SIMON LINDGREN

DIGITAL MEDIA & SOCIETY



Digital Media & Society

'An impressive accomplishment. The book will reward both students and advanced scholars with its comprehensive overview, deft and accessible style, and an array of significant insights contributing to our developing understanding of social media and, most broadly, a coming post-digital society.'

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'A brilliantly written, essential text for understanding how digital media are changing society and how we can theorize and empirically study digital transformations.'

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Digital Media and Society is a remarkably clear and engaging guide to understanding the complex interactions between technology and the everyday. The compelling current examples beautifully illustrate concepts and theories, making learning a pleasant ride.

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Digital Media & Society

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Author's Note on the Cover

One of the key conclusions to be drawn from this book is that social actions and phenomena that may appear to be quite random, insignificant, or even absurd can end up having a larger potential to transform society than one might initially believe. I discuss, in the concluding chapter, how novel social forms, such as memes and trolling, may be wrongfully construed as ephemeral curiosities while they may in fact be early clues about some truly new ways of engaging and behaving that are emerging as a consequence of the saturation of the social by the digital. This is a complex process where embryonic social forms that we initially lack names for, and consequently adequate understandings of, gradually assume broader meanings and exert a more far reaching influence on modes of thinking and acting in society. This book's cover design — a rendition of 'Flamethrower Squirrel', the star of one out of many meme images being circulated on the internet — was chosen to represent this.

Part I Theories

1 Digital Society

Key questions

- What is digital society?
- What is the relationship between technology and social change?
- What does it mean, from a social perspective, that things are digital?
- In what social and historical context was the internet created, and how has it evolved?
- What does it mean that 'media are social environments, and that social environments are media'?

Key concepts

Digital society * digital media * the internet * social change * post-industrial society * information society * media ecology * media logic

Today we have the internet. We have smartphones. We have apps, social network services, blogs, and media sharing platforms. One stunning statistic after another tells us about the extreme amounts of information and knowledge — much of it created by 'ordinary people' — flowing through the silicon, copper, optical fibre, and wireless infrastructures in the skies, under the ground, and in our laps and pockets. Indeed, most people are quite well connected, and instead of digital things *in* society, we increasingly have *digital society*. It wasn't always like this, however. Like the wheel, the printing press, the steam engine, the telephone, and television before it, digital media have put their mark on society of today. At the same time, people in society continuously contribute to shaping the new media through the ways in which they use, adapt, or resist them. In general, this process of society transforming and being transformed by media happens along the lines of what historian of technology Melvin Kranzberg (1986: 545–546) has called Kranzberg's first law. It goes like this:

Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral. [...] Technology's interaction with the social ecology is such that technical developments frequently have environmental, social, and human consequences that go far beyond the immediate purposes of the technical devices and practices themselves, and the same technology can have quite different results when introduced into different contexts or under different circumstances.

This book is about digital media and society, and I have chosen to use the concept of 'digital society' throughout the book to refer to the result of the equation of digital media + society. As you will soon become aware, there are many other potential suggestions, both for what is the best equation for describing society today, and as regards to how it is best resolved. This is because social scientists love to name things. We like to develop sets of concepts — theories — that we imagine will grasp some of the key features of some slice of reality. Among the things we love the most is to give names to phases and periods in the history of society and early modernity, and on social patterns and phenomena within those frameworks. Since about half a century back, the race is on to characterise our present age of multitude, fragmentation, computerisation and global connectivity. As you will see in the first five chapters of this book, there is definitely no lack of suggestions, but there is, however, a lack of consensus over which concepts are the best. For the time being, then, let's call our present society *digital society*. I mean then, society as affected by digitally networked communication tools and platforms, such as the internet and social media.

In this <u>first chapter</u>, I discuss what the *digital* is, and how it can affect the *social*. I give a historical background to the internet, a set of technologies at the centre of a relatively new form of society — the one that I call digital society, remember? Depending on whom you ask, this same society might also be called a post-industrial society, an information society, a network society or a number of other names. I also introduce in this chapter what *media* are, from a perspective where they are seen as *environments* for social interaction, rather than

simply as channels for the transmission of information. The media environments of today are increasingly complex and entangled, as new tools and technologies are introduced so frequently.

Internet or internet?

