

Social media – New challenges and approaches for communications research

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This issue of the *European Journal of Communication* comprises revised versions of papers first given at a symposium convened and hosted by the journal, and held at the University of Minho, Braga, Portugal, in May 2016. We are extremely grateful to the University, and especially to the *Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade* (Communication and Society Research Centre). The discussion prompted by the presentation of papers at the symposium allowed for the revision of the papers into their present form.

The topic of social media has been a recurrent one in papers published or received by the Journal in recent years. Many such papers have derived from relatively small-scale research on the use of social media by homogeneous groups, or have taken a particular interest in the presumed ways in which such media have affected, even transformed, the nature of political communication, whether this means the methods by which politicians communicate with the electorate or by which political mobilisation among embryonic social movements is developed. It seemed to us essential to take stock of where much of this work is going, and of the assumptions that were often left unstated within it.

In particular, we were struck by four aspects of research on social media. The first was the uncertainty of the term itself. Like many, we were unclear what its opposite – unsocial media – could possibly mean. Are all media not social in their very nature? Sometimes, perhaps quite commonly, the term was used as a loose shorthand for one or two notable platforms that had come to engage so much of people's lives (especially better off and younger users), to such an extent that replacing the term social media with 'Facebook or Twitter' would serve perfectly well in many reports.

Second, we were struck by the sheer scale and speed of the development of these forms of communication, however defined. The statistics are often jaw-droppingly large. By September 2016, Facebook, by some distance the largest of the social media, could claim 1.7 billion regular users (meaning at least once a month), while WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, QQ, WeChat, QZone, Tumblr and Instagram each had 500 million or more such regular users.¹ The most popular 'social networking sites' in another list also included YouTube (1 billion users), LinkedIn (255 million) and Pinterest (250 million).² Definitions change and, as these examples show, vary from analyst to analyst, and data raise as many questions as answers, but these figures are startling and appear in sentences that would have been incomprehensible to a reader a decade or two ago. Facebook, after all, began as an attempt by an ambitious 19-year-old student at Harvard to replace the university

'facebook's', only with better photos. It was not just a dating site but 'aimed at the simple problem of keeping track of your schoolmates' (when did this become a problem?), and possibly, it is speculated, introduced by its inventor, the unquestionably geeky Mark Zuckerberg, 'to help him deal with his own introverted personality' (Kirkpatrick, 2011: 29, 33).

Third, the impact of these tools on social behaviour, and sociability in general, is incontrovertible, though it may often be over-stated. How many elections have been dubbed 'the first internet election' or the 'first Facebook election'? The Arab Spring, the revolutionary wave of major changes in North Africa between 2010 and 2012, and other revolutionary changes have sometimes been celebrated excessively for their apparent dependence (often subsequently questioned) on social media. Less dramatically, it is sometimes suggested that social protest movements, such as the universal 'Occupy' events, were made possible only because of their use of social media to link and mobilise participants. This has, however, been questioned as over-simplifying more complex political events which simply happen to occur when 'digital technologies are woven into the fabric of the social environment' (Ganesh and Stohl, 2013: 426).

Nonetheless, it is a rare casual observer who is not impressed by the sheer difficulty of navigating an urban stroll without sidestepping constantly around others walking purposefully but unseeing towards them who have their heads down, apparently pre-occupied by a mobile phone screen. Similarly, whether travelling on the underground in London, New York or Tokyo, any non-user is bound to be struck by the lines of silent commuters all apparently in deep engagement with something held at navel level, 'tethered' to the Internet as Sherry Turkle (2012) memorably put it in *Alone Together* (p. 155). Beyond their impact on the minutiae of sociability, even the most traditional of media researchers has to sit up at the discovery that, as a recent research study based on a survey of over 50,000 people in 26 countries, showed 'social media has overtaken television as young people's main source of news'.³

Finally, the financial scale of these technologies alerts us to the political economy of the organisations that control and develop them. As early as 2004, Mark Zuckerberg was being introduced to venture capitalists, quick to sense a fast growing opportunity, and in June that year was offered US\$10million for his company (Kirkpatrick, op.cit.: 41). The company's market capitalisation had soared to US\$104 billion by 2012, and this figure had more than doubled by 2015. YouTube was bought by Google for US\$1.65 billion in 2006. WhatsApp was bought by Facebook for over US\$19 billion in 2014. While such companies began as the dream children of small numbers of, usually silicon valley, technological whiz-kids (though the origin mythology of this can be much sentimentalised), they are big businesses now, and their owners, whether venture capitalists or the young technological entrepreneurs who started them, are vastly wealthy and powerful. The huge revenues generated by these organisations, from advertising primarily, and their extraordinary power as market research and surveillance tools alert researchers to the broader social, political and economic significance of these technological developments, in ways that are too often relatively disregarded.

These, and many more concerns, are addressed by the social media analysts and experts contributing to this issue. In her article, Lomborg reviews the way research in this area has evolved. She notes the divergent trends of researchers, some of whom lean

to a dystopian view of the development of social media, while others tend rather to celebrate the liberatory and emancipatory use and potential of such media, as they see it. In the light of that, she sets out clear directions that should order the major research tasks ahead of us. Jensen and Helles offer an analytical framework which allows us to examine social media in the wider context of communications media generally. They suggest that ‘in examining the long-term shift from mass communication toward networked communication, research has tended to neglect how the users of social media speak into the system, above and beyond what they say to each other’. Chambers takes on the major task of assessing the impact on intimacy of the growing use of social media, and asks quite what is meant by ‘friendship’ as it has been operationalised (and some would say denuded of real meaning) by co-option into the procedures of Facebook.

Fuchs’ article draws our attention to the political economy of these media, and especially draws on Marxist theory to do so. He argues insistently for a critical perspective in such work, and relates the undue emphasis on a non-materialist underpinning of research in this field to wider problems in the nature and ideological and material bases of research in academia, not least in relation to communications. Enli’s article is concerned with the implications of social media for the sphere of politics, and asks to what extent they have changed, or are changing, the relationship between political actors and those they presume to, or do represent. Based in her own empirical work, she draws our attention to the need to recognise both continuity and change in such relationships.

In all these articles, it becomes plain that the rapid growth of social media, however defined, represents a significant development in the field of media and communication. Whether rooted in political economy, political, sociological or social psychological frameworks, the changes described and analysed here represent a major challenge for researchers in our field. The *European Journal of Communication* will regularly and frequently present the best of research and analysis enabling the questions and proposals so eloquently and provocatively raised by our contributors in this issue, to evolve, and so to widen our understanding.

Notes

1. See data from Statista at www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/ (accessed 18 October 2016).
2. See <http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/social-networking-websites> (accessed 19 October 2016).
3. See <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital-News-Report-2016.pdf>

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