

Innovation case study social medias media essay

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Dave Manneh 33234711 MSc Digital Sociology Centre for Creative and Social Technologies University of London, Goldsmiths[A CASE STUDY OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN INNOVATION AND ITS AFFECT ON, AND RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIETY]Social Media is all the rage now and justifiably so. Undergirded by a technological innovation that has and continues to prove a catalyst for better communication and other forms of socio-cultural evolution, makes it truly deserving of the accolade. In this essay, brief attempts will be made to provide some background on the innovation[s] and the foresight that made these technological platforms a reality. The unique challenges and opportunities that social media presents socio-cultural researchers is rich and varied, and attempts will be made to illustrate some of these. It's perhaps worth mentioning that an essay I wrote Sensory Sociology unit [The Sociological Analysis of Instagram as Digital Cultural Phenomenon] has some similarities to this essay due to the inter-relatedness of the two topics.

Contents

Introduction: How and where it all began

Social Media, Social Networking Sites [SNSs] or Web 2.0 as the Web Communication Platforms/tools are variously referred to provide useful [and perhaps an unsophisticated] window into the complex nature that is 'network societies' (Castells, 1997). But what is beyond doubt is how much more interconnected people and societies have become through these innovations. Social Media not only makes it possible for individuals and communities to share user-generated content, but more importantly it enables the co-creation, discussions, and modifying of such content, thus introducing substantial shift in modes of communication between

communities and individuals, and a trigger for cultural innovation and change (Kaplan Andreas M., Haenlein Michael, 2010: 61). Due to the phenomenal pace at which Social Media is evolving, now is perhaps an opportune moment to reflect back on how and from where it all began. It is universally agreed that the Internet has its origins in ARPANet; a 1960's era US military computer and communications. The predecessors to today's Social Media platforms were Internet-based applications like, Telnet, FTP, ListServe, and Email. Perhaps the most influential of these early innovations was the World Wide Web (WWW), a creation by the British engineer Tim Banners-Lee in 1990 (Fuchs, 2008: 121). ' This concept allows a user-friendly browsing in a shared information space by making use of browsers like Mosaic, Internet Explorer, Netscape, Lynx, Viola, Opera, Mozilla, or Safari' (Fuchs, 2008). The precursor to the numerous browsers that makes WebPages so ubiquitous today is Mosaic. The foresightedness and altruism of Tim Banners-Lee's employer; CERN to ' donate' what has undoubtedly become one of [modern] society's most profound innovations is indeed fortunate and laudable. It is no exaggeration to claim that the user-friendliness feature of the World Wide Web [WWW] was perhaps the singular most important contributing factor to the phenomenal explosion in Internet use and the resultant exponential rise in applications, systems and tools that emerged on the back of it. The past few years has witnessed a massive growth in society-changing cultural innovations ranging from the huge growth of the virtualisation of group networks and social identities, 'to the digital convergence of text and audio-visual media' (Karaganis, 2007: 9-10). In a relatively short period, these innovations have engendered the creation of digital media communities all because of the inherently ' participatory

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dynamics' (Karaganis, 2007) that undergirds it. The list of Social Media applications seems to be on an upwards trajectory. Almost every facet of society is being affected by/with Social Media so much so that some of the applications have taken firm roots in society's common lexicon: Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube, Google+ etc to are significantly impacting society innumerable ways.

Social Media and its role in the ' Social'

There is a widespread misperception that ' Social Network' and ' Social Media' are one and the same. Social Media as defined by boyd and Ellison (2008: 211) are 'web services which facilitate users maintaining ' public or semi-public profile within a bounded system' and through which they can ' articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection' [(2008: 211). Dhiraj Murthy]. A social network on the other hand is " a structure made up of actors (individuals, organizations, or other groups) called " nodes", which are (connected) by one more specific types of interdependency, such as friendship, kinship, common interest, financial exchange, dislike, sexual relationships, or relationships of beliefs, knowledge or prestige" (1). Typical Social network services are web-based, with the central focus being the means for interactivity over the internet [through applications, tools, web-services etc] providing users (actors) the means to share ideas, engage in activities, organise events, and shared interests within individual networks. Murthy summed it up beautifully thus:... The ' social' part of social media refer to its distinction from ' traditional' media (Murthy, 2011). This new medium is designed to facilitate social interaction, the sharing of digital media, and collaboration. Social networks are also

important to social media – especially in their ability to disseminate’ (Dhiraj Murthy, 2012). This sociality feature of social media is impacting nearly all aspects of today’s culture and society from participation in civic and political activities to education and training. Sometimes one cannot help but wonder whether the social is shaping technology or the reverse is true, i. e., technology is shaping the social as illustrated in the ‘concept of affordances’ (Gibson 1979). ‘Affordances is the type of action or a characteristic of actions that a technology enables through its design’. Though a thorough analysis of and elaboration on both the term and concept of ‘affordance’ is well beyond the scope of this essay, nevertheless... typical for the affordances of social media is that they allow for the establishment of a social network structure and for interactive exchange within and between such defined networks (boyd, 2011). (...) . Social media affordances may change both the individual and the mobilizing agency aspects of mobilization processes by introducing new types of communication structure and by allowing for new communication forms. The central element of this transformation is the network structure that underpins social media. (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, Wollebæk, 2012).

Some Observable Affects of Social Media on Socio-Culture

The phenomenal pervasiveness of the Internet and Social Media makes them worthy subject of study for social scientists, as they touch, affect and influence most facets of today’s culture and society. Social Media applications, technologies and tools are developed principally as means of enabling those basics of human needs: communication, information gathering and interaction etc. Social Media, it is fair to say sort of forces

society to live in a seemingly parallel domain where everyday realities co-exist and society is forced to adapt. People, communities and society seem to be near yet so far away. One can live relatively close to another person geographically but yet never meet physically. On the other, there could be great geographical distance between two people and yet they can be and are very close, and are on an almost daily contact. This reality is forcing, albeit inadvertently, a new ritual of inter-personal relationships and social interaction; forcing a seismic shift from the traditional means and methods of communication. As result new ways of studying societies and cultures need inventing. And though at embryonic stage, [in the grander scheme of social changes], it would seem that the social science disciplines are making valiant efforts to catch up with this reality even if there currently does not exist a disciplinary structure of studying the Internet. (Cavanagh, 2007: 3). Cavanagh (2007) cautioned further that the current state of affairs as pertains to the sociological study of the Internet is constrained due to the fact that Sociologists have traditionally been subsumed by, and interested in theorising about diversity, multiplicity and difference Cavanagh, 2007: 3).... Thus far it would not appear that academic discourse around the internet is particularly sociologist friendly. Sociology, with its grand theoretical schemas, appears forlornly anachronistic on an academic landscape people by theorists emphasizing diversity, multiplicity and difference. Sociology's equally dearly held commitment to the here and now, the empirical and the demonstrable, seems less well suited to survive than cultural studies' commitments to virtuality, where this is understood as 'the mediation of relationships, their malleability, the artifices, and the constant possibilities of arrangements' (Webster 2005: 451). For this reason, among more

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institutional others, Webster argue that cultural studies has outpaced sociology in responding to the new dynamics of information (Cavanagh, 2007: 7). For Sociologists the debate has been centred on the issues and 'questions of the internet's relationship with offline life and offline communities' (Cavanagh, 2007: 11), and the intersection between physical and electronic space. The focus for them being questions of how to fully understand the symbiosis between online and offline communities, and how these two communities can 'serve the same socially integrative role as traditional communities' (Cavanagh, 2007: 11). This shift in focus has been championed by the likes of Kroker and Weinstein's theory of the 'virtual class' (1994), Scott Lash's theories of information underclasses and overclasses (2002), Mark Poster's virtual classes (1998), Hardt and Negri's multitude (2004), and Manuel Castells' network classes (1997). These theories have placed 'new communications technologies' as a central reference point. In their views 'Social class has come to be predicated on the wider notion of inclusion and access, where access is understood as the ability to use and exploit new media' (Cavanagh, 2007: 12). The core message from the above theories is that class has now to be viewed through the prisms of one's [or a community's] 'inclusion/exclusion' (Cavanagh, 2007) from the Internet, as these are the result of 'digital divide' (Norris, 2001; Van Dijk, 2005) between communities with the ability and means to access and know-how, on one hand and those without on the other. Together with the realisation of a 'digital divide' another major human component that has become central to these new technologies of communication is identity. How this new [virtual] identity is evolving in the age of digital technology vis-a-vis how the 'sense of our self is developed, and in the role that identity

