Social Networks and Their Effects on the Offline World

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Caught in the Net?
Global Google-Cultures

Abstract

We can conceive of the world of the Internet through two different metaphors. In one of these metaphors, the Internet is a natural extension of the physical world in which we live, with the laws and structures of the one being valid and applicable in the other. Another, more radical interpretation would be that the Internet is a new and unexplored world in itself, where everything can be and is different. To most of us, the first metaphor might be the more natural one to follow. However, we must not forget the concept of network externalities. In networks, things begin to happen that none of us can expect or foresee, and these events start to take on a life of their own, at least to some extent. In this article we highlight some of the expected and unexpected changes the Internet – and social media in particular – has brought to our lives.

1. Introduction

The Internet has freed many human activities from the limitations of time and place. Mobile accessible information resources on the 'cloud' are available to us all the time, independent of our actual physical location.

This has eliminated many of the restrictions on life that societies once had. However, one should remember that similar revolutionary changes in social structures have happened before, and have included innovations such as the steam engine, electricity, railways, as well as innovations in medicine and many food processing and agricultural technologies, to give just a few examples. We have also witnessed leaps forward on the less technical side of things, although these leaps have often been more incremental and evolutionary in nature. Examples of this include the development of language, of money systems, of different organisational forms and structures, and of political systems and their principles. And hopefully the Internet will not be the last major innovation that mankind sees.

This article lists and takes up certain issues that are currently being discussed with regard to the Internet, and social media in particular. Five years ago, many of the topics taken up here were not even issues yet; and five years from now, the topics under discussion will surely be very different, and many of the problems and issues discussed here will hopefully be settled, and have become common knowledge to everyone.

The purpose of this article is to show some of the ways in which the Internet and social media have caused deep changes to societies. Individuals, organisations, industries, states and the whole world order are being challenged through the Internet and social media.

Most things in this realm often develop toward the better, but some of the trends noted in this article could lead to risky scenarios.

2. Fragmentation of Society and its Interests

Social media is clearly strengthening the trend toward the individualisation and fragmentation of society. People's use of social media is scattered across several different platforms that represent millions of groups and interests. Those with similar ideas and values congregate online to discuss issues with each other. Right- and left-wing political activists discuss topics mostly with people who have similar political views as themselves; people interested in cats or dogs can find other people with those same interests; fans of classical music are able to avoid fans of rock and roll, and vice versa; and so on and so forth. People easily get locked into small circles of interest. Gone are the days when a shared national mindset and a shared collective memory were formed through a few public TV and radio stations and a few leading newspapers and journals. In the long run, this will inevitably lead to poorer general knowledge among the population. On the other hand, it is clear that the Net and its social media outlets will be an El Dorado for those inquisitive people seeking to study and understand different cultures and ways of living.

One thing to keep in mind is that there are no first-class and second-class tickets in social media, no difference between the business and economy seats. People from all social classes are free to meet in a common forum. This will inevitably benefit society.

A sad phenomenon connected to social media is that of hate speech. Social media is generally unedited and often allows people to express themselves anonymously. This potential is often exploited for purposes of negative propaganda and in order to encourage other people to mistreat and mistrust certain parts of the population. Yet by attempting to control hate speech, societies can lose an extremely precious value: that of the freedom of speech. At the moment it seems that, in most societies, the reining in of hate speech takes precedence over freedom of speech. Yet in many instances, the possibility of expressing oneself anonymously is crucial, for example in order to express criticism or enter into discussions of certain delicate issues wherein revealing one's real name would threaten one's safety.

3. Delivering Platforms, Allowing for Social Innovation

Social media is seldom constructed with some specific use, pattern or process in mind. Rather, social media producers provide platforms that allow users to innovate the product themselves.

A classic case of social innovation is that of spreadsheet software such as Microsoft Excel. The products were first designed for performing structured counting activities. But people soon started to use these tools as small databases to store and present written and visual information. Spreadsheets evolved from mathematical tools to databases to general application generators. Some of them developed more functions relating to statistical calculations, others developed more functions relating to version management, and there were many other developments as well. The important thing to note is that the software

developed through social innovation was led by users and facilitated by vendors who were willing to incorporate changes that the users wanted.

Nowadays, most social media is constructed in this way, with users innovating the products at hand by deciding how the products' tools are to be used. And social media platforms adjust themselves to different uses. The same platform can be used for discussing child care problems or discussing the specifications of rockets, and different interactions taking place on the same platform can be either rigidly structured and led, or completely self-directed.

4. Mixing Different Spheres of Life

The more platforms we add to our communication portfolios, the more blurred our lives become. One of the key explanations given for the success of Facebook, for example, is that it compensates for and substitutes many other media, including e-mail, text messaging and personal home pages. This of course is only true on the condition that people actually stay away from those other forums, which seldom is the case.

