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The Fabric of Social Media:
An introduction

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The Fabric of Social Media:

An introduction

Shenja van der Graaf

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, social media has become a widely used umbrella term that refers to the set of tools, applications, and services that enable people to interact with others using network technologies such as personal computers and smartphones. Social media tends to be associated with a convergence of production, distribution, and consumption practices and a blending of user creativity, collaboration, and sharing-enabled and sharing-assisted network technologies. In this way, social media is said to have deeply penetrated into the mechanics of everyday life, affecting people's interactions, institutional structures and professional routines. This paper offers an inclusive perspective of the "fabric of social media", which underpins understandings of both social and media. In particular, it highlights the dynamics of empowerment, always-on lifestyle, and professionalization.

INTRODUCTION

Related to a “participatory turn” reflected in the claimed democratization of Web technologies, social media – here used in the collective – is a widely used umbrella term that refers to the set of tools, applications, and services that enable people to interact with others using network technologies such as personal computers, smartphones, tablets, and network-capable televisions. Facilitated by user-friendly and attractively priced (or free) software technologies, emerging social media sites on the Internet are “all forms of digital culture, networked in technology [...] and collaborative in principle” (Uricchio 2004: 86). This observation echoes other definitions of social media – a term that sometimes is interchangeably used with “social software,” “social computing,” and “computer-mediated communication” – in blending together technology and social interaction for the co-creation of value.

A dominant discourse in this regard is the linkage of social media to the notion of Web 2.0. (O’Reilly, 2005). This term describes the tools for making social media rather than the process, product, developer, or user. Widely adopted in the scholarly literature, the term Web 2.0 can be seen to point to a shift from a static perspective on Web content delivery towards a more dynamic perspective, where Web tools, applications and services are put into the hands of people who are regarded as participants rather than as end users. Social media genres can take many different forms, varying from collaborative projects, to blogs and microblogs, to content communities, to social networking sites, to virtual game worlds, and so forth, and which are underpinned by technologies such as groupware, file-sharing technologies, application programming interfaces (API), wikis, podcasts, wall-postings, instant messaging, social bookmarking, and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). Increasingly, many social media can also be integrated via social network aggregation platforms.

Social media tends to be associated with a convergence of production, distribution, and consumption practices and a blending of user creativity, collaboration, and sharing-enabled and sharing-assisted network technologies. In this way, social media is said to support the democratization of knowledge and information associated with a shift from individuals as mere content consumers to content producers; a practice generally referred to as *user-generated content* (or user creativity). It highlights people that create online content by deploying words, texts, pictures, and video, and using social media formats as a vehicle for carrying and dispersing the content. In 2006 Time Magazine acknowledged the growing importance of social media by naming *You* person of the year.

MAPPING THE INTERSECTION OF SOCIAL AND MEDIA

In its ability to connect people across time and space, the power of social media is rooted in facilitating a range of easy accessible and scalable channels through which interactions can occur. It includes systems that support one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many interactions. Many of these kinds of interactions support the generation of “digital spaces” for people to gather, participate and create, and publics to form (e.g., “performative innovation”, “networked publics”). With the availability of affordable and accessible tools for interaction, social media is emerging globally (e.g., Facebook and YouTube (US), QQ.com, Weibo, Sina.com (China), vk.com (Russia), Cyworld (Korea) as a creative infrastructure that is associated with pervasive knowledge-intensive, information-rich and user-centric activities underpinning the information society. More specifically, social media emphasizes the prominent role of information and knowledge and the use of digital information and communication technologies, thereby highlighting opportunities for various participatory practices to take place. And, while computer code, or architecture, is generally not understood to determine user practice, it does shape the way in which people can interact, guiding a plethora of (new and altered) practices in terms of communication, collaboration, information dissemination, and social organization (boyd 2008; van der Graaf 2009). What makes social media different from previous media, is the way it is designed, the way people use and behave on it, and the way participation spreads, and thus, – as an integral part of everyday life – social media has the potential to alter how society is organized.

From diverse lines of research ranging from media, to business, to law, to economics, social media and its new avenues for dissemination and engagement are explored, using various methods such as social network analysis, netnography, and data-mining techniques. In these literatures, participation, collectivism, and creativity seem to be shared features, drawing attention to the increase of the (marginal) productivity of the networked user. Many, fully-fledged and not so fully-fledged, terms, concepts, and models can be detected that seek to capture this trend. The question that runs through the various fields of scholarly research is whether social media is a development that has a detrimental effect on our culture, or is empowering and the way forward to sustain growth and innovation in society, benefitting democracy, culture, law, labour, and creative expression.

In the *media and communication field*, people are understood to engage in the production of meaning, whether of cultural texts, corporate intentions, or the technology itself. Generations of researchers have focused on the determining effects of technology, the producing corporations, and the public – the latter understood both as creators and

audiences. However, the recent proliferation of digital technologies, particularly social media, has reactivated debates regarding the aesthetic status of new, technologically-enabled expressive forms, and questions have been raised regarding the role of commerce in the production of culture. Digital technologies have introduced new issues regarding the originality and reproducibility of digital content that are particularly difficult to address, and they have blurred the lines among producer, distributor, and consumer to a far greater extent than was the case for previous media forms (platforms).

