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Couldry, N.; van Dijck, J.F.T.M.

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Researching Social Media as if the Social Mattered

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Nick Couldry¹ and José van Dijck²

Abstract

The institutions we have come to call “media” have been involved for over a century in providing an infrastructure for social life and have invested in a quite particular and privileged way of re-presenting the world as “social.” The dialectic between “media” and “social” has become more urgent to understand in an era when media and information infrastructures have expanded, converged, and become embedded more deeply in the texture of everyday life, while at the same time the claims of “media” to be social have become explicit, indeed insistent. This article asks what it would mean to address this new social/media dialectic head on—as if the social mattered. The word “social” is our necessary term for thinking about the complex interdependencies out of which human life really is made and the claims to represent that interdependent reality made from particular positions of power. All forms of power have invested in certain representations of the social. This battle matters, and now “social media”—the infrastructures of web 2.0—are at the heart of that battle. The article seeks to offer a plausible agenda for a collaborative program of research to address this struggle over the definition of “the social.”

Keywords

personal data, social construction, the social, value

The a priori of empirical social life consists of the fact that life is not entirely social.

Simmel (1971, p. 14)

It has become common for eminent social and cultural commentators either to dismiss “the social” (as merely the construction necessary to keep the institutional project of sociology going: Latour, 2005) or silently to bypass it, grounding their understanding of contemporary social dynamics in the “harder” terrain of neuroscience (Castells, 2009). Granted that Latour’s dismissal of “the social” is meant as a move to make room for a more thoroughly material account of the associations that help make up our experiences called “social” (an outcome to whose value we return later), his gesture still has consequences: deliberate or otherwise, this devaluation of the social as an object of analysis ignores the fundamental point that we need the term “social” to point to “the totality of complex interrelatedness” that is the “basic reality of human existence” (Sewell, 2005, p. 326). Insisting on *this* as our object of analysis does not mean reifying “society” or relying only on accounts of the social that serve particular accumulations of power. Rather, it involves, first, taking the social seriously as *a site of necessity, and necessarily contested, representation* of whatever it is that binds large domains of human interaction together

and, second, approaching the particular configuration of resources and representations that generates the social at any one time and space as *itself* in need of sociological and cultural unpacking within “a properly materialist theory of culture” (Hall, 1996, p. 48). This is especially important in an age when the social has become a site of new economic value and intense redefinition—when the term “social media” is not a description but an appropriation of the social (Mejias, 2013). At such a time, to study social media as if the social matters means studying digital culture not as “hard” system or “soft” processes of meaning-making but as “a dialectic of system and practice” (Sewell, 2005, p. 169).

All forms of power have invested in attempts to construct reality a certain way, and the age of “social media” is no exception. But *its* constructions work at a different level and with a greater intensity than earlier social representations. They work through processes of counting and aggregation that allow a new and hegemonic *space of social appearances* to be built:¹ a space that does more than hover above

¹London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

²University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:

Nick Couldry, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK.
Email: n.couldry@lse.ac.uk



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everyday practice because its horizons are being built, at the level of micro-adjustments of practice, *into* the habits of individual actors, with direct benefits for the accumulation strategies of collective actors.

The social is big business, a fact for which the language of social theorizing provides useful cover: in a video roadshow just before Facebook's 2012 stock market launch, Mark Zuckerberg claimed Facebook was "a fabric that can make any experience online social" (quoted van Dijck, 2013, p. 67). At work here is a pressure to use the social, and its algorithmic reprocessing, as a new frontier where markets can be built and value generated. While the prehistory of this move is complex, as we note below, the move carries a particular force that supplants such complex history and installs a new normal: a door into a new "social" that will barely remember any older ones. A materialist account of the processes that give this pressure cultural form must precisely *hold on* to memories of those older versions of the social as a reference point against which to judge the hegemonic role in hosting social life now played by digital platforms that barely existed a decade ago (van Dijck, 2013).

