

Reclaiming the “Social” in Social Media

Panel Proposal for *Social Media and the Transformation of Public Space*
University of Amsterdam, Netherlands: June 18-20, 2014

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Panel Rationale

Academic perspectives on social media tend to prize individualistic, psychological, or aggregate accounts of these technological phenomena, usually looking at the impact of social media on everyday life, as affecting individual attitudes, or (increasingly) as mass clumps of so-called “big data” or “social networks.” This panel, on the other hand, seeks to emphasize social, cultural, organizational perspectives on social media, particularly at the ways in which media are embedded in specific places, spaces and times. We do so, in part, by examining the overlap between the personal and the political in activist use of common social media tools and the surprisingly personal, passionate motivations of new journalism startups and their audiences. But we also do it by problematizing the very notion of the social itself, particularly the division between “technology” and “culture” that exists at the heart of much new media analysis.

Despite the accumulation of much qualitative, empirical work on new media organizations and their journalistic counterparts, there has been surprisingly little written about the ways that emotions and so-called non-rational attitudes influence the decision to start or join a startup journalism organization, or to consume content produced by a startup news outlet. Witschge and Deuze seek to rectify this gap in the literature, looking at the decidedly emotional, dare we even say passionate, motivations that drive the founders of new journalism organizations. The acknowledgment of these passions, furthermore, challenges some of the basic normative attitudes of much journalism theory. Likewise, Gerbaudo discusses how increased activist adoption of social media tools like Twitter and Facebook imbricates the *personal* (including, but not limited to, personal social networks) in the political. What happens, for instance, when a loosely connected group of friends start to receive activist or mobilizing messages from another friend, one whom might not share their political beliefs?

Anderson and Ford, on the other hand, challenge the very distinction between social, cultural, and material perspectives on social media use. Anderson, reviewing and summarizing much of the current literature on journalistic adoption of new technologies, argues that journalists maintain an attitude toward various technological forms that can be best classified as cultural, but that this symbolic attitude is itself constrained by the very materiality of technological devices themselves. Social media, in other words, contain affordances that big data does not, and this affects how journalists think about it. Ford also analyzes an institution that defines itself, rhetorically, in opposition to social media - Wikipedia—but demonstrates the inconsistency between the Wikipedia practices and Wikipedia rhetoric in this regard. What, she asks, do these incongruences, say about what the “social” in social media actually means? With these papers this panel seeks to re-frame debates about technology and its effects. Foregrounding the material, normative and cultural aspects of (social) media production and use, this panel problematizes the dominant interpretation of the “social” in social media and proposes alternative conceptions.

Paper Abstracts

C.W. Anderson, City University of New York

“What Hating Social Media Means: Economic, Organizational, Cultural, and Material Perspectives on Journalistic (non)-Adoption of New Technology.”

One of the major findings of journalism studies scholarship throughout the early years of the 21st century has been the relative non-adoption, slow adoption, or differential adoption by news organizations of a variety of new digital technologies including those of blogging, linking, and social media. These technologies have usually been scorned and ignored, or taken up in ways that are often orthogonal to their theoretically intended purpose. On the other hand, big data and algorithmic techniques have been surprisingly popular in newsrooms. This paper proposes that, especially given the relative affinity for journalists toward big data and algorithms, we need to fuse cultural perspectives on technology with materialist aspects of technology to understand this paradoxical adoption and non-adoption.

Heather Ford,

“Wikipedia: NOTFACEBOOK.”

The Wikipedia policy, ‘Wikipedia is not’ lists a number of media forms that should be excluded from any conception of the project. According to this policy, Wikipedia is neither a newspaper nor a dictionary, a soapbox nor a crystal ball. One of the oft-quoted policies, shortened as ‘WIKIPEDIA:NOTFACEBOOK’ is that ‘Wikipedia is not a social networking service’ and that user pages should present only limited biographical information. Despite these proclamations, Wikipedia practice displays aspects of all these forms. What is the significance of such inconsistencies, and what does this mean for the way we conceptualise and understand the ‘social’ in ‘social media’?