Especially since the 1990s, researchers have shown an increasing interest in this linkage between new technologies and users, looking especially at the formation of new social collectivities and bottom-up redefinitions of cultural practices. These studies have aimed to examine social media sites that relate commercially produced or provided media content to – often unexpected kinds of – official and unofficial grassroots user practices such as machinima and mash-ups. These studies have tended to yield insights into the aesthetic status and social power of content and online networking by casting the work of participating people as transgressive. This was taken to mean that such participation works against the perceived economic interests of the producing or providing corporation, such as file-sharing networks, or at least in ways unintended or not considered by the producing or providing corporation but not perceived as harmful, such as fan fiction. Transgressive actions were thus seen involving people in taking basic, commercial materials provided by corporations and actively re-appropriating and redistributing those materials as cultural practices (Jenkins 2006).

While this blurring of production and consumption practices is not a new phenomenon it has become more salient in the context of digital technologies facilitating those diverse practices on a wider scale. These emerging social media sites of what Bruns (2008) has termed “produsage” (a combination of production and usage; cf. “pro-am” and “prosumer”), such as social networking sites and citizen journalism, are seen as a move away from industrial practices towards “user-led online environments”. In this view, for some researchers, social media empowers people in digital production practices. People are seen as migratory, socially connected, and resistant, describing a “collective intelligence” where users have more control over the flow of information. Alternatively, a *technologist approach* may encourage a focus on social media practices veering between the extremes of techn-utopia and techno-dystopia. In particular, attention has been given to the role of algorithms as a key logic governing the flows of information on which people seem to depend (Gillespie, 2014).

In the discussions of social media in the context of user practices some of the *social science* frameworks view the changing media landscape as a “commons(-like)” and public affair, while others treat users as market-based entities of production. Associating social media participation with the political process, Benkler, for example, has described the emergence of a “networked information economy” that makes the contemporary cultural production system more transparent and malleable by stressing the efficacy of individuals in a more democratic culture of nonmarket-based participation and self-reflexivity. He points to the organization of production in free and open-source software such as Wikipedia, Digg and Slash.dot that does not rely on markets or managerial hierarchies to illustrate an increasingly commons-based peer production of information, knowledge, and culture. This driving force of the emerging economy where loosely connected individuals freely collaborate and share resources and outputs is characterized as being “radically decentralized, collaborative, and nonproprietary” (Benkler, 2006: 60). Such a framework offers an “alternative mode of production” (and, thus, does not replace markets or firms), and may offer an advance in identifying and allocating to the role of social media a shift in publicness contextualized in terms of democratic theory.

Others understand social media as part of broader “structural affordances of a capitalist economy” in which social media practices are considered as “work” (Hinton and Hjorth, 2013). Jenkins (2006) has explored this uneasy relationship of what he termed “convergence culture” at a moment when an increasing interest of firms in user activities can be witnessed for reasons such as revenue opportunities and re-enforcing consumer commitments. This collision of firm and individual interests draws attention to the interplay between the structured commercial agenda of firms and the, generally, differently purposed agendas and appropriations of people using social media. At stake is the interplay between structure and agency that alters the logic by which both firms and users process information and content. In approaching social media in terms of “sharing and transforming culture” – traditionally part of non-commercial, “free” culture – vis-à-vis the domain of commercial creativity, “the consequence is that we are less and less a free culture, more and more a permission culture” (Lessig, 2004: 8). In fact, a complex generative capacity seems to go hand-in-hand with social media practices; when commercial and non-commercial worlds have collided, the corporate world has been quick to assert the terms of its control by tightly structuring the terms by which people may interact with their goods and services. When any type of (user) engagement is not appreciated, a subscriber’s account can be banned, content can be removed, or, other legal steps can be undertaken. Napster, the music service, was an early example of how this process might work in practice.

Research in the field of *marketing and innovation management* has shown an increasing interest in the commercial application of social media, suggesting a new business paradigm of Web-based economics. Interestingly, cultural values including the terms mentioned earlier – participation, collectivism, and creativity – can be seen to underpin the new or altered business models, thereby highlighting an ideological paradigm shift from producer-power to user-power, and from firm-provided content to user-generated content that, arguably, restructures post-industrial societies and post-service economies (van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009). For example, collectivism or mass collaboration are seen as a new mode, or capability, to harness knowledge and to innovate and generate value promising more efficient and effective usage of human skill, intellect, and originality. In this view, social media is approached as a (digital) culture of “commonality and creativity” associated with a shared trust in the grassroots powers of people. As a result, the conventional hierarchical business model of producer-consumer seems to be rapidly replaced by what has been termed a “co-creation” model, a term that originated in and is frequently deployed in the business literature (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Frequent use of such terms seems to justify the blurring boundaries between collective (non-market, public) and commercial (market, private) modes of production, and between proprietary (closed) and non-proprietary (open) hardware and software platforms. In so doing, this approach skillfully merges a capital intensive profit-oriented focus associated with industrial production, with a labour intensive, non-profit-oriented focus supported by peer production.

