

Why we need to examine multiple social network sites

Communication and the Public
1–5

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DOI: 10.1177/2057047316681171

ctp.sagepub.com



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Abstract

The hyper-concentration of research on mainstream social media sites like Facebook and Twitter comes at the cost of lesser emphasis on, if not the exclusion of, other platforms and practices. How might our conceptualizations of social media and social interaction change if we were to explore a wider range of systems to enrich our theorizing? This piece considers three examples of how looking beyond the usual suspects may broaden our understanding of how social media sites play into privacy management, identity work, and interpersonal relationships. I argue that our theorizing of social media and the practices that surround them gains strength from exploring varied sites of study.

Keywords

Boundary regulation, identity work, media choice, privacy, social network site

Introduction

In 2012, Nicole Ellison noted¹ that we “[n]eed to examine multiple social media sites, not just one. Studying only one social media site is like blind men describing an elephant.” In the story that she references, a group of blind men who are trying to make sense of an elephant end up with drastically different accounts depending on which part of the animal each has happened to examine. While each of the resulting accounts, differing and even contradictory as they may be, adds accurate information about the animal, it is only in combining the observations that the men can begin to describe what the elephant looks like.

As scholars, we risk running into similar issues as the protagonists of the story if we choose to scrutinize a select few social media sites at the expense of excluding other platforms and practices from our field of analytic vision. If we focus only on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—or whatever happen to be the most popular systems to study at any given moment—do we not gain insight only into parts of

the proverbial beast of how social media sites play into privacy management, identity work, interpersonal relationships, and other topics of interest? How might our conceptualizations of social media and social interaction change if we were to explore a wider range of systems to enrich our theorizing?

boyd and Ellison (2007) originally defined social network sites as

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or 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)

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Six years later, they offered an update to the definition, characterizing a social network site as

a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site. (Ellison & Boyd, 2013, p. 158)

That the authors revised their definition within a relatively short timeframe reflects the rapid changes in the social and technical landscape. In researching social media sites, we are always chasing a moving target.

While there is value in documenting features and practices as they change over time, an important aspect of how we can hope to make lasting contributions is our conceptual work. Theorizing, too, is influenced by the systems we choose to study. Considering a diverse range of sites can lead to richer and more balanced conceptualizations of social media and social interaction. In the following, I discuss three examples of how looking beyond the usual suspects may broaden our understanding of how social media sites play into privacy management, identity work, and interpersonal relationships.

Countering the trend of increased openness

How might looking beyond Facebook and other popular systems help us to establish a more balanced view of privacy management in the context of social media? Let us consider changes to sharing defaults and privacy settings on social media sites as an example. Here, the typical story is one of an increasing push to openness. Boyd and Hargittai (2010) have documented how changes to Facebook's privacy settings have caused a number of heated debates over the history of the site. Commonly, changes toward increased openness and decreased obscurity get framed as (potential) privacy violations. As such, shifts in that direction have captured the attention of

researchers and advocates focusing on privacy, arguably for a good reason.

Yet, according to Altman's (1975) theory of privacy as boundary regulation, people's efforts to regulate boundaries may fail both toward achieving too little or too much privacy. Altman (1975) conceives of privacy as "an interpersonal boundary process by which a person or a group regulates interaction with others" (p. 6). This definition is often quoted in research on privacy in networked contexts, such as social media sites. This approach casts privacy as a dynamic process of trying to achieve the right amount of interaction, advancing an understanding of privacy as a dialectic process where too little interaction leads to social isolation and too much to feelings of crowding and intrusion.

