Bringing Back the “Social” to the “Unsocial” Media of Today

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Abstract

Social media serves many purposes: it connects friends, families and colleagues with each other, functions as a news aggregator, and fosters opinion formation and expression – it even has the power to create political movements. Further purposes, on the other hand, are surveillance and data exploitation and control over citizens by the government. Social media’s original intentions of communication and exchange of information have transformed into monopolies dominating their users by offering services with ulterior (financial) motives. Is social media “unsocial” rather than “social”? This paper provides an insight into the challenges social media pose and examines possible alternatives to bring back the “social” to the “unsocial” media of today.

Keywords

(un)social media, social media alternatives, information society

1. Social Media – Anything but Social?

Internet platforms evolved from being virtual means for accessing information (Web 1.0) to places where users could create and modify content collaboratively (Web 2.0) (Aghaei et al. 2012). Together with the concept of user-generated content – different types of media content developed by end-users – the latter evolved into what we know as social media today (Kaplan/Haenlein 2010). “Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan/Haenlein 2010: 61).
There are several issues which make up the prevailing concept of social media. Firstly, it has developed into a means for (narcissistic) self-presentation resulting in an overflow of content generated, regardless of its quality or impact (Lovink 2016). Secondly, social media today is associated with big corporations such as Facebook. Capitalistic monopolies rule the economy, their primary goal being to generate revenue by exploiting and selling their users’ data (Taplin 2017). This leads to the third problem: surveillance, and with it, privacy infringement (Keen 2015). Is social media anything but social? How did social media develop into the “unsocial” media it is today? More importantly, is there a solution to counteract the problems?

This paper aims to discuss these challenges and compare proposed alternatives of social media. The purpose is to find answers to the questions and observe if there is a way to bring back the social to social media.

2. The “Social” in Social Media

The perception of the term “social” in information technology has changed over the last few decades from being a work-oriented exchange between isolated nodes focusing on collective sharing to what Lovink (2016) names the “Empire of the Social”. The ‘social’ here is an exchange of communication fostering empowerment of individuals and the establishment of relationships between those. The expression of the social takes place in networks, on social media (Lovink 2016).

Facebook is deemed to be the most successful social media networking site (Statista 2019). According to the company, the social networking site registered more than 2.38 billion monthly active users as of March 2019 (Facebook Newsroom 2019). The founder, Mark Zuckerberg, developed the platform to keep in touch with his former classmates from Harvard (Kaplan/Haenlein 2010). The original intention – to connect with people via the web that one would not have been able to connect with due to distance – remains until today. Facebook and other networking sites (e.g. work-related sites such as LinkedIn) are ever-growing and successful in connecting people and maintaining relationships.

Being able to connect with others has led to scholars claiming that social media has a huge potential to be a democratic tool (Lievrouw 2011; Marwick 2013; Schejter/Tirosh 2016; Trappel/Nieminen 2018). As the Internet has participatory abilities, it can foster relevant democratic discussions, especially when people are involved who are not yet politically active (Couldry et al. 2007). Activism, protests or direct interaction with business or governmental organisations are simplified through social media (Marwick 2013). Thus, social media is seen as an alternative to social institutions, especially for social movements, which “identify
government and corporate institutions as threats to freedom, democracy, and human rights” (Marwick 2013: 3). It is a means that gives people, especially those that are marginalised and oppressed, space to express their opinions and beliefs and facilitates participation to initiate social, political or cultural change (Lievrouw 2011; Schejter/Tirosh 2016). The circulation of content is facilitated and amplified through social networks due to “spreadability” (Jenkins/Ford/Green 2013), which is beneficial for awareness-raising. John Lennon’s bed-ins for peace have a whole new meaning now that people can actually start revolutions from their beds – by using social media.

3. The “Unsocial” in Social Media

Most conversations online happen through social networks, such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, and are gradually replacing physical conversations (Keen 2015). Keen (2015) argues that the more people connect and communicate through social networks, the lonelier these people become. According to a study by the University of Pittsburgh on social media use and perceived social isolation, young adults aged 19-32 years with a high social media use seem to feel more socially isolated than those who are less exposed to social media. More specifically, “those who used social media ≥ 121 minutes per day had about double the odds for increased PSI [perceived social isolation]”, in comparison with adolescents spending less than 30 minutes per day on social media (Primack et al. 2017: 3). Is social media dividing rather than connecting people?

