Two types of popular discourses about social media should be subject to more critical scrutiny. One type focuses on the attributes of social media without recognizing that it is necessarily a social, and therefore historical, practice. Interactivity, openness, connectivity, sociability, and personalizability are some of the familiar attributes in this discourse. Claims about this or that attribute then become the basis for making assertions about the functions of social media. This focus on attributes explains why different people could cite the same attribute to support opposing arguments. Thus, while some argue that the openness of the Internet helps to promote a more democratic society, their detractors may counter that Internet openness breeds racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination and oppression.

The other type of discourse concentrates on what people do or do not do with social media. A case in point is a recent online debate about teenagers' use of social media triggered by Andrew Watts' (2014, January 3) essay “A Teenager’s View on Social Media Written By An Actual Teen.” Commentators question the representativeness of one White college teenager’s experiences with social media and rightly affirm the diversity of experiences among youth of different gender identities or racial and class backgrounds. Interesting as this debate is, its perspective does not depart from that of the teen’s essay: that is, its presentist focus. Speaking of Facebook, for example, Watts writes, “It’s dead to us. Facebook is something we all got in middle school because it was cool but now is seen as an awkward family dinner party we can’t really leave.” This may well be true, and it is great to hear it directly from an “actual teen.” But for media scholars, there are other interesting and important questions: Why was Facebook cool for Watts then but not anymore? What happened in between middle school and college that explains this change? For it is change, or the lack thereof, that should be the object of a critical analysis.

Time, it seems to us, is a missing variable in much current thinking about social media. This is partly because social media presents itself to be such a forward-looking industry that forgetfulness about its past is made into a virtue. If the talk of the town today is Web 3.0, then anyone who still talks about Web 2.0 is passé, and the competition is always on for someone to proclaim the birth of a new generation of, say, smartphones. A product of the ideology of the market, this forward-looking attitude engenders a myopia about both the past and the present (and hence also about the future). Paying attention to time and change by asking questions about how this attitude has come about in the first place helps to problematize what is presented as natural.

For many years, media scholars have lamented the lack of historical methods and sensibilities in communication studies. The editor of a special issue on “History and Political Communication” in 2001 writes that “If there has been a ‘return to history’ in the human sciences, analysts of political communication apparently have missed their cue” (Ryfe, 2001, p. 407). Elihu Katz (2009) argues that if at some point in its history the field of sociology abandoned communication, it was because communication was perceived to be too focused on the short-term and to have neglected considering change over time. Bannerman and Haggart (2015) call on more communication scholars to use the theories and methods of historical institutionalism “to examine informal routines and formal institutions over time [original emphasis]” (p. 15).
One way of incorporating time into the study of social media is to break social media practices, institutions, and processes down into smaller temporal phases using the strategy of periodization. Periodization is a heuristic device for understanding change by identifying continuities and discontinuities in historical processes (Jessop, 2004). Viewed from this perspective, for example, the Twitter, Facebook, or Weibo of 2014 would appear different from that of 2010 and the differences, namely, change, would have to be accounted for.

Another way of highlighting change is through longer term historical comparisons. Thus, for example, to understand the influence of online feminism, scholars might go beyond Twitter’s hashtag feminism and survey the longer time-span of online feminist activism in the past two decades. Similarly, the youth culture on Facebook might be compared with the online youth culture prior to Facebook to reveal the historical and cultural specificities of Facebook as a social media platform (van Dijck, 2013).

Historical imagination is not just about providing the historical background for what is happening at present. Nor is it about discovering historical precedents of a new phenomenon and thereby implying that nothing under the sun is new. A historically informed analysis views social practices and formations as the outcomes of the interactions between social action and social structure. Such an analysis focuses on “processes of becoming rather than states of being” (Abrams, 1982, p. 267). In it, the past is not just data or background, but the very conditions that constitute the present.

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