This perspective, particularly in *economics*, can also be seen to concentrate on issues of accessibility and the diffusion of knowledge, or, value amplification associated with network effects, and bypassed processes by which corporations manage to convert acquired knowledge – outside the boundaries of the firm, via users – into specific competences, capabilities and (economic) value. Within the context of rapidly expanding social media sites, consulting with people has become an important focal point for corporations. In a more traditional view of innovation (i.e. manufacturer-centric innovation) organizations take on most, if not all, of the product development, while in the “users-as-innovators” model, people become part of the stages of idea generation and development, suggesting that people are capable of innovating for themselves. This is referred to by von Hippel (2005) as the “democratization of innovation” and has been shown to occur in the context of physical and information-based products and services. According to von Hippel (ibid: 64) the perspective of user-centred innovation is underpinned by:

- “(1) the steadily improving design capabilities (innovation toolkits) that advances in computer hardware and software make possible for users;
- (2) the steadily improving ability of individual users to combine and coordinate their innovation-related efforts via new communication media such as the Internet.”

This practice/process is often enabled and supported by firm-provided toolsets. In this way, people are presented with a broader palette to participate, shifting the locus of the firm-user interface while people can contribute to product or service development. The firm may benefit from these practices, for example, via feedback that may guide within-firm innovation. Yet, by inviting and, in many cases, facilitating participatory practices, innovation becomes (relatively) open and distributed, challenging the more standard division of labour between organizations and users, urging corporations to adopt new or alternative business models and ways of organization.

SOCIAL MEDIA: TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In understanding the co-evolution of social media in terms of “sociality” and “media” (or, “platforms”) generally two perspectives can be discerned, the administrative or instrumental, and critical approaches, each guided by their own research agenda highlighting particular values and actions in the cultural, social, political and economic domains (Mansell, 2012). The distinction is not clear-cut. In the context of information and communication technology (ICT) research, the administrative approach tends to focus on the materiality, or hardware of ICT and aspects related to the mastery of technological and social systems, while a critical view tends to focus on the material characteristics, symbolism of technologies and their applications, and aspects of the diversity of information production and consumption. In the context of Internet research, the administrative stream can be seen to veer in its understanding of social media towards a progressive means of benefiting the economy or an inclusive technology advantaging democracy, while the critical stance tends to give precedence to unequal power relationships over opportunities of resistance or mobilization.

A closer look at the various literatures that engage with social media in all its facets, enables us to distil a user-centric and network-centric analytical framework (Langlois, 2013). The *user-centric* framework centre-stages the linkage between technology and empowerment. It highlights the centrality of people supported by social media in creation and exchange practices, fostering new ways of expression, meanings, representations, and so forth. The role of social media as a platform is of lesser importance than is enabling and facilitating technology associated with more opportunities for participation and agency. The *network-centric* framework tends to focus on the examination of networked conditions and regulations underpinning the dispersion of information on the Internet. In other words, research tends to address the technical elements of the infrastructure – or, the processes of transmission – vis-à-vis political and economic dynamics, which tends to yield insights into

governance issues involved in network control. For example, legal, political and economic struggles can be detected about deep packet inspection and the monitoring of illegal downloads, etc., which are currently being played out. Research of this kind shows the way the “conditions of networking” are (re)formed by political and economic interests that are said to endanger or limit the extent of user participation and agency, drawing attention to issues such as privacy and surveillance.

However, the dynamic underpinning the intricacies of social media – that is, how social media develops in relation to other (social) media, technological architectures and the socio-cultural logic guiding its performance – warrants a view of social media as a dynamic process embedding both a techno-cultural construct and socio-economic structure (van Dijck, 2013). Renewed attention is needed to make the networked conditions apparent that underpin social media practices, together with a reassessment of the dynamic and open-ended flow that guides communication practices. This is put aptly by Langlois (2013: 96) when she argues that “focusing on the networked conditions within which the cultural process of communication takes place and within which parameters of participation are defined involves tracking the interplay between networks of technology, policy making, economic interests, legal frameworks, and the cultural production and circulation of meanings”. As such, the “fabric of social media” is seen as *embedded (user-centric and network-centric) relationships between conceptualizations of technology, users, content, ownership, governance, and business models*.

Thus, for those with an affinity to technology, the term ‘platform’ is utilized in the examination of the techno-socio-cultural roles of (meta)data, algorithms, and interfaces. These, in various capacities, are seen as shaping the experiences of those using social media. Amazon, for example, computes algorithms to learn about people’s reading tastes and purchase behaviours and, in this way, can make book suggestions. With a slogan “Customers who bought this item, also bought...” Amazon can adhere or appeal to different modes of sociality, directing certain consumer behaviour (van Dijck, 2013). Algorithms then are seen as a corporation’s core proprietary asset. Also, research on the front-end of technology, that is the user-facing interface, tends to analyse “defaults”. It examines the standard settings of many software applications that can be seen to steer user behaviour, often referred to as “ideological manoeuvrings” and associated with struggles over privacy and information control such as is the case for Facebook.

