

Jamie gartland

[Technology](#), [Internet](#)



Jamie Gartland CS1 Student Number: 11388466 CM227 Assignment 1 Due 14th of December Social Media is more 'personal' than 'social'. Critically examine this claim vis-a-vis its cultural implication for the shaping of our cultural identities. Base your research on a critical reading of contemporary academic writings on social media.

" His mind slid away into the labyrinthine world of doublethink. To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them; to use logic against logic..." - George Orwell, ' Nineteen Eighty-Four' The prevalence of social media has led to developments in the way in which we communicate with each other and the way in which we view ourselves. This essay will investigate how social media has become a place where identity is formed and culture is created in contemporary society. The particular issues that will be discussed are the creation of culture and identity online, the reasons for the creation of online spaces, and the possible outcomes thereof, both beneficial and detrimental. With the opportunity to construct a self-image online come many consequent opportunities. There is the chance to omit, exaggerate, glorify and nullify certain details about oneself in a self-effigy which is available for anyone you wish to make it visible to. Naturally this transforms the way in which people communicate with each other, as it is communication on a whole new plane. Face-to-face interaction is forsaken and in its place is a new realm of interactions where people speak to one another virtually. As real life communication is marginalised, many of its

associated fears and drawbacks are eliminated. It is described as a silent world, where conversation is typed, and to enter it, one forsakes body and place and becomes a thing of words alone (Rushkoff, 1994). The Internet has overcome space and time, creating a world where we can communicate with each other and live out some of our offline desires, for example friendship, interaction, community and public life (Jones, 1997). The nature of the Internet is intrinsically communicative. Its primary objectives must therefore be to provide a database for information, and a space for communication, collaboration and appraisal, in order to better society and global knowledge. Jones suggests that the subsequent improvement in communication should result in the curing various social problems, which apparently arise from a lack of communication. "The Internet would thus make community better. It was to result in a community free of the constraints of space and time, and so free us to engage with fellow humans irrespective of geographic proximity and the clock" (Jones, 1997). There are further implications as Douglas Shluer (1996) forecasts, "life will be happier for the online individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity." Shluer, however, neglects to mention the value of communication with people whom have not been carefully chosen. It is these relationships, which may often be ones of conflict and disagreement, in which real issues may be addressed, and new ideas may occur. Conflict is inevitable, and it is a precursor for change. History is made when opposites come together and there becomes an issue which is to be resolved, but if people are to socialize only with other like-minded people, then there will be less conflict, and therefore less cause

for change. A possible outcome of this is the vast fragmentation of society. If people of similar mindsets are kept to each other through the filter of social networking then it can be assumed that there will be a vast proliferation of cultural identities, subcultures and divisions in society. If social media serves to contain certain groups of people within themselves then they will strengthen and further affirm their own beliefs and ideologies and there may be little or no crossover between these different communities. We should not overlook that it is we who, in our rush to overcome space and time, instead fragment them, and thus cause the ruptures we want healed (Jones, 1997). We are living in a period of enormous disarray in all our institutions and in much of our personal life as well (Carey, 1989). Jones (1997) likens the spread of the Internet to the rise of railroad tracks, which also transformed society and brought people of different backgrounds and communities together, " though not symbolized by tracks and telegraph lines, but by the personal computer, keyboard and mouse. " Instead of travelling along telegraph lines however, the Internet comes via existing cable installations (Jones, 1997). The point he makes is that what we are currently experiencing with the Internet is a progression of technology similar to all those we have seen before, in that it follows paths we've already known and used for a long time. These progressions, which further our social reach and ability, are powerful ones. They surmount and transcend the existing limits of our existence. Railroads provided people with further geographical mobility, and the Internet gives us an expanded intellectual and social reach. Social media in particular has given us an online space in which we can contact people regardless of where they or we are, not only overcoming geographical

boundaries, but eliminating them altogether. This free reign over the Internet gives rise to what Giddens describes as ‘ the project of the self’ (Giddens, 1991). This is what social media allows people to do, using the Internet a vehicle for creating an image of themselves to be seen by others. This image can be carefully cultivated so as to produce a version of oneself which is exactly as one would like to be perceived. The social aspect of the Internet is so malleable and diverse that users of networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram to name a few, have the opportunity to be seen not only how they wish, but by whom. They provide new opportunities for identity and intimacy and allow us to experiment (Livingstone, 2011). Many seek to construct a valued representation of oneself which affirms and is affirmed by one’s peers (Livingstone, 2011). This is a large part of the motivation for partaking in social networking as it helps people, both young and old, to establish a self-image, and to share it with others. Social media in this sense is as personal as it is social. In creating an online identity which people feel is accurate to their own beliefs and values it may serve to instill confidence and solidity in oneself. It may also act a benchmark and something to stand by should their ethos be challenged in the physical world. Much modern social media research is focused on children. Their reception of social networking has been the most extreme and the degree to which they communicate online far surpasses that of previous generations. In a 2011 EU study, it was found that 50% of 11-16 year olds find it easier to be themselves online than they do in face-to-face communications, and one third discuss matters online which they wouldn’t discuss face-to-face (Livingstone, 2011). Also referenced by Livingstone in a subsequent essay

