Facebook

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Facebook is a complex site, marked by its massive size, continual expansion and ever-increasing platform power. In 2019, Facebook surpassed 2 billion monthly active users, making it the largest social media platform. Along with Google, Facebook dominates the global digital advertising market, effectively forming a global duopoly (Burrell 2019; Garrahan 2017; Reuters 2017). Facebook's size and network power mean that it has a considerable advantage over other social media platforms, sets the standard for the social landscape (Caplan and boyd 2018; Zittrain 2018; Tufecki 2014), and plays a significant role in shaping the practices of individuals, communities and industries.

Like other social media, Facebook simultaneously perpetuates the capitalist logic associated with corporate structures while reproducing a citizen oriented logic that enables community building, social movements and many forms of creative and civic expression. In light of these opposing logics, Facebook is first presented in this entry as an instance of anti-citizen media that co-opts citizen action and subverts the social into monetizable forms of connection through metrics and the like economy (Van Dijck 2013; Marwick 2013; Fuchs 2017). To illustrate Facebook's capitalist logic, this entry will draw on the Cambridge Analytica events, involving the harvesting of personal data across the Facebook platform to facilitate targeted political campaigning and advertising (Greenfield 2018). The entry will then move to examine Facebook as a form of citizen media – understood as those "artefacts, content, practices, performative interventions and discursive formations" which enable citizens (and non-citizens) to "position themselves within and in relation to society and participate in the creation of diverse publics" (Baker and Blaagard 2016:16). As a form of citizen media, Facebook provides a platform for citizens to come together, be heard, share and mobilize. Its grassroots and citizen oriented logic can be observed in a range of protest and social movements, such as the Arab uprisings, Occupy and Black Lives Matter (Gerbaudo 2016; Tufecki 2017a). Facebook's potential to oppose the corporatization of citizen connections has also been explored in terms of its contribution to identity expression and community building (Miller 2011; boyd 2014; Lingel 2017), as well as its contribution to citizen or participatory journalism (Rone 2016). In these contexts, Facebook facilitates connection – providing the means for ordinary people to self-identify, build, and make communities of practice visible to insiders, outsiders, and all those in-between.

The rise of the Facebook ecosystem

Facebook has come a long way from its early days as a single purpose website for sharing Harvard student pictures and profiles, inspired by the paper-based face books – i.e. student directories that have been "common to American Universities from at least the 1960s" (Gray 2007:73). The Facebook platform, first implemented through the 'Facebook Login' button (formerly called 'Facebook Connect'), marked Facebook's expansion from a single web-based social network "into the rest of the web" by integrating external web data into its growing range of services and user information databases (Helmond 2015:1). Today, Facebook presents itself as a complex mobile-first site encompassing a "[p]latform; social plugins such as the Like button, the Share button and other similar offerings; and other

media, brands, products, services, software … devices or networks now existing or later developed" (Facebook 2018). Scholars agree that providing a single definition of Facebook is challenging. Madianou and Miller describe it as a kind of polymedia or "multiplex of co-constituted and interconnected media spaces" which encompass a wide range of services and communication forms (2012:172). Likewise, Van Dijck (2013; Van Dijck et al. 2018) describes Facebook as a connective rather than social medium that makes social metrics – including likes, comments and shares – visible. From their perspective, Facebook encompasses many sites providing key cultural, social, and economic infrastructures.

As Hoffman et al. (2018) have shown, founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg's public statements on Facebook have also shifted over time. While he first referred to Facebook as a directory during his dorm room days, he later defined it as a "'core social infrastructure' for the web – and increasingly – the world" (as cited in Hoffman et al. 2018: 205). Against the backdrop of these developments, critical scholars have come to conceptualize Facebook as an exploitative company that monetizes the social through the exploitation of user data, enables mass (self) surveillance, and exploits the free labour of users while also perpetuating a 'like ideology' (Fuchs 2014:153, 160; Scholz 2012; Van Dijck, 2013; Sandoval 2014; Vaidhyanathan 2018). One of the common themes emerging from this body of work is the idea that Facebook is a constitutive space of eco-systems (Van Dijck 2013), underpinned by power relations (Fuchs 2014; Sandoval 2014), and driven by the need to enable communication and connection (Gerbaudo 2016; boyd 2014; Miller 2011; Jenkins et al. 2016). The key debate here does not question the fact that Facebook is powerful, but concerns how it is powerful and how all of its elements come together in systems that are predominantly exploitative, enabling and/or empowering. Bucher and Helmond (2018:235), for example, have explored the deep connections between Facebook content and the actions that it enables. These connections are presented as affordances that yield a better understanding of the actualities and potentialities of the dialectic between social interfaces and uses, behaviours, or contexts (Plantin et al. 2016; Helmond 2015; Srnicek 2017).