While perhaps people are not always fully aware of the mechanisms that underpin their social media practices, research has shown that they are not “dupes”, uncritical of social media either. Studies have yielded insights into how different social media architectures

facilitate specific styles of connectedness, self-presentation (such as “real-life identity” versus “alias”) and taste performance. Moreover, debates about the role of people --at times, recipients, consumers, producers, amateurs, citizens, labourers and so forth – in the context of social media tends to concentrate on ideological issues such as empowerment (e.g., fluid ownership status, monetizing strategies) and identity formation in expressing and presenting oneself, and, again, rising issues about the control over information.

From a content-perspective, social media has been approached as a vehicle for user-generated content. Especially since the mid-2000s, an increase in content as “connective resource” rather than as a means of expression can be detected. This user-created content draws attention to what people dis/like, their opinions and engagements, and so forth, and tends to offer a building-ground for group-forming and community-building as well as to offer valuable insights into trends and consumer preferences. Battles over “good content” among users and owners are commonplace. Content owners seek to resolve these by imposing rules and guidelines about what is appropriate or legally allowed. Moreover, over the past decade or so, a shift can be detected from offering (digital) products to services, requiring corporations to look for new ways of monetizing online creativity and sociality such as selling virtual products, subscriptions, advertising, and (meta)data. Research veers between viewing monetizing strategies as a static exploitation model and as dynamic facilitator in the process of shaping sociality and creativity. In this context, associated issues such as ownership structures become relevant as well especially as many social media platforms started out as nonprofit, “collectively owned user-centred” organizations and have made a shift to profit-driven and commercially owned organizations. For example, early start-ups such as MySpace, YouTube and Flickr were bought respectively by News Corp., Google and Yahoo!

Against this “inclusive perspective”, the following themes highlight the analytical fabric of social media which informs understandings of both social and media (Hinton and Hjorth, 2013). These dimensions can be broadly defined by the dynamics of *empowerment*, *always-on lifestyle*, and *professionalization*.

Participation, power and privacy

The discourse about social media has stressed a “participatory turn” linked to the increased amount of interaction opportunities on the Internet. This “mass self-communication” highlights the capacity for people to self-generate, self-direct, and self-select their social media environment and is said to empower them. For example, Twitter was used in upheavals in Moldova and Iran to broadcast to citizens and the world about ongoing events, making self-communication “an extraordinary medium for social movements and rebellious individuals to build their autonomy and confront the institutions of society in their own terms and around their own projects” (Castells, 2008, np). More generally, the organization of social media sites tends to offer a structure of interdependence that can be characterized by relations of a minimal hierarchy and organizational heterogeneity associated with bottom-up and egalitarian accounts of power. In this view, social media is said to allow and facilitate people to take control over their lives.

While some scholars have pointed to such increasing empowerment opportunities, others take a more critical stance. For instance, Mansell (2002: 409) urges examination of the capabilities people need to possess in accessing and using social media asking “whether the deployment of new media is consistent with ensuring that the majority of citizens acquire the necessary capabilities for interpreting and acting upon a social world that is intensively mediated by the new media”. Also, it has been argued that people are “pushed” to participate in social media, resulting in a questioning of the benefits of such (seemingly) social sites. Scholars have also addressed the issue of control or the role of the proprietor of social media platforms because, increasingly, user contributions or communications are, in one way or another, subject to commodification processes such as advertising sales. This has drawn attention to these participatory practices as “free labour” (see the section “participation, creativity and commercialization” below), and rather than being seen as a revolutionary moment of the re-distribution of wealth and control, social media is said to obscure the economic dynamics and patterns of capital accumulation.

This is of particular importance because – given the technical underpinnings of social media sites and often-changing Terms of Service (ToS) – people are continuously challenged to understand and maintain vigilance about the visibility, or public nature, of the information and content (“personal data”) that they produce and share. Consequently, it is desirable for people to configure and adjust their privacy settings (if) allowed to do so by using the mechanisms offered by social media service providers. In addition, there also tends to be a host of third-party services and applications such as aggregators and advertising networks, that are affiliated with a social media site and that also may have access to personal data and

this, generally, is unbeknownst to the users of the social media sites. Moreover, numerous multimedia information extraction techniques exist that facilitate inferences from private data about the users, rendering personal data access and dispersion even more obscure for people (e.g., “online behavioural advertising” (OBA), which is a mechanism that collects such online data as viewing behaviours from unique computers or devices over time).

