

Understanding Contested Public Space with Social Media

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Social media are increasingly entangled in contentious matter; and contentious or uncertain situations - “when no one knows what to do, when unprecedented kinds of consequences make themselves felt” - are precisely where publics come into their own (Marres, 2012: 56). Social media platforms and their politics (Gillespie, 2010; Van Dijck, 2013) are implicated in issues relating to commercial interests, privacy, censorship, identity and so on; at the same time, established notions of publicness and publics are being unsettled via these same entanglements. Social media hold the potential to rearrange the way we participate *as* publics and *experience* publicness. Our experiences of publics and publicness can of course range in emphasis in relation to their entanglements with the physical and the digitally mediated. In effect, sites of contention can circulate predominantly within digitally mediated spaces, physical spaces or achieve a similar presence across multiple spaces. Questions therefore arise with regards to how such sites of contention come into being, what the roles of different people and things are in their unfolding, through which methods we can study these phenomena, and what theoretical equipment we need to interpret them.

This panel brings together both senior scholars and early career researchers from the Social Media Research Group at Queensland University of Technology, Australia. Each of the five papers pays theoretical and methodological attention to the entanglements of social media with shifting notions of publics, focusing particularly on moments or sites of contention (or disconnection), where these notions are most uncertain and open to redefinition. They do this through a range of methodological approaches by which sites of controversy, connection and disconnection can be understood - including social media analytics, mapping and visualisation, ethnography and discourse analysis. The papers engage a range of theoretical paradigms to illuminate different aspects of processes of contention, including those rooted in studies of scientific controversy, the politics of identity and nationalism, the dynamics of cultural chaos and crises, and the practice and politics of journalism. The sites of empirical investigation range from dominant Western platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, through to powerful sites such as Weibo in China and niches of subcultural activity within those. Through these diverse approaches, the panellists aim to open up debate regarding how we might come to understand the role of social media in public modes of deliberation (or disagreement), and the processes by which matters are deemed to be settled, or not.

Hashtag as hybrid forum: Controversy mapping, digital methods and the case of #agchatoz

Jean Burgess (Associate Professor of Digital Media, CCI, QUT) & Theresa Sauter (Postdoctoral Research Fellow, CCI, QUT)

This paper reflects on a project that uses digital methods to investigate how controversial issues -- and issue publics -- are being constituted via the contemporary media landscape. We demonstrate how social media data can be used to identify and track the emergence of new sites of uncertainty and public concern across science, technology and popular culture, and the 'ad hoc publics' (Bruns & Burgess, 2011) that form around them. Using this approach, we present an exploratory analysis of the Australian agricultural community's hashtag #agchatoz, which works both as a source of 'speculative examples' and exemplifies the concept of "hashtag as 'hybrid forum'" (Callon et al, 2001).

The Emergence of Trending Topics: The Dissemination of Breaking Stories on Twitter

Axel Bruns (Associate Professor and ARC Future Fellow, CCI, QUT) & Theresa Sauter (Postdoctoral Research Fellow, CCI, QUT)

Twitter is widely recognised as a key medium for the dissemination of breaking news. Bruns & Burgess (2011) describe how ad hoc publics form, especially around shared hashtags, as events and issues become more widely recognised, and Hermida (2010) and Burns (2010) both describe this as Twitter's "ambient news" function - always in the background, until trending stories push it into the foreground. What is less understood are the early moments of such 'trending', before hashtags and other mechanisms define a new story as breaking news. This paper explores these early processes: by tracking the dissemination of links to Australian news sites on an everyday basis as part of the ATNIX project (Bruns et al., 2013), we were able to trace the shift from sharing to trending from the very first links being shared on Twitter to the subsequent widespread dissemination of trending topics. We use innovative visualisation techniques to show the dynamics of this transition and to map the networks of interaction which emerge onto the overall Australian Twittersphere.

Public service media and social media: interactions and impacts

Brian McNair (Professor of Journalism, Media and Communication, QUT)

This paper explores the accumulating evidence of social media impacts on democratisation and political reform processes. With reference to recent political crises in the Middle East and post-Soviet Europe, and to ongoing political tensions in Asia, the paper asks if social media can be credited with a significant redistribution of cultural power from elite to mass, or 'publics', in countries where strict communication control regimes have hitherto prevailed. Building on Cultural Chaos (McNair, 2006), and drawing on current research on Communication and Political Crisis, the paper assesses the 'effects' of social media in relation to the emergence of embryonic public spheres and popular protests against authoritarian governments.

In the name of nationalism - reproducing Guangzhou's geo-identity on Weibo

Wilfred Wang (PhD Candidate, CCI, QUT)

The territorial dispute between China and Japan over the Diaoyu Island (the Senkaku Islands in Japanese) in mid-2012 triggered nationwide nationalist protests in China. Guangzhou, the capital city of the southern province Guangdong, was one of the main protest sites. With nationally shared outrage against the foreign force (Japan in this case), cyber nationalism was also exploited to draw attention to Guangzhou's local identity. By collecting and studying data from Sina Weibo, China's most popular social media, this study investigates how Guangzhouers negotiate their rights and duties through Weibo and how local identity is reproduced within a context of strong nationalism.

Towards a Theory of Disconnection and Social Networking Sites

Ben Light (Professor of Digital Media Studies, QUT)

Connection and connectivity have become significant areas of emphasis in our definitions of SNS and in our understandings of how these technologies are used. Based on qualitative interviews with a variety of people who engage with a diverse range of SNS I will put forward an alternate reading that emphasises disconnection as integral to our lived experiences of SNS activity. From my analysis, I have developed a theory of disconnective practice. Disconnective practice refers to the potential modes of human and non-human disengagement with the connective attempts made possible with SNS. These modes of disengagement sit in relationship to our experiences of a particular site, between and amongst different sites and with regard to these sites and our physical worlds. Disconnective practice highlights SNS as operationally contradictory whereby connection and disconnection coexist and can be mutually necessary.

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