Bruns (2008) describes users of social media platforms as Generation C, where the ‘c’ stands for the massive amount of content people are creating through the means of these digital communication technologies. Social media in the twenty-first century is witnessing a high willingness of the public to share personal information, ideas and opinions openly online, which Lovink (2016) characterises as a “database full of users”. This “citizen-as-user” concept reduces the term “social” to an overflow of content generated regardless of its quality or impact (Lovink 2016). A platform that experiences this overflow in a special way is Instagram, the pioneering platform for self-presentation. Apart from the possibility of adding captions, the platform is restricted to just two yet very expressive types of media formats: pictures and videos, of which more than 100 million are uploaded every day, amounting to a total of 50 billion shared photos since its launch in 2010 (Aslam 2019). The concept is simple but provides the perfect conditions for self-portrayal. The ability to put oneself in the centre of attention on social media has led to a “Selfie Culture”, as Marwick (2015) puts it. A “selfie” is a self-portrait of a person which aims at “documentation of self for consumption by others” (Schwarz 2010: 165), “Advertisements for Myself”, so to speak (Keen 2015: 68). This “hypervisibility” goes
hand in hand with the urge to constantly compete with others via social media (Keen 2012) and prove one’s existence (Keen 2015). The “Selfie Culture” represents exactly the egocentric character of today’s web culture. It is primarily an instrument for people to display and improve their social (online) status (Marwick 2013).

People’s proneness to self-expression on social media is being turned into a commodity for the economic benefit of various market sectors. The ideology can be understood as a “winner-takes-all economy”, a “euphemism for a market that tends toward monopoly” (Keen 2015: 36). The problem at hand is that these monopolies have evolved into capitalistic platforms integrating various digital communication services into one centralised unit (Lovink 2016). These platforms can be considered capitalist because they go beyond the mere purpose of providing a means for digital communication by exploiting their users for corporate venture (Keen 2015). The Internet giants collect their consumers’ personal and usage data through the platform and sell them to third parties. One of the primary revenues of big Internet companies is based on “surveillance marketing”, in which personal data is sold to advertising companies (Taplin 2017). Advertisers purchase these data to tailor ads to the individual to increase conversion rates (Pariser 2011). Predictive technologies, such as face recognition, which are not only employed on digital devices such as smartphones but on social network platforms as well, are more frequently used by insurance companies to improve underwriting (Christl/Spiekermann 2016). E-scores use consumer profiles that are generated based on any kind of data of a person and are especially utilised in credit scoring (O’Neil 2016).

An extreme case is that of China. Because of China’s media censorship, platforms such as Facebook are blocked. Its citizens rely highly on WeChat, a government-controlled messaging application that provides features similar to popular social media platforms (Harwit 2017). While China’s regime has been criticised for having access to the users’ personal data through the app, it is preparing to go a step further in supervising its citizens. China’s government is planning to implement a “social” scoring system by 2020 to “assess how ‘good’ a citizen is” using a digital technology based on big data to monitor and rate their inhabitants (Naughton 2018). The examples mentioned above show how social media platform monopolies exploit their users by collecting and selling their data, fostering surveillance and the concept of “the transparent citizen”. Surveillance poses an especially huge threat to an individual’s freedom, privacy and equality (Floridi 2015).

Social media platforms filter content based on the knowledge they have about a person, acquired through data collection (Pariser 2011). While this might provide better orientation in the big sea of data (Latzer et al. 2016), these “echo chambers”, as Sunstein (2017) calls them, inhibit the users’ freedom of choice, promote polarisation and facilitate extremism (Sunstein
Another downside of using social media regarding democracy is that many social movements fail to mobilise outside the bounds of the Internet. While networks can indeed create an uprising (the Arab Spring of 2011 seems to be a prime example), many do not succeed in carrying out the changes desired (Lovink 2016). People might not be willing to go the extra mile and participate “in real life” or feel the movement lacks trust due to missing face-to-face conversation. Governments in totalitarian states have the power to shut down or manipulate the online conversations (Chenoweth 2017).

The desire for social gatherings on social media is accompanied by the fear of generating harmful evidence against oneself that might be used for ulterior motives – financially or supervisory (Lovink 2016). “Intraviduals”, as Keen (2012) calls them, are facing the dilemma of connecting online while desiring individual freedom. This prevailing dilemma underpins the need for creating other forms of social communication collectively to overcome present formats such as Facebook.

4. Alternatives to (Un-)Social Media

Many have recognised that it is necessary to break up the dominating monopolies, highlighting the fact that these are not only making profit from their users’ data but play a supporting role in privacy infringing activities, as mentioned above (Keen 2015; Lovink 2016; Mosco 2017; Netchitailova 2012; Sunstein 2017; Taplin 2017).