Several efforts have been made to examine the risks involved in social media use. One stream of research has focused on the identification and classification of privacy risks. These risks tend to be derived from the social media platform-third party service dynamic or from the mixed public-private dimension of user profiles accessing personal data. Many analytical tools such as network-based inference techniques are available that can utilize publicly available information to make predictions about a private individual. Another line of investigation engages with privacy risk awareness vis-à-vis the user of a social media site. These studies seek insights into the user-site interaction using privacy scores such as “item response theory”, making the extent of exposure of private data for the particular user transparent. Lastly, an interest in “privacy wizards” is of interest to some researchers. Such tools help people to configure their privacy settings giving some access to selected pieces of data and not to others. Examples of such tools are vector-based representations of community membership and adaptive policy prediction systems that combine concept detection with a mining approach. Thus, in times of the changing user practices and expectations, at stake are online privacy, personal data protection and personal data value definition (Pierson, 2012).

Privacy concerns have been raised especially about young social media users. For example, it is possible to reconstruct social security numbers by examining personal data provided on Facebook. Another concern is an apparent disconnect between young people’s desire to protect privacy and their actual behaviour, a so-called “privacy paradox”. Trust is also an important issue. In fact, trust and usage objectives may impact on what people are willing to share. For example, Facebook users express greater trust in Facebook than MySpace users do in MySpace and have been shown to share more information on the site. Moreover, people are more likely to give away personal information if a request comes from a “friend”, jeopardizing security such as “phishing” schemes. Yet studies have shown that young people tend to be aware of potential privacy threats and that many are rather proactive about minimizing them (Livingstone, 2009). On another note, privacy is also implicated in users’ ability to control impressions and manage social contexts (see next section). Privacy options have also been found to be inflexible when it comes to dealing with conflicts with friends who understand privacy in a different way.

Furthermore, protection and revelation of personal data flows involve tangible and intangible trade-offs for the data subject as well as the potential data holder and are supported by implicit assumptions of (economic) value. Research has tended to concentrate on (explicitly or implicitly) measuring the amount of money (or benefit) an individual is likely to find appropriate in order to give away his or her personal data. Also, the investigation of tangible prices or intangible costs has yielded insights into the extent individuals are willing to pay to protect their privacy. Following a “canonical” economic stance, however, people are understood to have stable preferences for privacy that underlie the mental trade offs they make between the costs and benefits of sharing and protecting personal data. This suggests that individuals make rational decisions about what personal information they reveal and what to protect, and, hence, that there is no need for market (or, regulatory) intervention.

Yet, contemporary debates focusing on the user-defined values of privacy adopt a behavioural understanding of the economics of privacy rather than approaching privacy decision making as merely “rational”. For example, user-defined values in privacy valuations have been found to be inconsistent (e.g., people seem to make inconsistent privacy-relevant decisions) and also there is evidence of a control paradox (e.g., providing users with more control over publishing information suggests increasing an individual’s willingness to disclose sensitive information). In fact, people seem to assign different values to their data privacy depending on “whether they consider the amount of money they would accept to disclose otherwise private information, or the amount of money they would pay to protect otherwise public information” on the one hand, and “the order in which they consider different offers for that data”, on the other hand (Acquisti, et al., 2010: 1); the “price” to protect a piece of information differs from the price people ascribe to it in the context of selling it. It is difficult, therefore, to make an exact evaluation of user-defined value toward their personal privacy; a gap that seems much wider than is the case for ordinary consumer products.

Not only does social media seem to impact on the logic of “empowerment and economics”, it also seems to challenge legal scholarship such as perceptions of “technology-neutral law” vis-à-vis newer terms such as “data protection by design”. Legal scholarship has tended to distinguish between separate legal domains such as privacy and copyright law and the implications, generally, seem to have remained within that particular domain. Social media associated with such a changing technological landscape can therefore be seen to challenge these distinctive domains. To date, few legal scholars seem to have taken a broader perspective on, for example, the dynamics of privacy and copyright in the social media context (Cohen, 2012). For instance, one’s personal data ecosystem can both yield people as

“data subjects” that turn into “data producers or controllers” qualifying their personal data as creative content protected under copyright law, while one’s posted photos on a social network site may also violate data protection law and the portrait rights of someone else. Furthermore, an interest in legal norms can be detected in research focusing on how socio-technical infrastructures may interfere with them as in the case of “default settings” which is addressed for example, by the European Union’s (EU) General Data Protection Regulation that is in the making for possible introduction in 2014. It embeds the design of privacy and data protection compliance into information systems from the start. The EU cookie law that introduced an explicit consent mechanism informing people when they are being tracked online is another means to protect privacy and supports people’s empowerment online.

The private public life

Terms such as “media life” (Deuze, 2012), where people increasingly are considered to live “in” social media rather than to “live with” media, or “mediation”, which describes the “mediated connection and interconnection” as the mortar of the infrastructure of most people’s contemporary lives, draw attention to the importance of the “digital” in people’s “offline world”. They highlight the dynamic between offline and online as well as private and public and the ways people perceive, manage or manoeuvre between these spaces.