While the trend among social media sites seems, indeed, to be pushing people to share more and more, identifying and investigating counterexamples could enrich our conceptual work regarding privacy management. Scoopinon, a Finnish news service, relies on tracking what its users read online on white-listed news sites. It abandoned its original, automated social sharing model in 2012 in order to focus on delivering personalized, "crowd-curated" recommendations for feature-length stories. In this process, Scoopinon users lost access to the behavioral data of others along with the chance to share their own reading data on the site. If we are to apply and adapt Altman's theory to the study of social media, should not we examine how users conceive of system changes like this that (unexpectedly) decrease access and visibility, instead of focusing solely on the inverse trend? Analyzing alternative examples that counter dominant narratives can help us understand reactions to changes in privacy settings and defaults more comprehensively. Counterexamples can help in recognizing where prior theories benefit theoretical understandings situated in the networked context of today, and where they fail to do so. Moreover, they can serve as a reminder that while prevalent service design trends and business logics may seem almost inevitable, they are, in fact, choices, not the only possible paths to take.

Media choices as identity work

As a second example, I will now turn to a system that is rarely brought up in conversations about

social network sites: Internet Relay Chat (IRC), a chat technology that was developed in the end of 1980s by a Finnish information technology (IT) student and became globally popular over time, well before the emergence of contemporary social media sites. This discussion relies heavily on a study of media choice in a Finnish student community (Lampinen, Lehtinen, & Cheshire, 2014) in which it was illustrated how individuals come to prefer some information communication technologies to others and how these preferences are used to serve identity work (as defined by Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). Members of the student community expressed preferring IRC to social network sites and other forms of social media. The participants were well aware that many considered IRC “old-fashioned” and “geeky.” Yet, they expressed a consistent preference for this technology. This brings up several interesting issues.

First, the observed preference highlights the need to engage in longitudinal studies of a technology in order to understand its lifecycle rather than capturing snapshots of its heyday. Examining how the uses of a technology and the meanings attached to it shift and change over time invites us to come up with more nuanced and contextualized understandings of the technology and its affordances.

Second, in this particular student community, IRC was symbolic of technical competence and skill—two identity markers that the community held in high regard. Choosing to use IRC, and having the skills necessary to use it without a graphical user interface, functioned as a source of pride and positive bonds among the community members. This alternative media choice served to define and declare individuals’ social identity as valued members of the community, and allowed members to distinguish their community from other student groups on campus. A risk in focusing on dominant social network sites, then, lies in inadvertently undermining the active choices individuals and communities make regarding the systems that they use. This can result in beginning inquiry with the question of why some individuals or groups choose *not* to use such services (sometimes discussed in terms of non-use) and in a failure to acknowledge how media choices can serve identity work. The example of IRC illustrates how

individuals and groups may choose not to use a mainstream service and, rather, opt for an alternative that allows them to embrace and communicate their own values.

Third, it is important to note that although community members expressed preferring IRC to social network sites and other forms of social media, this does not mean that they would have refused to use these other technologies. Rather, participants used a range of technologies, for varied purposes and to varying degrees (Lampinen et al., 2014). While IRC was the technology of choice within the student community, other tools were often better suited for maintaining interpersonal relationships beyond this particular community. People commonly identify with several groups, and each of these social identities can encourage particular media choices. Focusing on any single platform is insufficient for making sense of an individual’s identity work. We need to strive to understand a range of platform use if we are to arrive at a clearer sense of how media choices can serve identity work.

Finally, the study documents how IRC’s significance in the student community spilled over to daily face-to-face interactions, too (Lampinen et al., 2014):

[B]eyond online presence and social interaction that was mediated by one’s preferred technologies, participants communicated their media choices in offline settings, for instance, through the use of relevant jargon, the sharing of insider jokes, as well as through explicit expressions of preference. Using technical jargon and “nicks” [IRC nicknames] beyond interactions on IRC made the medium a visible part of student life in daily face-to-face encounters, providing individuals with ample opportunities to signal their identity as community members. These offline practices ensured that also those community members who did not use IRC knew of the medium, its significance, and the social cost of foregoing the shared ICT preference. (p. 125)

This example challenges us to pay attention to which media are dominant locally, rather than concentrating our efforts on what is popular in the mainstream, or fascinating due to its status as “the new and the shiny.” The study concludes that relying on

any simple idea of the desirability of different technologies may be misguided when theorizing how people strive to differentiate themselves with distinctive media choices, especially when distinction is approached on the level of groups or communities (Lampinen et al., 2014).

