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Facebook: The role of the human agent in a *non-neutral* technology

Abstract

It is hard to dispute the popularity of online social networking especially amongst the young generation. Yet there is little consent about the moral dimension of social network sites, such as Facebook, Bebo and Friendster. For social critics they are merely a means of surveillance and control, while for many members of the digital audience they are a fascinating way to create and validate friendships in a virtual world and place oneself on public display in an almost exhibitionist manner. This essay aims to explore the ‘non-neutrality’ of online social networking (Facebook) in contrast to the significance of the human agent and his-her purposeful use of the technology. Light’s argument on the relevance of the Actor Network Theory (ANT) developed in the work of Latour will be examined and contrasted with the social constructivist view that the actual behaviour of the human agent who uses the technology towards a purpose that sustains a personal meaning may render the alleged amoral dimension of the technology less significant for the individual.

Keywords: Technological determinism, Actor Network Theory, agency, online social networking, virtual communities

Introduction

Online social networking has become a commonplace in our times, as social network sites keep growing in terms of their user base enabling individuals to participate in a number of activities as members of online communities. According to eBizMBA (2009) based on combined traffic metrics Facebook leads the table of the most visited social network sites, followed by MySpace and Twitter. Facebook (2009) itself reports a base of more than 350 million active users worldwide, 70 per cent of whom are outside the United States. Meanwhile, the total number of 15-24 year olds visiting any social network site in the UK rose from 5.9 million in June 2008 to 6.8 million in June 2009, which constitutes a 14 per cent rise (comScore, 2009). In the same period the UK was the second largest country (after the USA) in the world in terms of Facebook users with more than 20 million users (Burcher, 2009).

Furthermore, in terms of mainstream press coverage of social network sites, as the popularity of the latter grew, so did the attention given to them by the media. In July 2005 Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation made its first significant internet purchase, when it bought InterMix Media, owner of MySpace, for \$580 million (BBC, 2005). The widespread coverage that the venture received was rightly substantiated by the market implications of the acquisition, as it allowed direct 'user trafficking' between the two outlets. More recently, the announcement that LinkedIn, one of the largest professional network sites, and Twitter would team up, in order to allow users to link their accounts and cross-share information, job postings and other user-generated content was welcomed as a partnership that would not only refresh the content of the two sites, but could also possibly lead to additional financial benefits for the two companies (Gelles, 2009).

On the societal aspect of the media prominence of these sites¹, the latter have often attracted the media's interest when various cases of deviance, fraud, and publication of sensitive information came to light putting this way in question the ethics and moral dimension of social network sites. In 2007 the local community of a small town in Missouri, USA, was shocked at the news of the death of a 13-year-old girl, who

¹ Hence the term *social media*, i.e. media that allow social interaction among users.

committed suicide after an unfulfilled love story that had taken place on MySpace (Leonard, 2007). This was subsequently found to be a hoax set up by a neighbour of the girl. In a recent Facebook entry row involving the now head of MI6, Sir John Sawers, personal details about the life of the former UK's ambassador to the UN were ordered to be removed from social network site Facebook amidst an explosion of concerns about possible security risk (BBC, 2009a). With the undisputable popularity of social network sites comes publicity and media attention, but is it for all the wrong reasons? For the average user online social networking is a pleasant recreational activity embracing the sustenance of new, but mostly existing, social ties (Wasserman and Faust, 1994; Boyd and Ellison, 2007), impression management of the self (Boyd, 2004) and the management of 'online' and 'offline' friendship networks in a balanced and complementary manner (Wellman et al., 2001). The present essay aims to explore what, the author believes, constitutes the two-fold existence of participating in online social networking: the human agency compared and contrasted with the technology itself as agent. The debate will focus around existing theoretical approaches and research traditions to online social networking, which treat both technology and the human factor as agents in this process. But, first I will make an attempt to contextualise scholarship on online social networks historically, as the existence of online communities dates back a few decades ago.

Early Online Communities

The development of online communities goes hand in hand with the birth of computer-mediated communication. Early work on computer-mediated communication as a means of support provision to human networks include the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET), the world's first example of an operational network developed by the US Department of Defence during the cold war, and attempts to enhance the Delphi forecasting method² through exposure of an experts panel to computer-mediated communication systems, such as computer conferencing (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978).