In the everyday, unmediated, or offline, environments, social interactions among people are guided by impressions they make and ritually attempt to manage. These can veer between carefully and carelessly crafted, explicitly and implicitly expressed, negotiated and adjusted signals – via, among others, speech, body language, fashion, which in combination convey attitudes, emotions, affiliations and so forth -, that people take into account to convey or interpret an impression in a particular social situation. Yet, in the mediated situation of the Internet, much of what were once said to be “honest signals” cannot be trusted as such in the online world. Here, identity information is concealed in the absence of corporeal cues and locale presence information. Therefore, people must deploy explicit means to engage and communicate among themselves online such as by creating a user profile on Facebook whereby the fields indicating one’s interests, background and so forth, may be understood as an act of self-presentation. Social signalling associated with one’s “digital identity” thus occurs via manoeuvring self-presentation and impression management vis-à-vis technology.

The conceptualization of “identity”, however, is contested. For example, a psychological or behavioural approach has tended to view identity as a developmental process marking the formation of identity (via crisis) from childhood through adolescence; a sociological stance has framed identity in relation to society, through “socialization” processes such as the role

of subcultures in an individual's identity development; an individual's sense of self in relation to a group of people gives way to a so-called "social identity" à la Goffman; power issues over the construction and control over identity have been highlighted in the examination of struggles in terms of class, race, and gender; contemporary social theory has linked identity to self-reflection and self-monitoring (Buckingham, 2007). From a legal perspective, identity tends to be used to refer to a particular person, while from a technical perspective, the term has been deployed as a "database placeholder" or a collection of information to identify a unique person.

Early work on identity in the context of technology and the Internet focused on how life mediated as a cyborg may impact on one's identity, thereby possibly challenging systems of power. Sherry Turkle's work has yielded insights into how technology assists in and complicates identity development among youths. Through psychoanalysis of her subjects, she found that youths tend to simulate identities online that are separate from physical interactions in the offline world. This is a view that stands in contrast to research showing that youths seem to present one side of their identity in relation to a particular social context.

Research has shown that people still tend to represent themselves and interact online in a way that is shaped by their digital presence, even when it lacks a corporeal sense. The Internet in general, and social media in particular, are not distinct spaces, but rather are interwoven with people's offline performances, conversations, and interactions, underpinned by other aspects of their lives. Thus, people tend to (seamlessly) move between the unmediated and mediated world linked by their participation and engagement with them. These participations are not isolated acts. Instead, they are inextricably connected to a context. The process of generating and maintaining one's online self encourages people to think about themselves; people must envisage themselves and how they would like to be perceived by others, and articulate this online, often in the absence of a context and feedback, which can result in being misinterpreted or represented in a way that is beyond one's control (boyd, 2008). Thus, participating in social media sites requires some degree of self-reflection such as contemplating what boxes to fill in and questions to answer in creating a profile on a social network as a means to construct and represent one's "digital body" (Brake, 2008), a practice found to have become a common activity these days. In signalling one's informational identity, cues are presented about common and distinguishing elements that guide the practice of impression management.

Danah boyd was one of the first to examine the negotiation of self-presentation in relation to other people in social networks. A practice referred to as "public displays of connection"

assists people to navigate and validate identity information provided in online profiles. Research has shown that variations exist between “accurate” and “fake” identity information and tends to vary from platform to platform. Self-presentation is also expressed via friendship. Research into such “friendship links” – often conducted through network analysis of, for example, profile and linkage data on friending and other usage patterns can be examined – has yielded insights into issues such as the role of friending in social drama, the link between the attractiveness of friends and impression formation, friendship vis-à-vis alternative network structures of performing “taste” such as via favourite music, and “likes” (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013). In the dynamic online-offline relationship, research has also shown that social networks seem primarily to maintain offline relationships. For instance, Ellison, et al. (2007) have shown that Facebook tends to support and strengthen existing offline relationships rather than encourage establishing new ones. Moreover, new social relations seem to be motivated by “weak ties” such as a common interest or friend.

Against this backdrop, research into social media have (re)invoked debates about what is public and private. Generally, the matrix extends from what is hidden and open, to what is individual and collective. A large body of research exists that is not so nuanced, however, despite the fact that “public” and “private” are relative terms guiding individual perspectives (Gal, 2002). In fact, some degree of privacy is necessary for people to self-actualize and grow and protect the integrity of relationships with other people. These “instances of privacy” are of great value as they allow people to “experiment” without fear of retribution. Different interactions or contexts then seem to correspond to different degrees of privacy and publicness – about for example, the kinds of information that are deemed appropriate to collect and share (cf. “contextual integrity”) – associated with different levels of protection from others.

As indicated above, participating in social media is not risk-free. On a different level of “offline” and “online” risk perception, people tend to be more aware of risks like crime in the physical world than in the digital realm. Also, people tend to perceive the risk of encountering harmful or criminal activity as being higher for online than offline activity, that is, they feel that they have limited choice and no personal control. People are also more afraid of new risks than those with which they are familiar. Interestingly, findings have pointed to users perceiving a greater risk when it comes to activities related to finances, such as online banking and making online purchases. Falling victim to, for example, using social networks or search engines tends to be considered less risky and these can be seen to compensate for becoming highly valued targets for attackers.