Facebook as a corporate and anti-citizen platform

Scholars working on Facebook as a corporate platform do not only focus on the issue of social or citizen co-optation (Rone 2016), but also the monetization and subversion of the social by a capitalist logic. Notable cases illustrating Facebook's long history of anti-citizen behaviour include the radicalization of right leaning Facebook users through targeted advertising directed at 'Jew-haters' and white supremacists (Tufecki 2017b); India's rejection in 2016 of Facebook's Free Basics – a 'free' service offered to countries with limited internet access through an app similar to 'Facebook Lite' that enables free access to Facebook - for monopolistic reasons (Bhatia 2016; Gurumurthy and Chami 2016; Vaidyhanathan 2018); and Facebook's 2014 study on emotional contagion, involving Facebook's mood manipulation of negative and positive sentiment in the content of 700,000 unknowing Facebook users' newsfeeds (Kramer et al. 2014; Meyer 2014).

These tensions, however, are most clearly illustrated by the Cambridge Analytica events, which exposed the misuse of millions of users' personal data for political campaigning in March 2018 (Rosen et al. 2018). This particular case is important because it highlights Facebook's political and economic impact as a global power broker of personal data,

confirming what many critical scholars have long argued (Tufecki 2014; Gehl 2015; Fuchs 2014; Sandoval 2014; Marwick 2013; Scholz 2012). In 2018, it was revealed that Cambridge Analytica, a data driven political consulting and commercial marketing firm, used personal data from up to 87 million Facebook accounts and data gathered through an app called 'This is your digital life' – which scraped data from Amazon Mechanical Turk workers and all of their Facebook friends and contacts in 2015. The issues at stake in this case include massive invasions of privacy for Facebook users along with improper use and retention of data. Crucially, the threat that this improper retention represented was not confined to those individuals and citizens whose personal data was non-consensually shared. Cambridge Analytica reportedly used this personal data in the Trump and Brexit campaigns and developed sophisticated tactics targeting voters that may have been instrumental in Trump's electoral victory and the UK's decision to leave the EU (Tufecki 2017b, 2018; Rosenberg 2018; Ingram 2018; Greenfield 2018; see Davies 2018 for an opposing perspective).

In his public apology released via Facebook, Zuckerberg (2018) admitted that the platform allows third party apps and developers to access the user data of anyone who downloads the apps, but also of anyone who is connected to the downloader. The Cambridge Analytica events thus revealed how the Facebook platform collects user data and enables its clients and developers to use or share that data in ways that suit them. Tufecki (2017b) argues that, contrary to what Zuckerberg's apology suggests, this was not a one-off failure. This breach clearly illustrated the impact of a core feature of Facebook's business model and the growing importance of platformization. In her critique of the implications of this business model, Tufecki (2018) concludes that Facebook "isn't a community; this is a regime of one-sided, highly profitable surveillance, carried out on a scale that has made Facebook one of the largest companies in the world by market capitalization".

Tufecki's views are informed by long-standing neo-Marxist critiques of mass media, where citizens are commodified as audiences to be bought and sold by media companies and advertisers (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944; Smythe 2009; Fuchs 2012, 2014). From a similar perspective, other scholars have presented Facebook as a data gathering platform that prioritizes advertising revenue over other more altruistic contributions to society (Vladeck 2018). Van Dijck (2013) argues that Facebook's main function is to automate sociality as well as to monetize social connections and personal information – a view shared by Marwick (2013) and Angwin et al. (2016). These attempts to profit from and monetize personal user data portray Facebook as a corporate and anti-citizen media platform. Instead of engaging citizens and enabling users to perform and constitute citizen oriented connections, Facebook's monetization of data transforms acts of citizenship into data commodities.

Facebook as a citizen oriented platform

As a powerful platform for self-expression of the networked citizen self (Baym 2015; Papacharissi 2011), relationship maintenance, and community formation (boyd 2014:7; Miller 2011; Lambert 2013), Facebook is often understood as a mirror of and a window into the interface between the personal, interpersonal and public. In this context, Facebook emerges as a site where communities of unaffiliated citizens – who act independently from organized groups and collectives (Baker and Blaagaard 2016) – and social movements

coalesce and consolidate. Facebook embodies the heart of participatory culture, where ordinary citizens can realize greater communicative capacities with fewer "barriers to artistic and civic engagement" (Jenkins et al. 2016:3-4). By actualizing the internet's "expansive possibilities for horizontal communication among citizens", it facilitates political action and fosters identity or community building initiatives (Tufecki 2014) where the divisions between political action and self-expression often become sticky and tangled.