² For more information, see Illinois Institute of Technology, 'The Delphi Knowledge Elicitation Method,' URL (consulted 9 December 2009): <http://www.iit.edu/~it/delphi.html>

In their earliest version online social networks had taken the form of what Rheingold (1993; 2000) defined as ‘virtual communities’, the progenitors of modern social network sites. According to Rheingold (1993), virtual communities are ‘social aggregations that emerge from the [Internet] when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace’ (p. 5). These aggregations introduced a new conception of computer-mediated social interaction that lacked face-to-face contact and was free from time and spatial confines. Rheingold was an early member of The Whole Earth ‘Electronic Link (The Well) -established in 1985- one of the oldest virtual communities still in operation, which inspired him to write his book *The Virtual Community*.

Early scholarly work on the emergence of online communities reflected a mixed reaction owing to an uncertainty about the ephemeral nature of the new phenomenon. Were online communities there to stay or did they simply represent a superficial new trend that was destined to be short-lived? Calhoun (1991) systematically avoids branding them as ‘communities’ due to the lack of direct social interactions, which creates a false sense of belongingness to the community, as opposed to a categorical feeling of being a ‘real’ member, who fosters genuine personal relations with his-her counterparts (Parks and Floyd, 1996). Along the same lines, Stoll (1995) argues that the cyberspace only provides the illusion of a community sense, as social ties can not be formed, unless people are physically brought together. He particularly underlines the lack of ability to express one’s emotions, as people ‘chat’ without speaking and ‘hug’ without touching. Every thought, emotion or feeling has to be transformed into text, so that every community member can understand and communicate. To this effect, a number of ‘emoticons’³ have been invented aiming to represent people's emotions in the cyberspace (Lasarenko, 1997).

By contrast, other writers (Oldenburg, 1989; Jones, 1995) view online communities in a positive light arguing that they could serve the function of filling a gap created by the disappearance of -what Tönnies (1955) referred to as- the ‘Gemeinschaft’ (translated as ‘community’) and the rise of the ‘Gesellschaft’ (translated as ‘society’) in

³ *Emoticons: combinations of typographic characters used to represent emotions and states of mind* (Lasarenko, 1997; p. 90)

modern cultures. According to Oldenburg (1989) the contemporary world is experiencing an intense disengagement from intimate forms of social bonding, which gradually leads to the demise of communities, whilst modernity promotes a spatial and organisational living pattern that prevents individuals from developing a sense of 'getting together' with others in public places, such as cafés, barber shops and pubs. Consequently, the question that needs to be put forward is: Can computer-mediated communication fulfil the promise of a revamped sense of community, in which people are truly connecting with one another, rather than isolating themselves from the others (as Jones (1995) envisaged)?

Online Communities and Performative Identity Formation

The architecture of online communities both implies and, in a way, imposes specific patterns of user interaction (Papacharissi, 2009). Castells (2000) argues that this architecture provides the grounds for a 'new symbolic environment' that does not reflect the real anymore: 'In a sense, all reality is virtually perceived [...] reality itself (that is people's material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe, in which appearances are not just on the screen through which experience is communicated, but they become the experience' (p. 404). Further exploring the internet's 'virtuality', Castells (2001) explains that the cyberspace provides a 'communication hybrid that brings together physical place and cyber place (to use Wellman's terminology) to act as the material support of networked individualism' (p. 131).

Consequently, the cyberspace does not have a 'where', as it is divested of all physical properties (Jones, 1995). After all, research evidence has shown that users experiment with performative identity formation in a variety of computer-mediated communication contexts. Smith and Kollock (1999) studied identity and deception in the context of Usenet newsgroups and found cases of identity manipulation, concealment and impersonation. Also, Turkle (1997) has argued that the cyberspace may facilitate the concealment of our own identity and the formation of false identities: 'The Internet is another element of the computer culture that has

contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicity. On it, people are able to build a self by cycling through many selves' (p. 178).