This tension is not, however, new. Simmel (1971) expressed the paradox beautifully in the passage already quoted above and in the following:

If now we have the conception that we enter into sociability purely as "human beings," as that which we really are . . . it is because modern life is overburdened with objective content and material demands. (p. 133)

Lefebvre (1958/1991) too (p. 18) at the dawn of the electronic media age insisted on the everyday as a site of ambiguity and contradiction, while Sewell wrote, long before the advent of social media, about the importance of a hermeneutic social science focused on the "*de*-reification of social life" (Sewell, 2005, p. 369, emphasis added). In that spirit, we side with those who look to resist the redefinition of the social as simply whatever happens "on" social media platforms.²

But how to research "social media" platforms responsibly in a "culture" of compulsory "connectivity" (van Dijck, 2013)? Researching the social/media relation today must mean more than merely describing how the latest platforms work, let alone celebrating their supposedly positive potential (democratic? expressive? socializing?). It must mean at least researching how social media platforms (and the plural production cultures that generated them) have come to *propose* a certain version of "the social," and how users go on to *enact* it. It must also mean researching how this social/media dialectic is generating *ethical or normative* concerns, how a more effective ethics of social life *through* media can be developed, and registering the fractured spaces from where alternative proposals of "the social" might be built. Such an account must draw from recent critiques of older sociological defenses of "the social"—Latour's (2005) critique of

Durkheim for ignoring the heterogeneity of the processes whereby experiences of "social" interaction get made; Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) critique of Bourdieu's inattention to the actual value of pluralism in complex societies—while holding on to the critical potential of "the social" as understanding particular forms of social control (Williams, 1990, p. 120).

In what follows, we present programmatically some priorities for a materialist account of the culture of digital platforms and the version of "the social" that they work to install: first, a brief review of the prehistory of this latest move to appropriate the social by media and communications institutions; second, an analysis of how exactly personal data from social interaction is now being converted into economic value; third, a review of how we might distinguish the possible long-term consequences of that second process over time; and finally, some reflections on the ethical, political, and analytic tensions in which this project of analyzing digital culture involves us.

Some Pre-History

The institutions we have come to call "media" have been involved for over a century in providing an infrastructure for social life and have invested in a quite particular and privileged means whereby "we" can access whatever is important in the social world. Such social claims "for" media were often deeply buried in media's practice, but, as the era of mass media began to recede, it became easier to see them at work (Couldry, 2000); even before that, various scholars had noted the deep relations between the very idea of "media" as social institutions, and our particular modern possibilities of social, political, or economic order (Beniger, 1987; Scannell, 1996; Zelizer, 1993).

The web of belief and practice that sustained the idea of mass media institutions as social, indeed at the "center" of what is social, can, one of us has argued (Couldry, 2014), be formulated in terms of myth: the myth of the mediated center. This myth has not disappeared, nor have mass media institutions' material basis and self-interested claims to be social. But media institutions have recently become entangled in a different project: the attempt by other (new) "mass media" institutions to build online spaces where the economy and social life can unfold. Facebook, Twitter, and Weibo *do* media on a mass scale, but through a very different spatial configuration from that of classic mass media. Instead of distributing the same content out to "everyone" as mass broadcasters have done, they provide online "platforms" (Gillespie, 2014) where "anyone" can interact with anyone else. Such interactions, broadly, follow whatever path people choose but, as Marx would have put it, not in conditions of their own choosing: indeed in conditions precisely that these new media institutions choose, conditions that, while they differ considerably depending on each site's technological design, business model, and political background, have in common

the deep and continuous algorithmic tracking of whatever interactions occur on these platforms.

Accompanying this radically new relation between media institutions and “the social” is an emerging web of belief: a “myth of us” (Couldry, 2015) that underwrites the belief, on which those platforms rely, that *this* is where “we” now come together. As with the myth of the mediated center, the myth of us is not a simple discrete credo, but an overdetermined pattern in how resources and actors are organized that reflects a number of other influences too: neoliberal models of market-based agency and the search for new forms of popular politics at a time of mistrust in political institutions. But the emergence of “the myth of us” is important, not just for the striking reorganization of daily interaction that it represents but because its pattern expresses the business model and the implicit goal or *telos* around which, whatever the complexity of their origins, today’s “social media” platforms have come to converge: to harness for value a vast domain of interaction that can plausibly stand in for social life itself through installing mechanisms for counting and valuing action in the very domain of everyday interaction the myth naturalizes.

