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Social Media and the Transformation of Public Space

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Abstract

This introduction to the Special Issue of *Social Media + Society* discusses the key theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches needed to gain insight into how social platforms intervene in public space. It starts by highlighting how in the emerging platform society public and private communication is reshaped by social media's commercial mechanisms, transforming the political economy of the media landscape. Given the complex character of this society, it is essential to employ different perspectives and approaches to trace the multifaceted forces at work in this new global system. Building on the seven contributions to this Special Issue, we show the need for multidisciplinary scholarship. More specifically, we consider the insights produced through historical–cultural, socio-technical, and techno-commercial inquiries into the evolving relationship between social platforms and public space. The introduction concludes with a reflection on the necessity to combine these perspectives in one analytical model.

Keywords

social media, publicness, platform society, theoretical perspectives

Introduction

More than 10 years after their emergence, we have reached a new phase in the development of large social media platforms, as well as in the academic scholarship in this area. In the early years, between 2004 and 2010, most studies focused on the user and the generous creative space offered by social media platforms. The subsequent 5 years (2010–2015) were especially dedicated to the question of how social platforms have become entangled with professional activities, such as news production and distribution, health care, education, and law and order; commercial transactions, such as the hospitality and transport sector; and civil activities, for example, citizen participation and protest organization. As social media are ubiquitously used, they become increasingly interwoven with various sectors in society.

The first decade of social media has given rise to an online infrastructure that is profoundly shaping the way in which societies are organized and publics are shaped. This global infrastructure is far from finished or complete; on the contrary, we are in the middle of a contest to define the contours of what we call the "platform society": a global conglomerate of all kinds of platforms, which interdependencies are structured by a common set of mechanisms. In this "platform society"—the title of our forthcoming book—public and private communication is reshaped by social media's commercial mechanisms, transforming the political economy of the media landscape. The impact of globally operating platforms on local and state economies and cultures is immense, as they force all societal actors—including the mass media, civil society organizations, and state institutions—to reconsider and recalibrate their position in public space.

Given the complex character of the emerging platform society, it is essential to combine different theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches to trace the multifaceted forces that shape this new global system. This introduction to the Special Issue of *Social Media + Society* discusses the different perspectives needed to gain insight into how social platforms intervene in public space. Building on the different contributions, we show the need for a variety of approaches. We have divided this issue into three sections, respectively, illuminating historical–cultural, socio-technical and techno-commercial perspectives on connective platforms. The introduction concludes with a reflection on the

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need to combine different theoretical perspectives on social media and publicness in one analytical model.

Historical–Cultural Perspectives

Two articles in this issue develop a historical–cultural approach to social media. Megan Ankerson focuses on a specific historical phase (the "prehistory" of social media), whereas Sara Marino traces how Italian migrants transform social media into transnational social spaces. Historical and culturally specific approaches may shed light on the intricacies of platform development in the context of particular sets of ideas and practices.

Ankerson's article argues that the World Wide Web's common historical periodization as Web 1.0 ("read-only") and Web 2.0 ("read/write") has become the sediment of a mythic narrative, identifying two radically different periods in the development of the Web. Social media platforms, with their perceived emphasis on interactivity and interpersonal communication via platforms, are firmly positioned in the second era, and the transformation from one phase to the next has fallaciously been caught by revolutionary adjectives. However, as Ankerson argues, we have much to gain by not exclusively positing social media platforms as a 21st century phenomenon. Looking into the genealogies of "social media," the author unravels how the concepts of Web 1.0 and 2.0 are continually reconfigured through design and production practices, cultural and technological frameworks, institutional arrangements, and professional affiliations.

