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A Call for Compassion in Social Media Studies

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Abstract

In social media we can see ourselves live, as much as we are blind to media. Compassion is therefore key in studying the role of social media in everyday life.

Keywords

social media, media studies, media life

Three days after the murder of eight journalists of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, media editor Jane Martinson of *The Guardian* (UK) wrote that this was an event during which “social media came into its own.”¹ According to Martinson, this was most notably exemplified by the mass outpouring of support on Twitter (using the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie), praising the platform as having “spread the story of solidarity.”

Earlier that week, much of social media was ablaze with the story of itself, forwarding and commenting on a story on Medium titled “A Teenager’s View on Social Media Written by an actual teen” by US college student Andrew Watts.² In his piece, Watts claims that Facebook is “dead to us,” that teenagers generally do not understand the point of Twitter, and that Instagram and Snapchat are the most used online social networks. Overall, Watts’s suggestion was that social media are particularly popular for the options they give teens to control their social identity when connecting with their peers. This in turn prompted a response by prominent social media scholar danah boyd, who argued that Watts’s narrative suffered from exclusion, as it ignored of kids who do not go to college, as well as all people outside the (sub-)urban comfort zone Watts seemed to live in. All people use social media a lot, for all kinds of purposes—but mostly to be in touch with family and friends, to be present and seen in the lives of people they care about.

What is refreshing in these snapshots of the many debates about the role of social media in society is that none of them suggested social media as a platform for digital narcissism and other such dangerous overuse of psychiatric labeling. This is not to say that people do not post an enormous amount of information about themselves online, nor that much of this information shared on social media is not particularly private

in nature. As Manuel Castells (2010) documents, a rather dramatic global shift from mass communication to mass self-communication is taking place, vastly increasing our engagement and involvement in media, and through media with each other (p. 246). What is important to recognize, as Zizi Papacharissi (2010), Nancy Baym (2010), and most recently Jill Walker Rettberg (2014) have done so effectively, is that social media provide people in an otherwise increasingly hypercomplex society (Qvortrup, 2003) a chance to reclaim themselves and to take control of their social identities. What is crucial about social media in society is that in and through social media, we can see ourselves live.

As I have argued in *Media Life* (2012, p. 238), seeing yourself live is no small achievement. In fact, it is safe to say that up until recently, one’s ability to witness oneself was limited to only the richest and most privileged members of society—those who could afford commissioning artworks such as drawings, paintings, sculptures, and plays in their name and about their persona. Although such acts of more or less public self-witnessing are strictly representational, they do mediate otherwise unseen aspects of oneself: certain characteristics and features, particular (often preferred) expressions, and emotions. Perhaps the only way that common people could hope to be able to catch themselves in the act of living was through their reflections in windows and mirrors. In the absence of effective means to self-witness, I tend to act in life based on an unspoken assumption of equivalence

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based on the supposition that people see me as the person I consider myself to be. The uncanniness of this belief is that we all know it cannot be.

Studies documenting people's use of social media generally find that when doing so, people tend to approximate their normal selves. As people spend most of their time in social media communicating their selves to real (yet imagined, inasmuch invisible) others, our efforts in this regard can be seen as so many attempts to project and live up to one or more versions of our selves that we create and get co-created in media. Our constant communication about the self therefore is just as much about projecting a true self as it is about living up and through the multiple versions of our selves that exist in the eyes and minds of others. However, we generally do not consciously, nor deliberately, see this process, nor do we necessarily reflect on it.

In this largely—and, I would argue, increasingly—unreflective way of being in (social) media, people's mediated self-actualization can become a mode of socialization that elicits social conformity exactly through hyper-exhibitionism because such self-expressive individualization requires much more work to be done by the individual toward active social integration. At the same time, there is no outside to (social) media anymore. We are drawn into media in what I consider a process where the media world and the system world have collapsed into the lifeworld. In that sense, effective reflection on the role of social media in our life is impossible—because the lifeworld is the world we experience most directly, instantly, and without reservation.

What we study when we study social media and society is therefore always already an imagined object—one I construct as I describe it, one I make when I aim to unravel it. It is this necessary blindness to the ontology of media, as most profoundly articulated by Friedrich Kittler (2009), which needs to be recognized. Beyond an intellectual dimension of this recognition, I would advocate for more compassion and empathy when researching and reporting on social media—its users, its industries, and its attendant consequences. Through this compassionate perspective, people can be seen as slowly but surely trusting themselves to technology (Kiran & Verbeek, 2010). Rather than giving up privacy and our freedom, this would be a way to create freedom, understanding freedom as “a free relation to the forces that help to shape our selves” (Kiran & Verbeek, 2010, p. 425). Trust in this context can have the quality of confidence, enabling people to take responsibility for their mediated lives—and empowering social media researchers to do the same for their intrinsically invisible, imagined objects of study.

In short, in the field of social media and society research, I would argue for

- *conscientiousness* about what we study, as it is something we necessarily construct;
- *compassion* about the people we study, as what they are doing is a way to turn hypercomplex social reality into something they can handle;
- *confidence* in the various ways in which social media establish human–machine relations that allow us to take responsibility for our life as lived in media.

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Notes

1. <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jan/11/charlie-hebdo-social-media-news-readers>
2. <https://medium.com/backchannel/a-teenagers-view-on-social-media-1df945c09ac6>

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Author Biography

Mark Deuze (PhD, University of Amsterdam) is a Professor of Mediastudies at the University of Amsterdam. His research interests include the way we live in media and the ways in which media professionals make it work.