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plays in social interactions and social situations' (Cavanagh, 2007) also needs careful study. The traditional means of identification, i. e. by race, colour, creed, religion etc are becoming less transparent due to the nature of social media and as a result such identifying traits are inapplicable to virtual communities. These emergent new identities are irrespective of geographical boundaries and or socio-economic standing. Users of social media can and do interact with care-free abandon as they feel less obliged to adhere to the usual 'real-world' societal norms and feel unconstrained by them. This is in essence Pierre Levy's vision of new " knowledge space" or " cosmopedia" [Jenkins, 2006], in which he links... the emergence of the new knowledge space to the break-down of geographic constraints on communication, of the declining loyalty of individuals to organized groups, and of the diminished power of nation-states to command the exclusive loyalty of their citizens. The new knowledge communities will be voluntary, temporary, and tactical affiliations, defined through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments. Members may shift from one community to another as their interests and needs change, and they may belong to more than one community at the same time. Yet they are held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge (Jenkins, 2006: 37). Another very important utility of digital technologies is the power of ' deterritorializing' of embedding knowledge and culture from existing institutions, practices, and geographies, and at the same time being tools of continuous social and political ' reterritorializing', as borders are redrawn, new institutions and structures emerge, and new forms of control are established. (Karaganis 2007: 11). Jenkins (2006) further more... links the emergence of the new knowledge space to the break-down of geographic

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constraints on communication, of the declining loyalty of individuals to organized groups, and of the diminished power of nation-states to command the exclusive loyalty of their citizens (Jenkins, 2006: 37).

Grassroots Innovation, the Architecture of the Internet and Socio-Technical Considerations

There is an almost universal agreement that the principal aim and objective of Internet architecture is connectivity and as a result the protocols were designed with ' flexibility and modularity' (Internet Architecture Task Force: 2010) as core components..... ' The tool is the Internet Protocol, and the intelligence is end to end rather than hidden in the network' (Internet Architecture Task Force: 2010). It is conceivable that these attributes of the Internet architecture facilitates other inter-related technological innovations. As is universally the case, the current architecture as brilliant as it is, still requires some refinement in its ' heterogeneity, simplicity, modularity and scalability' (Internet Architecture Task Force: 2010) in order to further promote Innovation. Cultural innovation in the past few years have been massive and society-changing. From the virtualisation of group networks and social identities to the digital convergence of text and audio-visual media (Karaganis, 2007: 9-10), in a relatively short period social media applications resulted in the creation of digital media communities with millions of participants. These platforms brought into sharp focus the participatory dynamics and arguably obsolescence of other cultural industries (Karaganis, 2007: 9). As a result of this monumental societal change, civic societies are encouraging and partaking in research into how these changes affects cultures and society. The field of research has been termed it ' Sustainability

Transitions' and its central tenet to address the need to re-evaluate the conventional and traditional model of development by focusing on sustainable patterns of production and consumption (2). Such a research was carried out by (Seyfang and Longhurst 2010) into... a niche analysis of a growing grassroots innovation- the international community currency movement' (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2010). This movement comprises a range of new socio-technical configurations of systems of exchange which have emerged from civil society over the last 30 years, intended to provide more environmentally and socially sustainable forms of money and finance. (Seyfang and Longhurst 2010). Their study suggests many of the prevailing ' niche processes are relevant in a grassroots context'((Seyfang and Longhurst 2010) though the ' existing theories do not fully capture the complexity of this type of innovation, nor does the niche development trajectory appear to follow the same path as that of market based innovations' ((Seyfang and Longhurst 2010).

