

Networking, or What the Social Means in Social Media

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Abstract

This article questions the meaning of the social in social media. It does this by revisiting boyd and Ellison's seminal paper and definition of social network sites. The article argues that social media are not so much about articulating or making an existing network visible. Rather, being social in the context of social media simply means creating connections within the boundaries of adaptive algorithmic architectures. Every click, share, like, and post creates a connection, initiates a relation. The network dynamically grows, evolves, becomes. The social in social media is not a fact but a doing.

Keywords

the social, algorithms, social networking sites

Social media is boring. Social media is a constant competition between people's egos. Social media is like a video game; you can create your dream character. Social media is so entertaining; I thank the heavens for it everyday. Social media is a career option. For some people, social media is their mask. Social media is making us antisocial. The horrible thing about social media is that once you posted anything you can never take it back; it will be on the Internet forever. Still not doing anything, social media is interrupting me. For most people, social media is about the social.¹

Indeed, the social is often heralded as key to understanding what social media is or what it is supposed to be. For platform owners, the social is their business model. Content providers claim to empower users by framing the social in terms of community, connectivity, and participation (Gillespie, 2010). For users, sociality manifests in different ways on different platforms. Take teens, the typical go-to demographic for media use. Although everyone *is on* Facebook, anecdotal evidence suggests that many teens *use* other platforms—photo sharing apps such as Instagram and Snapchat—where social pressure is less strongly felt (Watts, 2015).²

However, as Latour (2005) reminds us, the social is not a thing or domain of reality; it does not explain, it is precisely what needs explaining. This is remarkably easy to forget, as social media platforms constantly suggest the opposite, take the social for granted, naturalize it, make the social equal happiness, inclusion, the good life. "Sharing is caring." "All that happens must be known" (Eggers, 2013). But as we all know, there can be no happiness without discontent, inclusion without exclusion, the good life without struggle.

Widely framed as the dark side of social media, much important work has already been done in terms of cyber bullying (Marwick & boyd, 2014), online harassment (Staksrud, 2013), trolling (Phillips, 2011), digital labor (Scholz, 2012), and surveillance (Andrejevic, 2013). While we should continue to be critical, let us also be critical of critique. In an agonistic fashion, what we might want to be doing as social media researchers is to circumvent or disrupt bifurcations. To what extent can we think of surveillance without automatically assuming exploitation or discuss digital labor without falling back on the catchall term of neoliberalism?³

In their seminal article on the definition of social network sites, boyd and Ellison (2007) suggest that a distinctive feature of certain web-based services (we now commonly group under the umbrella term social media) is that they "enable users to make visible their social networks" (p. 211). Not networking but *network* sites, boyd and Ellison stress, as these sites are about showcasing users' already established networks, not about finding new friends.

Indeed, friend and follower lists are still a common feature of many social media platforms. While it might still hold true that people mostly connect with people they already know, they do so within the boundaries and constraints of software

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and adaptive algorithmic architectures. Users do not simply articulate and make their networks visible; the networks are also articulated and made visible *for them* by the underlying software and algorithmic logics governing many social media platforms. As I have argued elsewhere, the regimes of visibility that platforms like Facebook facilitate need to be understood as medium specific (Bucher, 2012). While users add friends and followers (often suggested by recommendation systems), adaptive algorithmic architectures increasingly curate and display these connections for us in specific ways. From a media aesthetic perspective, where media are understood to act as mediators of sense perception, it seems rather troubling that treatments of “aesthetics” are almost altogether missing in contemporary scholarship on social media. Much work needs to be done. If data, as Galloway (2011) argues, have no necessary visual form, then there is a need for future research to develop a critical understanding of these proliferating algorithmic “fabrication” of forms. How exactly are data being put into new forms of meaningfulness?

The social then is not a fact as Durkheim would have had it. The social does not manifest itself as an existing circle of friends, demographic, or movement. It is not the same as a social network. The social is not something that can easily be articulated or made visible. According to Facebook, the social is a graph, where users are the nodes constantly engaged in making connections (or edges).⁴ In the Facebook universe, users need not be humans connecting with other humans (see, for example, Kendall & Zhou, 2010). Users can be business pages, songs, or newspaper articles. Being social simply means creating connections within the boundaries of the system. Every click, share, like, and post creates a connection, initiates a relation. The network dynamically grows, evolves, becomes. The network networks.⁵ The social in social media is not a fact but a *doing*. The social is constantly performed and enacted by humans and non-humans alike. Social network sites, it seems, are less about the already articulated networks, as boyd and Ellison originally suggested. Rather, social media (or shall we say social networking sites) are fundamentally about networking inasmuch as the term indeed “emphasizes relationship initiation” (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211).

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Notes

1. All of the previous sentences are verbatim quotes from tweets posted by individual Twitter users. They represent a small selection of tweets containing the phrase “social media is,” searched for and published on Twitter, 12 January 2015.
2. These sentiments seem to be largely shared by my students in Communication and Information Technology (IT).

3. This is not to say that the mentioned authors do not already side step such binary conceptions.
4. Facebook famously talks about *the social graph*, referring to the idea of mapping out “all the connections between people and the things they care about” (Hicks, 2010).
5. While alluding to Heidegger’s (1971) notion that the “thing things” (p. 174), the networking network is not to be understood in a strictly Heideggerian manner as a gathering of a unity (wordling of fourfold). More closely aligned to Whitehead’s (1978) understanding of process, the network would have to checked and confirmed be understood by the ways in which it becomes.

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