The interplay between the public and the private is central to various studies on the Arab uprisings, where Facebook provided a platform for activists and unaffiliated citizens in "Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and latterly Yemen and Syria" (Axford 2011: 682) to share information and take part in political mobilizations. Murthy (2018), Zuckerman (2013) and Axford (2011) have explored how Facebook was able to circumvent government control and give voice to the voiceless against a complex backdrop characterized by severe restrictions of free expression, rife corruption and economic precarity. Focusing on the case of Egyptian activist Wael Ghonim, Alaimo (2015) argues that Ghonim's Facebook page 'We are all Khaled Said' became a key site of mobilization and political training. In 2011, it led to a series of mass protests, not only against the brutal murder of Said by Egyptian police, but also against widespread poverty, government failures, and widespread misinformation (Alaimo 2015:4). Facebook thus became a site that transformed unaffiliated citizens into a citizen movement which sought to reshape Egyptian politics (Gerbaudo 2016; Alaimo 2015; Murthy 2018).

A very different example of Facebook serving as a constitutive site of both community and political change is the New York drag queen community platform (Lingel 2017). Through interviews, Lingel documents the importance of social media, and Facebook in particular, for performers to promote themselves and enact "queer solidarity and mutual aid" within and across the drag community (2017:102). Drag tends to involve males dressing up in extravagant costumes to impersonate females while lip synching popular songs and disrupting particularly "conventional notions of femininity and masculinity" (Lingel 2017:101). By using pseudonyms or aliases, drag queens seek to develop their drag personae – which sometimes requires keeping their drag identities separate from their non-performing selves. Facebook was used as a form of citizen media in this context, as members of this community faced having their Facebook accounts frozen in violation of the platform's real-name policy. Lingel's respondents used Facebook not only as a site for self-expression and community building, but also as a site of protest against the real-name policy, that they regarded as "homophobic and prejudiced" (2017:117), and as problematic for abuse and domestic violence survivors. Lingel argues that the drag and queer community were successful "where others were not" because "they acted collectively" and "celebrated their alterity" and difference (2017:118-119).

Facebook's dual logics: Citizen power and platform dominance

Following long-standing patterns in the history of mass media (Murthy 2018; Lievrouw 2011), Facebook is both an emancipatory and exploitative platform. Its role in contexts like the Arab uprisings and New York's drag community shows that Facebook is instrumental in connecting communities, coordinating collective action, fermenting political change, and most importantly, enabling users to participate in and develop diverse publics – all of which

are important steps in appropriating corporate media as citizen media to foster acts of citizenship. But the very spaces that Facebook provides for unaffiliated citizens to become visible to themselves and to others are buried under deeply divisive power structures. Apart from prompting calls for its reorganization as a kind of public utility or "information fiduciary" responsible for protecting personal data and connections (Balkin 2016), Facebook's history of privacy invasions and data economics is widely held to jeopardize its potential to serve as a citizen-oriented platform. But while alternative social media like Diaspora*, Ello, Minds and Mastodon may appear to be better options for a fairer, more citizen-oriented world, network effects mean Facebook is likely to maintain mainstream dominance (Gehl 2015; Fuchs 2014; Lievrouw 2011).

Future directions

The Cambridge Analytica events are bound to influence significantly the way in which Facebook evolves over the next decade. This high-profile data harvesting case has prompted efforts to institute regulatory reviews of Facebook and other big technological companies, and drawn critical attention to various aspects of platform behaviour. These include the use of competition curbing practices, the influence of social media on the outcome of electoral processes, and the role Facebook and other platforms play in circulating disinformation – as discussed in the UK Parliament's Final Report on Disinformation and Fake News (UK Parliament 2019); and the Online Harms White Paper (DCMS 2019). Likewise, Facebook's role in perpetuating hate and reinforcing entrenched inequalities is also attracting scholarly attention (Benjamin 2019; Gillespie 2018) and bringing Facebook's role as a core social infrastructure under intense scrutiny. Beyond this socio-political dimension, the research agenda on Facebook is exploring its place at the forefront of many technological innovations, including artificial intelligence, sophisticated facial recognition tools, predictive analytics, finance and micro-payments, and emotional manipulation – among many other areas of public-facing research. Since it first emerged, Facebook's potential for mass connection has been socially, economically and politically transformative, so it is imperative to continue interrogating its role within the digital ecosystem and its future impact on public well-being, both citizens of today and tomorrow.

Recommended Reading

Gehl, R. W. (2015) 'The Case for Alternative Social Media', *Social Media + Society*, July-December: 1-12.
Drawing on the alternative media tradition, Gehl theorizes alternative social media as radically distinct from their corporate counterparts. This paper yields new insights into the power of corporate media, as well as the impact of social media on the nature of sociality.

Helmond, A. (2015) 'The Platformization of the Web: Making web data platform ready,' *Social Media + Society*, September: 1-11.
Outlines the infrastructural process of platformization – understood as the extension of social media or other digital services, sites or apps across the web for data extraction and exchange – using Facebook as an example.

Tufecki, Z. (2017) *Twitter and Tear Gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*, Yale: Yale University Press. Available at https://www.twitterandteargas.org/downloads/twitter-and-tear-gas-by-zeynep-tufekci.pdf
Explores the links between social media and social movements, from the 1960s civic rights movement to twenty-first century movements such as the Arab uprisings, Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement and Occupy.