The word for the globally interconnected network of computers is sometimes written with a capital 'I', and sometimes not. I have chosen to go with the non-capitalised version of the word in this book. I will talk about the internet rather than the Internet. Early in its history, in the 1970s, the name of this new fantastic network was most commonly written as 'the Internet', and this is still a very common form today. In fact, the internet is still quite fantastic. Actually, in some documents up until the early 1990s, the internet was even called the INTERNET, with all capitals.¹ While views differ, and there might indeed be some good arguments for retaining the capital 'I', one must decide on one of the options when writing a book like this. I think a good way of seeing it is that, today, the internet is incorporated into the lives of people in a way similar to radio (not Radio) and television (not Television). I have used the same logic in writing of the web rather than the Web.

¹ <u>http://volokh.com/2013/11/12/history-internet-typography-division-contd/</u>

Media Everywhere

For most people today, there is nothing strange or novel about using digital tools for doing social things. But those of us who were born before the major breakthrough of the internet still tend to refer to it, and the gadgets and software with which we interact with it, as something eternally new. This is because there is a tendency to make a connection between media and *social change*. Media are tools, channels, platforms and strategies which we can use to obtain, produce, and share knowledge about the world around us, through communication and interaction. Media are at the centre of how we, as groups and individuals, relate both to society at large — as a structure — and the many social activities that happen within it — as a setting for our lives together. Therefore, there is nothing odd or surprising really about people making sense of their lives, their sociality and their place in history through their relationships with media. Throughout history, different media, such as cave paintings, television, or the internet and mobile phones, have all played a specific role in how we relate to the world, and how we understand how society has transformed, and is continuously transforming.

But media don't just enable us to say, think, and do things. They involve possibilities as well as limitations for how we can act and interact. This is what we mean when we say that they are *structures*. If we regard media as just television, radio, the internet, and so on, there is, of course, life beyond media, where people can think, create, and do stuff. But a wider definition of media includes our very languages — both written and spoken — and the more abstract cultural and symbolic 'mythologies' and ways of thinking. Just as a 1980s television producer could not transmit either smell or touch to the audience, and a blogger in the 1990s could not embed video as easily as a blogger can in the age of YouTube, languages also 'decide' what can be said and done, or not. Depending on the media — broadly defined — that we can use, some things are more likely to be created, thought, done, or achieved than others. This is why a science of the social *must* deal with the media of its time. Beyond the specialisms of media studies, where things like film genres or journalistic conventions are analysed, there is also a need for sociologists to examine the role of media in a much more general sense. No matter if one adheres to Marxism; to the theories of sociological classics like Weber, Durkheim, or Simmel; to traditions in social theory such as symbolic interactionism, structuralism, or poststructuralism; there is always an interest in the tools and structures used in the creation and maintenance of social reality.

Exercise

Different tools and platforms that we use to get or spread information, and communicate, enable and limit what we can do in their own specific ways. The medium used will alter our ways of seeing, speaking, and acting. Think about the difference between learning about current events from the website of a big media corporation and from friends on Facebook or Twitter. In what ways are your uses of television and YouTube similar, and how do they differ? How do you act in a phone call as compared to in text messaging with the same person? Try to think of other examples of how different media lead to different ways of thinking and behaving.

Throughout history, key shifts in technological ability and practice have changed how people relate to the social sphere and the world around them. The invention of writing by the Sumerians around 3000 years BC enabled the transition from reliance on spoken word and memory to the preservation of laws, stories, and other items through the creation of written text. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan wrote, back in the 1960s, that one of the most crucial transformations of people's ways of being social following the transition from oral to written cultures was the separation of thought and action. McLuhan claimed that this was because the processes of externalising spoken sounds into media, such as letters, changed people's 'mental processes'. With the subsequent historical emergence of other technological developments — the introduction of the printing press, radio, telephones, television, computers — McLuhan (1962: 32) identified a development towards an 'externalization of our senses' that creates:

a technological brain for the world. Instead of tending towards a vast Alexandrian library the world has become a computer, an electronic brain, exactly as in an infantile piece of science fiction. And as our senses have gone outside us, Big Brother goes inside. So, unless aware of this dynamic, we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence.

So, even if he was quite pessimistic about what life would be like inside the 'electronic brain' of society, McLuhan made the vital point that it is impossible to analyse or theorise about social and cultural change without focusing on how people and their communication and interactions are affected by the media that they use. Much like, as he put it (1962: 64), 'the alphabet is an aggressive and militant absorber and transformer of cultures', and that 'a nomadic society cannot experience enclosed space', any digital media application — Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or any other — will affect and shape sociality, and influence what we can say, do, or experience, or not. At the same time, like I said before, people's uses of the applications will also contribute in turn to shaping them.

