

A World Beyond Facebook: Alternatives in Social Media. The Research Agenda of the Unlike Us Network

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Whether or not we are in the midst of yet another internet bubble, we can all agree that social media dominate the use of internet and smart phones. The emergence of apps and web-based user to user services, driven by an explosion of informal dialogues, continuous uploads and user-generated content have greatly empowered the rise of 'participatory culture'. At the same time, monopoly power, commercialization and commodification are on the rise as well with just a handful of social media platforms dominating the social web. Tension are on the rise what to make of the influence and impact of 'social media'.

Two contradictory processes – both the facilitation of free exchanges and the commercial exploitation of social relationships – seem to lie at the heart of contemporary capitalism: empowerment & control, freedom & paranoia. On the one hand new media create and expand the social spaces through which we interact, play and even politicize ourselves; on the other hand they are literally owned by three or four companies that have phenomenal power to shape the architectures of such interactions. Whereas the hegemonic Internet ideology promises open, decentralized systems, why do we, time and again, find ourselves locked into closed, centralized environments? Why are individual users so easily charmed by these corporate 'walled gardens'? Do we understand the longterm costs that society will pay for the ease of use and simple interfaces of their beloved 'free' services?

The accelerated growth and scope of Facebook's social space is unheard of. As of February 2012, Facebook is said to have more than 845 million active users,¹ ranking in the top three first destination sites on the Web worldwide, with a possible valuation of 100 billion US dollars in the run-up of expected IPO. Its users willingly deposit a myriad of snippets of their social life and relationships on a site that invests in an accelerated play of sharing and exchanging information. We all befriend, rank, recommend, create circles, upload photos, videos and update our status. A myriad of (mobile) applications orchestrate this offer of private moments in a virtual public, seamlessly embedding the online world in users' everyday life.

Yet, despite its massive user base, the phenomenon of online social networking remains fragile. Just think of the fate of the majority of social networking sites. Who remembers Friendster? The sudden implosion (and careful recovery) of MySpace is unheard of and comes with a parallel demise of Bebo in the UK, Hyves in the Netherlands and StudiVZ in Germany. The eventual fall of Twitter and Facebook – and Google, for that matter – is only a masterpiece of software away. This means that the 'protocological' future is not stationary but allows space for us to carve out a variety of techno-political interventions. Instead of repeating the entrepreneurial-start-up-transforming-into-corporate-behemoth formula, isn't it time to reinvent the internet as a truly independent public infrastructure that can effectively defend itself against corporate domination and state control? How to study such ephemeral spaces? PhD students may gain from new insights produced by the newly established 'software studies'

¹ Emil Protalinski, "Facebook has over 845 million users", ZDNet, February 3, 2012, found on the Facebook entry in Wikipedia (accessed April 17, 2012).

discipline but face the risk that their object of study has vanished before they hand in their thesis. It is one thing to formulate a 'black box' theory to study the algorithmic cultures of such social networking websites. But what happens if the algorithms indeed remain a black box? This may happen not only because of the computer science deficiency amongst arts and humanities scholars, we are also running into very real corporate secrets and related patent wars. To a large degree social media research is still dominated by quantitative and social scientific endeavors that play with APIs and data visualizations.

So far the social science focus has been on the moral panic around young people, privacy, and identity theft. From the self-representation theories of Erving Goffman's 1959 study to Michael Foucault's *Technologies of the Self* and graph-based network theory that focuses on influencers and (news)hubs, a range of studies and approaches have become available. What is missing so far is a rigorous discussion of the political economy of these social media monopolies. It remains hard for scholars and experts across the board to get a handle on the money/value flows. What price do we pay for the free use of services such as Facebook and Google? There is also a substantial research gap in understanding the power relations between the social and the technical in what are essentially software systems and platforms.

