

## Social Media Surrogate

### Summary

Social Media Surrogate is a conceptual online performance. The piece in its simplest form consists of the following four actions:

1. Write a script to gather data from a social network which accurately characterizes your online presence in that environment
2. Write a script which uses *only that data* to objectively emulate your account's online behaviors
3. Allow both scripts to run indefinitely
4. With the scripts still running, stop using this social network

The audience for this performance is anybody who has access to view the account in which the performance is occurring. Notice that the audience is not “anybody who has access to view the **performer's account**” – the performers are two computer scripts. The person whose account is being used becomes a member of the audience as soon as they complete the fourth action listed above.

While some may view this project as a fun experiment in the world of machine learning and natural language processing (and obviously it does delve deeply into those realms), my goal is to explore virtuality and the idea of the virtual self. I do not have any answers or theses on this subject, but I hope that by raising questions, those explorations are made – questions such as:

- How does the virtual space affect the depth and quality of interpersonal relationships, both in the physical and online worlds?
- Are our virtual selves and our physical selves one and the same or are our online identities entities unto themselves?
- Can the essence of individuals be encoded, as proposed by Hans Moravec and other Futurologists?
- How has the virtual effected our perception of mortality? (Not in the sense of “the soul living on” but rather, if a person dies but their virtual self lives on, how would that affect their “friends” which they knew in the real-world versus those with whom they were only acquainted in the virtual?)

Social networks differ from other online interactions in that they are, more often than not, extensions of the physical world as opposed to the alternative fantastic environments created by online games such as World of Warcraft and Second Life or the anonymous underworld of bulletin boards. We use these social networks to discuss and document events which occur in the physical world and often times our actions in social networks have real-world implications, and vice versa.

Since they are extensions of the physical world, the user accounts on social networks are associated with actual people. Whether the account is an accurate representation of that person depends upon how one uses the buffer which exists in all online communications. This buffer allows one to sculpt their online persona by researching what is said before is said, adjusting images to remove a stain or wrinkle before sharing, and deleting misguided statements as if they had never been stated. None of these can be done in the real world.

## Lessons Learned

My original intention with this piece was to see it through to completion, and begin the performance with my own Facebook account. Neglecting numerous warnings from computer scientists and academics familiar with machine learning and natural language processing, I decided to continue on with the project and write scripts to realize the performance. The problem arises in attempting to create a script which accurately and objectively emulates online behaviors and communication. Emulating behavior alone is fairly difficult – also attempting to emulate one’s writing style could take years to accomplish. (Given that I wanted to analyze the online persona alone – with no outside influence – it was essential that the script contained no pre-conceived instructions as to how to behave – it must figure everything out *on its own*.)

What did I learn from this project? I should respect the opinions and insights of experts in the field, especially when multiple sources say the same thing. Acknowledging that something is beyond my skills opens the door to collaborations. And if the time isn’t right, the time just isn’t right – there’s no need to try to accomplish everything, all alone, all right now.

## Conclusion

This piece currently consists of an idea, and thousands of line of code which try their best to execute that idea, yet fall drastically short. However, I’ve failed to realize that the concept itself has been the actual piece all along. Going back to the discussion of the audience, not many people would have ever seen this: only those who actively viewed my profile (out of a potential 400 Facebook friends) would have been a viewer. The real impact of the piece comes not from the *documentation* of the performance (as I had originally envisioned) but in the *concept* of the performance. The documentation of the performance would have distracted from the underlying concept by placing too much emphasis on the performance itself as a display of computational proficiency and demonstrating the relative “shallowness” online interactions based upon the “success” of the performance.