was that most online communication serves primarily to sustain existing relationships rather than establish new ones (Boneva et al, 2007). Danielle, one of the children surveyed for this study is quoted as saying " You can just change it all the time [and so] you can show different sides of yourself. " These findings suggest a shift in social standards for the next generation. If fear is eliminated online, and the complications of face-to-face communications such as shyness, speech, eye contact and the overall experience of sharing the same location and time with somebody are foregone, then the result is a freer, more open conversation with less boundaries. " Social networking disembeds communication from its traditional anchoring in the face-to-face situation of physical co-location where conventions of trust, authenticity and reciprocity are well understood, re-embedding it in more flexible, complex and ambiguous networks, in which, it seems, children share advice and support from peers. " (Heverly, 2008) This may herald a new type of future society, comparable to George Orwell's 1984, or to Marshall Poe's take on the Internet where he likens it to Plato's cave. These forecasts are clearly somewhat dramatic and extreme, but the general notion that our face-to-face communication is declining prevails. Plato was on firm ground in asserting that we naturally seek the comfort of illusions (Poe, 2010). He likens the Internet to " a cave of massive proportions, " where all we see is the reflections of real people and real things. He suggests that the Internet is a self-indulgent arena, where personal gratification is the only end. We don't know who or what these reflections really are, but usually we don't much care. Perhaps it's better if we don't know what they are, as the objective of the Internet is a distraction,

a place for fun and a virtual reality that is satisfying to us (Poe, 2010). In relation to social media, this take on the Internet is quite apt. It is clear that people are not entirely honest, nor can they be when creating an online persona. It is virtually impossible to capture who you are in real life and transfer it on to a monitor, condensed into a series of pictures, paragraphs and posts. People are non-transferrable, but they can choose which aspects of themselves that are to be transferred. They can choose to display who or what they follow, or perhaps, wish to publicly appear to follow (Burgess & Green 2009). In this vein, it is said that we can either be seen or not be seen, should we so choose. We are free to look where we will without regard for the judgement of others. The ability to cast our own shadows, unlike Plato's cave dwellers, is an added bonus (Poe, 2010). The personal aspect of social media comes in here. You can choose whether or not to play the game, to cast a shadow or to remain in the darkness. It is in these spaces where identity is formed. Culturally and socially Internet users cultivate their identities based on what they 'like', which is often cross referenced with and heavily influenced by what their peers 'like'. This is a reference to social media and casting a shadow, which is the entire point of social networking: connecting with others online. Poe posits that the reason for this behavior is that it is both enjoyable for us and pleasing to others, and whether or not it is truthful is entirely beside the point. Entertainment is the primary objective when socializing, and sometimes we are best entertained by lies, foolishness and impropriety (Poe, 2010). This take on social media echoes that of Steven G. Jones, who asks "who are we when we are online?" In terms of cultural and social identity forming, social media sites have been instrumental in

establishing links between people who collaborate to create and develop media with cultural meaning. The Internet acts as a place for such enthusiasts to share ideas and information, and also to critique and appraise each other's efforts. The launch of YouTube in 2005 was a major step forward in the development of social media and online sharing, and though there were other sites that offered a similar service, YouTube prevailed as the number one video-sharing site. It was a simple idea which offered a combination of video sharing and social networking. The website provided a simple interface within which users could upload, publish and view streaming videos without high levels of technological knowledge, and within the technological constraints of standard browser software and relatively modest bandwidth (Burgess & Green, 2009). YouTube in its early days encouraged people to 'show off [their] videos to the world' and 'securely and privately show [their] videos to [their] friends and family' and its slogan was 'Your Digital Video Repository' (Burgess & Green, 2009). All of which entices people to display and share their media efforts online, regardless of quality or expertise. This was the beginning of online public participation, where the users are the creators, and the website is just a space where the content is displayed and consumed. Long before the ubiquity of Facebook, YouTube was encouraging collaboration and connections between users, with an emphasis on linking channels together and subscribing to one another in order to see what other users were producing and subscribing to themselves. This provided a platform for users and acted as a nexus at the genesis of online sharing. YouTube is described as a cultural system, which is created and sustained by users through their own activity. This includes uploading