What we first need to acknowledge is social media's double nature. Dismissing social media as neutral platforms with no power is as implausible as considering social media the bad boys of capitalism. The beauty and depth of social media is that they call for a new understanding of classic dichotomies such as commercial/political, informal networks/public at large, users/producers, artistic/standardized, original/copy, democratizing/disempowering. Instead of taking these dichotomies as a point of departure, let's scrutinize the social networking logic itself. Even when Twitter and Facebook would disappear overnight, befriending, liking and ranking will only further spread as memes, embedded in software. Unfacebooking will take a while—unless we bet on the speed of sudden implosions.

Social media platforms are too big and too fluid to research—not only because of the sheer size of users, heavy traffic, closed databases and overkill of metadata. The impossibility to reflect on them is also given by their fluid nature, presenting themselves as helpful gatekeepers of temporary personalized information flows. Would like to freeze dry them? A day in the life of Twitter? What we need to do is develop ways to capture processual flows (which explains our obsession with info visualization and cool statistics). The problem here is not one of mutation of the object but one of actual disappearance. Before we have gone through the literature, theorized the field and developed specific critical concepts, written down methodological considerations and compiled datasets the object of study has already changed dramatically. Research runs the risk of producing nothing more than history. In a variation of Einstein's quantum theory we could say that it is not because we observe it objects change but because we research it. But this idealistic notion is unfortunately not the case. The main reason for research futility is our collective obsession with the impact of technology over its architecture. This is also the case with simplified, easy-to-use informal network sites. At first glance social media present themselves as the perfect synthesis of 19th century mass production (in this case of networks) and History in the making (see the 2011 Arab spring). There is surprisingly little 'différance' at work here. In that sense these are not post-modern machines but a straight forward modernist products of the 1990s wave of digital globalization turned mass culture.

The massive popularity of social media should not be seen as a 'resurrection' of the social after its death. The online system is not designed to encounter the Other, despite the popularity of online dating sites). We remain amongst 'friends'. The faith of social media (if there is any) is rather to design and run defensive systems that can recreate community feelings of a lost

tribe: computer generated informality. The social, that once dangerous category of class societies in the process of emancipation, has now gone defensive, facing massive budget cuts, privatizations and the depletion of public resources. In this respect we need to further radicalize what Jean Baudrillard wrote about the 'dead of the social'.

The implosion of the social in the media as he described it happened 20-30 years before the birth of Facebook. This move away from the messy and potentially dangerous street life of the crowds into the regulated traffic flows of the actual clearing of public space in favor of post-Fordistic interactivity inside the confined spheres of apartments, cafes and offices. The renaissance of the body social as Web 2.0 is not part of a retromania to revive the 20th century Social Question. The very idea of social media is not to return before the Omega Point of History, circumventing Hiroshima and Auschwitz while continuing the Human Story at some other point. In this case the Social is produced for no other reason to extract value. The Social Media Question circles around notions such as aggregation, data mining and profiling. The algorithmic exploitation of human-machine interaction consciously takes the risk that the dark of the social (mob behavior aiming at system suicide) can be managed.

Considering the wide and ambitious effort that is made here, it seems important to narrow down what precisely is meant with the term 'social media'. Some would go back the days of early cyberculture and stress the public domain aspect of these 'virtual communities'. This somewhat catholic term lost its hegemony in the late nineties when start-up firms, backed-up by venture capital and 'silly money' from investment banks and pension funds flooded the scene. In this Golden Age of Dotcommania the emphasis shifted away from the internet as a public domain towards the image of electronic shopping mall. Users were no longer seen as global citizens of cyberspace and were instead addressed as customers. This came to a sudden halt in 2000/2001 when the dotcom crash unleashed a global financial crisis. This coincided with the surveillance crackdown after 9/11 that had major implications for internet freedom.