So social science needs to concern itself with the roles of the prevailing media formats in the development of the social and how this evolves and transforms. This is especially important for the new media of any era, as they might be harder to approach critically during the time that we familiarise ourselves with these technologies and integrate them into our everyday existence. As scholars we must, as McLuhan (1962: 40) wrote, try to capture the new 'translation of culture' which happens alongside the introduction of new media technology. One particular challenge of this is that:

Every technology contrived [...] by man has the power to numb human awareness during the period of its first interiorization. (1962: 153)

Today, we live in a digital society in the sense that we are in an era where our lives, our relationships, our culture, and our sociality are digitised, digitalised, and affected throughout by digital processes. When we repeatedly speak of 'the digital' in this way, we use it as an encompassing notion for our current experience of social life. But what is 'the digital', really? Is it a purely technological phenomenon? How does it relate to humankind? To communication and interaction? Are there measurable qualities to what it is to be 'digital' or has it rather to do with subtler or gradual processes? What does it mean that society 'becomes digital'? What changes have digital media introduced to the forms and methods through which we relate to each other and the world around us, and how can such transformations be analysed?

Zeroes and Ones

From the outset, the digital has to do with mathematics. Being digital, then, means simply using numbers — digits — rather than analogous objects to convey information. When some form of input is numerically encoded, it can be subjected to mathematical processes such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, or division, through algorithms — procedures by which computers carry out stuff — that are defined in software programs. In computing, input values are converted to binary numbers, 0 and 1, instead of using all numbers ranging from zero to nine. The binary system was invented by philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz in the 1600s. He used this system for coding, computing, and controlling information when experimenting with ideas for machines that could do calculations by using things such as marbles — being in place, or not — and punched cards — having holes, or not. This is how the computers that we have today, in anything from smartphones and laptops to refrigerators and drones, work too, but with refined microelectronics instead of marbles.

The usefulness of binary numbers for building computers, gadgets, robots, and the like, has to do with the electronic aspects, as in e(lectronic)-mail or e(lectronic)- democracy. In digital electronics, the number '0' means that electricity is off, while '1' means that it is on, and different computerised things communicate — transfer instructions and information — with the help of electronic pulses of these ones and zeroes. The power of binary is that it works with the smallest and most efficient computer programs, or circuits, which are created through series of 1/0 switches that are arranged so that they can perform various logical or mathematical operations. Technologically speaking, this binary system forms the basis for everything we do that is digital.

Experiments similar to those of Leibniz were developed by scientist Charles Babbage in the 1800s, through his work to first construct a 'Difference Engine' (difference as in the 0/1 idea of binary), and later, a more complex 'Analytical Engine'. Ada Lovelace, who worked on creating instructions for the Analytical Engine, is considered to be the world's first computer programmer. While neither the computer nor the code were ever finished or tested, these early attempts paved the way for the subsequent development of computers and software throughout late modern history. Lovelace, who wrote in her notes about possibilities for computing that included many other uses than just calculating numbers, was a visionary. She made the important distinction between numbers, and the operations to be performed, and the results to be achieved. She wrote in one of her notes that the Analytical Engine:

might act upon other things besides number, were objects found whose mutual fundamental relations could be expressed by those of the abstract science of operations, and which should be also susceptible of adaptations to the action of the operating notation and mechanism of the engine [...] Supposing, for instance, that the fundamental relations of pitched sounds in the science of harmony and of musical composition were susceptible of such expression and adaptations, the engine might compose elaborate and scientific pieces of music of any degree of complexity or extent. (Toole 1992: 178–179)

At their core, then, computers have been invented and developed to solve mathematical problems, but their actual capabilities, obviously, stretch far beyond mathematics. During the latter parts of the 20th century, digitisation had advanced beyond purely scientific

applications, as text, sound, graphics, and images became digitally encodable. Today, computers can store and transmit data, which changes how we deal with anything from our family photos and recipes to government documents or business plans. We have also learnt that computers can manage communication networks, and this has transformed how we form friendships, and how we connect and stay in touch with people, sometimes across large geographical distances. Furthermore, computers can process text, images, and sound, which has changed the way in which writers write, musicians play, and painters paint. Spaceships and airplanes are flown by computers, and digital devices are increasingly entangled in our everyday lives, in the form of laptops, tablets, smartphones, and things like robot vacuum cleaners. Digitalisation of ourselves and sociality continually moves ever closer with wearable devices and smart scales, showers, and toilets. Still, at the heart of every computer lie circuits that contribute to all of these social and cultural transformations, through the breaking down of operations into mathematical equations. As Paul Ceruzzi (2003: 1), a computer historian, puts it:

Deep inside a computer are circuits that do those things by transforming them into a mathematical language. But most of us never see the equations, and few of us would understand them if we did. [...] As far as the public face is concerned, 'computing' is the least important thing that computers do.