Two case studies from the 1990s—the era labeled as the "read-only" Web—demonstrate the conflicting visions of what the future of the Web might entail. *Day in the Life of Cyberspace*, launched on 10 October 1995 by the MIT Media Lab, and *24 Hours in Cyberspace*, launched on 9 February 1996 by photographer Rick Smolan's production company, Against All Odds, serve as prisms onto this historiographical debate. This article traces the development and afterlife of these two commercially sponsored projects, showing not only the significance of reading and listening in these early Web projects but also of speaking and writing. In contrast, Ankerson points out that the practice of blogging, which has been celebrated as a Web 2.0 model, very much depends on listening/reading technologies like RSS feed readers, and reverse chronological structures. Thus, rather than making a hard distinction between Web 1.0 and 2.0, she maintains that it is more productive to trace the subtle rather than radical shift in the Web's modes of address "from one that prioritizes a social imagination of indefinite strangers, to one that vacillates between imagined strangers and numerable, identifiable, individuals." Taking a historiographical perspective and being attentive to these shifting modes of address, we can move beyond the triumphant rhetoric of the social web and gain a more precise understanding of how a specific type of "social" revolving around user profiling and targeted advertising has become installed and naturalized.

Moving from a historiographic to an ethnographic perspective, Sara Marino examines the transformation of public space through a study of Italian online communities in London, fleeing the financial crisis in their home country. Following in the footsteps of important digital ethnographers such as Christine Hine, Marino traces the dynamics of group memberships and the "circulation of social capital." She aptly reminds us that there are important social media spaces beyond the major commercial platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Especially, online forums were vital as ways of "sharing solidarity and support, while SNSs were used as entertainment tools." It is crucial to identify such public spaces apart from the mainstream commercial platforms to understand the formation of transnational identities. Marino shows how Italians created a home-away-from home to adapt to different cultural-economic customs and construct a sense of "we-ness."

The distribution of private and public space across these networks becomes manifest in the organization of this web community, as the idea of sharing and supporting gets configured by all users. Whereas commercial social media sites such as Facebook are largely preformatted, in these online forums migrants shape their own social space in line with specific national and transnational concerns. Ankerson's and Marino's perspectives are complementary, to some extent overlapping: the organization and imagining of public space, audiences, publics, and communities via online platforms result in the mutual configuration of user needs and platform features. Arguing their cases from specific historical and cultural contexts, both authors highlight the importance of cultural imaginaries in the configuration of social media sites, and vice versa in the configuration of social connections through these sites. Let us now turn to three articles that approach social media from a socio-technical perspective.

Socio-Technical Perspectives

The next three articles, authored by Susanne Almgren and Tobias Olsson, Sander Schwartz, and Stefania Milan, focus on the socio-technical dimensions of social media and their impact on the transformation of public space. This is not to say that they omit or neglect cultural or historical specificity, on the contrary. Some of their case studies involve national (Swedish, Danish, and Canadian, respectively) professional or political movements, but their focus is primarily on how social networking sites (SNSs) shape the daily routines and everyday practices of these movements.

First, Almgren and Olsson examine how established news organizations handle the emergence of social platforms and participatory media channels. Their empirical approach involves an analysis of how a Swedish online newspaper comes to grips with online participation through implementing an article comment function. More particularly, the researchers examine to what extent users' comments are shaped by the technological features on the site, inviting

them to respond. As it turns out, the news site's attempts to steer readers toward "lightweight news" such as entertainment, arts, or sports does not always converge with readers' actual interests in commenting on serious news topics, such as health and politics. This again makes clear that socio-technical steering is never a self-evident process. Technological affordances and users' activities and preferences often articulate each other in unexpected ways.

The phenomenon of media organizations "nudging" online user participation via technological features toward safe havens of online commentary raises several important questions. What exactly do news organizations expect from their audiences in terms of engagement? And how do they deploy interface features to implement editorial stewardship? In online news contexts, the interaction between producers and consumers is thoroughly reconfigured through technological interventions and needs to be addressed by professionals. Yet, given the unanticipated ways in which interaction is reconfigured, such technological interventions need to be understood as ongoing experiments in the redesign of public space.

The intricate relationship between technology, producer, and user is also the subject of analysis in Sander Schwartz's paper about the role of social media in a Danish election campaign. Schwartz's metaphor for this contested relationship is the "dinner table," where the table represents Facebook as a technical platform; the role of host is performed by the moderator; users serve as the "invited guests" at the dinner party. Using Dahlberg's notion of contestation, the article analyzes citizen's comments on eight political candidates' Facebook pages during the 2011 Danish election campaign. As it turns out, the Facebook pages are fan pages rather than platforms for serious and critical interaction, "leaning towards echo chambers by design."

