

Social Media, Emoticons and Process

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In this chapter I analyse notions of ‘personal information’ and ‘emoticons’ by drawing on some concepts from Whitehead’s process philosophy. I will look at some of the ways that they are *prehended* through acts of *concrecence* to form as *actual entities* within the social media context. Interview data concerning everyday use of social media is drawn upon for the analysis. I conclude that ‘personal information’ is often prehendend as impersonal due, in part, to its marketability; whilst ‘emoticons’ may be prehendend as more personal, these are pre-produced as universal and basic, qualities which tend to fix and strip away at emotion’s affect related dynamics. This occurs through the multiple desires associated with social media, to simplify and qualify actual occasions.

A prominent philosopher who advocated this attitude, was Albert North Whitehead particularly in a book he wrote entitled *Process and Reality*.¹ Within this book, Whitehead introduced a body of concepts which are arguably useful for the humanities and social sciences today but can appear odd when first introduced. For example, a relatively simple term such as ‘society’ is defined as “a nexus with social order; and an ‘enduring object,’ or ‘enduring creature,’ . . . whose social order has taken the special form of ‘personal order.’”² A ‘society’ for Whitehead can refer to such things as: books, rocks, and cups; in other words, things which appear to have “temporal endurance.”³ Although a society tends to be an ‘enduring object’ it is additionally subject to change through an ordered series of ‘actual occasions’. For example, Whitehead states that the life of man is a historic route of actual occasions wherein one is successively passed on to the next; for instance, the learning and forgetting of a language can be understood as an enduring object (society).⁴ Any aspect of what he terms ‘a person’s enduring character from birth to death’ can be understood as a society. ‘Societies’ then, have some form of temporal endurance and are made up of what he terms *actual entities*. Actual entities or actual occasions are central to Whitehead’s metaphysics. They are moments or “drops of experience, complex and interdependent”⁵ which perish with every single instant, but unlike societies, they do not change.⁶ They are rather like snapshots in time and space. They are not the material stuff, for example, of Democritus’s atoms, but “the unity to be ascribed to a particular instance of concrecence.”⁷ “A concrecence is a growing together of the remnants of a perishing past” for example the passing of aspects of an actual entity “into the vibrant immediacy of a novel, present unity.”⁸ *Concrecence* therefore is rather like the mechanism through which process occurs. Generation after generation of actual entities succeed one another without end, but seem to continue to exist (as a society) through the datum that they transmit. What passes from one moment of becoming (an actual entity) to the next are what Whitehead denotes as *prehensions*. Prehensions are the feelings of another entity or actual occasion. “Actual entities involve each other by reason of the prehensions of each other.”⁹ In other words, prehensions are the feelings and experiences of another actual entity which are subsumed within the becoming of another actual entity, rather like a chain, or multiple matrices of chains of becomings. Prehensions then “feel what is there and transform it into what is here.”¹⁰ However, terms like feelings, experiences and prehensions are not limited to human activity,

Halewood explains “a stone feels the warmth of the sun; a tree feels the strength of the wind.”¹¹ Indeed “a simple feeling” for Whitehead is not to be understood in the same ways that we might understand the concept, but “is the most primitive type of perception, devoid of consciousness.”¹² So “actual entities involve each other by reason of their prehensions of each other”¹³ within acts of concrescence. He explains that every prehension consists of three factors:

- (a) “the ‘subject’ which is prehending namely, the actual entity in which that prehension is a concrete element;” for example a stone or a human
- (b) “the ‘datum’ which is prehended;” the datum of the above example of a stone’s prehension could be for instance the absorbed heat of the sun
- (c) “the ‘subjective form’ which is how that subject prehends that datum.”¹⁴ It is worth noting here that the subject may have different powers (forms) of prehension. For example, although a stone may have the power to absorb heat it will not have the power to imagine heat.

The account of some of Whitehead’s concepts that are given above is a particular perspective leading to a particular process philosophy attitude that is adopted here to look at perceptions of social media, personal information and affect.

Sixteen interviews were conducted inquiring into ‘everyday social media use’. A range of people were interviewed and the only inclusion criterion was that the participants were adults and used social media daily. The interviews were concerned with how people use social media, the sorts of information they share, issues relating to security, trust and affect related activity. In the following sections, two themes of the interviews are discussed, ‘personal information’ and ‘emoticons’.

According to Phelps, Nowak and Ferrell¹⁵ marketers tend to distinguish between two types of personal information: market level or modelled data and personal or individual specific data. Modelled data includes information about for example the character of the consumer group, market segment, media audience, and geographic location; while individual specific data includes more focused information for example: names, addresses, demographic characteristics, lifestyle interests, shopping preferences and purchase histories. Phelps et al, suggest that there are, though, five general categories that are usually used for marketing, which are: demographic characteristics, lifestyle characteristics (including media habits), shopping/purchasing habits, financial data, and personal identifiers (e.g. names, addresses, social security numbers).