Personal Data and Economic Value

Calling an algorithmically defined online configuration “social” has been one of the smartest semantic moves in the history of media institutions. Online sociality increasingly serves as a proxy for social interaction, whereas, in fact, this “social” comes as an *effect of* a new dominant techno-economic materiality. At the same time, this materiality makes itself virtually invisible and thus intractable to those analytical modes of interpretation conventionally used in the humanities and social sciences to interpret social interaction. It would be misleading of course to forget the longer history of governments and corporations counting populations and producing quantitative measures as a basis for imagining the social domains over which they rule (Porter, 1996), but even that history fails to prepare us for the force of these new enactments of the social: an attempt to install a redefinition of the “social” *through* new infrastructures of association, rather than some already existing sense of “connectedness” (“communities”) or collectivity (“us”). Here, Latour’s (2005) attention to the constitutive force of associations and, much earlier, Callon and Latour’s (1981) account of how building “obligatory passing-points” for actors and objects enables new possibilities of “representation” are crucial.

This new techno-economic materiality can hardly be understood without probing its underpinning principles of datafication, manipulation, and commoditization. Using the word “social” to describe computational connectivity has been a peculiar example of reversification—a process in which words come to have a meaning that is opposite to, or at least very different from, their original sense. When Mark Zuckerberg vowed in 2010 that Facebook’s mission in life

was “to make everything social,” he really meant: to move social traffic onto a networked infrastructure where it becomes traceable, calculable, and so manipulable for profit.

If in the 19th and 20th centuries economic forces infiltrated the specific domains of leisure, sports, and public communication, in the first decade of the 21st century, it is the whole domain of informal connections and interpersonal exchange that has been absorbed by commercial platforms. Building an online infrastructure onto the World Wide Web, a few large companies managed to monopolize viable “social niches” such as searching information, chatting with friends, and exchanging cultural content. The automated mechanisms emanating from these connective platforms now dictate how online sociality is structured. Google’s search engines never *mimicked* a social process of searching information; they *created* a new system of data circulation based on algorithmically defined criteria of quantified popularity. Facebook’s “friending” or “liking” buttons have little basis in the social reality of consolidating friendships or preferring cultural content (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013); they are computational systems that assign data their value as economic currency in a global online sociality.

Personal data—both the information we yield voluntarily and behavioral data reaped without our knowledge—have become the scalable resources of the new online economy. Data can hardly be considered extractions of pre-existing social interaction: the platform infrastructures provide novel playing fields where communication and exchange of data follow designated routes. Through this platform apparatus, personal data become part of aggregated collections that can be disconnected and reconnected at will for corporate, not social, ends. The “social” as newly defined becomes an *effect of* online sociality rather than the other way around: flows of data are triggered to produce systems of economic gain—systems that revolve around the accumulation of attention and a sustained, if implied, claim that accumulated attention (as measured) *is* social value. In mass media, professionals select content that draws eyeballs in order to sell attention to advertisers; in social media, platform owners design algorithms that simultaneously connect users to content and ads, thus maximizing the efficacy of eyeball attention. Rooted in the principles of automated popularity (number of clicks) and connectivity (number of relationships), online platforms become the arteries of a new online “social”—enabling, promoting, distributing, and steering data flows. Minute registration of every single online move translates into a new algorithmic proposal for further online interaction. In other words, personal data become the “nudging input” for personalized content output—a fully automated process in which algorithms serve as editorial as well as advertorial agents (Gillespie, 2014).

