Making Sense of Society Through Social Media

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Abstract

All media are social—they are after all media, in between, intermediating between producers and consumers of content, information, conversation, between the actors in the media and the audiences who read, listen, and watch. And the sociality of the media does not stop there: the processes of media production are social processes just as much as the activities of media audiencing. So strictly speaking, all media are social media. But only a particular subset of all media are fundamentally defined by their sociality, and thus distinguished from the mainstream media of print, radio, and television. It is the actual uses which are made of any medium which determine whether it is indeed a social medium—so let us investigate their roles in and interplay with the societies in which they operate.

Keywords

social media, intermediation, society

As we launch this new journal for *Social Media + Society*, let us begin by acknowledging our dirty little secret: Ultimately, all media are social. How could they not—they are after all *media*, in between, intermediating between producers and consumers of content, information, conversation, or between the (usually elite or newsworthy) actors who are in the media and the audiences who read, listen, and watch. And the sociality of the media does not stop there: The processes of media production are social processes just as much as the activities of media audiencing. So strictly speaking, all media are social media.

But of course, what we mean when we discuss, analyze, research social media builds on a much narrower definition of "social media." All media are social, but only a particular subset of all media are fundamentally defined by their sociality, and thus distinguished (for example) from the mainstream media of print, radio, and television. Such distinctions are commonly derived from the technological and structural traits of these media: They are operating on a networked, many-to-many rather than a broadcast, one-to-many basis; they are demotic rather than elite, with the means of media production in the hands of the people rather than concentrated in a few commercial and/or public service organizations; and they are largely free from editorial control or censorship, rather than operating gatekeeping regimes of one form or another. Such criteria are met, for example, by mail and telephone, as well as by *Facebook* and *Twitter*, but a purely techno-structural definition still seems not enough—after all, even the most

successful social medium of the pre-Internet age, the telephone, was initially envisaged by some of its early users as a kind of wired radio delivery system (just pick up the receiver and listen) rather than as a two-way communication medium. Only when the medium of the telephone settled into its present predominant role, as a means of facilitating ad hoc simultaneous oral communication independent of distance, did it become a social medium.

So in the end, it is the actual uses which are made of any medium—how its technological and structural traits are enlivened by day-to-day practice, what role or roles it assumes within a given society—which determine whether a given medium is indeed a *social* medium. A medium cannot be a medium unless it mediates, and cannot be a social medium unless it is used to mediate in a particular way, but actual eventual uses are never simply predetermined by technological features alone—they are co-created, co-evolved in the interplay between technologists, operators, and users. This, I think, is why it is important to have called this journal *Social Media + Society*, and not just *Social Media* (and why I've previously co-edited books called *Uses of Blogs* and *Twitter and Society*): what this journal needs to deliver is not

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simply scholarship which treats social media as objects, but which investigates their roles in and interplay with the societies in which they operate. In this, I follow Richard Rogers' (2009) call not merely to study "the Internet," but to study "culture and society *with the Internet*" (p. 29; emphasis in original): in this new journal, let us study society through the lens of its interactions with social media.

Social Media + Society is unlikely to cover older media such as mail, telephone, and email much at all, even though they all have strong claims to being included in the group of properly "social" media—and there are good reasons for this which emerge precisely from that study of society through the lens of social media. The more recent generations of social media have come to enable a sociality of a different order of magnitude: They have made the previously private many-to-many interactions in older social media forms substantially more public, and thereby enabled others to join in with the conversation, with varying results. As a consequence of this quantum leap, we get the fragmentation of public debate into myriads of individual conversations which draw on diverse sources and authorities to come to diametrically opposed points of view, but also the crystallization of vast publics around issues of shared concern from #kony2012 to #icantbreathe.

It would be far too simplistic to characterize this change in the way that public information flows, public debates, the very public sphere itself are operating as positive or negative overall; indeed, I would expect the pages of this new journal to see their fair share of debate between the different points of view on just how modern social media are affecting and interacting with society. But by now, there can be little doubt that social media *are* having a profound impact on societal processes, from political debate to everyday communication and from the media ecology to the national economy. I trust that this journal will be at the forefront of global research into these questions; and in doing so, it will also have to confront a number of key challenges closer to home: these

include the ethical and privacy implications of working with social media data; the researchers' involvement with the policies and politics of the platforms they study; the development and evaluation of new methods for gathering, processing, analyzing, visualizing, and publishing the data upon which our work is based; and the productive integration of such social media research with our diverse existing disciplinary methods and knowledges. Let us cheerfully address these challenges—and then do it all over again when the next generation of social media comes along.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Reference

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