

Chapter 17

Social Net/work(ing) on Facebook:

An Analysis of Audiences, Producers, and Immaterial Laborers

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ABSTRACT

Reactions to new media vary from utopian pronouncements about their democratizing potential to fear about social deviance. The news media spend a great deal of time discussing new media, especially as they relate to young people. Again, sometimes these media are reported on as democratizing forces as when Time magazine declared “You” to be the person of the year (Grossman, 2006). Other times they are described as a source of social anxiety, for example, when NBC News (2011) reported on flash mobs as “swarms of mostly young people organized through social media, texting, tweeting, using Internet sites, and increasingly turning violent in cities across the country” (para. 4). However, social media are rarely discussed in terms of their capacities to tap into users’ activities as forms of labor. This chapter contributes to the discussion of user generated content as labor (Cohen, 2008; Peterson, 2008; van Dijck, 2009) by examining the process of building and maintaining an audience in the form of a friends list while simultaneously being an audience member in others’ friends lists. This labor is examined in this chapter through looking at the motivations individuals cite for using Facebook and how those users describe their feelings about their friends list qua audience or how users describe themselves as members of an audience.

INTRODUCTION

The site under analysis in this study, Facebook, falls under the category of a social network site as defined by danah boyd and Nicole Ellison (2007) as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1)

construct a semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). One argument this chapter will make is that Facebook breaks down the distinction between social network sites and social networking sites.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0312-7.ch017

It will also be argued that Facebook can be defined as a virtual community. Blanchard (2004) defines virtual communities as “groups of people who interact primarily through computer-mediated communication and who identify with and have developed feelings of belonging and attachment to each other” (p. 55). She argues for two kinds of virtual communities: place based and dispersed. The place based communities are those communities which include face-to-face (FtF) communication and a virtual component, such as a message board about the place in which the FtF communication takes place. A dispersed virtual community is one that does not have any FtF component. Functionally speaking, Facebook could be seen as serving both forms of virtual communities. On one hand, groups can be formed *because* they are made up of individuals who are geographically separated from one another and then find each other on Facebook. For example, one respondent to the survey for this study voiced a common theme saying Facebook is “a great tool to help keep in touch with friends that live far away.” There were also respondents who discussed Facebook as a way to maintain relationships that do not have an FtF component but are strictly in a dispersed virtual community. One respondent said she uses Facebook because, “I like the social element as I live in a rural, isolated location.” Another respondent noted that Facebook can serve as an aid for combating shyness, saying, “it’s helped me stay friends with people ... I’m very introverted, and tend to tunnel into my house ... that usually meant friends would drift off to more social people.” This echoes research that has examined uses of social media for those with varying degrees of social anxiety (Blumer, 2010; Orr et al., 2009). However, most respondents framed this dispersed community in professional terms, using Facebook as a way to network with others in their profession whom they have not met FtF.

This chapter will begin with a literature review discussing the definition and distinction between social network and social networking websites.

It will also look at research on immaterial labor in the use of those sites. The method section will explain the implementation of the survey for this study. This will be followed by a discussion of the data, broken into two sections. The first will discuss the quantitative data; the second involves an interpretive analysis of the open-ended questions from the survey. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing the theoretical implications of Facebook users thinking of themselves as audience members rather than content producers.

LITERATURE REVIEW: IMMATERIAL LABOR, AUDIENCE STUDIES, AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

The overarching argument of this chapter is that the creation of content within social network(ing) websites is a form of free labor which, while it may be of value or create pleasure for the user generating it, is engaged in on behalf of whatever institution happens to own the website with which the user has an account. This research builds on work that makes this same argument about a variety of online, user generated content (Zwick 2008; Arvidsson, 2006; Banks and Humphrey, 2008) and employs Maurizio Lazzarato’s (2006) theory of immaterial labor, which is defined as, “the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity” (p. 132). In this case the commodity is a social network(ing) website. The informational aspect of immaterial labor is, “where the skills involved in direct labor are increasingly skills involving cybernetics and computer control,” the cultural aspect is “a series of activities that are not normally recognized as ‘work’ ... defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion” (p. 132).

It is also important to define precisely what is meant by social network(ing) websites and how the concept of immaterial labor fits into the way this research conceptualizes them. Boyd and El-

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