Traditional approaches to personal identity formation have assumed that 'the construction of identity is both social and symbolic' (Woodward, 1997: 10). We are differentiated both by our belongingness to a social group or category on the grounds of an authentic set of fixed, inherent characteristics, which at the same time exclude other social groups (essentialist approach), and by material goods we use as symbolic signifiers of difference (interactionist approach). As Slater (2002) aptly points out 'Just as going online seemed to detach one from place, it also seemed to detach one from the body. Disembodiment signifies that a person's online identity is apparently separate from their physical presence, a condition associated with two features: textuality and anonymity' (p. 536). Textual communication constitutes a significant part of online communication among internet users, even if the transmission of voice and image through video conferencing, or any type of net meeting, may still be available in certain computer-mediated communication environments (Slater, 2002). On the other hand, anonymity enables the creation of a genderless, postmodern self, which undermines the Cartesian subject with the dualistic dimension of male and female (Poster, 1990). The qualities of the online identity, which can change as easily as the various forms that Proteus⁴ took, are fluidity, uncertainty and variability.

From Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 Online Social Networking

With technology advancing constantly, user involvement in the operations of online communities has gradually become more elaborate. This further established the role of users as active participants through interactive web applications. In the early stages of the World Wide Web online content provision almost exclusively derived from businesses. User experience was limited to viewing of static pages and sending of emails, while interactivity was very basic (e.g. Usenet newsgroups, IRC, etc.). The boom of the dot.com trend in 2001 signified a true turning point in the history of the web and changed the user experience forever (O'Reilly, 2005). The primary focus of

⁴ Proteus, a sea deity of the Greek mythology, according to legend used to take various forms symbolizing the flexibility of the waves in taking different shapes.

the internet shifted from information to communication and cooperation (Fuchs, 2009). This shift is generally known as the transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. The latter is characterised not only by the software that enables the web, but -more so- by the services delivered on it. It is argued that one of the ‘most characteristic examples of Web 2.0 are social networking platforms like MySpace or Facebook, which allow the online maintenance and establishment of social relationships by an integrated use of technologies like email, websites, guest books, forums, digital videos, or digital images’ (Fuchs, 2009: 80). Earlier forms of virtual communities, e.g. The Well, relied on Web 1.0 technologies, such as Usenet, MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon), Internet Relay Chat (IRC), and mailing lists, for their members to communicate with one another. Modern social network sites are much more user-generated content focused and to this effect they rely on Web 2.0 technologies, such as information sharing, video-sharing, blogs, while the user can run various applications directly from his-her browser and then share the knowledge with as many users as s-he wishes. West and Turner (2009) note that the label Web 2.0 has been employed to describe a web that ‘has become more expansive, more democratic and more interactive’ (p. 376). This arguably promotes an inclusive, participatory culture among users, who themselves become producers of content (like professionals) through blogs, podcasts and direct access to news websites. Users have the potential then to become citizen journalists, or ‘netizens’ (citizens of the ‘net society’), as Hauben and Hauben (1997) argue. Consequently, can we argue that the ‘net society’ is an inclusive, democratic society?

According to Fuchs (2009), this ‘renewed deterministic techno-optimism’ (p. 84) fails to take account of a fundamental question: If Web 2.0 users can participate in online networks by producing content, hence create discourse, how much attention does this information receive and, most importantly, what is its impact on society? This last question enables the logical transition to the next few paragraphs, in which I am going to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the relationship between technology and society. Technological deterministic views will be contrasted by social determinism, in an attempt to establish the roles of both the human factor as agent, but also that of the technology (social network sites), which also has the capacity of acting as agent.

Technology and Human Factor as Agents

The discussion about the relationship between technology and society was originally fuelled by views that either perceived the technology itself as the dominant agent with the potential to define the nature of the social landscape, or supported the assumption that the role of the human agent in appropriating the use of the technology is more important. Technological determinism consists, in MacKay's terms (1995), in that technological progress is autonomous of society; it shapes society rather than existing in a reciprocal relationship with it. In other words, it assumes that technology, in fact, determines the nature of society. In these terms, early scholarship on the social role of technology perceived the changes in the technological realm along with their commensurate implications on the social norms as having an enormous impact on society, also known as the 'future shock' (Toffler, 1970). The debate about the deterministic nature of technology is not a new one. It dates back to the 1960s and the widely known MacLuhanian phrase 'The medium is the message' (MacLuhan, 1967).

On the other hand, social determinism (or social constructionism) celebrates the importance of the human agent and the wider social context seeking to establish a mutual relationship between technology and society rather than having it that technologies transform societies (Williams, 1974). Technology is socially shaped; it is not the sole cause of social change (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1985; Bijker, Hughes and Pinch, 1987).

