

Social Media and the Struggle for Society

Social Media + Society
April-June 2015: 1–2
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DOI: 10.1177/2056305115580477
sms.sagepub.com



Nancy K. Baym

Abstract

This piece argues that all communication media are inherently social. The term “social media” emerged at the time that companies began harnessing what people were already doing online, turning socializing into revenue streams for venture capitalists and the people who run internet companies. The paper critiques the conversion of social interaction into wealth for the few and argues that we need to fight for media that help build better societies rather than those that view people as data profiles to be sold to advertisers.

Keywords

social media, wealth inequality, social justice

Any medium that allows people to make meaning together is social. There is nothing more “social” about “social media” than there is about postcards, landline telephones, television shows, newspapers, books, or cuneiform. There are distinctive qualities to what we call “social media” (see, for example, Ellison & boyd, 2013; van Dijck, 2013), but being social is not among them. Long before “social media,” the Internet was used to do what Facebook’s mission statement promises: connecting with friends and family, discovering what is going on in the world, sharing and expressing what matters. If the words “social” and “media” don’t describe anything distinctive, what cultural work does the term “social media” do?

It obscures the unpleasant truth that “social media” is the takeover of the social by the corporate. “Social media” happened when companies figured out how to harness what people were already doing, make (some of) it a bit easier, call it “content,” and funnel our practices into their revenue streams. The term “social media” puts the focus on what people do through platforms rather than critical issues of ownership, rights, and power. Social media scholars tend to approach the topic the same way, asking how people use the sites and with what consequences. Too few of us focus on platforms’ force as actors in this socio-technical economy. Society needs our work to challenge what we study.

It is telling that the term “social media” was first used around 1994 (Bercovici, 2010). Until then, the Internet was funded primarily by the United States’ National Science Foundation (NSF). Social was ever-present. Commercial activity was banned. In 1994, when the NSF handed the backbone of the Internet to commercial networks, commerce gained entry. Economic exchange and advertising became

permitted. Commercial platforms like AOL were allowed to join. The term “social media” gained widespread currency about a decade later, when “Web 2.0” platforms based on “user generated content” seemed to subsume the Internet. As Marwick (2013) explains, these rebrandings drew an investor-oriented line between the burst Internet bubble of 1999 and a future that might again make money.

Social media platforms do offer social value. Facebook’s mission statement begins by claiming its purpose is “to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.” They’ve done a remarkable job at making people open and connected. Every month, 1.35 billion people, nearly one out of every five humans alive, log in (Facebook, n.d.). I use Facebook every day and have since 2006. I find its arrogance infuriating, but without it, my social networks would not be as strong. I would lose touch with people I value. Some great things would not happen.

But it is also true that “social media” platforms tend to be created by small groups of (usually) (young) (White) (American) men, funded by venture capitalists, in hopes of getting rich when, and if, the sites are acquired. Facebook has made Zuckerberg the 21st wealthiest person in the world (Chalabi, 2015). He is worth more than most of his site’s users *combined*. Who is really giving power to whom?

The gross exacerbation of wealth inequality between site users and founders is one way “social media” disempower

Microsoft Research New England, USA

Corresponding Author:

Nancy K. Baym, Microsoft Research New England, 1 Memorial Drive,
Cambridge, MA 02142, USA.
Email: baym@microsoft.com



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the people they claim to empower. There are others: They rely on opaque algorithms that filter who sees what. Users can neither understand nor knowledgeably influence these filtering mechanisms, nor can we see whose interests they serve. Platforms have take-it-or-leave-it terms of service that nearly always overreach. In times of massive surveillance, we never know where our data will end up, used by whom for what purposes.

Social media are part of a larger economic disempowerment that thrives on young creative workers' willingness to engage in their own exploitation (e.g. Gill & Pratt, 2008). As Marwick (2013) and Neff (2012) show, the dream of being the next Zuckerberg, or at least having an early stake in a winning social media site, drives countless people to spend their 20s working overtime with little stability and little to show for it. Their odds are about as good as taking up a guitar in hopes of becoming a rock star, but the hours are worse.

Social interaction is fundamental to our humanity. It is the means through which we create our very worlds. Communication media are crucial in shaping our futures. At their best, social media would help us build better worlds. They would help us become better humans. But social media cannot foster more just societies when their primary goals are growth and profit. Better societies cannot be built on models of humans as data profiles to be matched with advertisers.

It is easy to be cynical. We should be. The problems are so much larger than social media. They concern capitalism, democracy, and the fundamental underpinnings of societal fairness. We have the right to be angry. We have the right to demand better.

We can't afford to despair. Communication, our most powerful tool, can still make better worlds. Social interaction is too important to be channeled into wealth for the few. It will be a long struggle to re-orient away from monetizing the social toward honoring it. Let's get started.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Author Biography

Nancy K. Baym is Principal Researcher at Microsoft Research in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her work examines how people and audiences understand and use communication technologies in their relationships.