When interviewed, participants generally tended to adhere to these marketers notions of ‘personal information’. When asked the question “What sorts of personal information do you put up on-line?” we got responses such as:

Participant 4: “Personal information the only personal information I put down is where they ask you where you are from your name so me personally would say that that’s probably the only personal information I put up”

Participant 5: “Just like the date of birth everything like that that’s already there like relationships and stuff like that that’s pretty much it”

Participant 6: “My name my date of birth and maybe my email will be visible”

Personal information is relatively loosely understood here by the participants through a variety of what Whitehead would refer to as societies, for example: birthplace, name, relationship status, date of birth and email address. Participant 4 suggests that the only personal information that s/he “puts down” is that which “they” ask for. The term “they” here seems to be in reference to the social media service provider (i.e. owners, administrators and designers etc.). The personal information that “they” ask for is in part driven by the desires of the marketers who will commodify this information.

The datum is abstracted and prehended by both the social media service providers and the user through processes of concrescence wherein fluid aspects of the self become frozen blocks of actual entities incorporating ‘personal information’. These in turn are prehended by marketers for commodification. Participant 5 suggests that the forms of personal information that are posted are those that are “already there” or those which are predefined by the social media service providers. Participant 6 adds, it (some personal information) is made “visible” presumably for those who desire to obtain such information. Hence a relatively static data-double is formed, a datafication of the self, which is made-up of societies of ‘personal information’. These “already there” societies tend to be thought of by the participants as relatively *impersonal*. The “stuff like that” that “they” capture is almost “already there” just requiring the final forms of data that the user produces to form the actual entities which fit into the given societies of ‘personal information’. This is rather like the user completing the product on a production line; to produce what Marx would classically refer to as a form alienation from the self. Thus societies of ‘personal information’ denote for users that which is ironically impersonal. It is that which is abstracted from the self, and used by others as capital.

The notion that the ‘personal information’ is construed as impersonal is further illustrated by Participant 2. In response to the question “What sorts of personal information do you put up on-line?” Participant 2 stated,

Participant 2: “Me I am not really one to put up personal information I would rather [pause] I don’t like putting up personal information online”

Yet in response to the question “In what ways do you communicate your emotions on-line?”, the same participant stated,

Participant 2: “Well you know you can for example you know Whatsapp my status on Whatsapp usually reflects my life yeah same thing as Facebook however you feel you write it on your status because status is how you feel at the current moment so yeah definitely”

The ‘status’ entry on social media platforms tend to be less fixed than what is considered above as ‘personal information’. One does not tend to select from such a limited set of

criterion, but it affords more open and dynamic expressions that can be updated at will. It may be considered as an actual entity of the current, but already passed, moment. Indeed, Participant 2 states that it “usually reflects my life”, it is “how you feel at the current moment”. The process of actualising a particular status therefore appears to be understood as more personal than the societies of ‘personal information’. Instead, one can reflect upon life, on feelings of the current moment that are ironically here considered as different to ‘personal information’. Perhaps this has something to do with such fleeting moments as not being as commodifiable as the societies of ‘personal information’ due to their qualitative and open-ended capacities. However, within this study, ‘personal information’ was not always considered to be impersonal as one participant responded quite differently to the question concerning personal information.

Participant 12: “Erm the most personal stuff that gets up on-line are my emotions and thoughts and feelings at the time so it could be something like oh I’m so frustrated that I have missed the bus but then I wouldn’t go deep into how I feel on Twitter or something like that”

Participant 12 portrays an understanding of ‘personal information’ as similar to how participant 2 above referred to status. Although interestingly the term ‘personal information’ is not used in the response but ‘personal stuff’; not just *information* but *stuff* seems to imply a less formal and more transitory quality. This “personal stuff” includes “emotions”, “thoughts” and “feelings” experienced “at the time” and hence captured in time and space through acts of concrescence of the prehensions which help produce particular kinds of actual entities “that gets up on-line.” The actual entity that is portrayed as being concresced above is of a particularised emotion (frustration) relating to an affective activity (missing the bus). This provides a nice illustration of the process of concrescence: a missed bus – prehended, among many other affects (prehensions), – producing personal stuff – such as frustration – actualised on social media – in an interview – in a transcript – at a seminar – in an article – between an audience; but necessarily and purposefully lacking the complex and relatively infinite depth of the actual occasion, i.e. “I wouldn’t go deep into how I feel”. So certain prehensions are selected (which Whitehead denotes as ‘positive prehensions’) for actualisation by participant 12 and others deselected (which Whitehead denotes as ‘negative prehensions’) as is always necessarily the case when humans communicate anything, but seems to be particularly so in relation to social media. The forms of actualisation afforded to users are limited by the infrastructure of the platform, among many other things. This form of actual selection is particularly illustrated through what I call ‘the emoticonisation of experience’.

Emoticons can be thought of as qualifying and fixing affect, or what we may here refer to as an actual occasion, consisting of multiple prehensions. For example, the prehensions related to the missing of a bus can be encapsulated through an emoticon that is seen to represent ‘frustration’. In this way, the complexity of the event is stripped, in its place we have the seemingly stable form. In the following section I turn to look at participant’s responses to questions concerning the communication of emotion on social media platforms and the use of emoticons.