The source keeping these hegemonic platforms alive needs to be detached to initiate change. The goal is to change the users’ oblivious understanding of technologies, transforming them from ignorant users to critical thinkers. A first step towards this transformation is putting the underlying infrastructure and prevailing business models into question. Lovink (2016) believes that unveiling technologies used for surveillance can foster change in the consumers’ mindsets, referring to cases like Assange and Snowden. In 2013, Edward Snowden revealed that the National Security Agency was monitoring their citizens unknowingly by having access to data which was acquired through the servers of big technology companies such as Google, Facebook and Microsoft (Lyon 2014). While these revelations might accelerate raising awareness and help users to scrutinize and understand the technology that they are using (Lovink 2016), it is not sustainable to rely solely on others to push this transformation. Users need to actively take part in educating themselves on their own as “[u]nderstanding the nature of networks – technical and social – is essential” (Rheingold 2010: 22).

To accomplish mindful social media use, Rheingold (2010) defines five interconnected ‘social
media literacies’: attention, participation, collaboration, network awareness, and critical consumption. Only those who master these literacies can be empowered by media (Rheingold 2010). “The part that makes social media social is that technical skills need to be exercised in concert with others: encoding, decoding, and community” (Rheingold 2010: 15). Users need to learn how to manage the massive amount of “eventless events” and abundance of information. “Data literacy” means healthy information processing, which is not concerned with complete withdrawal but self-control and discipline. What is important here is real-time content curation, meaning filtering relevant information (e.g. by using RSS aggregators), and fact checking. By doing so, users will obtain a critical sense of validity towards information (Lovink 2016) and establish “Crap Detection” – to put in the words of critic Rheingold (2012). Lovink (2016) suggests “cybernetics 2.0 initiatives” that educate a new generation of the technically skilled. A composition of experts in the field of computer science, philosophy and the arts, that put critical theory and cultural studies in relation, is fundamental to achieving this objective. Following the transformation of users’ mindsets is a reconstruction of the existing social media platform infrastructure. Snowden’s discoveries led to an increased demand for alternatives that are supposed to be decentralized, non-profit, attach importance to privacy and shift away from the prevailing business model based on ulterior (financial) motives towards tools that encourage collaborative federalism and represent societal values (Lovink 2016). The concept of “organized networks” fits these requirements. “Orgnets”, developed by media theorist Ned Rossiter (2006), do not have their focal point set on growth through sharing and updating but on progressing collaborative non-profit platforms.

Organized networks are co-emergent with digital communications media, while networked organizations typically precede the advent of digital ICTs. Of special significance is the tendency for networked organizations to adopt intellectual property rights as the regulatory architecture for commerce and institutional partnerships whereas organized networks are often staunch advocates of open source software and culture. (Rossiter 2006: 14)

Diaspora and Lorea are examples of such alternatives (van der Velden 2013). However, most of these alternatives are still not fully decentralized or have not raised enough awareness amongst the (critical) public (Lovink 2016; van der Velden 2013). Even if the latter is fulfilled, social media alternatives struggle with accumulating a user base since many believe detaching from a big platform such as Facebook would lead to social exclusion (Sevignani 2013).

Mosco (2017) seeks to adopt the concept of a public utility in computer communication to solve the issues of the post-Internet world. He proposes public information utilities that control the power of monopolies on data, information and knowledge. Social media would be a publicly controlled open platform with equal access, where citizens are in charge of their own data,
while still advocating analogue alternatives. As a result, public information utilities would counteract environmental, privacy and workplace issues which the world is facing today.

5. Conclusion

It is undeniable that social media has had a huge impact on society. It connects friends, families and colleagues, is a tool for news consumption, opinion formation and expression, and can mobilise people to unite against injustices. The other side of the coin, however, reveals the risk of isolation and loneliness, threats to privacy because of surveillance and data collection, and control over citizens by the government. It is obvious that the purpose of social media goes beyond communication and content generation. What was once the original intention has transformed into hegemonic companies offering their services with ulterior motives.

At this point, the disadvantages outweigh the benefits. People’s mindsets towards social media monopolies need to change to fully embrace social media’s potential. It is necessary to educated users to acquire social media and data literacies and establish a critical view towards the overload of information. In addition, alternatives to the prevailing social media systems that focus on equal collaboration and participation, such as the concept of organised networks or public information utilities, need to be promoted. Critical users together with a network whose infrastructure is transparent, decentralised and open to the public can potentially bring back the social to the unsocial media of today.

References


Short Biography of the Author

**Sarah Jeske** is a master student in Digital Communication Leadership (DCLead) at the University of Salzburg and the Aalborg University Copenhagen and has worked in user experience design and software development. She strives to combine her previous studies of Media Informatics and Human-Computer Interaction with social sciences and management studies within the DCLead program to master the future challenges of digital communication.

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