Further to the above points, if one was to share the view that social network sites do provide the possibility for agency (deriving from user interactivity), this would reduce them to a purely operational function, whereby the user has control over the technological platform. However, the architectural structure of these sites is such that leaves the user with no alternative but to fully embrace social interaction (Lewis and West, 2009). For this reason, it is interesting to explore and understand how the technology and the user both act as agents and parts of the same network. Previous scholarship on networks emphasises the importance of agency not only for humans, but also for objects, as well as less tangible concepts (Latour, 2005). Also known as Actor-Network-Theory, Latour's (2005) approach considers an actor-network as inherently heterogeneous consisting of various different parts, both social and

technical. For example, the actor-network established by a given social network site (i.e. Facebook) comprises of its users, their personal knowledge and past experiences, their profiles containing background information about themselves, their 'friends' lists, the actual technological platform through which interaction takes place (i.e. the website), the technological competence behind the platform (i.e. Web 2.0), the moderators/web administrators of the website, and the owners of the business as a whole. The network acquires importance as the synergy created by its combined parts, which necessarily means that, if an actor disappears from the equation for some reason, the network is likely to collapse. Actor-Network-Theory lies in the middle of the spectrum within the two extremes of technological determinism and social determinism, as it perceives technology both as 'actant' (when it is the agent) and 'acted upon' (when the human factor is the agent). Other scholarship on networks focused on the nature of social ties (relationships) amongst the 'nodes' (users) of the network (Milgram, 1967)⁵. Here the individual users of the network and their characteristics do not matter, as the whole emphasis has shifted on their social ties (Social Network Theory).

In discussing the morality of the technology in the case of social network site Facebook, Light et al. (2008) disclose the ethics of the website by considering the agency of the technology. They discuss some of the strategies used to enrol members of social network site Facebook and the possible implications for those strategies, which unravel the 'non-neutrality' of the technology. Light et al.'s (2008) argument will be followed up on the case of the moral character of social network site Facebook by drawing upon an empirical example from ongoing research of the author on the subject area, in order to illustrate that the architecture and design of the network shape the user experience and possibly direct decision-making. Therefore, I am going to discuss below the recent new privacy settings guidelines that Facebook announced to the dismay of its critics (BBC, 2009b).

⁵ In his book *The Small World Problem* Milgram (1967) describes his theory on the 'six degrees of separation', which, even if later disputed by many critics, still found its way into the media (films and television) and into websites (SixDegrees.com)

Facebook's 'Second Privacy Trainwreck'

Following the launch of its then new feature called 'News Feed' on 5 September 2006 (Sanghvi, 2006) users logging onto the site faced a page that listed every update, activity or profile change that their friends had undertaken. Even though this information was always publicly accessible from each user's profile pages, the 'News Feed' feature made this information even more accessible in that it presented it all in a timely and organised manner in the very first page that users came to immediately after logging onto their account. This simply meant that the social dynamics of Facebook were about to change. The fears of many users were down to the fact that the new architecture of the website could 'rupture people's sense of public and private by altering the previously understood social norms' (Boyd, 2008: 14). This was Facebook's first privacy 'trainwreck'. Since then, the social network site briefly returned to the spotlight about its privacy policy, when it was revealed that it was in breach of the Canadian law by holding on to members' personal information for an indefinite period of time (BBC, 2009c). Consequently, even though it managed to keep the 'News Feed' feature and convince users that it came with more benefits than disruptions, the website was forced to change the way it used member information and also had to increase the transparency of its policy guidelines. But, its second most important moment in a series of public debates about the protection of user privacy came on 9 December 2009, when the company announced it was changing its privacy policy (again!) 'nudging' people towards sharing personal information with every Facebook member there is and also making their profile easy to find via search engines (BBC, 2009c).