Participant 3 [I: In what ways do you communicate your emotions and feelings online?] Erm statuses – smiley faces and photos [I: So emoticons are helpful?] Yes [Are you more open to expressing emotion and feelings online than you are offline?] Yes [Can you describe why this is?] Because if your face to face with someone and your offline you are showing your emotions more whereas when you are online it doesn't have to be taken so seriously.

In the above extract, participant 3 explains how the emoticon creates a form of desired deception. Rather than it expressing how s/he feels, it is used as a way of masking or obscuring feelings. When face-to-face this is more difficult to achieve. This process can be understood as a form of what Goffman¹⁶ would describe as 'face-work' or what Hochschild went on to call 'emotion-work'.¹⁷ Thus the use of the emoticon here is somewhat subverted as its static nature actualises the desired affectivity.

Participant 2: I would find it easier to express myself online - reason being I get helped – I've got emoticons - I have phrases – I have got all sorts of things to give me help in hand to explain the way I feel just in case I can't use just words.

The emoticon here, again, is used to reduce complexity. Stock phrases and emoticons are occasionally wheeled out to help "explain" feelings. A snapshot, or actual entity, here works as a visual representation of the experiences that are presently difficult to codify within the words of a language system. The prehensions are better represented in one static symbol it seems. Thus the reduced selection (negative prehensions) of 'basic' actualised 'emotional expressions' facilitates communication. It may not fully represent that which is prehended but it enables some form of desired effect.

Participant 4: [OK are emoticons helpful?] What's that sorry emoticons? [I: You know – the little smiley faces] Erm yeah I believe they are I mean in terms of over text because you know you won't want people on Facebook to know what you're typing to people – you could say something with a smiley face at the end and it could mean different things to different people so in that respect yeah I think they are.

Participant 4 explains how s/he uses the emoticon to reduce the ambiguity of the text. It facilitates some form of objective comprehension of the statement being expressed. Here we find the actual entity (the Facebook entry for example) in this context, enhancing the desired meaning of the text.

In the above examples therefore it seems that the actual entities derived at through the use of emoticons on social media platforms are the result of the concrescence of prehensions 'actualised' through multiple desires. In the three extracts we saw desires to: deceive, explain and objectify experience. In each case there is a fixing and qualifying of affect. The complexity of multiple prehensions are stripped through the stable and basic form of the emoticon. The emoticon colonises the affective processes, through reducing complexity with, perhaps, the resulting increase of clicks, likes, friends, users and related economies.

The process philosophy oriented analysis here of what can be described as the becomings of the actual entities within social media through prehensions and concrescence, moved the focus from that which is produced to the processes of production. This form of analysis led to an understanding that the so called personal information which the social media platforms often collect, tends to be prehended as static and fixed actualisations of a much more complex reality. These snapshots or slices of reality are pre-defined to fit into categories that make so called 'personal information' easier to understand and commodify. Ironically, rather than being perceived by the social media users as personal, this datafication of the self, tended to be viewed as relatively *impersonal*. Additionally, phenomena which were prehended as less fixed, fluid and idiosyncratic did not tend to be thought about as 'personal information'. Hence the term has taken on for most of the participants a different meaning, one that relates to internet economies rather than the individual. Expressions and representations of affective activity, although arguably very personal, were more likely to not be associated with the term 'personal information'. For example, a status update, although maybe replete with emotion related information, appeared outside the realm personal information.

Additionally, the use of affect related expressions and representations also often involve processes which exonerate complexity. Emoticons can be thought of as fixing (actualising) and stripping otherwise dynamic affect related processes (prehensions), to simplify and qualify, for example, the relatively infinite complexity of an actual occasion and yet, they were discussed as useful signifiers of phenomena. Indeed, the emoticon incorporated multiple uses. These appeared not to be used to simply express some inner emotion or feeling in a straightforward way. It was used to reduce the complexity of affect in at least three ways by the participants; to facilitate: deception (to manipulate how others perceive the emotional state of the user), explanation (used in place of words) and objectification (to reduce the ambiguity of a statement). The emoticon, while being produced to enhance emotional expressivity, has in some ways reduced the complexity of an expression. This appeared to be ironically understood by participants as bestowing advantages as it facilitates various desired effects. The basic emotions thesis has many critics often arguing against the assumption that there are six or so hard-wired emotions that are universally expressed through the face. What is interesting here is that whether these basic expressions do signify some inner reality or not may not be the point. Perhaps the emotional facial expression, like the emoticon, like the categories of 'personal information', indeed like all symbolic systems, but particularly those conveyed through social media, allow for the reduction of that which is incessantly complex to undergo some form of actualised presentation, allowing the desired prehensions expression.

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4. Ibid., 89-90.
5. Ibid., 28.

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7. Ibid., 323.
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9. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 20.
10. Ibid., 133.
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