Manipulation and commodification are not the *consequences* of datafication; all three mechanisms are intrinsically intertwined in the configuration of the platform ecosystem as preconditions of its use and exploitation—an ecosystem that,

although its elements have emerged over time and from multiple sources, is the object on which business objectives are now firmly targeted. The new playing field is not a level one, where independent social actors choose between discrete consumer options. A few powerful platforms and partnering corporations define the gateways and control the signposts to the flows of content and data they can assume users will produce. Google and Facebook, as two of the most powerful gatekeepers, each control a vertically integrated chain of platforms and search algorithms, allowing them to define the conditions for online traffic. In their meticulous analysis of “Googlenomics,” Rieder and Sire (2014) demonstrate how the Silicon Valley–based search mogul procures a mesh of “tangled activities” through a string of interrelated platforms, from search engine to advertising agency and from user-generated content platform to social network service. Google’s command over the flow of personal data and content data is inscribed in the very mechanisms that enable their materialization; it is increasingly difficult to understand the complex economic fabric of online sociality:

[F]rom a media and communication perspective, analysis and critique have to adapt to a new situation in which money, power and visibility flow in new and complicated ways, content is managed as data, advertising is priced and distributed by algorithms and media bias is a set of parameters applied to millions of units at a time. (Rieder & Sire, 2014, p. 14)

Common economic and governmental terms like consumer welfare or anti-trust legislation seem to fail to capture this new online complexity, allowing the ecosystem to develop its own socio-legal conditions (Cohen, 2012) and control the marketplace of connectivity.

In these vertically integrated chains of platforms, social networks like Google+ and Facebook increasingly position themselves as gatekeepers to all online activity. Marc Zuckerberg’s earlier mentioned claim from 2012 that Facebook is “a fabric that can make *any* experience online social” makes yet another twist in the process of reversification when we realize that online identification increasingly takes place through the border patrol of Facebook and Google. Platforms such as Uber, Airbnb, and thousands of smaller online market places use Facebook-verified access to control their users. Traffic control comes at a price: the exchange value for ID services is data access, and through these gateway services, Facebook and Google install themselves at the heart of the data economy. We are constantly confronted with stories about Uber customers or Airbnb hosts as empowered socio-economic agents, but overlooked in these stories is how so many online platforms are built upon on, and dependent upon, algorithmic foundations designed and controlled by a few increasingly powerful data companies.³

In this global system, the “social” appears as a derivative of the techno-economic—and yet, this is not a system that can be separated from everyday use or users of social media.

Users are at the center of online sociality, giving away their data in exchange for free services. However, defining personal data as “raw resources” that fuel the apparatus obscures the power of *platforms* as driving forces of *every* online interaction and profoundly misreads such data’s ontology (Gitelman, 2013). Any interpretation of data as a reflection of an underlying “social” reinforces the ideology of dataism or the myth of big data (boyd & Crawford, 2012; Couldry, 2014; Crawford, 2013; van Dijck, 2014).

The “social” of “social media” platforms is of course lived out *by social actors*, who are trying to achieve their individual and collective goals, more or less in coordination with each other. The last thing we want to do is dismiss that field of action as unimportant or inconsequential. Our point, rather, is that the *coextension* between so many everyday domains of social exchange and interaction and the *managed continuities* from which economic value is today being extracted poses unprecedented dangers for collective life. Superficially, there is a similarity with how earlier media institutions *represented* the social “out there” back to the mass audiences who were living it, but what today’s representation of the “social” is routed through stands in for something much closer to home: through what you or I are doing, now, our daily habits, adjustments and aspirations, the very spaces where we feel we need to be.

Consequences: Theorizing “The Dialectic of System and Practices”

For humanities and social science scholars still committed to holding on to the critical potential of the term “social,” it seems particularly urgent to research the longer term *consequences* of such commercially driven enactments: in politics and government, in everyday practices such as informal communication, or in public domains such as education, health, or law and order. “Researching the consequences” may be an awkward term for what is really theorizing the “dialectic of system and practices” as earlier suggested in the words of Sewell (2005, p. 169). The infiltration of continuous algorithmic tracking and models for predicting online movements into our daily social and cultural practices may be shaping the way in which the “social”—or rather, society—is organized, but of course such processes are never simple or without possibilities for contestation or resistance (Couldry & Powell, 2014; Couldry, Fotopoulou, & Dickens, in press). With that caveat, let us sketch some implications for three very different areas: health, education, and government.

