Prefiguring social media: the culture and technology of 1990s web publishing

Moderator: Niels Kerssens, University of Amsterdam

Overview

To prefigure means to be an early indication of something, or to imagine or suggest beforehand. This panel explores how 1990s web publishing innovations, initiatives, technologies and discourses intersect with issues that appear to be unique to a new paradigm of participatory and social media. Where social media histories may center on a succession of platforms (from Friendster to Facebook), or trace the genre's roots to early social uses of networked computing, these papers find resonances in a period of web history in which the medium's capacities for self-publishing were initially explored, built and theorized.

In its very point of departure, then, the panel suggests two correctives to popular accounts of web history and social media's place within that history. First, it rejects the sharp oppositions drawn up between the first and second decades of web development and design, whether articulated as web 1.0 vs. 2.0, publishing vs. participation, read-only vs. read-write, and so on. Second, it emphasizes a view of social media as publishing media, and thus sooner a remediation of practices, technologies and forms of mass media than the extension of personal communication suggested by such terms as "connection" and "sharing."

Following the insights of media archeology, "to prefigure" may also mean to imagine or suggest differently. The histories explored here provide new critical perspectives on social media in two ways. On the one hand, insofar as they point to particular aesthetic or technological divergences from today's social media platforms, they force us to question what is missing and why - that is to say, they function to some degree as a history of paths not taken. On the other, by detailing the specific circumstances in which antecedents emerged, thrived or failed, they serve as reminders of the contingency of media forms, or how they are subject to various cultural, commercial and technological pressures. Together, the papers thus contribute an historical approach to the ongoing attempt to understand the character and significance of social media.

The estranged subjectivity of insurgent selfhood: Dave Winer, Jorn Barger and the emergence of blogging
Rudolf Ammann

In previous publications I identified Dave Winer of Scripting News and Jorn Barger of Robot Wisdom Weblog as the two most central actors in the initial network of weblogs during the formative 1997 to 1998 period. Throughout this period and the preceding years, both of these early bloggers contributed a large number of postings to the web and to usenet. The study of these writings reveals a considerable divergence in the two bloggers' objectives, yet also a striking congruence in their ideological commitment to the cyber-utopian counter-culture of the preceding decade. In this paper I address the 'politics of consciousness' at the heart of this commitment, and its manifestation on the web as a locus of identity production that is dedicated to a sense of quasi-revolutionary, insurgent selfhood. The paper traces such identity production – advocated as 'integrity' (Winer) and 'self knowledge' (Barger) – to the romantic lineage of American transcendentalism and discusses it as a prefiguration of the 'estranged subjectivity' of social media.

Making/Unmaking a Social Web: Historicizing the "Read-Only" Logic of the 90s Web
Megan Sapnar Ankerson

Understood as "Web 2.0," social media platforms are typically distinguished from the "read-only" logic of Web 1.0. Yet, this narrative risks naturalizing technological progress without attending to the complex ways that "social" and "publishing" functions were first negotiated in web production. Drawing on interviews, archives, and trade press, this paper compares two global web-publishing events, "Day in the Life of Cyberspace" (1995) and "24 Hours in Cyberspace" (1996), focusing on the tensions between "social" possibilities and the uncertain role of media institutions. Here, the "read-only" web doesn't accidentally emerge; rather, it constituted a hard-fought victory at the time.

The Platformization of the Web
Anne Helmond

This paper provides a critical account of the "platformization" of the web, that is the consequences of the rise of Web 2.0 as the "Web as Platform" (O'Reilly 2005) signifying a shift from software applications built for the desktop to web applications built upon the web. Popular social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter are not only built on the web platform, but are also platforms themselves on which others can build by offering an Application Programming Interface (API), enabling a structured exchange of content, data and functionality between websites, services and platforms. In this paper I focus on how websites have historically enabled such exchanges by looking at web-native elements such as RSS and widgets in order to analyze early mechanisms for the syndication of content and the exchange of content and functionality. The aim is to understand changes in the composition of the web by looking at the circulation of content and data flows between various actors from a medium-specific perspective.

Cyberspace, the social graph and other legacies of digital utopianism
Michael Stevenson

From cyberspace to Web 2.0, dominant perceptions of the web and its exceptional character would appear to have changed radically in the past 20 years. Where once the web promised to become an electronic frontier exempt from real-world constraints on movement, identity and enterprise, now it is popularly understood as an unprecedented source of social and cultural data - that is, a space in which the real world is made increasingly transparent. Counter to the sense that our understanding of the web has simply been upgraded, this paper argues for seeing continuity in how the web has been imagined. In particular, I examine how powerful concepts like the social graph resonate with assumptions and ideas that characterize digital utopianism as it emerged in the early 1990s.

Bios

Rudolf Ammann was recently awarded a PhD by University College London for his work on the emergence of blogging in the early web. He is Designer at Large at the UCL Centre for Digital Humanities.

Megan Sapnar Ankerson is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan. Her research interests include new media industries, visual culture, software studies, and web history. She is currently working on a book that explores the commercial development of web design industries and aesthetics during the dot-com era.

Anne Helmond is a PhD candidate with the Digital Methods Initiative, the PhD program in New Media & Digital Culture at the Department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam. In her dissertation she studies the platformization of the web. Her research interests include software studies, platform studies, digital methods, social media, web archives, algorithms and data flows between web platforms.

Michael Stevenson is an assistant professor in the Department of Journalism at the University of Groningen, and a member of the Groningen Centre for Media and Journalism Studies. In addition to his research focus on web history, he is a founding member and contributing researcher at the Amsterdam-based Digital Methods Initiative. He has also created or co-created a number of new media art projects, including The Whatever Button (with Erik Borra) and the social media profile service Elfriendo.com (with Govcom.org).