The more blurred and fragmented our communication landscape becomes, the harder it is to master it. One important topic here is that of leisure time vs. work time. Many people prefer not to separate these two domains, often forgetting that many of us have several roles: for example the role of a private person versus that of an employer or an entrepreneur.

Social media makes it easy to blur the boundaries between different roles. This is often a problem: if you present something, the recipients should be able to tell in which role you are doing the presenting.

There is also a practical side to this issue. Many employers fear that people spend too much time on the web and hence ignore their work-related tasks. According to many empirical findings, the case is often the other way around: modern information and communication

technology (ICT), including social media, tend to keep us alert to work-related issues and tasks around the clock, and throughout the year.

A similar blurring of boundaries occurs between marketing messages and other messages. When we communicate, we often try to advance certain things and question other things. However, in traditional marketing such as TV commercials, for example, the goal is to keep marketing and editorial materials separate. Within social media, however, this goal becomes next to impossible to achieve. For example, we can witness millions of blogs that look like normal chat and online small talk, but that are actually maintained as very planned and focused marketing tools. Within social media, the boundaries between marketing and other communication become more blurred than ever.

5. Deep Effects on Health Care

Health is perhaps our most valuable resource, and it is therefore no wonder that health issues are discussed so intensively in social media. In the best-case scenario, health-related information and services on the web lead to better quality of life and less sickness; in the worst-case scenario, this can lead to a wrong self-diagnosis and hence to the wrong self-treatment, which can of course be harmful or even disastrous to one's health. This is one of the dangers of social media relating to health.

As in other areas of life, excessive fixation on one issue can lead to harmful and extreme behaviour. 'Cyberchondria' is one new phenomenon that has emerged on the Net, and one that has been further accelerated by the Net.[1] Cyberchondria is an extreme and unnatural interest in health issues, an interest facilitated by the rich information available on the Net. A common indication of cyberchondria is that of feeling ill or expecting to fall ill when there

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[1] *Lewis, Tania*: Seeking Health Information on the Internet: Lifestyle Choice or Bad Attack of Cyberchondria?, in: Media, Culture & Society, No. 4, Vol. 28, 2006, pp. 521-539; *White, Ryen W./Horvitz, Eric*: Cyberchondria: tudies of the Escalation of Medical Concerns in Web Search, in: ACM Transactions on Information Systems (TOIS), No. 4, Vol. 27, 2009, Article 23.

is no actual cause for this. In extreme cases, this leads to personal and family tragedies, as well as to the excessive demand for and consumption of health-related services and products. Personal tragedies can include self-treatment with the wrong methods and medicines, or self-destructive behaviour, including suicide.

Defining when we have a case of cyberchondria and when we do not is extremely difficult. The sharing of health-related information on the Net is a very positive phenomenon, of course, and has greatly benefited society. An example that deserves special mention is that of peer support. Through different social media, people now have the possibility to share health-related information with one another. In the case of rare diseases in particular, patients often become the real experts on the disease, and social media allows these patients to communicate with one another independent of physical location – even people on different continents can easily communicate with one another about their shared disease. As in other areas of life, simply 'meeting' people with the same interests and problems can be extremely beneficial, and often greatly contributes to the health of the people involved.

Social media offers health care professionals – and those from other professional groups as well – platforms and forums to discuss professional issues and work on their skills. However, forums where medical professionals and common citizens can meet are still rare. Such joint forums are scarce because medical professionals often have their own closed sites and forums, and are often reluctant to participate in discussions in open media.

Maintaining traditional web pages is still clumsy and labour-intensive. The tools are not the easiest to use, and because of HTML, the WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) mode of operation generally remains a distant dream. One of the successes of social media is that they free users from the extreme attention to format details. Within Facebook or other similar products, you have access to – and have to be content with – a certain environment and user

interface that you cannot manipulate very much. You are freed from the burden of looking at the technical details of the user interface, and can concentrate more on the content itself.

6. Deep Impacts on Language

It is clear that social media – and electronic media in general – are changing language and our ways of using it. Messages are becoming shorter and more encrypted. The notion of a single common language that unites a nation is on the way out. The tendency of society as a whole is to value time, and time can be saved through shorter messages and texts. It is hard to say how much of this development can be attributed to ICT and social media in general.

One aspect of Internet culture is the domination of the English language on the Net. Software products are generally initially composed in English, and they reflect the constructions of the English language. Versions in other languages are often lower in quality because of inaccurate translations, and perhaps also because of missing functionalities. The versions in other languages usually appear on the market much later. On the other hand, the Internet gives people access to material in almost any language. Where else could you have such easy access to so many materials in foreign languages?

Here, a distinction must be made between writing and composition. "Writing is the externalization and remaking of thinking… composition a reflective tool for making meaning".[2] Writing programmes such as Microsoft Word offer tools for composition, but media based primarily on short messaging generally only provides support to writing, not composition. On the other hand, social media provides a space for the social construction of meaning, which is integral to the democratic processes of societies (Berger and Luckmann 2007). All the same, it must be noted that social media might be endangering the role of composition in communication.

