event	78.1%
Other type of theatrical activity	11.5%
Non-theatrical activity	5.1%
Festival/season	4.0%
Other	1.3%
Total	100.0%

TABLE 13.3 Coding of the presence of references to artists or events in Facebook posts not directly related to the activity of the company/artist

Reference to artists/events not related to own activities	%
Not present	89.8%
Theatre artist/company	4.0%
Non-theatrical artist/company	3.8%
Event	0.7%
Artistic community	0.3%
Other	1.3%
Total	100.0%

promote the work of other artists not directly related to the company. Perhaps even more interestingly, when promoting the work of others, there is almost as much reference to non-theatre artists as to theatre artists.

From what we have observed on Facebook, it is still more appropriate to speak of a 'presentational labour' rather than a 'relational labour'. Boundary management with the fans does not appear to be a central aspect.

Albeit in a few cases, some interesting combinations of languages emerge. These combinations corroborate the declarations of some interviewees regarding the attempt to overcome the idea that the online presence is strictly promotional. At least three-quarters of the companies whose profiles we analysed follow a style of promotion on Facebook that could be described as fairly standard. However, among the remaining quarter of companies, we can spot highly distinctive communication styles. Amongst these profiles, we have distinguished five approaches which break down the boundaries between promotion, narration and artistic communication: *paratextual extension*, *company as a public actor*, *dilution of the promotional aspect*, *'artistic life is personal'* and *'personal life is artistic'*.

The paratextual extension approach is when the Facebook post provides additional elements about the theatre play which feed into the paratextual corpus that surrounds the performance. These elements can be details about the production process, sources used by the performers, extra-theatrical references such as films, songs or visual artwork, or audio-visual fragments that transmedially extend the performance. This approach is often adopted by the Compagnia Frosini/Timpano, one of the most forward-looking companies in Italy when it comes to transmedia experimentation applied to theatre (Gemini and Brilli, 2020). One example is a post (Compagnia Frosini/Timpano, 2019) in which they present a poem by the poet Carlo Bordini as one of the source materials that led to the writing of the text for their show *Zombitudine* (2013).

In the approach which we named 'company as a public actor', the theatre group intervenes on social media as a critical entity commenting on current events and disseminating calls to action. The clearest example of this position is that of the Motus company. Motus's artistic path has always involved establishing a connection between performance and action in the public sphere. This attitude continues on Facebook as well. Motus intervenes as a vocal presence both on current events – as in the series of posts on the Mediterranean migrant crisis and in support of the Open Arms NGO (Motus, 2019a) – and on episodes concerning the artistic community they belong to, as in the case of sexual harassment and bullying allegations against the acclaimed Belgian director and choreographer Jan Fabre (Motus, 2019b).

In the 'dilution of the promotional aspect' approach, the promotional aspect is still present in the Facebook post, but is complemented by a narration of the

company's life or by personal reflections from the artists. In this respect, there is a tendency to mitigate the promotional aspect, where information about the show dates is preceded by other kinds of communication. This type of co-presence of communicative functions is found, among others, in the profile of dance and performance artist Marco D'Agostin. One example is a Facebook post, dated 17 May 2019 (D'Agostin, 2019), titled 'BELLA STORIA + COSA SUCCEDERÀ STASERA' [A Beautiful Story + What's Coming Up Tonight]. This title immediately establishes a combination of storytelling and promotion. In the post, D'Agostin recounts how, following a lecture on his work given to a group of high school students, each student sent him a letter signed 'best regards', like the title of the artist's performance. At the end of the post, he writes how he will celebrate this touching event by channelling that youthful energy into that night's performance of his piece *First Love*. Thus, not only does the post contain both a promotional and a personal narrative, but it tries to put these two components in dialogue with each other.

By 'artistic life is personal', we define a style of social media communication where the working routine of the company is described as a way of life. Rehearsals, travel, workshops and moments of leisure are not just the building blocks leading up to the performance event; they also describe a specific way of existing in the world, based on being a group of people affectively and artistically connected. The posts by Collettivo Cinetico are examples of this style. The company associates the hashtag #becinetico to its more narrative posts, making explicit the confluence between 'working as' and 'living as' a company. For example, in a Facebook post from 29 June 2019, Collettivo Cinetico published a photo of the company engaged in nude free climbing on the Ligurian naturist beach of Sassoscritto (Collettivo Cinetico, 2019). This is a moment of leisure, but one which embodies the bodily poetics of their performances.

Lastly, by using the reverse formulation 'personal life is artistic', we mean the way in which an artistic approach becomes a lens for looking at one's personal life. As in the previous style, it is difficult to separate the personal narrative from the narrative of artistic activity. In this case, however, what is narrated is not the company's work, but moments in the artist's life that open up insights into aesthetic and political reflection. In a Facebook post, dated 10 November 2019, performer Silvia Calderoni recounts a moment in which she finds herself sorting out the photographic archive on her computer (Calderoni, 2019). She reflects on how the overload of pictures classified in folders reflects an attempt to give order to the 'schizophrenic multitude' of which each subject is composed. The daily event thus becomes the stimulus for engaging in a subject consistent with one of the topics of the performer's artistic work, without leading to the promotion of a specific project.

In the next stages of our research we should also pursue this 'qualitative' look at social media communication in the contemporary theatre sector. The purpose will be to understand whether these styles we have observed are unique to individual artists/companies or constitute ways of overcoming the promotional logic that is giving rise to new communication practices.

13.5 Conclusions

In this paper, we have seen how the idea that performance artists can have a fruitful dialogue with social media has been present in the academic debate and among artists for years now. Yet this theme has been scarcely investigated.

One of the points which emerges firmly from our analysis is the willingness of artists to distance themselves from a purely promotional intent. Some oppose this aim with a different kind of conception of the company's communication. This conception is sometimes defined in terms of the construction of the aura of the company. The lexicon of the 'aura' appears as a way to extend the autonomy of the artistic field to typically heteronomous components (such as the production of promotional material). This conception also follows the will to cultivate a presence of the theatre company that gives continuity to what is, by definition, an ephemeral appearance linked to the theatrical event. We also find, both from the interviews and from analyses of the profiles, a scarcely interactive usage, which appears more presentational than relational. Is this distance from relational labour part of that logic of overcoming the promotional attitude? Or is the aura discourse used as a way to compensate for the lack of resources and skills needed to implement relational work? Further research is needed to clarify this issue.

Indeed, in some cases, companies seem to experiment in that grey area between the need to be known and performativity. However, this attitude does not emerge as a prerogative of the whole contemporary scene. In other words, we did not find a style that could be described as 'distinctive' for the way contemporary theatre is present on Facebook.

At the same time, contrary to widespread opinion, it is not digital platforms per se that redefine the boundaries between public and private, and between two-way and one-way communication. These boundaries are the product of artists' communication choices. We did not find sufficient evidence to support the hypothesis that online communication has necessarily made artists' exposure more personalised overall. This could, nonetheless, be due to a shift concerning Facebook itself, which has declined in its self-narration function for users compared to a decade ago. For this reason, in the next steps we would

like to extend the content analysis to Instagram, where we can expect a higher degree of self-narration. A further step in the research will be to compare the data for the year 2019 with that of the last two years which were affected by the Covid-induced closures.

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