Paolo Gerbaudo, King's College London

“Social Media Activism and Informal Organisational Cultures.”

The adoption of social media as mobilising platforms across a number of social movements part of the 2011-13 wave, from the Arab Spring, to Occupy Wall Street and the anti-government protests in Turkey and Brazil needs to be understood in connection with organisational cultures. Specifically the use of tools articulating friendship and acquaintanceship connections such as Facebook and Twitter has come to constitute a perfect fit for the practices of informal organising that have come to dominate social movements after 1968. In this context, social media act as a flexible organisation tool that is used in alternative to formalised organisational structures and connected bureaucracies. This situation raises a series of serious contradictions, given the intermingling between personal and political, private and public relationships that this logic of organising brings about.

Tamara Witschge, University of Groningen

Mark Deuze, University of Amsterdam

“Passion, Politics and Play in Journalism Start-Ups.”

New endeavors in journalism such as Follow The Money, LocalFocus, TPO Magazine, Sargasso, and NewPaper in The Netherlands challenge conceptualizations of what is news, by whom and how news is produced, and as is the focus of this paper, what news is for. In this paper we examine the self-reported social relevance and public interest at the heart of these news start-ups. In this way, they challenge both the predominant scholarly understanding of journalism’s role in society as well as the predominant individualistic understanding of digital media. We propose an alternative approach to gain insight into the mix of passion for news, personal politics and the pleasure of play that drive new actors into the news industry.

Author Biographies

C.W. Anderson is an Assistant Professor of Media Culture at the College of Staten Island (City University of New York), and director of research at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism. His book, *Rebuilding the News: Metropolitan Journalism in the Digital Age*, was published in January 2013 by Temple University Press. *Rebuilding the News* chronicles the history of online journalism in Philadelphia from 1997 until the present, and discusses what the larger lessons of Philadelphia can teach us about journalism in the digital age. His current research traces the use of “documents” and “data” in journalism from the beginning of the 20th century to the present, in an attempt to flesh out a cultural history of the idea of the journalistic “report.”

Mark Deuze is Professor of Media Studies at the Department of Media Studies of the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. From 2004 to 2013 he worked at Indiana University’s Department of Telecommunications in Bloomington, United States. Publications of his work include seven books including "Media Work" (Polity Press, 2007), "Managing Media Work" (Sage, 2010), and “Media Life” (Polity Press, 2012). Weblog: <http://deuze.blogspot.com>. E-mail: mdeuze@uva.nl.

Heather Ford is a DPhil student at the Oxford Internet Institute at Oxford University where she is studying how Wikipedia editors write history as it happens. She has worked as a researcher, activist, journalist, educator and strategist in the fields of online collaboration, intellectual property reform, information privacy and open source software in South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States. Before this, she worked as an ethnographer for Ushahidi, the Kenyan-based non-profit technology company that develops free and open source software for information collection, visualization and interactive mapping where she studied how Wikipedia and Ushahidi communities work together to verify information collected from social media sources.

Paolo Gerbaudo (1979) is lecturer in Digital Culture and Society at King’s College London. He has worked as a reporter for the Italian Left newspaper *il manifesto* and has been involved in anti-corporate, global justice and ecologist campaigns. His current research focuses on the use of new media and social media by social movements and emerging digital parties. He is the author of *Tweets and the Streets* (2012), a book analysing social media activism in the popular protest wave of 2011, from the Arab Spring, to the indignados and Occupy Wall Street.

Tamara Witschge is a Rosalind Franklin Fellow at the University of Groningen, Faculty of Arts. She has been a lecturer at the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University and research associate at Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre. Her research explores the ways in which news journalism is reconfigured in times of technological, economic and social change. She has published widely on this topic, and is co-author of the book ‘Changing Journalism’ (2012, Routledge). Tamara has been the General Secretary of European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) and is a member of the editorial board of the international journals ‘Digital Journalism’, ‘New Media and Society.’