The design and communication mode of these recommendations came across as 'nudging' for the average user. Since the new policy took effect (9 December 2009) a persistently reoccurring pop-up window appeared on the user's screen prompting them to choose and confirm their new privacy settings. Even if the settings appeared overall more simplified and clear than previously and despite the introduction of a new option that enabled members to set the privacy level on specific pieces of content (e.g. a photo), the recommendations for the levels of privacy given to users (which were also the default privacy levels) were very different from what users had

previously accepted as their ‘default’ settings. In this regard, the display on the recommended privacy settings page stated:

‘We recommend that **Everyone** be able to see information that will make it easier for friends to find, identify and learn about you. This includes basic information like your About Me description, Family and Relationships, Work and Education Info and Website, as well as posts that you create, like photo albums and status updates’

The feedback from the critics (e.g. European Frontier Foundation) of Facebook on the transition to the new privacy settings indicated a series of concerns about users who could unintentionally compromise their privacy without even realising that they have done so. It is more than evident that the way this transition has been designed by the company owners is trying to impose a certain pattern of predetermined choices on the end user. This is further enhanced by the use of ‘positive’ language with such verbs as ‘share’ and ‘connect’ in the opening page of the guide to the new privacy settings, which may predispose the user in a positive manner in connection with the company’s privacy recommendations. This example comes in to confirm Light et al.’s (2008) argument that Facebook applications and the overall architecture of the network begin shaping the user experience already at the point of registration and continue to do so at later stages, e.g. when the user decides to edit his-her profile, or when s-he manipulates his-her privacy settings to control the level of the public character of the profile.

The Role of the Human Factor as Agent

If the technology of online social networking as acting agent has a moral dimension, what is then the role of the human agent in social network sites? There is a limited number of qualitative studies on the context of usage of social network sites, and the ones by Livingstone (2008), and Lewis and West (2009) are currently the only ones focusing on young people in the UK.

Early mass communications research shifting its focus towards the audience showed that mass media usage tends to be goal directed, as opposed to non-purposeful activity

(Blumler and Katz, 1974). Media audiences then use the media to gratify specific needs. Contemporary research on social network sites supports both active and passive engagement with the technology (Lewis and West, 2009). The passive element consists in users engaging in extended periods of 'stalking' (usually of ex-partners) through various applications on Facebook and more often by checking the 'News Feed' feature. Passivity and the element of engagement seem to be contradicting one another in the first place, but the emphasis here is on the non-participatory aspect of usage. The active element though seems to be much more prevalent in the discourse here. Boyd and Ellison (2007) note that the large body of computer-mediated communication research, which looks at social network sites is concerned with the management of self-impression and identity formation, the creation of a private space for themselves and their 'close' friends, the management of online 'friends' and the bridging of 'online' with 'offline' networks. This is also in line with previous scholarship on young audiences, which claims that youth has an active role in creating meaning from media texts by drawing upon prior knowledge, as well as bringing set expectations to the text, until they strike a balance in their reception process, with which they are happy (Cohen, 1973; Murdock, 1975; Murdock, Phelps, 1973). Furthermore, quantitative studies on the usage of social network site Facebook by UK first year undergraduate students showed that users engaged with the technology towards purposes that sustained real and practical meaning for them, such as to prepare them for university life through Facebook pre-registration (so that they can meet new people), but also to help them settle into their new reality, rather than using the site for any type of educational activity or formal learning (Madge et al., 2009).

Conclusion

The emergence and increasing popularity of social network sites is a harbinger of a new wave of online communities, where personal information gradually becomes more open and accessible to the entire community signalling possible risks about the user's privacy, but also the power and control that users have over the manipulation of this content. As discussed above, the architecture and design of these sites may point to that technology can act as agent to validate a certain state of affairs, which users

could easily accept without exercising any kind of critical thinking. The culture of online social networking is such that often users do not have control over the technology. Incidents such as the firing of a teenage girl for posting a comment on her Facebook profile about her job being boring (BBC, 2009d) are not uncommon. In her own mind she was thinking that it was a mere ‘throw-away’ comment with very little significance, which was most probably the reason why she did not initially mind its public display. The danger here lies in the fact that users have certain expectations from these websites in terms of their privacy protection and sometimes engage in regular usage without having established whether those expectations have been truly met. On the other hand, users can also be ‘actants’, which gives them a better sense of control over the technology and its assumptions. In this actor-network the appropriation of the technological element by the human factor opens the door to the creation of new conceptions about how users manage impressions of the self and deal with issues of power and control. Further research into the usage patterns of social network sites and the gratifications that users derive from them would help to shed more light onto how audiences make sense of the technology and the type of relation they establish with it.

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