

1 Introduction to social media

It's 9 p.m. and in the busy streets of Shanghai, a Chinese teenager takes a picture via her iPhone and loads it up to her social network site (SNS), Renren. Meanwhile, a high school boy in Manila logs on to his Facebook page via his personal PC to say hello to his aunty who has just woken up in LA. Elsewhere, two university friends in Seoul stay up late to play a social media game in their local *PC bang* (PC internet room), while another university student in Beijing logs on to FarmVille to play with their parents in a far away village. In London, two high school students sit together editing and commenting on their Facebook pictures in a local café. At the same time, two old friends meet up face-to-face in New York for breakfast, thanks to Facebook Places.

These fleeting moments of connection take place through flashes of light, across deep-sea cables and microwave pulses that bounce invisibly between orbiting satellites. If we could see these connections plotted around the globe, the world would be illuminated like an exquisite decoration, shimmering with the mediated social interactions of many of its nearly seven billion inhabitants. Today, social media in its many forms accounts for a great deal of this mediated activity. Social media bleeds across platforms (desktop computers, mobile phones, tablets and on modern network-capable televisions), across social and media contexts, and creates various forms of presence. As smartphones continue to move into mainstream everyday life in many urban settings globally, the demographics of social media are also changing. Once upon a time, SNSs were just for the young (boyd and Ellison 2007), but today young and old can be seen using SNSs in everyday life.

As SNSs evolve, the term 'social media' is also developing to encompass the growing and often unwieldy sphere of contemporary online media practice. For Melissa Gregg, social media accompanies a movement towards 'presence bleed', 'where boundaries between personal and professional identities no longer apply' (2011: 2). Underlying this concept is an array of questions about the changing nature of what is public and what is private, and where work ends and life begins, as social media infiltrates every facet of everyday life.

2 UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA

For danah boyd, SNSs are a genre of what she calls ‘networked publics’ (2011), that is, public groupings that are structured by the logic and reality of computer networks. For Mark Andrejevic, the ‘networked sociabilities’ of SNSs are ordered by a ‘separation of the user from the means of socialising, thus permitting “storable and sortable” collections of social data’ (Andrejevic 2011: 311). In other words, the social activities of the user can be easily adapted by social media companies into ‘user profiles’ that are then sold to advertisers. This phenomenon has led media activist and theorist Geert Lovink to argue for alternative models of social media beyond the stronghold of mainstream companies like Facebook and Google (2012).

Understanding Social Media attempts to engage with some of these complex debates about the definitions of social media. We reflect upon the differences between SNSs and social media and how the rise in devices such as smartphones and locative media services such as Facebook Places, Google Maps, and Foursquare are changing the fabric of social media. We acknowledge that social media is currently transforming definitions of both ‘social’ and ‘media’.

Social media impacts on the way in which we think, experience and practise ‘online media’. It is no longer merely a form of teen socialising – it has become an integral part of everyday life. In turn, this influences how we reflect and engage with friends, family, colleagues and politics. Social media further amplifies the changes in the media landscape and as it does, it provides new avenues for dissemination and engagement. For some critics, social media is part of the rise of participatory culture which empowers users (Jenkins 2006) to produce their own content, to become ‘producers’ (Bruns 2005). For others, social media is part of broader ‘structural affordances of a capitalist economy’ (Andrejevic 2011: 312) in which users’ free labour is exploited for the benefit of corporations (Kücklich 2005; Andrejevic 2011; Lovink 2012). For still others, the relationship between production and consumption has now altered and should not be understood in the same way that sociologists understood production in an industrial context (Banks and Humphreys 2008). The widely varying ideas, criticisms and exhortations about social media reflect the complex social processes that it engages with.

In order to address these issues, and provide a framework for understanding the many different concepts and theories that inform the debates surrounding social media, we deal with four recurrent themes throughout this book. These themes are: empowerment/control, online/offline, the role of the local/cultural (especially in non-Anglophonic contexts) and the ‘intimacy turn’. The first two themes present as dichotomies. However, rather than seeing them as an ‘either/or’ relationship, we suggest that the reality is somewhere

in the middle, and their apparent oppositions provide us with two ways in which we can critically examine social media. So, social media is neither entirely empowering nor entirely controlling. In fact, it is often both.

Likewise, it is important to acknowledge that social media contains offline modes of engagement: it is never entirely just an online phenomenon. Given that social intimacy has always been mediated (Hjorth 2005), the online/offline tension suggests new entanglements for social interaction, notions of presence and its impact upon public and private spaces. The relationships that people have online are always shaping, and shaped by, the offline. This may be as obvious as the recognition that our online friends are frequently people we know from home or work. Or it may be as subtle as understanding that how we behave online, who we choose to make friends with online, and how we use our online time are all influenced by the reality of our offline lives.

The final two themes – non-Anglophonic contexts and the intimacy turn – respectively focus our attention upon the global and local nature of social media. In this book, we want to emphasise the truly global nature of social media by mixing Anglophonic and non-Anglophonic perspectives. We seek to bring balance and emphasise the socio-cultural nature of social media in light of the dominance of Anglophonic approaches (Goggin and McLelland 2009). This not only serves to highlight how different cultural perspectives change the meaning of certain concepts (like privacy, for example), but also serves as a foil to help us better understand how our own cultural practices involve assumptions and tacit knowledge. The local continues to play a key role in the uneven global evolution of social media across a variety of platforms, modes of presence, contexts and media.

Even intimacy operates upon micro (individual), meso (social) and macro (cultural) levels as a glue for social relationships. When we refer to the ‘intimacy turn’, we are drawing attention to the way in which the concept of intimacy can be used to understand some of the erosions between public and private spaces, and between work and leisure in contemporary societies (Berlant 1998). To put it another way, social media affords certain kinds of social performance that involve making intimacy more public. For example, when a Facebook user takes and uploads self-portraits, they may well only intend these to be viewed by an audience of close friends even though they have their privacy settings set to public. However, with Facebook owning the copyright of the pictures, which are available to be seen by anyone with a Facebook account, how the pictures would be recontextualised and further consumed is complex and little understood. Alternatively, a user might have their personal photo albums set to be viewable only by family and friends, and so the viewing activity becomes a semi-public performance.

4 UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA

Such constructions of contemporary online identities reminds us of sociologist Erving Goffman's work on impression management, especially his use of the analogy of the theatre stage (with its frontstage and backstage spaces) in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). With the 'context collapse' of social media (boyd 2011) it is not uncommon to see users having more than one Twitter and Facebook account for different 'public' and 'private' contexts. Friendship and intimacy can be both amplified and commodified through social media.

Through these four themes, *Understanding Social Media* explores the fabric of social media today. By no means exhaustive, this book seeks to provide case studies that allow for reflection upon the changing nature of social media. It is structured into six main chapters, an introductory chapter and a concluding chapter. Each chapter deals with a different subject and its relationship with social media, and acts as a vehicle to explore the four themes that run through the book.

Chapter 2 explores the rise of Web 2.0 as a way of contextualising the ideological environment in which social media operates. Rather than presenting Web 2.0 as a revolution in the way the web 'works', as some have, we take a more critical stance. We examine the way in which Web 2.0 functions as an ideology that declares the corporate world's growing understanding that the internet is not only mass, but also social, media. We then look at both the empowering and the controlling elements that go hand in hand with Web 2.0.

Chapter 3 engages with the undisputed icons of social media, social network sites or SNSs. Here we contextualise SNSs within a tradition of internet studies which has been conducting research and enquiry into the nature of online communities for more than two decades. Without attempting to deny their novelty, we emphasise that SNSs represent a continuity with earlier ways of thinking about the social aspects of the internet. In this chapter, we look at how in the field of internet studies, early notions of the internet as a series of virtual communities have yielded to more recent ideas of SNS practices and discourses as involving 'networked publics' and 'intimate publics'. We also engage with a number of other research approaches to SNSs in order to define the field.

With a more thorough understanding of SNSs and some of the ways they have been theorised in place, Chapter 4 returns to the themes of control and empowerment we introduced in Chapter 2, and applies them to practical examples of social media in action. In this chapter we look at how internet participation can yield user created content (UCC) and how it has allowed the figure of the 'produser' (Bruns 2005) to emerge. We describe this as being a potentially empowering outcome of social media, and examine how

produsage is present in online activism and citizen journalism. We then consider how the intimate turn has challenged traditional models for journalism (Goggin 2011) and how participative media is destabilising the established power structures of governments and what Dan Gillmor refers to as 'Big Media'.

Just as participative media is challenging the status quo in politics and journalism, it is also challenging the established structures in other spheres of life. In Chapter 5 we examine cultural production and focus on how social media is precipitating and reflecting changes in the arts as a specific site of cultural production. We look at how cultural institutions such as galleries and museums are responding to new challenges by embracing Web 2.0 inspired notions of social media and how this is displacing their traditional roles as arbiters of taste. We examine how artists are responding to social media, and how the emergence of art-themed SNSs like deviantArt are challenging conceptions of art production and consumption as well as distinctions between the amateur and the professional artist. Finally, we examine the cultural complication of what Jean Burgess has termed 'vernacular creativity' (2007).

In Chapter 6 we look at games, a realm which has always been associated with the social. Here we look at how social media and games intersect in the form of SNS games – games that are played within SNSs and take advantage of features such as friends' lists to add a social dimension to their practice. While social games offer new types of places to play and socialise, they also involve two forms of labour. First, time spent playing online games raises money for the SNSs and game companies through advertising and in-game purchases. Second, since social games are a way to socialise, playing games is also a way to maintain contacts and thus provide the means to maintain social capital. In this chapter, we explore the role that social games play in maintaining inter-generational ties in China as a case study. Specifically, we examine how social games act as a way for youth who have moved away from home for work or study to maintain relationships with their families.

In Chapter 7 we reflect upon the convergence between social, locative and mobile media, and upon the uneven journey of the mobile phone's role in this. In particular we look at how location-based services (LBS), such as Google Maps and Facebook Places, have converged with mobile and social media through the smartphone. We look at how mobility has become about more than the ability to take your social media with you as the popularity of such devices has grown. Specifically, there are two results: the expansion of cartographies enabled by LBS devices and mobile apps; and the development of location-based social apps that blend social relationships with geography.

6 UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA

These changes reflect broader shifts in the relationships between identity, place and community and raise important issues about privacy, but also how we narrate and attach meaning to place. This chapter also considers the changing role camera phones play in our understandings and visualisations of place, especially as they become entangled in locative media practices.

We end with a brief conclusion that summarises the main themes of the book. While we have written the chapters in this book to flow from one chapter to the next, the book can also be read randomly one chapter at a time. When concepts come up in each chapter that have been covered elsewhere, we refer the reader back to the relevant chapter. The major themes we cover in the book – empowerment and control, online and offline, non-Anglophonic contexts and intimacy – are woven into and across the chapters. You are encouraged to cherry-pick the pieces in the book that interest you if that method of reading suits you best.