In an effort to reconstitute its dominance in the world IT market Silicon Valley was forced to re-invent itself and unleash a renaissance movement called Web 2.0. This reincarnation of American entrepreneurial energy put the user in the driver's seat in order to maximize its dominance in the crucial 'mainstreaming' phase of internet culture due to the role out of broadband and the arrival of mobile internet. The central slogan of the Web 2.0 era was 'user generated content', with Google as the main player to make profit of this shift away from the production and purchase of paid content towards the exploitation of user data. From blogging to photo sharing and social networking, the idea was to reduce complexity and user freedom in exchange for easy-to-use interfaces, free services without subscription and large database with free content and user profiles to browse through.

Whereas the Web 2.0 ideology stresses the variety of start-ups through popular news sites from the US Westcoast such as TechCrunch, Hacker News, Slashdot, Wired, Mashable and ReadWriteWeb, various activities of O'Reilly publishers and conferences such as SXSW (Austin) and LeWeb (Paris), the term social media indicates a next stage characterized by consolidation and integration. When we talk about social media we essentially only refer Facebook (the social hangout place) and Twitter (for short and fast news exchanges). While this reduction is done in an unconscious manner, it perfectly illustrates the desire to agree on a common standard of communication (knowing that this is not really possible in this still dynamic environment).

Social media indicate a shift from the HTML-based linking practice of the open web to liking which happens inside closed systems. The indirect and superficial 'liking economy' keeps users away from basic understanding what the distributed Web is all about. With info acts such as befriending, liking, recommendation and updating Facebook introduces new layers between you and others. The result is for instance reducing complex social relationships to a flat world

in which there are only 'friends'. Google + was initiated in response to this positive, New Age world view without antagonisms. This is the contradiction of the democratized internet: whereas many benefit from simple technology, we all suffer from the cost of same simplicity. Facebook is popular because its technical and social limitations. This brings us to the need for a better understanding of interfaces and software that is now stored in the Cloud. We cannot access the code anymore, a movement which could be seen as part of the 'war on the general purpose computer' as described by Cory Doctorow at the 28th Chaos Computer Congress in Berlin (December 2011).²

Whereas we demand open data, use open source browsers and argue over net neutrality and copyright, 'walled gardens' like Facebook close the world of technological development and move towards 'personalization' in which messages outside of your horizon will never enter your information ecology. Another important watershed between Web 2.0 and social media is the arrival of smart phones and apps. Web 2.0 was still entirely PC-based. Social media rhetoric emphasizes mobility: people have their favorite social media apps installed on their phone and carry them around wherever they are. This leads to info overload, addiction and a further closure of the internet that only favors realtime mobile applications, pulling us further into accelerated historical energy fields such as the financial crisis, the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements.

In July 2011 the *Unlike Us* research network was launched, dedicated to social media monopolies and their alternatives, founded by our Institute of Network Cultures (Hogeschool van Amsterdam) in collaboration with Korinna Patelis (Cyprus University of Technology, Limassol). The launch event took place on Cyprus on November 28, 2011. A 2 1/2 day conference with workshops happened in Amsterdam, March 8-10, 2012.³

The events, blog, forum, list, reader and other outlets deal a range of topics (some of them listed below), inviting theoretical, empirical, practical and art-based contributions. *Unlike Us* anticipates the need for specialized workshops and so-called barcamps, realizing that its agenda is diverse and can take the initiative in a variety of directions—up to the danger of fragmentation. We have to urgently move on from the question so often heard inside firms, NGOs, government departments and (vocational) education how best to utilize Facebook and Twitter. In contrast with scholars around Christian Fuchs discussing the (Marxist) political economy of social media⁴ and an (internal) DFG meeting with German social media academics in Løeburg early February 2012, Unlike Us is primarily interested in a broad arts and humanities angle about web aesthetics (as described by Vito Campanelli and others), activist use and the need to discuss both big and small alternatives and does not limit itself to academic research. No matter how understandable the need for practical how-to information is, including the need to spread information about alternative platforms, our research cannot

² Cory Doctorow, *Lockdown, the Coming War on General-purpose Computing*, <http://boingboing.net/2012/01/10/lockdown.html>.

³ For more information on the Unlike Us network, the related email list, upcoming conferences and workshops, including the blog and (academic) publications, see: <http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/unlikeus/>.

⁴ See: <http://www.icts-and-society.net/events/uppsala2012/>.

stop there either. To conclude we list a summary and selection of the Unlike Us research agenda, put together in July 2011 by a group of people who collaborated online.⁵

Political Economy of Social Media Monopolies

Social media culture is belied in American corporate capitalism, dominated by the logic of start-ups and venture capital, management buyouts, IPOs etc. Three to four companies literally own the Western social media landscape and capitalize on the content produced by millions of people around the world. One thing is evident about the market structure of social media: one-to-many is not giving way to many-to-many without first going through many-to-one. Is it therefore justified to talk about monopolies, even if they are temporary and do not dominate markets in all countries? Would conglomerates or silos be better terms?

The Private in the Public

The advent of social media has eroded privacy as we know it, giving rise to a culture of self-surveillance made up of myriad voluntary, everyday disclosures. From day one Facebook has generated a row of privacy scandals. New understandings of private and public are needed to address this phenomenon. What does owning all this user data actually mean? Why are people willing to give up their personal data, and that of others?

How should software platforms be regulated? Is software like a movie to be given parental guidance? What does it mean that there are different levels of access to data, from partner info brokers and third-party developers to the users? Why is education in social media not in the curriculum of secondary schools? Can social media companies truly adopt a Social Network Users' Bill of Rights?

Artistic Responses to Social Media

Artists are playing a crucial role in visualizing power relationships and disrupting subliminal daily routines of social media usage. Artistic practice provides an important analytical site in the context of the proposed research agenda, as artists are often first to deconstruct the familiar and to facilitate an alternative lens to understand and critique these media. Is there such a thing as a social web aesthetics? It is one thing to criticize Twitter and Facebook for their primitive and bland interface designs. How can we imagine the social in different ways? And how can we design and implement new interfaces to provide more creative freedom to cater to our multiple identities? Also, what is the scope of interventions with social media, such as, for example, the 'dislike button' add-on for Facebook? And what practices are really needed? Isn't it time, for example, for a Facebook 'identity correction'?

Software Matters: Sociotechnical and Algorithmic Cultures

One of the important components of social media is software. For all the discourse on sociopolitical power relations governed by corporations such as Facebook and related

⁵ Marc Stumpel, Sabine Niederer, Vito Campanelli, Ned Rossiter, Michael Dieter, Oliver Leistert, Taina Bucher, Gabriella Coleman, Ulises Mejias, Anne Helmond, Lonneke van der Velden, Morgan Currie and Eric Kluitenberg and the initiators Geert Lovink and Korinna Patelis.

platforms, one must not forget that social media platforms are thoroughly defined and powered by software. We need critical engagement with Facebook as software. That is, what is the role of software in reconfiguring contemporary social spaces? In what ways does code make a difference in how identities are formed and social relationships performed? How does the software function to interpolate users to its logic? What are the discourses surrounding software? One of the core features of Facebook for instance is its news feed, which is algorithmically driven and sorted in its default mode. The EdgeRank algorithm of the news feed governs the logic by which content becomes visible, acting as a modern gatekeeper and editorial voice. Given its 800 million users, it has become imperative to understand the power of EdgeRank and its cultural implications. Another important analytical site for investigation are the 'application programming interfaces' (APIs) that to a large extent made the phenomenal growth of social media platforms possible in the first place. How have APIs contributed to the business logic of social media? How can we theorize social media use from the perspective of the programmer?

Researching Unstable Ontologies

Software destabilizes Facebook as a solid ontology. Software is always in becoming and so by nature ontogenetic. It grows and grows, living off of constant input. Logging on one never encounters the same content, as it changes on an algorithmic level and in terms of the platform itself. What does Facebook's fluid nature imply for how we make sense of and study it? Facebook for instance willingly complicates research: 1. It is always personalized (see Eli Pariser's Filter Bubble). Even when creating 'empty' research accounts it never gives the same results compared to other people's empty research accounts. 2. One must often be 'inside' social media to study it. Access from the outside is limited, which reinforces the first problem. 3. Outside access is ideally (for Facebook and Twitter) arranged through carefully regulated protocols of APIs and can easily be restricted. Next to social media as a problem for research, there is also the question of social research methods as intervention.