The technological features of Facebook pages seem to prohibit serious dialogues and critical interventions, instead favoring acclamations over political dissent. Examining focus groups of respondents, Schwartz concludes that Facebook pages are successful in connecting politicians with supportive citizens, allowing for strategic political communication and the effective marketing of partisan views. Politicians are in fact moderators of their own political messages, and the technological features of the Facebook platform very much facilitate the "likeable" view of a candidate. Hence, as political marketing strategies and social media marketing instruments become entangled, the space for public debate is closed down. As in the case of the Swedish newspaper discussed in Almgren and Olsson's article, the technological features of online platforms and social action mutually articulate each other.

If the relationship between producer, technology, and user is fundamentally socio-technical in nature, we need to carefully interrogate how such configurations take shape in particular professional settings. In her contribution to this Special Issue, Stefania Milan takes on Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg's notion of collective action by analyzing the organization of protests through social media. She argues that the dynamics of collective action are as much defined by the politics of platforms as by the intentions of its users to achieve a communal (political) goal. Milan offers the notion of "cloud protesting" as a framework for empirical analysis, showing how mobile social media are not merely mediating devices in the hands of activists, but how they shape and are shaped by communicative actions.

The example of the Toronto Occupy protests is a case in point. Through the use of social media platforms, activists develop a collective, communal identity that binds them together, helping them to turn the performance of few protesting individuals into a large-scale event via real-time web streaming. Deploying the technical amenities of social media platforms, the protestors call people into action by means of tags, citations, mentions, and so on. Popular social media practices, such as the use of hashtags and retweets, promote instant conversations and continuous content exchange. The collective identity of protestors is thus extended online, through a number of online mechanisms that enhance the life cycle of civil action.

As we have observed in the previous two articles, the downside of social media in the context of collective protests is their tendency to echo the voices of like-minded people, discouraging critical engagement or dissent. Moreover, as Milan remarks, the life cycle of social media actionable protests is typically very short and tends to disappear as quickly as it emerged. The visibility of online protests, though, can gain traction through frequent repetition, both online and offline or via mainstream media. "Cloud protesting," just as commenting on online news and gathering support through Facebook fan pages, illustrates the strengths and drawbacks of social media dynamics. The socio-technical nature of social media communication calls for much more scrutiny as we are only beginning to see how defining its features are for the organization of democracy in Western societies.

Techno-Commercial Perspectives

Whereas the first five articles in this Special Issue focus on the relationship between technology and users, highlighting historical–cultural and socio-technical perspectives on social media, the last two contributions explore techno-commercial dimensions. It is not that authors of the previous five articles turn a blind eye on the commercial mechanisms that drive most social media platforms; it is simply an aspect of social media that seems less relevant to their approaches of platforms as historical, cultural, or socio-technical phenomena. However, as Rob Heyman, Jo Pierson and David Nieborg demonstrate, we cannot ignore the platform-specific and contextual features that drive social media economics.

Heyman and Pierson concentrate on ways in which Facebook, as the biggest commercially operating social network service with the largest number of global users,

connects users to advertisers and data exploiters. Seemingly, technological features, such as the EdgeRank algorithm, the News Feed, and Gatekeeper function, are in fact commercial mechanisms, allowing Facebook to control connections between users and, more importantly, connectivity between users and third parties. As we have already noted in Schwartz's contribution, Facebook features channel users toward a particular "likeable" object while constructing support and acclaim, and it also does this in a way that optimizes the consumption of commercial messages along the way. Steering users to connect to others and to other pages, Facebook tweaks its techno-commercial system designs to maximize results in terms of data acquisition and advertising exposure.

What Heyman and Pierson show is that Facebook's business models can hardly be seen apart from its socio-technical configurations. Channeling private communication between users, the social media platform converts into a public space that exposes users to all kinds of commercial messages, meanwhile extracting information from users' behavior as they move along the streets of online social traffic. Choosing the Latourian angle of actor–network theory, the authors show how platforms constitute socio-technical ensembles where users are steered across obligatory passage points to perform acts of communication. In this grid, the intimacy of Facebook's perceived private space distracts from the manipulative design of its commercial and public space.