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[2] *Lavelle, Ellen/Zuercher, Nancy*: The Writing Approaches of University Students, in: Higher Education, No. 3, Vol. 42, 2001, p. 374.

7. Upheaval of Political Systems

The printed press has traditionally been called the fourth power of state.[3] Electronic media, including the Internet, have not been granted this status as enthusiastically, even though it seems that the power of electronic media is now even greater than that of printed media.

It might not be a coincidence that the collapse of many political systems coincided with the advancement of satellite broadcasting and the Internet revolution. This happened in communist countries, and is just now happening in the Arab world. It remains to be seen how revolutionary the changes in the Muslim world are going to be, and how quickly we will see change in China.

Social media is especially dangerous to the political elite. Ideas spread across social media in haphazard ways and without any systematic patterns. No-one is in control. Unexpected things happen in this kind of networked environment.

To repeat my previous point, social media can be an excellent platform for political processes too. Truly interactive political discussion can emerge within social media, and it can allow those people who are quiet or neglected to have their voices heard on the traditional political scene. A lot depends on the will of the political elite here.

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[3] *Bennett, W. Lance*: Toward a Theory of Press State Relations in the United States, in: Journal of Communication, No. 2, Vol. 40, 1990, pp. 103-127.

8. The Promises of Virtual Worlds

Virtual worlds are an interesting phenomenon within social media. They are divided into two main classes: 1) those containing a game environment, where some preset task has to be performed according to given rules; and 2) those more closely resembling the 'real' world, where fewer given rules exist and where the participants have no specific predefined task to perform.

All of us face difficulties and disappointments in everyday life. Virtual worlds can be places where you can compensate for this. The restrictions and preset conditions that hold you back in the real world are usually less pronounced there: you can become a virtual millionaire even though you have very little capital in the 'real' world; you can win lots of friends even though you are in fact more of an antisocial type in reality. Virtual worlds can also be places to escape from the troubles of the real world.

Virtual worlds can also be places to make money in the real world. Artefacts made in a virtual world – characters, for example – can often be turned into real hard money. Many people already make their living through these virtual worlds, where they add value through their virtual presence and their hard work.

Virtual worlds are forums wherein people from different backgrounds can meet and perform social interactions easily and without preset conditions. Your virtual self can be quite far removed from your real self in the physical world.

Virtual worlds are also spaces wherein enterprises and other organisations can operate. A religious mission, a political movement or a commercial product can all find new followers through virtual words, followers that would be very difficult or impossible to find through traditional methods in the real world. Virtual worlds have also become important channels for promoting and marketing different issues.

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9. Perils of the Digital Divide

The digital divide can be seen as a major nuisance in the knowledge society,[4] the black death of the 21st century. The digital divide refers to uneven access to computing, information processing and communication processes, including and perhaps even culminating in information resources.

As computing resources become cheaper and more mass-produced than ever, financial issues are becoming a less prominent factor in the digital divide. Of course, ICT resources are still too expensive for many. However, basic hardware is cheaply available nowadays, and most software is available in open source format. Many information resources are also freely available for those who take the time to find out how to access them. The good news is that information can be easily multiplied when the will exists. The bad news is that knowledge – to say nothing of wisdom – cannot be multiplied so easily.

The current digital divide not only runs between the rich and poor, but also between those who have the skills needed to operate in the Internet world and those who do not have them. The Internet in particular is in a constant state of flux, and agility and the ability to learn and unlearn things quickly is necessary for its use. This is often easier for younger generations than for older ones. It is no wonder that one speaks of Digital Natives when referring to the generations of people who learn to use the Internet during their early childhood.[5] These generations are accustomed to working with the Internet, and they demonstrate flexibility and agility in their Internet use.

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[4] *Norris, Pippa*: Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide, Cambridge 2001.

[5] *Prensky, Marc*: Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1, in: On the Horizon, No. 5, Vol. 9, 2001, pp. 1-6.

10.   Conclusions

This article has discussed how social media changes our society and our ways of living. Network externalities, unexpected developments because of our social activities on the Net, emerge daily. We are able to 'internalise' most of them, and we take advantage of most of them by including them in the general ways in which we operate and run our lives. Yet some developments remain problematic, and require further action.

As individuals, we always feel that our generation is the one undergoing the great changes and revolutions in society, and social media is certainly one of these great changes. Yet history has almost always embarrassed us: the changes of the future are usually much more radical than those of the past. So if we feel that the Internet and social media have already radically changed our lives, what should we anticipate in the future? It is our joint responsibility to see to that the changes will benefit mankind and society, and that the Internet and social media will not become sources of depression, inequality and degeneration.

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15th KARLSRUHE DIALOGUES
11th–13th February 2011

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