viewing, discussing, and collaborating. In doing each of the aforementioned, they form a network of creative practice (Burgess & Green, 2009). It is a place where culture is formed through communication, involving everybody from contributors to viewers. A new type of socializing occurs in this space, which is socializing with a cultural outcome. If content is given cultural meaning through its recognition and appraisal, then YouTube is certainly a site of mass cultural development. One of the key aspects of modern social media is the sharing of content. It occurs across many websites, as hyperlinks are copied and pasted, shared and sent from person to person, seeking a reaction or a response from another individual. With each share of media, cultural meaning is added to it. The context in which it is sent, along with the reception of it at the other end, add further meaning to it. The act of viewing and forming an opinion on something is a cultural process in itself, and if it is shared again, then the process begins again. If something is popular this process is repeated over and over and it will no doubt become a common topic of conversation among those who helped to give it such exposure. This act of publicizing content makes users of social media cultural agents, working to popularize something they find appealing. " Agency is about choice and the freedom to exercise that choice. It is about the ability of an individual to imagine the outcome of a social encounter and to act in such a way as to achieve that outcome. " (Kidd, 2002) Joshua Green and Henry Jenkins (2011) discuss how media audiences create cultural meaning in a networked society. They recognize that through acts of spreading media, users gain extra interest in a certain piece of content as it holds more meaning for them if they helped to promote it. They enjoy a sense of

discovery and promotion, and they can find themselves acting as trendsetters, even ahead of the mainstream media. This is due to the immediacy of online sharing as compared with broadcasted material. The spreading of media often relies on the public as a message carrier (Dawkins 1976), introducing the concept of going ‘viral.’ There is an emphasis on the agency of the audience as they ascribe meaning to cultural content, particularly when they share it directly with each other. The feeling of receiving a shared piece of media is comparable to receiving a gift (Green & Jenkins, 2011), and the sharers are often subsequently entered into a system of reciprocal social gestures. The users as a group become a powerful audience, and have the simple but pivotal choice of whether or not to share. The more often content is shared the more meaning and weight it carries, and in this sense, the audience holds all the power in terms of ‘spreadability,’ a concept introduced by Green and Jenkins. There is an evolving consensus, which is an accurate measure of public opinion. As audiences have become aware of their newfound agency they have become even more active in the production and distribution of media. In their online society, they have created a culture machine, separate from large broadcasters and corporations. It is solely the people, who have become the users, who have also become the producers and the audience, that decide what becomes culturally important. Moreover, it is the online experience of becoming an avatar, and communicating with others online that has led to this evolution of society and transformation in the consumption of media. Healthy, wholesome, entertaining, fulfilling, fun or otherwise, the online communication of contemporary society continues to shape the culture of a

generation. References: Orwell, G. 1949. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Penguin Group

Rushkoff, D. 1994. *Cyberia*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco

Jones, S. 1997. *Virtual Culture: Identity & Communication in Cybersociety*. London: SAGE Publications

Shluer, D. 1996. *New Community Networks*. New York: AMC Press

Carey, J. W. 1991. *Communication as Culture*. Boston: Unwin & Hyman

Giddens, A. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Livingstone, S. and Ålafsson, K. 2011. *Risky Communication Online*. Report, EU Kids [Online] Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/33732/>

Livingstone, S. and Brake, D. R. 2010. On the rapid rise of social networking sites: new findings and policy implications. [Online] Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/30124/>

Boneva, B., Quinn, A., Kraut, R., Kiesler, S., & Shklovski, I. 2006. Teenage Communication in the Instant Messaging Era. In R. Kraut, M. Brynin & S. Kiesler (Eds.), *Computers, Phones, and the Internet: Domesticating Information Technology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Heverly, R. A. 2008. Growing Up Digital: Control and the Pieces of a Digital Life. In T. McPherson (Ed.), *Digital Youth, Innovations, and the Unexpected* (Vol. 4: 199—218). Cambridge: The MIT Press

Poe, M. 2010. *A History of Communications*. [Online] Available from [http://www.dawsonera.com/remote.library.dcu.ie/depp/reader/protected/external/AbstractView/S9780511987311](http://www.dawsonera.com/remote/library/dcu.ie/depp/reader/protected/external/AbstractView/S9780511987311) [Accessed on 10 December 2012]

Allen, R. E. 2006. *Plato's Republic*. New Haven and London: Yale UP

Burgess, J. and Green, R. 2009. *YouTube: Digital Media and Society Series*. Malden, MA: Polity Press

Kidd, W. 2002. *Culture and Identity*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan