

What Are the Stakes in Doing Critical Research on Social Media Platforms?

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Abstract

One of the key challenges facing social media studies is the capacity to undertake independent, critical research. As the field of social media is massively dominated by corporate players with a vested interest in both privatizing social data and developing proprietary social analytical tools, it is now crucial to advocate for a politics of public social media research.

Keywords

platforms, big data, critical research

The rise of social media platforms, combined with the shift in knowledge and economic production toward big data, has fundamentally transformed the stakes of critical research, that is, research that identifies power inequalities to develop alternatives.

By this, I do not only mean that we are now dealing with massive datasets containing a puzzling array of information about people, social relations, behaviors, emotions, and so on, and that therefore we need new software-assisted methodological tools along with new research ethics guidelines. More generally, we now face the growing impossibility of doing independent critical research because research into the social has now become a closed market. The economic wealth of social media corporations lies in their capacity to attract, own, and analyze social data. It therefore comes as no surprise that access to such social data for research purposes is increasingly becoming more difficult. One now has to pay for access to social data in analyzable formats, and therefore, scores of researchers with little or no funding, along with graduate students, activists, and the likes cannot undertake intensive social data research.

Even more problematic is how social media corporations now dictate the kind of research that can be performed on their platforms. Corporate grants and agreements to do research exist, but when a social media corporation gets to choose which project to fund, it is easy to imagine that it will be projects that further contribute to adding value to social data. The Facebook mood manipulation experiment (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014) is such an instance of academic research that did not act in the public interest, but rather in the interests of corporate players seeking to find new marketing strategies.

In the United States, we see the arrival, on top of this corporate agenda, of specific types of state-sponsored research that have grave implications for civic life. When the Department of Defense, for instance, offers funding through its Minerva Project to find the algorithm that will detect whether or not Twitter discussions might lead to political unrest, it becomes clear that social media, far from being beacons of democratic participation, are quickly becoming tools for surveillance and pre-emption. In short, an administrative agenda has taken over research into the social data generated through social media platforms. And far from being participatory forms of communication, social media platforms are quickly becoming powerful tools of social and political control.

The marginalization of critical research into social media platforms raises crucial issues about the capacity to develop democratic and truly participatory forms of knowledge creation. Indeed, the privatization of social data means that the public itself is deprived of the means to understand social, political, and economic issues and to create alternatives. Access to data for independent research is, in short, a public issue, and one that requires further advocacy. The question of ownership of social data is one that should be more forcefully addressed, and it is becoming urgent to create alternative and transparent public architectures for storing, retrieving, and analyzing social data. Such an endeavor cannot be done by

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researchers alone, but requires an alliance with activists, artists, journalists, and publics in order to create new venues for the co-production of social knowledge.

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Reference

Kramer, A., Guillory, J., & Hancock, J. (2014). Experimental evidence of massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 111, 8788-8790.

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