Pitfalls of Building Social Media Alternatives

It is not only important to critique and question existing design and socio-political realities but also to engage with possible futures. One of the aims of the Unlike Us initiative is to contribute and support 'alternatives in social media' such as Crabgrass, Appleseed, Diaspora, NoseRub, BuddyCloud, Protonet, StatusNet, GNU Social, Lorea and OneSocialWeb to the idea for a distributed Twitter alternative called Thimbl. How does collective design of alternative protocols and interfaces look like? We should find some comfort in the small explosion of alternative options that become available in 2012, but also ask how usable these options are and how real is the danger of fragmentation. How have developers from different initiatives so far collaborated and what might we learn from their successes and failures? How do we experience the transition from, or interoperability with, other platforms? Is it useful to make a distinction between corporate competitors and grassroots initiatives? How can these beta alternatives best be supported, both economically and socially? Aren't we overstating the importance of software and isn't the availability of capital much bigger in determining the adoption of a platform?

Understanding early failures and successes of these attempts seems crucial. A related issue concerns funding difficulties faced by projects. In what ways does regionalism (United States, Europe, Asia) feed into the way people search for alternatives and use social media. Is there

such as thing as a universal definition of 'the social'? When we think of alternatives, how close should they remain to the techno-social conventions as defined by blog software, YouTube or Facebook? And is it possible to go for radical designs?

Social Media Activism and the Critique of Liberation Technology

While the tendency to label any emergent social movement as the latest 'Twitter revolution' has passed, a liberal discourse of 'liberation technology' (information and communication technologies that empower grassroots movements) continues to influence our ideas about networked participation. This discourse tends to obscure power relations and obstruct critical questioning about the capitalist institutions and superstructures in which these technologies operate. What are the assumptions behind this neo-liberal discourse? What role do 'developed' nations play when they promote and subsidize the development of technologies of circumvention and 'hacktivism' for use in 'underdeveloped' states, while at the same time allowing social media companies at home to operate in increasingly deregulated environments and collaborating with them in the surveillance of citizens at home and abroad? What role do companies play in determining how their products are used by dissidents or governments abroad? How have their policies and Terms of Use changed as a result? The justified response to down play the role of Facebook in early 2011 events in Tunisia and Egypt by putting social media in a larger perspective has not taken off the table the question of how to organize social mobilizations. Which specific software do the 'movements of squares' need? How are governments using the same social media tools for surveillance and propaganda or highjacking Facebook identities, such as happened in Syria? What is Facebook's own policy when deleting or censoring accounts of its users? How can we envision 'organized

networks' that are based on 'strong ties' yet open enough to grow quickly if the time is right? Which software platforms are best suited for the 'tactical camping' movements that occupy squares all over the world?

To conclude, discussing the latest research trends we can see a growing tiredness over the 'exploitation' thesis of social media in favor of a more detailed analysis of the 'like economy'. The critical mass advantage of Facebook and Twitter is wearing out, but where are the alternative platforms? The monopoly position and related controlmania is

becoming too obvious and a banality to present as a research outcome. Power patterns in the IT industry, from IBM, Microsoft to Google and Facebook are becoming well-known. Ordinary users do not want to look uncool; this is why they follow the herd. We all still have to get used to the two faces of the networked reality: networks are both ideal to scale up quickly so that early movers, cashed up with venture capital can take over a technology or application in no time; and the distributed and decentralized, informal side of networks. Lately, so-called social media companies have emphasized the first and neglected the second. It is time for designers, programmers and geeks and nerds of all nations to step in, realize the dark sides of corporate-state control (such as in the case of ACTA) and become active.