

Social Media: The Unbearable Lightness of Meaning

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Abstract

Milan Kundera, in his classic *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* undertook a consideration of the ephemeral. So I use it as a springboard for a brief consideration of social media and what is fixed and what is passing about its meaning to us as a self-aware species. Paradoxically that application of the concept slips into a conceptual tesseract as we attempt to hold social media to mean yet another contrivance for fixing our life experiences and then realize that who we were yesterday is not necessarily who we are today nor who we will be tomorrow, nor how we will be remembered once we're gone. To hold its meaning still is to enter a self-referential paradox where the meaning of the thing contradicts the nature of that which it represents and vice versa. All that to say that while it is impossible to confirm whether social media are simulation or simulacra, it is possible to orient their meaning, through how we use them and design them, toward our better natures. If we succeed, it will fix not individuals but our common humanity, which may be the one thing about us that has never been ephemeral.

Keywords

critical perspectives, cultural perspectives, design history

Recently, after contemplating our knack for making contrivances for communication—the written word, the Internet, the telegraph, smoke signals, and so on—I turned to a colleague and said, “maybe we ought to just admit that we’ve classified our species in the wrong branch of the hominid genus and change our name to *homo habilis-profundus*?”¹ She laughed as she scrolled through her friends list on Facebook, nodding her ascent. Debates over our appropriate place on branches in primate taxa notwithstanding, it is hard to argue with the proposition that we love our communication tools profoundly, no? The more they tell us about each other and ourselves, the more we love them.

But why do we love them so? Certainly, there is use-value to them, but then how that value impacts our lives is chimeric, always changing and bending to the anthropological subject position. I would argue that one cannot say unequivocally what social media mean for everyone in some sort of unified cultural theory of meaning. It takes on too many forms, captures so much, is deployed for so many uses, and changes often. Should we, like Wittgenstein, admit that “whereof one *cannot* speak, thereof one *must be silent*?”² I would say, not this time and not in this new venue for our research and discoveries.

How then should we begin? In this case, I would say we might consider our research into social media as exploring a new continent or ancient ruin. We might want to see social

media as a lingering architecture upon which we hang our joys, our agonies, our desire to be seen, and our sense of adventure. Doing so may tell us quite a bit about ourselves, our patterns of meaning-making, and the nature of being human. I cannot escape the notion that social media today is to us what cave walls and naturally found pigments were to our ancestors 40,000 years ago in El Castillo in Spain, the Chauvet Cave in France, and Indonesia’s limestone caves: a means of knowing we are here with others, that we remember, and we wish to leave a mark.

We can give any number of reasonably grounded social scientific or ethnographic explanations for why we take and share selfies; why we make duck faces; why we rant, scream, whisper, tweet, and hope for the roar of applause in the form of “likes”; and so on. It is and will continue to be useful to explain those “whys” for our growing understanding of this particular cave wall. There is a categorical difference between walls then and now, of course. Thousands of years ago, those few who had survived the day, who had returned

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to shelter from the hunt or from foraging, must have been glad and had a profound yearning to leave something behind before the great unknown of tomorrow would be upon them again. Today, tomorrow is only moderately more certain for anyone, even with the benefits of modern farming and antibiotics. So the very human practice of leaving something behind continues.

If we imagine that social media in society today is an extension of those ancient cave walls, we must recognize that instead of the few who survived the day eons ago, we are billions scribbling desperately on the wall. Together we are capable of great beauty and of great horror. So it falls to us researching and using it to reveal how that digital cave wall, made not from shifts in tectonic plates or flood on limestone, but by someone designing it, shapes the prints we leave behind and our manner of leaving them.

The critical perspective remains as important for social media research today as it has always been in our research of anything social, from science to art. So if my contribution herein should contemplate what social media is and what it can become, then I tell you my worries about it. I worry about how quickly social media are becoming commonplace. How they teeter on the precipice of the banal and in so doing their importance as a means for making meaning becomes shrouded in the fixity of things as they are, not as they have been made purposefully to be through design. Generations will be born into this social media world and know not a moment in history when all we had were cave walls. They will not know an age when life times were divided differently between public and private moments nor when data were too big and not small enough. For those generations, it will simply be the way things are.

What becomes of social media, whether it will serve human flourishing or the “banality of evil”³ will depend on how we remain mindful of it, celebrate it not too much, and retain a historical perspective on it. We might choose to devote some of our research toward learning how we may tilt the arc of social media history in line with another arc—the one that bends toward justice.⁴

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Notes

1. *Homo habilis* is the tool making variant in the hominid genus. We are currently self-named *sapien* in that genus, which I think may hint of hubris.
2. This quote comes from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* where he wrestled with the limits of language as a representational medium for reality.
3. On evil and its banal forms, see Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.
4. Martin Luther King Jr once noted, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

Author Biography

Hector Postigo (PhD, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute) is Associate Professor of Media Studies and Production at Temple University. His research interests include video games, intellectual property, and social movements/hacktivism.