Grassroots Innovation- Some Case Studies

Having missed out the first five weeks of the academic year put me at a massive disadvantage. Nevertheless having the good fortune of attending one particular lecture [and guest lecturer] impacted me profoundly for the sheer dedication and devotion of Mr Ken Banks and the innovative means and ways he is improving the lives of millions of Africans is inspirational. FrontlineSMS one of his pioneering projects still continues to be the foundation for thousands of social life-changing projects across Africa and beyond. Despite the fact that the application is not in the strictest sense a Social Media tool, all the same it is worthy of emulation for the sheer

simplicity but yet innovative genius that it is. FrontlineSMS is open source software which enables users to send and receive text messages without requiring Internet access. Its basic concept was as a means to harness the power of mobile to lower barriers to social change. Modifications have been made to the original idea and product making it ' more intuitive, simpler to extend and run over networks, and also to make it easier to manage larger volumes of messages' (3). This has resulted in stronger and more robust production, thus facilitating a means for customisation and integrativity with ' other platforms and systems' (3). Though introduced in Africa the use of FrontlineSMS now spreads far and beyond the continent. As is usually the case, some innovations come into being on the back of societal upheaval and so it was that the murderous fratricide which ensued after the 2008 Kenyan elections became the catalyst for a tool aptly named Ushahidi or " testimony" in Swahili. It was created as a platform to map hotspots of violence around Kenya by the means of SMS, email or the web and proved tremendously helpful in data visualization. Due to the deadliness and urgency of the situation, the production of the tool from conception to production took a mere week. It has since proven versatile as 'a prototype and a lesson for what can be done by combining crisis information from citizen-generated reports, media and NGOs, and mashing that data up with geographical mapping tools(4). In addition for being used as a platform monitoring elections, Ushahidi has also been utilised for stock-control of medicine and tracking mobile phone companies. The sociological benefit and effect of the platform is huge. What makes Ushahidi even more useful is the fact that the primary medium of reporting and updating incidents is via mobile phones rather than the Internet due to accessibility of the latter for <https://assignbuster.com/innovation-case-study-social-medias-media-essay/>

people in 'developing countries' making the mobile phone the 'foundational element' of the tool (4). The research into 'the international community currency movement' by (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2010) sheds light on the intricacies and inner workings of community banks. One such firm is Favabank; an innovative approach to banking that promotes the idea of cashless bartering and trading in and within communities in the UK. Unlike the traditional banking system, Favabank and similar organisations operate a transparent system and believe that the 'size of the economy should be representative of an 'aggregation of community good-will' (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2010). Unlike mutual credit systems that are run on volunteer basis, Favabank is operated as a self-sustaining organisation with the means to develop the platform to offer the best user experience and create mainstream appeal(5). Though different to mainstream financial institutions, all the same Favabank has built on 'the foundations laid by other systems by automating the accounting and brokering side of managing transactions and complementing the transaction engine with a social media experience including groups and local pages'(6). The stated aims and objectives of Favabank is to eventually achieve 'mainstream acceptance as currency of choice' (6). These are bold and optimistic objectives but nonetheless not insurmountable.

Social Media and the Sociological Methodology

Social Media inherently enables the study of three theoretical paradigms that can be applied when studying society's structure: functionalism, symbolic interactionism and critical theory as it provides Sociologists a platform through which objective socio-technical aspects of virtual communities can