A very important “tradeoff” in the “private public life” is that many people are willing to give away personal information in exchange for benefits such as speed, convenience of transactions or gift vouchers when they feel this social or economic gain is more worthwhile than their privacy loss. Paradoxically, many people also seem to claim control over the information they disclose by adopting strategies to protect themselves from certain privacy risks – or, surveillance practices – and an assertion of their right of ownership over their information. Their concerns about the creation of boundaries around their data and their perceptions of the risks involved in the disclosure of their personal data influence their adoption of some types of protection strategies and their intention to resort to online privacy-protecting behaviours either by falsifying or withholding information or by using certain technology-based protection strategies. Other important concerns include identity theft or impersonation, phishing, finance (e.g., credit card details), harassment (e.g., stalking and bullying) and so forth.

Participation, creativity and commercialization

The rise of social media witnessed in the emergence and adoption of an increasingly large number of platforms and user base has yielded a complex ecosystem where both community dynamics and commerce can be seen to intersect.

As pointed out earlier, user engagement is central to social media practices and is captured by conceptualizations such as convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006 – see his earlier “participatory culture”), produsage (Bruns, 2007), wealth of networks (Benkler, 2006), and like economy (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013). Although stemming from different perspectives and, perhaps, encapsulating different aspects of social media, they all seem to celebrate – just as Time Magazine did in 2006 – the millions of people that in one way or another participate in and contribute to social media platforms that thrive on user-generated content (UGC). This may be so even not all of these social media sites are “pointless” without user participation or contribution, and will fail without these practices that include a broad spectrum of engagement from low-level inputs such as simple communication interactions such as a “like” in Facebook and product reviews, to high levels of participation or creativity, such as the generation of elaborate mash-ups uploaded onto YouTube and total conversion modifications of games.

Not much systematic research is available as yet into the ways users participate on social media sites, what they may contribute, and how and with what frequency they may interact with others. Yet some research does focus on orientations such as a “lurker/poster” dichotomy (or, passive/active participation), location of consumption practice, participation

qualities such as social and topical involvement (van der Graaf, 2009). A rather bleak picture exists indicating that a relatively small percentage of users are actual creators (e.g., of blogs, upload videos, game modifications). In fact, several studies have shown that, most Internet users like to be entertained by reading, watching, and downloading content contributed by others rather actively producing it (cf. “social media pyramid”). More systematic and empirically robust, global research is needed to address motivations for participation, skills, literacy, and related issues.

User driven practices seem to point to a kind of “talent-led economy” where “work” and “play” appear to become increasingly blurred, drawing attention to user practices, not as mere play, consumption and entertainment, but rather as working for free, which can lead to entrepreneurship and competition with the platform or social media providing firm. This kind of mixture of personal and professional identities has raised many questions about the labour and exploitation associated with the blurred boundaries of production and consumption. Approaching user engagement practices as a form of labour is not new, yet it has become salient in the context of social media. The kinds of inputs provided by users are said to provide “value” to the social media platform and/or the corporation hosting it as well as to the (extended) community at large through their – in many cases, freely shared – knowledge and labour contributions.

Thus, user practices are seen as “free labour” that through value-adding practices balance somewhere in between paid and voluntary work (Terranova, 2000). For example, the main obstacles to “precarious playbour” for game modders are the “recognition of their status as creators of value for the industry and gamers alike, claiming their intellectual property rights and overcoming the ideological representation of modding as mere hobby” (Küchlich, 2005: 7). Indeed, modders operate in a firm-hosted community from which the game corporation continuously seeks to benefit, albeit by proxy. Firms regard mod practices as attractive resources for free brand creation à la game-turned-mod-turned-commercial-title Counter-Strike (Valve Inc.), extensions of the game’s shelf-life, increased loyalty, innovation, and recruitment, while users seem to be drawn by activities such as problem solving, hacking, self-expression, and portfolio-building. Questions are also raised about the implications of this greater user agency for the labour and employment conditions of professionals, as free or cheaply-produced content is “a clear threat to the livelihoods of professional creatives whose prices are driven down by, or who simply cannot compete with, the commercial mining of these burgeoning, discount alternatives” (Ross, 2009: 22).

Overall, social media is mostly praised for its generative features that inform the dynamic relationship between user participation as input and user innovation as output. This

generative capacity is one that thrives on unexpected and unfiltered modifications and contributions made by all kinds of users (Zittrain, 2008). In this effort to invite users to participate and co-create, the more closed production and innovation model is giving way to a more open, distributed and modular model, often crossing the boundaries of the developer or hosting organization of the social media platform. In this view, user practices are increasingly approached not in terms of “unpaid and exploited” sources of labour, but rather in terms of a complex negotiation of meanings, practices and experiences in the context of operating in more open and distributed innovation platforms (van der Graaf, 2012). People are thus not per se seen as being blind or unknowing of the platform’s objectives.

