Introduction: From Culture Digitally

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Abstract
This essay introduces the special issue of Social Media + Society curated by the editors of Culture Digitally and drawn from the community of Culture Digitally contributors.

Keywords
affordances, social media, culture digitally, controversy, platforms

Recognizing that social media are as old as communication itself, and that socially based communication has always utilized platforms, digital or nondigital, which were somehow networked, the editorial scope of the journal includes and extends beyond contemporary trends to invite scholarship that broadly studies media as social entities, environments, and architectures.

This is how Editor-in-Chief Zizi Papacharissi described, in the first issue, this journal’s intellectual aspirations.

Culture Digitally (http://culturedigitally.org/) and Social Media + Society are, we like to think, cut from the same fabric. For 5 years now, we have endeavored to gather scholars and practitioners who explore the myriad ways in which societies, organizations, and individuals engage networked communication technologies, and the practices, cultures, and imaginaries that emerge around them. Participation in Culture Digitaly has not been based on membership in a specific discipline or on a bounded list of preferred objects of study. We accept that social media and the attendant technologies that surround it are in the process of becoming and that studying them requires chasing a moving target—even, at times, stumbling around in the dark. To twist the age-old Indian fable a bit, groping around blindly, but doing so together, we may be able to better know the elephant lumbering before us in a dark room where we can only see with our hands.

That invitation seemed to strike people at just the right moment, a moment of ferment and tectonic shifts:

• **Shifts in theoretical perspectives.** Scholars trained in Communication, Science and Technology Studies (STS), Sociology, Anthropology, and Information Science are hoping not to shore up their disciplinary battlements but to range beyond them in search of fresh vantage points.

• **Ferment in the object of study.** All of us recognize the challenges of studying new technologies and platforms that come and go, controversies that explode and then are eclipsed, cultural phenomena that surge and vanish. All of us are committed to figuring out how to account for and contextualize these emerging phenomena, without becoming entangled in cycles of hype and obsolescence.

• **Tensions around the mechanisms of academic publication.** The pace of printed journals and academic presses is ill-suited to cutting edge scholarship about fluid phenomena; many of us are increasingly unwilling to publish in journals that are closed in both the legal and material sense, timid about protecting scholars’ fair use of copyrighted material, and willing to engage in increasingly capricious pricing arrangements.

Together with members of our growing community, generous support from the National Science Foundation (NSF), and our own academic institutions, we established workshops designed to generate the kind of serendipity and mutuality many of us feel we have not enjoyed since graduate school or experience too rarely in encounters in conference halls or over dinner. We also built and maintain an online venue where these scholars can play out ideas, pose provocations, or dig into current events, and stir their work into the intellectual and public mix in a lively and timely way, without foregoing intellectual depth. From the crew that joined us at our first workshop in early 2011, the group of scholars contributing to Culture Digitally has grown, often in ways we did not direct or anticipate: many scholars found us, in
part because they too were seeking a different way of doing innovative scholarship on social media and cultural participation, and found some value in our particular approach.

We see *Social Media + Society* as also seeking a new approach to these challenges, one complementary to the path we have taken with Culture Digitally. So, we were honored when we were asked to help assemble a Special Issue in the journal’s formative moments. In the spirit of previous gatherings, we chose to organize the issue not around a single topic of concern, but instead turned to the scholars who had found us and asked them to submit their most provocative work for consideration. And once again, our gifted friends and colleagues delivered.

It is not surprising that several of the papers in this collection are not just grappling with the intersection of technical and social structures, but looking to refine new ways to think about that intersection. Nick Coulardy and Josè van Dijck interrogate what exactly we mean by “social” when it comes to social media, worrying that too often we take what platforms allow as interaction between people to stand in as social, rather than recognizing it as a simulation of sociality. Tracking our friends and loved ones by occasionally skimming a partial and curated list of the updates and photos they have chosen to upload is offered as being “social,” but it is a very particular and deliberately crafted version—one that not only obscures its own workings and agendas but, as Coulardy and van Dijck argue, also can obscure, even replace, older understandings of sociality. In her research on social movements, Carla Ilten worries about the technological shaping of the social in similar ways, when civic engagement is managed using otherwise entrepreneurial platforms. A social movement must contend with the politics of the technology it depends on. If it doesn’t, Ilten argues, a platform’s politics may abdicate those elements of the social that make a movement what it is, in the “social media” of bodies mobilized on the ground.

