SI: Manifesto

Putting Social Media in Its Place: A Curatorial Theory for Media's Noisy Social Worlds

Mary L. Gray[1,2]

Abstract

The quest to make sense of media's impact—what it does to us—dominates communication theories and popular discourse about media. But the impulse to collar, cultivate, domesticate, or measure the impact of media on individuals and society can have pernicious effects, too. This essay calls for a set of new analytical models to account for media as messy instantiations of social interaction transforming before our very eyes. We need to shift from a media effects paradigm that narrowly focuses on the brightest signals of social media use and turn to what I will call here a curatorial theory of social media. This approach, inspired by research from several founding editors of *Social Media + Society*, focuses on media's cultural work and myriad manifestations—from its technologies to the discourses that flow through and from them. Let us attend to the more elusive, noisy cultural and social forces that bring some aspects of media sharply into focus while obscuring others. And, above all, let us pay attention to the curatorial reworking of media that happens in particular places—nations, towns, bodies.

The quest to make sense of media's impact—what *it does* to us—dominates communication theories and popular discourse about media. The Frankfurt School's attempts to comprehend the chilling efficacy of fascist propaganda (Wiggershaus, 1994); media scholar George Gerbner's use of cultivation theory in television's early days to measure how media exposure, over time, shapes shared perceptions of the world (Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978); and domestication theory's accounts of media melting into individuals' intimate lives (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992) all reflect a productive lineage of scholarship deeply concerned with calculating media's measurable impact on society. But the impulse to collar, cultivate, domesticate, or measure the impact of media on individuals and society can have pernicious effects, too.

We tend to approach media and information communication technologies as if they are solid objects with intrinsic features able to broker the defining difference between life and death, war and peace, or a better restaurant selection. In some instances, this approach imbues media technologies with inherent powers, impervious to social, cultural, or temporal forces. We aggressively cheerlead or deride specific media technologies when assessing their impact on society. We also increasingly level lived experiences with social media to scatter plots of clustered masses. This decontextualized display of media use privileges the visibility of digitally traceable networks, inviting us to ignore the noisy bits of social worlds that leave little digital detritus behind. Relatedly, our efforts to track what is trending on social media amplify an imagined majority of individuals-in-aggregate, reproducing notions of "typical social media users" floating frictionless through unfettered exchanges or outliers beyond our reach.

But media are not tangible tools we hold with a sure grip. They relay and refract moments of social exchange (Henderson, 2008). And societies are not the sum total of individuals linked through social networking sites. Societies are exponentially more than the sum of their digital footprints. We need new analytical models to account for media as messy instantiations of social interaction transforming before our very eyes.

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[1]Microsoft Research, USA
[2]Indiana University, USA

Corresponding Author:
Mary L. Gray, Microsoft Research, One Memorial Drive, Cambridge, MA 02142, USA.
Email: mLg@microsoft.com

media. This approach, inspired by research from several founding editors of *Social Media + Society*, focuses on media's cultural work and myriad manifestations—from its technologies to the discourses that flow through and from them. Let us attend to the more elusive, noisy cultural and social forces that bring some aspects of media sharply into focus while obscuring others. And, above all, let us pay attention to the curatorial reworking of media that happens in particular places—nations, towns, bodies.

Much of my work concentrates on what it takes to become a legible, visible citizen of the world and the collective, cultural work it requires of us all. Specifically, I've spent the past several years learning from the lives of queer and questioning youth in the rural United States, to understand how they negotiate a sense of difference in a place where they are presumed to be isolated, alone, and out of place. I started with the assumption that the Internet would make their individual lives easier. I was wrong. Sometimes it matters. Sometimes it doesn't. But "it" (media) is always tethered to the particularities of physical locations, material contingencies, and the passing of time. These facets of our social worlds matter when trying to understand everything from the role of social media in cultural revolutions to the deliberations of queer rural youth cruising mobile media apps to pick a local park for a summer evening of campy fun.

Attending to issues of place and social location in my research gave me a way to bear down on the power relations that shape the presence, absence, and silences that give texture and meaning to technologies' role in rural queer young people's everyday lives. Social media research offers a renewed opportunity to plumb, as noted anthropologist Keith Basso put it, "the wisdom that sits in places" and the subtle destruction that comes from ignoring how people make sense of their immediate environments (Basso, 1996).

Social media are exemplar objects of analysis for exploring the manifestations of privilege, marginalization, and circulations of power wrought by digital media. Social media scholarship could challenge the assumption that there is something settled or predetermined—predictable—about the meaning or potential of communication and information outside of their practiced, situated deployments.

If all social media come to us curated, as Tarleton Gillespie argues in this inaugural issue, then they arrive on the scene with well-worn cultural baggage, inseparable from its meaning, and by extension, meaningful analysis. Importantly, social media researchers are curators, too. In making sense of social media use and trends, we also feed headlines and public debates that reproduce the curated content that we study. These data cannot be understood without unpacking myriad spatially bound political, economic, cultural, and pragmatic deliberations that shape what we can and cannot analyze, including those that position us as researchers. That means that handling social media data comes with ethical commitments, different from the ones that currently accompany a framework of datamining. Social media research means working with data produced through human social interactions. We need a curatorial theory of social media to shift our full attention to the messiness of context and human interaction in the thick of social media's significance. And this shift will be hard.

A curatorial approach to social media asks the general public to look past eye-catching gadgets and the latest app to, instead, pay close attention to the context of social media access, production, and engagement. This framework could rob us of the novelty and predictive prowess that make us so interesting to funders, reporters, and a general public hungry for stories of technologies as the heroes or villains and of the individual user as the arbiter of his or her own destiny in the face of technological change. But that shift is necessary if we are to begin accounting for the circulations and dynamics of power that shape and undo the meaning of social media.

And (even more challenging) a viable curatorial approach to social media will require extracting the public interest embedded in privately owned, commercial media data. We must make a case for the scientific need to make social media data, often stored behind the technology industry's walled gardens, accessible in the name of public health and social welfare. To do this, we will need industry- and university-based researchers to unite and pry open proprietary data for social research. We will have to agree on a shared set of ethical practices when it comes to interloping in the social worlds of people sharing their lives via media. We will also need to dissolve the distinctions between preexisting data sets and working with the digital expressions of people's social interaction if we are to have any hope of respectfully engaging the humans producing the data at the center of our research questions.

Are we ready for this? I think we are.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Author Biography

Mary L. Gray (PhD, University of California, San Diego) is a Senior Researcher at Microsoft Research and an Associate Professor in the Media School, with adjunct appointments in American Studies, Anthropology, and Gender Studies, at Indiana University. Her interests include the intersections of media, social movements, and cultural identity; gender and sexuality; the political economies of digital labor; and critical, qualitative approaches to big data.