

Chapter 17

Reappraising Social Media: The Rise of the Global Digital Family

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reappraises social media. The corporate perspective promises a growth market based on user data exploitation. On the other hand, users expect emotional contagion and authenticity from their social media experience. They want to connect to friends and family. As a consequence, users accept corporate exploitation of their data. Users see social media as a human right. To users, the technology is key to global knowledge dissemination, with the potential to challenge traditional power structures resisting change. Building on Obar and Wildman, the chapter concludes with an improved definition of social media suggesting that user data tagged to user accounts, user generated content (UGC), and user behavior in the multi-device universe is the lifeblood of social media. Research suggests that social media has propelled mankind beyond McLuhan's global village into the global digital family.

INTRODUCTION

Without a doubt, social media has penetrated our daily lives deeply, influencing the way people connect to friends and family. Research shows that user data tagged to user accounts, UGC and user behaviour is the life blood of social media, making it possible for SNS-owners to generate profits and for users to connect to social media at home, at work and while travelling.

User data makes it possible for Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's 'post-familial-family' (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998, p. 68), which is no longer limited by class and ethnic origin, to be extended into the virtual domain, giving rise to the metaphorical Global Digital Family beyond McLuhan's 'Global Village' (McLuhan, 1962, p. 31).

Early during the evolution of the Internet critics argued that "social systems do not work with machine-like precision; human beings have the capacity to interpret and respond to ambiguity" (Daft & Lengel, 1986, p. 569). Back then, the emerging Internet was considered a medium low in richness unlike face-to-face communication. Yet, by 2015, Dunaetz et al find that:

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Building relationships through lean media has become common and many people find it more effective than face-to-face communication for developing relationships. (Dunaetz, Lisk, & Shin, 2015, p. 3)

Considering definitions proposed by Professor Nicole Ellison, Professor Andreas Kaplan and Assistant Professor Jonathan Obar even communication software Skype can be considered social media, just as crowdfunding platforms Indiegogo and Kickstarter would qualify. All of those feature Web 2.0 technology, user accounts, UGC can be disseminated, and interaction is possible on blogs and threads.

According to scholar Jose van Dijk Wikipedia too can be considered social media (Dijk, 2013a), yet is this perception shared by users? This research highlights the important role of emotional contagion for social media. Kramer et al (2014) investigated emotional contagion in social networks, reaffirming the importance of emotional contagion. Emotional contagion is crucial, just as the extension of a credible and authentic personality. Kaplan understands the need for authenticity and advises marketing experts to be “unprofessional” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). But pretending to be unprofessional merely creates the illusion of a real personality with all its faults and weaknesses: it is more likely to be perceived as fake.

What makes the online experience authentic is explored in more detail by Robert Kozinets (Kozinets, 2015), quoting Toennie’s idea of *Gesellschafts-* versus a *Gemeinschafts* type interaction (Tönnies, 1887). This model explains why for example crowdfunding can be considered a *Gesellschafts*-type transaction, whereas social media, as understood by users, is a *Gemeinschafts*-type transaction, shedding light on why users do not perceive crowdfunding sites themselves as social media.

Social media is not just a technology platform that makes it possible for users to connect and companies to exploit user data. Social media is a platform facilitating emotional contagion and the extension of a credible and authentic personality into the virtual social media world, which helps to explain the social media explosion during the last decade. Today, algorithms interpret user data and social media has become ubiquitous, for example:

- By the end of 2016 Facebook exceeded 1.75 billion members (Statista, 2017): a quarter of the world’s population has joined Facebook to interact with other humans;
- 310 million users are active on Twitter (Statista, 2017a) and Tweets by President Donald Trump “stoke anxiety” and “move markets” according to the Washington Post (Rucker & Paquette, 2017), evidence how emotionally engaging social media is;
- 467 million people are subscribed to LinkedIn (Statista, 2017b) using the platform to promote their work and career profile;
- Mobile devices have reached 6.9 billion subscriptions worldwide and Ericson predicts that 9.5 billion users will have a mobile device by 2020 with access to social media networking sites (Ericson Mobility Report, 2014). In other words: by 2020 there will be more mobile devices online than there are humans currently living on Earth (Geohive, 2015);
- Google’s Loon project aims to provide Internet access anywhere in the world via balloons positioned in the earth’s stratosphere (Google, 2013);
- YouTube was acquired by Google in 2006 (Monica, 2006), and streamed its first video on April 23, 2005 (Karim, 2005) featuring over one billion users worldwide in 2015 (Youtube, 2017e).

Social media and networking monoliths Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and LinkedIn offer the opportunity to tap into or create communities to and connect to like-minded people, not only changing

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