be analysed. For an effective study of SNS, Sociologists would need 'to be become participatory, become active participants in part of the collaborative cultures of Web 2. 0 (...) and explore innovative methods and means of utilising ' the interactive potentials of SNS, as research tools or research technologies' (Beer and Burrows, 2007). Viewed through a sociological prism the evolution of the World Wide Web, from hyperlinked textual structure, to web 1. 0 (text-based websites with communicative features), to web 2. 0 (social media platforms, cooperation and communication features) and what the future or web . 30 [not yet in existence but theoretically an extension of web. 20 (Fuchs, 2008: 125-126), Social Media is forcing a rethinking of the repertoires of empirical sociology and as a consequence it behoves sociologists to not ONLY adapt new methods of training but asks for greater reflection on how they can best relate to the proliferation of social data gathered by others, which is currently largely ignored(Savage and Burrows, 2007). From a Durkheimian perspective, all software is 'social' for the simple fact it is 'a product of social processes' ... produced by humans in social relations, objectifies knowledge produced in society, and is applied and used in social systems' () thus making 'Web pages and other web 1. 0 technologies Durkheimian social facts: [(Durkheim 1982, 59). (Fuchs, 2008: 126)]. In stark contrast to Durkheim, Weber's contention is that ' not all action is social' (Weber 1978). Not every kind of action, even of overt action, is ' social' in the sense of the present discussion. Overt action is not social if it is oriented solely to the behaviour of inanimate objects. For example, religious behavior us not social if it is simply a matter of contemplation or solitary prayer. (...) Not every type of contact of human beings has a social character; this is rather confined to cases where the actor's behaviour is

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meaningfully oriented to that of others [(Weber 1978, 22sq) (Fuchs, 2008: 126)]. It is therefore correct to deduce that in the Weberian sense communicating on social platform and internet is social action and Web 2.0 and 3.0 further expands the sociological meaning of sociality in the Internet from Durkheimian, and non-Weberian towards a Durkheimian and Weberian understanding. Hence the term social software is both Durkheimian and Weberian in contrast to forms of web 1.0 software that are Durkheimian and non-Weberian (Fuchs, 2008: 126). Web 3.0 technologies like wikis are not only communicative, but also cooperative. Web 3.0 reflects an understanding of the social as cooperation that can be traced back in its most pure form to the works of Marx. For Marx and Engel cooperation is the essence of the social: " By social we understand the cooperation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end. It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of cooperation, or social stage, and this mode of cooperation is itself a ' productive force'" [(Marx and Engels 1846, 30). (Fuchs, 2008: 126-127)].

Conclusion: The Future is uncertain, The Future is the Singularity

From R. Thornton, to Alan Turing, to Vernor Vinge and latterly Ray Kurzweil & Sean Arnott respectively [with other notables in between], the concepts and theory of a phenomenon termed the Technological Singularity has been and continues to be espoused. Though there is as yet no agreed universal definition of the term, all the same the central of theme of the idea is that that a time will inevitably come when human intelligence will increasingly

becomes non-biological and much more powerful than it is at present. This they espoused will be the beginning of new evolutionary era and civilisation that will enable mankind to transcend its inherently biological limitations and amplify its creativity. (Ray Kurzweil, 2005). Vernor Vinge in his paper (The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era) posited that within thirty years mankind will possess ' the technological means to create superhuman intelligence' (Vernor Vinge; 1993) (...) ' shortly after, the human era will be ended' (Vernor Vinge; 1993). This was a rather promising but also dooms-day like prophecy and if proven right then 2023 will be epochal. He went on to argue that humanity is on the... edge of change comparable to the rise of human life on Earth. The precise cause of this change is the imminent creation by technology of entities with greater than human intelligence. There are several means by which science may achieve this breakthrough (and this is another reason for having confidence that the event will occur). (Vernor Vinge, 1993). The basic idea of Singularity is that humans can build something slightly smarter than them, and these innovations can in turn build something that even smarter than themselves and the process then repeats exponentially. It is thus fair to assume that Artificial Intelligence in combination with Social Media and other SNSs [amongst many] due to the speed of and variety in innovation are perhaps the burgeoning steps that will lead to the attainment of singularity. Thusly, researchers in social science and related disciplines are faced with challenges but also opportunities for studying society from different perspectives. They would ' need to draw attention to and seek ways to understand how our very relationship with the past is quietly being reconfigured, and with revolutionary effect' (Karaganis, 2007: 28). Driverless

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cars and trains can be argued to an attainment of the singularity dream but what further evolution and transmutations Social Media platforms take, how these will affect society and other consequences are yet unknown, but one thing is certain: mankind will be equal to the challenge.