As a result, market and non-market relations play an increasingly constitutive role in society and economy. What is at stake may, arguably, not be the commodification of the “social” but rather how the co-evolution of the social and business relations is framed, thereby questioning the suitability of the labour-play framework to fully understand the dynamic relationships involved in of social media (Banks, 2013; Hartley, 2008). For example, Potts, et al. (2008: 4) have coined the term “social network market”, which is informed by the idea that participation is a multifaceted dynamic encapsulating all “agents involved in the system, not just inherited corporate structures” as participants. User practice is said to be constituted in networks of practitioners stressing “information feedback” over individual preferences or price signals, suggesting a move beyond the investigation of “media power” towards the “growth of knowledge”, operating in the “complex borderland between social networks and established markets”, which is not to suggest that power relations are not relevant.

Whereas both users and firms actively appropriate and rework digital resources, it is typically only the corporation that can claim full rights over their products. The firms have developed legal contracts outlining what can and cannot be done with the product or service. Issues of artistic appropriation and ‘fair use’ are firmly on the agenda – such as in the context of music and film – but legal scholarship can also be seen to concentrate on the underlying code of social media sites rather than on mere user experiences (see above). The rights of users (as creators) tend to be bound by a site’s End-User License Agreement (EULA) that typically denies the user any type of ownership and, as such, contributes to an unbalanced arrangement of firm-user relationships in product and service development. The legal pay-off for user participation in creative and social practices remains mainly marginal in terms of legal protection and ownership rights associated with user creativity on social media platforms.

In general, it may be said that users of social media sites find themselves in the peculiar situation of being in the business of creating proprietary experiences (bound by the firm's software) that can be commercial and non-commercial proprietary extensions of the firm-developed product or service. For example, explicitly, users of the virtual 3D world Second Life can develop digital content that can be exchanged for money and a commercial license can be retrieved for business purposes, but, implicitly, freely available content may result in an overall better firm-developed product experience and direct more traffic towards the platform. Therefore, the pay-off for user participation in content creation practices seems to remain marginal in terms of legal protection and opportunities for entrepreneurship.

There is research interest in multi-sided platform business models that include users who participate and contribute to the social media platform, offering a greater potential for (market) growth by harnessing the (entrepreneurial) drive of participating users in existing or new social media sites underpinned by the enabling platform. Contributing users have this constellation space at their disposal to work in, negotiate with and reconfigure. The firm can thus strategically access the knowledge provided that once was outside its boundaries. Such a multi-sided platform approach highlights a more collaborative set up, on the one hand, and a more competitive one, on the other.

The relationship between the organization of within-firm resources and external user-driven resources suggests the likelihood for multiple centres of social and creativity-related activity, competition and compensation to occur, where the firm and users rub shoulders in different formations, moving attention away from the fluidity of firm boundaries to platform boundaries. Such ambiguous boundaries (associated with, e.g., the reduction of costs and non-linear expansion) seem to indicate an "entrepreneurial approach" towards the organization of "work" processes which may not only benefit the firm, but, in one way or another, also contribute to the users of social media services. Social media then seem to draw attention to the potential for the co-evolution of participation and competition to occur, which may offer opportunities for competition (and compensation) for all participating stakeholders.

FUTURE AVENUES: DIGITAL, SOCIAL AND MOBILE

Research on social media has moved on two fronts. First, moving away from either hailing or rejecting such sites, to offering a basis to assess claims attached to the idea of the participatory and social Web. And second, moving from the intuitive and implied to being manifest in empirical evidence.

Social media principles, mechanisms, and strategies provide many potential avenues for further exploration. For example, research into the different interactions occurring in various social media representations like social networking sites, portal sites, and online gaming sites, and, more importantly, mobile technologies, where each seems to reveal particular interactions between the goals of the platform and the interests of users. Future research designs allowing for a comparative perspective across selected social media sites could yield insights into the variety of participatory structures that may be aligned with differences in purpose, interest, site structure, and interaction – and what they may reveal about underlying (media-supported) social relationships and exchange trajectories locally and globally.

Research could focus on the kinds of input that people can give, the structure of inputs, external rule sets, and the community-based norms informing the loci where the development and organization of platform-user interactions are likely to assert themselves. An approach to social media as an inclusive logic could link identified practices and processes to the complex connections occurring between social media platforms, mapping users, technologies, institutions, and economic structures, yielding insights into (new) constellations that could benefit understandings of power relations, (dis)locatability, entrepreneurship, and human development.

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Notes for contributors:

Contributors are encouraged to submit papers that address the social, political, economic and cultural context of the media and communication, including their forms, institutions, audiences and experiences, and their global, national, regional and local development. Papers addressing any of the themes mentioned below are welcome, but other themes related to media and communication are also acceptable:

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- 150-200 word abstract
- Headings and sub-headings are encouraged
- The Harvard system of referencing should be used
- Papers should be prepared as a Word file
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