In contrast to Schwartz's analysis of Facebook's function as a dialogic user space, Heyman and Pierson pay relatively little attention to actual users who may resist or protest their (in)voluntary engagement with this platform. However, they draw attention to the techno-commercial *system* that promotes certain dominant commercial features at the expense of actual users and their freedom to interact willfully. Heyman and Pierson's conclusion that Facebook is "colonizing user's lifeworld" makes one wonder about the broader economic context of this techno-commercial system.

Which brings us to the last article completing this Special Issue. David Nieborg questions the relationship between affordances, users, and owners of game platforms from a political economy perspective. He argues that Facebook's economic position in the larger ecosystem of connective platforms cannot be underestimated. The world of game developers and game users is largely dependent on social networks (first and foremost Facebook) for the accumulation of economic value. Taking the free online game Candy Crush Saga as a case in point, Nieborg explores how app developers, such as Candy Crush's owner King, are pivotal in generating and stimulating Facebook's connective value. Arguably, the network effects gained from online games' distribution are equally profitable for both Facebook and King; however, since Facebook profits from King's activities by both accumulating user value and advertising revenue, the social network doubly benefits from the connective properties of games by generating traffic and data.

Like Heyman and Pierson, Nieborg calls attention to the business models underlying social media systems, but the last contribution also sheds light on the political–economic context in which the social gaming industry operates. Already dominant players like Facebook gain power and strength through the commercial expansion of much smaller players like King and others. Platform owners who hold central position as gatekeepers in the larger ecosystem of social media become vital linchpins between small game studios and large and diverse global audiences. Without the network effects offered by Facebook, they would never be able to expand their market. As Nieborg concludes his contribution, the idea that every startup or every small game studio is an equal player in the world of "multisided markets" is a fallacy. All platforms are equal, but some are more equal than others. Facebook's capabilities to leverage network effects are infinitely bigger than any other platform currently up and running in the social media universe.

Heterogeneous Configurations

All seven articles brought together in this Special Issue show a different aspect of the "platform society." Looking through the eyes of a cultural historian, taking a socio-technical approach, or finding a techno-economic angle, all contributors highlight a different aspect of social platforms "mediating" between private and public space while reconfiguring society's online traffic. Indeed, each of these articles' succinct approaches demonstrates not only the potential of applying multiple viewpoints but also the limitations of letting them stand alongside each other. The challenge of studying social media platforms, in our view, is to scrutinize how cultural imaginaries, user and professional practices, technological architectures, and business models are constantly and intricately entangled. It is through such heterogeneous configurations that public space is transformed. The "platform society" is not a static state, but an emerging dynamics.

It takes multidisciplinary scholarship to bring together the diverging vistas on these dynamics; the articles in this Special Issue are vital exercises in applying key theoretical perspectives to a moving object of study. The next step is to combine them into comprehensive—yet not all-encompassing—analytical models; most of all, we are interested in developing models that show how socio-cultural practices and techno-commercial strategies mutually shape and articulate each other.

Reflecting on the insights produced by the seven contributions, it becomes clear that the central features of the emerging platform society should never be taken as self-evident. Each actor in the heterogeneous configurations traced in this Special Issue—from cultural imaginaries to

users and from technologies to business models—plays its part in the ongoing transformation of public space. Too often, scholars, including ourselves, have the tendency to focus on one particular set of relations as the key to understand how the whole is constituted. This tendency is particularly problematic in the current reorganization of publicness, in which social and cultural activity becomes deeply intertwined with the techno-commercial infrastructures of social platforms. By focusing on one part of this configuration, we tend to misinterpret the dynamic forces at play. One-sided interpretations prevent us not only from comprehending how the rise of social platforms threatens the democratic character of public space but also from appreciating the space of agency afforded to citizens and public institutions in actively shaping the platform society. By bringing together vital theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, this Special Issue presents the essential building blocks for developing new analytical models, which we hope to be more apt at capturing these seemingly contradictory dynamics.

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