The theory of affordances is quickly becoming an important tool among our group of contributors and more broadly among research that studies how social media platforms choreograph human relations and then invite users to inhabit those relations. Two essays examine the theory here. Both suggest that “affordances” may be emerging so prominently because it charts a convenient path midway between technological determinism and social construction. And both essays wonder, perhaps for all its theoretical convenience, whether the idea of affordances is losing some of its specificity and its intellectual legacy along the way. Peter Nagy and Gina Neff argue that the term too often degenerates into a glorified word for the “functions” or “features” of a technology, forgetting the crucial role that human perception played in the original thinking of Gibson and then Hutchby—that it is more about how the artifact is perceived to offer some function. Joshua McVeigh-Schultz and Nancy Baym wonder whether people point to technical affordances to make sense of the overlapping layers of the tools they take up, crafting narratives of choice and constraint that help them make sense of the practices they adopt.

How should we study platforms, on platforms, that connect platforms? Anne Helmond makes a compelling case for why we must look much more deliberately at the features and functions of social media platforms—not the menu options users fiddle with, but the technical arrangements that define and redefine the workings of social media itself. She focuses on what she calls the “platformization” of the web: when large-scale social media sites developed application program interfaces (APIs) so that other sites and services could interact, not at the level of the interface that users see, but as tools that function astride each other, or allow one site to query another’s data and then incorporate those data into their service. From games and widgets that function on or in partnership with Facebook, to the circulation of “likes” and like counts between Facebook and other websites, Helmond classifies these technical intersections and makes a case that this material change has redesigned the web itself.

In addition to digging more deeply into the technical infrastructure of social media, Noortje Marres and David Moats suggest that we might benefit from tracking backward from how they shape controversies to understand the cultural footprint of social media. They propose revisiting the “controversy analysis” approach familiar to the field of STS. By doing so, researchers could “pay equal attention to the ways in which a digital platform like Twitter mediates public issues, and to how controversies mediate ‘social media’ as an object of public attention.”

While many of our Culture Digitally scholars examine social media in order to revisit fundamental ideas about and approaches to technology and sociality, others are teasing out the tensions between the sometimes progressive goals of social media users and the commercial imperatives of the platforms on which they depend. Robert Gehl calls on social media scholars to pay greater attention to “alternative social media,” platforms and tools designed deliberately to sidestep some of the commitments required of mainstream social media platforms: business models that depend on advertising and the exhaustive collection of data, platforms whose workings and governance are closed to users. These alternatives may more powerfully meet the ideals articulated by alternative media theory and decades-long efforts to expand public and local involvement in traditional media production—that the mainstream social media platforms meet to a much lesser degree.

Since both of us made our initial forays into media studies by contemplating technologies designed to enforce media industry regimes and technologies taken up to resist them, readers might rightly imagine that we have a commitment to research that examines how users confront technologies and their affordances, the tension between the shell and the ghost inside. This tension is examined here in several essays. Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund point out that, although fashion blogging provides women an alternative source of both information and entrepreneurial opportunity, the social media platforms they must use still remain within a logic of capital, reproducing social and labor valuation inequalities that have
long been evident in “women’s work.” Similarly, Lonny Brooks, Che Meneses, and Barbara Keyser’s study of students’ encountering the “serious” video game Evoke, meant to teach solutions to complex social problems through play, suggests there is much more at play on that game platform. Their study identifies a logic embedded in the game’s design that is not far from the rampant accumulation of capital and exploited labor that created the very problems it claims to address. The game stops being merely a platform for “play,” and the “magic circle” continues to elude games designed for learning. Mirca Madianou offers us some hope that all is not lost in this pernicious tension between the politics of commercial platforms and of users who seek a greater good. By illustrating instances where social media can be used to communicate and deal with disasters, while remaining critical of the cultural biases in their implementation, she shows that a balance is possible among the many politics on a platform.

Finally, not all social media uses are quite so progressive. The issue closes with a round table discussion that began at one of our Culture Digitally workshops, hosted in London by King’s College and Goldsmiths. During that workshop, many in our community toiled over the growing presence of hate as both a force and a commodity online. Here, Alison Harvey, Tim Jordan, Tamara Shepherd, Sam Srauy, and Kate Miltner contemplate the history of hate online, including trolling, misogyny, racism, and just a penchant for chaos. How did hate grow into one of the distinctive and disturbing realities of Internet culture? The history of the Internet, like the history of anything that fosters cultures, can be a mirror that shows those lucky enough to write that history what they most want to see. As counterpoint to that, the round table contributors offer a lucid discussion of the history of Internet hate, that may be the beginnings of what historian David Takaki would call “a different mirror.”

We are honored and humbled by the trust that our colleague have given us with their ideas, their writing, and their openness to a close and unflinching peer review. We thank our reviewers who took the time and energy to provide critique, feedback, and suggestions. We hope this collection of ideas will serve as impetus for more questions, more conversations, and more probing together into the essence of what culture, communication, technology, and our collective humanity mean as they engage with what counts as social media in this particular historical moment.

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