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Infrastructures of Mobile Social Media

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Abstract

In the age of mobile media, social interactions prioritize proximity and depend on our material engagement with the world. As such, the study of social media in the mobile era must look beyond the interface. Studies in this field must go beyond what takes place on the screens of devices to contextualize those interactions with what is happening around those devices. Moving beyond the interface, the study of social mobile media must then take into account the various infrastructures that make these practices possible (including fiber optic cables that run along the paths laid by railroad tracks, the mobile switching centers run by mobile providers that route data, the Internet data centers and peering points, and the servers that connect people and data). As social media scholarship turns toward the various levels of invisibility and visibility of the infrastructures required for mobile social media to work, it becomes clear that practices of social media are one node among a massive network of materiality.

Keywords

mobile media, social media, infrastructure, materiality

In the age of mobile media, social interactions prioritize proximity and depend on our material engagement with the world. Our mobile devices take us out into the world and make social interactions meaningful in site-specific ways. Where you are matters. Who is nearby matters. This is a shift in the geographies of social media. No longer are we fetishizing the ability to span global borders and annihilate the material conditions of everyday life; instead, mobile social media reinvest us in the nearby practices of embodied space.

As such, the study of social media in the mobile era must look *beyond the interface*. Studies in this field must go beyond what takes place on the screens of devices to contextualize those interactions with what is happening *around* those devices. Since mobile media are spatial in nature (i.e., we take them with us on our everyday journeys and use them to give meaning to these spaces), the sites at which we engage social media on mobile devices are just as important as the content being exchanged. These spaces of interaction—as they link with many contextualizing features such as cultural practices, social mores, power structures, systems of oppression, and identity performances—become key components for how social interactions are exchanged, interpreted, and ultimately get incorporated into our conceptions of social intimacy.

Moving beyond the interface, the study of social mobile media must then take into account the various infrastructures that make these practices possible. Yet, infrastructures are often designed to disappear; they typically get integrated into our everyday lives in an invisible way (Parks, 2012). We may not think about cell reception until it stops working. We are unlikely to think about which cell tower we are connected to until we are out of range. And even in these moments of "breaking," or what Martin Heidegger (1962) termed the move from a tool being "ready-to-hand" to "present-at-hand," we still do not always have the infrastructural literacy to understand how social media is necessitated on a wide range of infrastructural elements.

Thus, many meaningful aspects of mobile social media do not happen at the level of cognitive awareness; instead, much of what constitutes our social interactions with mobile devices takes place in the realm of the cognitive unconscious (Kihlstrom, 1987). In order for our focus and attention to function, much of the world recedes into the background. This includes the invisible infrastructures like fiber optic cables that run along the paths laid by railroad tracks, the mobile switching centers run by mobile providers that route data, the Internet data centers and peering points, the servers that connect people and data, and the immense air conditioning units used to keep these servers cool (Blum, 2012; Ceruzzi, 2008).

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These invisible infrastructures of mobile social media are the pivot point for the politics of use. During my research into the infrastructure of mobile culture, I have wandered Internet peering points and mobile switching centers, reveling in the ability to see what typically goes unseen by the everyday user (Farman, 2015). As I learn about how these technologies work, I have found myself commenting on the experience, "I didn't know that about mobile technologies!" The next question I ask myself is "Who benefits from me not knowing?" The answers to that question reveal the power dynamics inherent in these invisibilities, their embeddedness, and their commonsense incorporation into everyday life (Gramsci, 1971; Ling, 2012).

Social media in the mobile age is deeply intertwined with the spaces that contextualize use, with the material infrastructures that make the devices and platforms work, and with those who produce these devices (Chan, Pun, & Selden, 2013; De Souza e Silva, 2006; Packer & Wiley, 2013; Sheller & Urry, 2006). An exchange between users on a mobile social platform is one node among a massive network of materiality. Mobile social media prioritizes the material spaces that contextualize use and get participants to go beyond the interface to interact with the ways that data inform these material spaces (Frith, 2015; Kitchin & Dodge, 2011). As social media scholarship turns toward the various levels of invisibility and visibility of the infrastructures required for mobile social media to work, it becomes clear that sociability and practices of social media must be analyzed alongside the material connections that contextualize use.

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