In the area of health and illness, social media platforms are setting the standard for organizing communication and normative behavior. Self-reported fitness data fuel platforms such as Fitbit—a platform providing wearable devices that track personal metrics related to standardized healthy behavior, such as heartbeats, blood pressure, footsteps, quality of

sleep, or sugar levels. Users constantly exchange and report metrics so that aggregated information can provide “normalized” standards for certain age groups. On the other end of spectrum, we find very similar platforms for self-reporting information about sickness. Users of the popular site PatientsLikeMe, for instance, exchange detailed information about their (chronic) diseases and the effectiveness of treatment, satisfying patients’ need to communicate their suffering by letting them share personal experiences. While the therapeutic function of health-related narratives has not suddenly disappeared, they now often perform a double function, the generation of health *data*: that is, *self-reported* effects of certain treatments, once transferred to an online environment, can be translated into objectified data, even if they are not solicited via standardized protocols. Quantifying people’s physical conditions through self-reported data has introduced a new way of organizing health that perfectly illustrates Foucault’s theory of normalization, not just in general terms but through the precise bodily adjustments and orientations that it strives to inculcate (the very *idea* of the quantified self).

Automated health and illness tracking does not appear as a by-product of online sociality, but constitutes a new economic and physical *reality* for researchers, doctors, pharmaceutical companies, data companies, and no doubt many patients too. Platform owners of Fitbit and PatientsLikeMe present their sites as products that serve the *public good*, with self-reported health data becoming public records that may lead to remedies and therapies. While narratives about health in contemporary societies remain in general terms highly contested, that does not override the peculiar force of regimes of justification (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) that work by the automatic secretion of data about actors’ bodies to shared platforms and databases. Meanwhile, access to different non-datafied models of understanding health and health risks weakened over time.

A second example of how social media dynamics may be influencing the organization of the social is in (higher) education. As with health, learning processes are increasingly transferred to online environments, or made dependent on the mediation of platform-like classroom tools, where they have to succumb to the principles undergirding the larger ecosystem of connective media. A large number of American school systems have introduced algorithmic tracking systems into the classroom, measuring and quantifying the learning process of children while sharing these data with (corporate) platform owners. In higher education, we have witnessed the explosive growth of massive open online courses (MOOCs) provided by platforms such as Coursera, edX, and Udacity, built on the same mechanisms underpinning the larger data-driven online sociality. MOOCs are driven by reputational systems of peer voting and popularity rankings; *learning* processes become *data* processes and so more readily translatable into tradable units. MOOCs use the same business models that dominate social media platforms: offering “free”

courses in exchange for user data and additional “freemium” services. This new platform architecture, built on datafication, commodification, and compulsory connectivity, reconfigures the relations between learners, teachers, and institutions. Rather than “mimicking” the social process of learning in an online environment, these new tools for online instruction may, if implemented more widely, deeply affect the pedagogical and economic value propositions of college education. Once again, our point is not to deny that the processes and outcomes of such transformations are contested or complex, but rather to notice the facticity of these particular distributed processes of evaluation and their role in reshaping the reference points for society’s organized attempts to shape the human resources of its future (i.e. education).

A third area is government. Government of course has little freedom simply to experiment with its modes of operation: too many other processes depend on it. Within modernity, government techniques for gathering information about its constituencies *were* the reference point for all other social narratives it produced and laid claim to. There was unsurprisingly therefore some concern when, in September 2013, the UK government appeared to signal a willingness to abandon its 10-year census issued to every household in the nation, arguing that existing data sources (including commercially available sources) might be more comprehensive and cost-effective (Dorling, 2013). As it turned out, the Office of National Statistics did not recommend this drastic action (Office of National Statistics, 2014). The long-term future, however, remains uncertain and will depend on the role of other providers of social knowledge and the new context for understanding the social that evolves over the next decade. To the extent that social media data are regularly claimed to be a better (because more continuous and comprehensive) source of social knowledge about the whole population and is funded accordingly, the landscape of government’s claims to know society will also gradually shift. This underlines the importance for academics, across the social sciences and humanities, to *contest* claims to equate “the social”—as it is constructed through economically driven infrastructures designed to make a social appear—with the only forms of social life that matter.

