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Why I Joined Facebook and Still Regret It

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Abstract

This article argues for a particular understanding of identity and sociality in social media. While there is considerable insightful research about the sociality and subjectivity produced in social media, it is also important to see that such identity and sociality is about creating and maintaining public-private boundaries online that can be different to those divisions of public and private that are lived offline.

Keywords

social media adoption, privacy, identity

I joined Facebook with my arm (metaphorically) bent a long way up my back by my family. I live in the United Kingdom but have brothers, nieces, nephews, and their children all living in Australia, and they were sick of keeping me up to date with the latest birthdays or “first day at school” by sending photos, when they knew all I had to do was join social media and be friended. My strong reluctance, and the consequent need for bending my elbow up my back, stemmed from a suspicion of social media, despite and/or because of years of involvement in virtual communication and communities both as a researcher and as a way of creating my life more generally (particularly in relation to online gaming communities I was and am part of that primarily used text based forums and allowed either alternate identities to my offline identity or anonymity).

Looking back, I now think there were two aspects that particularly troubled me about social media, and continue to do so, despite an appreciation for the ease with which I now see the birthday cake candles being blown out. These two aspects also constitute for me core themes of social media research: divisions of public and private, and the enclosure of social relations in online spaces.

Many still think of dividing private and public based on the idea, at least implicitly, that the information about a person’s subjectivity is in some sense “theirs” and should therefore not be alienated from them without their knowledge or against their will. This idea indexes a great deal of policy discussion about social media and privacy, based on what social media networks do with the information about inner selves that people post on them. But in highly virtually mediated environments, we are all familiar with the instability of the markers that identify someone that are far more easily spoofable than a voice or a person’s looks or signature. If we

receive a spam email, we judge it on its content and not on the email address it purports to come from. This is the case even if it is a familiar address from someone we know. I argue (Jordan, 2013) we do this because we experience identity online as being based on producing a style of communication that can be read consistently to produce someone’s online identity precisely because the name the communication comes from cannot be trusted.

Such a means of identifying subjects produces a different divide of public and private because the “inner self” is not held by the subject but is produced in a style that is read by others. This means a collective right of the network to the many readings needed to make each identity is created that recognizes the potential damage to subjects’ identity if parts of the network that have read them into existence disappear. This kind of identity contrasts with the private right of the individual to their inner subjectivity as property. This second way of dividing public and private relies on how an identity can be “read,” and it can co-exist with dividing public and private according to the inner property of subjectivity, creating a tension I have always found awkward in social media.

We continue to decide public and private according to our rights to our inner selves as information, but we also create a different public–private divide based on the rights of the network to create and sustain itself through collective forms of “reading” identity. If we understand social media as a site in which different ways of creating and maintaining

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public–private divides are enacted, then we can ask where or in what space these divides are practiced and this connects to the second issue that troubles me and many others about social media: that they are enclosures of cultural, emotional, and social relations that the owners of the enclosures can mine for profit.

This has been extensively discussed and is intuitively clear from things like the value Facebook as a company generates, which comes entirely from its mining of social relations that are created for it for free that can then be made into targeted advertisements. These relations are, of course, not created for Facebook—like pictures of my nephew’s children’s parties, they are created for family and emotional reasons—but Facebook and other social media are able to convert such small moments of sociality into free labor that the enclosure controllers benefit from.

These two concerns about social media I have briefly noted also, to me, index two of the main traditions of social media research. On the one hand, there is extensive work now done on issues of identity and sociality within social media and, on the other hand, there is the “political economy” of social media networks. These are not separate and it is both the content of each and their conjunction that most powerfully delineate, for me, the main research issues of

social media analysis. This research helps explain to me why I needed my elbow being bent to join Facebook and why, despite being able to see birthday cake candles being blown out, I tend to regret that I did so.

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Author Biography

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