After Connectivity

van Dijck, J.F.T.M.

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After Connectivity: The Era of Connectication

José van Dijck

Abstract

With the borders between technological, cultural, and political organization becoming increasingly fluid, there is more need than ever to rearticulate the relationship between "social," "media," and "society."

Keywords

connectivity, globalization, technology, platform economics

It is interesting to launch a new journal that carries the terms "social media" and "society" in its title, at a moment in time when their meaning is fiercely disputed. The word "social" in relation to media has lost much of its gist due to one of Marc Zuckerberg's early calls to "make everything social." In my latest book (van Dijck, 2013), I argue to replace the term "social media" with "connective media" and I also call for a multi-layered examination of the "culture of connectivity" to include techno-cultural as well as socio-economic aspects. During the first decade of social networks (2004–2014), the word "social" gradually shifted its connotative gravity from "connectedness of human users" to "automated connectivity of platforms"—automated through algorithms, data flows, interfaces, and business models.

In 2015, we are ushering into the second decade of "social media" by adding another meaning to its layered dynamics. In a remarkably critical article in *Time* magazine, featuring a profile of Marc Zuckerberg following him on an exploratory mission to India, reporter Lev Grosman (2014) quotes COO Sheryll Sandberg as saying, "If the first decade was starting the process of connecting the world, the next decade is helping connect the people who are not yet connected and watching what happens." The sound bite relates to the promotion of a nonprofit initiative called Internet.org, which Facebook launched in 2014 as part of a coalition of high-tech companies such as Nokia, Samsung, and Qualcomm, who state as their mission to bring the Internet to developing nations in parts of the world that are underserved. However, the initiative is not about bringing the Internet to the rest of the world, but about plugging the have-nots into an app distribution system whose entrance is exclusively guarded by Facebook. The company wants to "watch what happens" once the rest of the world's consumers get hooked (up) to a system that has little to do with human connectedness and is all about

automated connectivity and data flows nudging them into commercial attention zones.

Perhaps a suitable term for this new missionary zeal is "connectication." If Californication refers to the influx of Californians into the various western states in the United States, "connectication" connotes the influx of California-based platforms into the various parts of the United States, Europe, and parts of Asia. Hooking up the remaining 5.1 billion people who have currently no access to the Internet is not like hooking them up to a piped water and irrigation system; it is like proposing to import a single brand of bottled water into remote areas of the world's developing countries. When even *Time magazine* calls Facebook's Internet.org mission "an act of self-serving techno-colonialism," we really need to pay attention to the politics prevailing in this second stage of social networking corporatism.

The question whether the Internet is either a utilities kind of traffic infrastructure or a corporately steered, data-based vehicle that shapes the world's communication and information needs is a fundamental issue that begs to be addressed in the age of connection. "Watching what happens" is not an option for people who are concerned about media technologies and business models shaping much of the world's social traffic. Like datafication and dataism (van Dijck, 2014), connectication testifies to a neoliberal agenda that is deeply penetrating national public spheres. Online sociality increasingly eludes national societal structures, which are traditionally cemented entirely in (public and private) institutions. Despite

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:
José van Dijck, University of Amsterdam, Turfdraagsterpad 9, 1012 XT Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
Email: j.van.dijck@uva.nl

Facebook's "social rhetoric" of connectedness and openness, the undercurrents of global information flows are increasingly and uniformly channeled through the bottled water systems that they themselves commission.

If there is one thing this new journal needs to provide for, it is to offer a platform to a variety of academic efforts to make comprehensible the techno-economic and socio-political dynamics involved in the connectication of global online traffic. As techno-colonialism is tightening its grip on the world's developing continents, it becomes urgent to critically assess not just "what happens" on the Internet or in social media, but to analyze and penetrate the various layers of the system's underlying conditions—its economics, politics, and technological dynamics. With the borders between technological, cultural, and political organization becoming increasingly fluid, there is more need than ever to rearticulate the relationship between "social," "media," and "society."

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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Author Biography

José van Dijck (PhD, University of California, San Diego) is a professor of Comparative Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands). Her research interests include media technologies, social media, media theory, and science and technology communication.