Institutional use of social media

As the final example, I will look into institutional use of social media. The focus here will be on Wilma, an online social network tool and database program that is designed for use in educational settings and widely implemented in Finnish schools. Over the last decade, Wilma has become a central coordinating tool in school settings in Finland. Wilma's functions are categorized toward helping to organize, report, and share information related to everyday life at school. The system provides one-to-one and one-to-many communication channels, mediating communications between teachers, pupils, and the pupils' parents. The software is also used for gathering data about pupils, and different stakeholders can interact with these records within the bounds of their roles in the school system. For instance, pupils can only access their own data and parents can access only data about their own children.

Mainstream social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, are sometimes used as part of the official functioning of schools, too, and they are of course widely used in casual interactions in these settings. Yet, much can be learned of how socio-technical mechanisms typical of social media play out in educational settings by studying systems that have developed with these contexts in mind and deployed in schools in a top-down manner. While Wilma has some of the characteristics ascribed to social network sites, such as identifiable user profiles and streams of diverse content, it is clear that the system is by no means a prototypical form of social media. As one of the most striking departures from the defaults of social media sites, there is no pretense that adopting Wilma would be a choice that individuals are free to make or refuse. This raises a broader question of how free are individuals to decide whether, and in what ways, they want to engage with other social media sites. And how

important is the idea of voluntary participation to our notions of what social media are like and how they play into interpersonal relationships?

As Lampinen and Lehmuskallio (2016) have described, Wilma provides access to an online social network that reflects and reveals how formal social networks in schools are formed. Notably, instead of allowing users to articulate their own connections as they please, and thus determine whom they interact with, Wilma establishes each user's social network based on their particular role in the social world of the school. Again, we are challenged to think about the room to maneuver that the design of social media sites affords to users, and the disruption that the introduction of these technologies can bring about in everyday practices. Teachers, for instance, are called upon to reconfigure boundaries regarding professional and personal life in response to the introduction of Wilma and the changes the tool brings about in the social dynamics of school life: How to retain authority and keep appropriate distance to students in the presence of a system whose features, such as instant messaging, evoke communicative norms that have evolved in leisure settings? And how to balance interactions with pupils' parents through the same system, when some use it to share excessive details about matters unrelated to school, while others are feared to mainly click through reports about the children, instead of actually engaging with the content that is shared with them? Considering and examining these challenges can help in understanding the even more complex landscape of roles and relations that are typical of mainstream, purportedly general-purpose, social media sites.

Conclusion

The hyper-concentration of research on mainstream social media sites like Facebook and Twitter comes at the cost of lesser emphasis on, if not the exclusion of, other platforms and practices. The examples of Scoopinon, IRC, and Wilma illustrate that our theorizing of social media and the practices that surround them gains strength from exploring varied sites of study. The characteristics of dominant forms of social media are easier to recognize when we contrast them with services that have been designed

differently, with different use cases and values in mind. Their particular characteristics and the (hidden) assumptions embedded in their features become apparent in comparison to systems that stem from a different history and/or locale. The empirical examples we choose to consider affect what seems illustrative of the conceptual phenomena under study. Media choices need not be mutually exclusive, either. Rather, these choices involve prioritizing and valuing certain media among the multitude of technologies that one (or one's group) uses. Finally, it is important to close by stating explicitly that the concerns expressed in this essay are not about Facebook or Twitter (or any other particular service) per se. There are problematic implications in concentrating our collective research efforts on *any* narrow set of technologies, regardless of whether it is a collection of currently popular social media sites, already obsolete technological objects, or something else entirely.

Note

1. In a tweet from the 6th International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media (ICWSM) in 2012: https://twitter.com/nicole_ellison/status/210318943682957312

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