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When Machines Speak to Each Other: Unpacking the "Social" in "Social Media"

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Abstract

This manifesto offers three approaches to understand the "social" in "social media." Drawing from emerging practices, discourses, architectures, and research, the manifesto argues that while it is important to look at how the emergence of digital media changes, regulates, and shapes the social structures of governance and inter-personal communication, it is also necessary to look at how sapient technologies communicate and talk to each other, thus creating a new sociality that emerges from machine architecture and interface design rather than human intention and social norms.

Keywords

social media, digital cultures, human machine interaction

One of the key questions that has been asked many times, with the rise of the social web, is "when was media not social?" It is a question well worth asking because the very ontology of media is in sociality. From understanding media as a "medium"—a presence that allows for things to pass through, to media as a connector, building specific interactions between identified entities, to media as a network, enabling new modes and nodes of circulation and distribution through transfer of traffic—media has always been imagined and conceived of as social. And yet, there seems to be a way by which new and digital media reinforce sociality as something that is new and unique to our mediated lives and relationships.

There are a few convincing approaches that help understand the valorization of the social in new media. Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2011), a cultural media practitioner and scholar in India, argues that the emergence of the social is a reference to the ways in which media infrastructure of information distribution gets shaped. Looking at older forms of telecommunication governance in India, Rajadhyaksha points out that the broadcast-based model always imagined a sociality that is engineered by the center. The wheel and spoke model did not mean that there was no peer-2-peer (p2p) connection, but that all p2p connection was enabled and mediated by the central broadcast authorities. So, even if two neighbors want to establish a mediated presence, the information would have to travel to the center and then be broadcast to the neighbor next door. Thus, even in locative media experiments, the emphasis was on the central media hubs' responsibility to connect the most remote and inaccessible geographies to the larger grid. Social media destabilizes this model and no longer succumbs to either central regulation or validation for the transfer of data. It allows for new connections that are not only local but also do not recognize the central authority of a regulatory and governing body, thus shaping a sociality of on-and-off connectivity that simultaneously disregards and circumvents the state-market structures of social organization. Social media, then, is not really about new kinds of sociality, but about a social that challenges the normative structures and shapes of regulation and governance of society that older models of mediation had established.

While Rajadhyaksha looks at the relationship between models of governance and technologies of mediation, there is another emerging approach that concentrates on people's own relationships with technological devices. Perhaps, the "social" in "social media" is not about person-to-person relationships, but the connections that we develop with the technologies in an age of pervasive and ubiquitous computing. As Namita Malhotra (in press) describes in her thesis on "Interface Intimacies," the new sociality is about our intimacy with technologies. We live with sapient machines. They slide between our fingers and vibrate in our pockets.

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They remind us of things, make sure that we stay in touch with people, and even when nobody is around, they give us haptic, sensory feedback, making sure that we never feel alone. Our screens are not just transparent devices through which our affect and intimacy travel to the person on the other side. Our interfaces have become sites of desire and recipients of affect, and our new social is perhaps about the love and care we devote to our machines as they care for us, and the people we love.

Kelly Dobson (2010), a robotics art practitioner, has conceived of neurotic companion robots that she calls "Omo." Omo responds, through touch, through pulses, through heat, and vibrations, to its companion, and it learns to alter its behavior through recognizing patterns of the human it is interacting with. In order to successfully and meaningfully interact with Omo, the human must learn to produce new gestures, new movements, new motions for the gratification of receiving predictive responses. This is not very different from the ways in which we change our lives so that our quotidian practices match the filtered realities of Instagram, or our wit operates in byte-sized tweets, or our relationships get mapped and networked entirely through the rubrics offered by Facebook. As the "Internet of Things" (Kopetz, 2011) slowly becomes a lived reality, and our machines become more and more intelligent at predicting our actions and responding accordingly, perhaps it is time to think of the social in social media, as our relationship with the mediated devices and technologies rather than with the people behind them. Because you do know that as long as you are on a social media network, you are never alone. Nobody might like your status, or share your tweet, or heart your blog, but you can be sure that deep in the heart of a server farm is a predictive algorithm that listens to everything that you say, keeps track of everything that you do, and waits, patiently, more sincerely than your parent, partner, or psychiatrist to record your everyday life.

To add to both these approaches, which focus around human–technology/human interaction, I would like to propose that social in social media is actually about sapient technologies interacting with each other, without the human as a reference point. Increasingly, in the age of big data, we are constantly faced with information and data sets that are too huge to be processed or parsed by the human subject (Tactical Technologies Collective, 2013). The human might be the bearer of information and the producer of data, but the data itself can only be meaningfully understood by predictive algorithms, curating platforms, and devices that deploy parallel and distributed computing on the cloud and in remote server farms, to actually produce any meaning out of them. It is, perhaps, the first time in the history of media that mediated outputs are aimed not at the human reader but at a machine reader, which makes sense of the complexity and produces visualizations and infographics that mere humans can process. This is mimicked and supported by the architecture of a computational network, where the different nodes in a network constantly communicate with each other, and traffic information that is not for human consumption.

Within the closed unit of a computer, different components constantly remind each other, through software protocols and drivers, that they exist and are alive. In the larger connected networks like the Internet, all the different devices ping each other with information that is meaningless to the human reader but is crucial to the sustenance of the networks itself. Physical hardware communicate with each other, producing both the possibilities and the limitations of what human information, expression, and desire can be. This produces a new imagination of the social—not as something that is an abstraction of human speech and practice, but the social media as the ontology of human interaction and communication. Or in other words, social media has become so prevalent and crucial because we are realizing that we are no longer the subjects of technology but subject to technology.

As our data subjects grow stronger and our social media profile acquire independent actions, increasingly, the social media is the context of our practice and the genesis of our identities rather than representations of our actions and identifiers. This reversal of the media as origin rather than media as extension signals a new form of machine sociality, where machine communication and learning produces new control, surveillance, and connected societies that are both limited and expanded by the machines, as they gossip, chat, exchange, leak, and circulate information that becomes the infrastructure of the new social.

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