Difficulties

The resources for describing social processes and social reality have never been evenly distributed, nor are they ever likely to be, and organized attempts to marshal such resources into particular authoritative accounts of the social are hardly new. What we face, however, is a new *type* of appropriation of such representational resources whereby the very space where sociality appears is being rebuilt (recalibrated) to produce a particular measurable kind of “social.” Although the temptation to see continuities back to earlier forms of public sociality and the measurement of populations is strong, a discontinuity is at work here that our previous languages for describing the social fail to grasp. The answer is not to give

up on the language of “the social,” but to explore new ways of holding to, indeed recovering, a recognition of other sites of social knowledge—other ways of being social—that are not easily counted or tracked and do not ipso facto constitute an automatic source of economic value for anyone.

A time when society’s languages for describing itself are being appropriated to particular ends poses at least three types of challenge. First, there is increasing normative disquiet at the costs (for quality of life) of the compulsion to connect, which is the practical sine qua non of data and value generation in a culture of connectivity (van Dijck, 2013). Those costs are troubling, not just because they are heavy (in terms of information overload and stress) but because they seem non-negotiable (a 16-year-old asked Sherry Turkle, “how long do I have to continue doing this?”; Turkle, 2011, p. 168). The only way of opening up those costs to negotiation is to hold on to other “platforms” for social life: indeed to de-reify the very discourse of “platform” that, as Gillespie (2010) has powerfully argued, has done such important work in generating the present moment.

Second, it is not easy to make a political object out of today’s corporate ambitions to *own* the spaces of interaction (Mejias, 2013) because almost every attempt to challenge such ambitions will itself involve the use of just such spaces. But the attempt must still be made. That means holding on to languages of political contention and orientation that are not easily reducible to metrics and to languages of transformation that only work because they require interpretation and which, for that reason, necessarily acknowledge the diversity of evaluative perspectives in a complex world.

Third, there is an analytic difficulty. It is very hard to find a meta-language that can capture the ways and levels in/on which this new “social” is being constructed in and around us. Talk of “logics” or “myths” gets us some of the way, by helping us “see together” the pattern of rearrangement (of resources, actions, and norms) that is being enacted in everyday practice. Actor Network Theory’s insights into how the social is built from many heterogeneous elements are also a vital part of our toolkit, despite some of Latour’s rhetoric about “the social” in his grander pronouncements. Particularly important will be a new wave of empirical work that tracks in everyday life the mechanisms by which today’s space of social appearances is being built, its entry and exit points, and rules of operation. We need a combination of theory, analysis, and observation that can give some shape to our inchoate sense that something important is missing from the version of “the social” now on offer in the domain we have come to call “social media.” Social media *and* society: unraveling this knot of power and representation may prove communication research’s greatest challenge yet.

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Notes

1. We echo Arendt (1960) ironically: there is no way back to a world where people enter the public space of appearances simply by choosing to walk into a public square. Who and what appears in the space of social media, and how, is *already* the basis of a system-based calculation, as we discuss in a later section.
2. We are building here on earlier work (Couldry, 2014, 2015; van Dijck, 2013) and following in the steps of some important voices that have begun to challenge the reification of social media: Robin Mansell’s *Imagining the Internet* (Mansell, 2012), Sarah Banet-Weiser’s *Authentic™* (Banet-Weiser, 2012), and Ulises Mejias’ *Off the Network* (Mejias, 2013). All authors seek to imagine an oppositional space outside corporate attempts to appropriate the social to economic ends.
3. For a rare reflection on such power, see “So Who Needs Facebook Friends?” (2014).

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Author Biographies

Nick Couldry (PhD, Goldsmiths, University of London) is Professor of Media, Communications and Social Theory at the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research interests include media power, social media, social ontology, social theory, and political movements.

José van Dijck (PhD, University of California, San Diego) is Professor of Comparative Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Her research interests include media technology, media and memory, digital humanities, and digital culture.