When we speak of today's society as being digital, we don't very often mean to say that it just draws upon binary numerical operations. What we do tend to mean is that it has been transformed in a number of quite drastic ways, following the development of the early 'computing' machines into smart devices which have increasingly enabled large-scale networked connections, coordination, and communication in both automated and humandriven ways.

Games Between People

The binary numerical system, and the advances in computing that were enabled by it, made digital information — the type of information which is stored using series of zeroes and ones — a crucial tool, dimension, and force of social life. This social transformation happened gradually during the 20th century, and is still constantly evolving today. In the early 1970s, sociologist Daniel Bell had already described the emergence of a future society where handling and relating to information would be at the very centre of daily life, even though today's social media, tablets, smartphones, and wearable devices might not have been exactly what he envisioned.

Bell (1973) used the term *post-industrial society* — which he later came to partly replace with the notion of an *information society* — to refer to entirely new forms of production and community that he claimed had replaced the previously prevailing industrial society. He said that this happened because of a powerful convergence between telecommunications and computer technologies. Bell talked about how different forms of work had been predominant during different historical eras, and argued that this had defined various types of society in different periods. Pre-industrial agricultural societies were dominated by the 'extractive work' of farmers, while the defining form of work in the subsequent industrial society had been the labour of fabrication, carried out by factory workers. The coming of the post-industrial society in the Western world, during the latter parts of the 20th century, was characterised by service employment and 'information activities'. Bell's idea was that as the form of work that was predominant in a certain era became rationalised to a certain level, a shift happened to the next form: when farming became highly automated, people turned to cities for work; as factories were increasingly robotised, people had to turn somewhere else.

Bell argued that what was emerging during the second half of the 20th century was an information society that met new needs that were arising among a post-industrial workforce. For Bell, the most important things that were then produced were services, and he felt that services were always 'games between people'. He said that information had become the material of work for a majority of people. Banks do transactions, therapists are engaged in dialogues, teachers convey and stimulate knowledge, software developers write code, and advertisers and journalists compose and transmit images and symbols. All of these jobs are about delivering services, and the service work that is done is also information work. As a result of this, Bell said that 'information professionals' represented the most prominent category of jobs on the new labour market. This did not mean that everyone was now a journalist or a marketer, but that nearly everyone deals with information in some form as a key part of their work. While Bell talked optimistically about this, in terms of 'the rise of knowledge experts', the same development has more recently come under debate as critical researchers have seen both the information work of professionals and consumers in digital society as a sort of *digital labour* — a concept that I will return to in Chapter 9. What the likes of Bell saw in terms of opportunity, democratisation, personal development, learning, and enjoyment can, from another perspective, be seen as just another form of mass value production for the benefit of capitalists.

Exercise

Think about the notion of information work and information professionals.

Is it true that the majority of people today work with information in various ways? Envision a predigital society (agricultural or industrial) and try to think of jobs in that society which you think were *not* information work. Try to think of ways that those jobs might still be defined as being dependent on various forms of information. Think of some jobs today that are clearly about dealing with information. Now try to think of ways to argue that these jobs are also about material aspects of social reality. Do you agree that we now live in an information society? What has happened with industrial capitalism? Has it been replaced?

The Bedlam of Blip Culture

Another proponent of the post-industrial perspective, futurist Alvin Toffler (1970, 1980), claimed — like Bell — that mediated information was now to become de-massified. Instead of the standardised messages that were transmitted, broadcast as it were, through traditional *mass media* channels from a few select senders to the uniform masses of the many, we were now to get 'narrowcasting'. This idea is quite similar to what writer and entrepreneur Chris Anderson argued some decades later in his book *The Long Tail* (2006). Anderson said that things with small, niche audiences will survive, and are important, in the digital world, in ways that they could not possibly be in a situation where one had to focus on a small number of things with huge audiences. In the early 1980s, Toffler imagined that digital media would work very much like they do today. Writing about what he called the 'bedlam of blip culture', he predicted, as many writers and researchers have more recently discussed, that the myriad small pieces of content offered through electronic media over time will make people more active in navigating and piecing things together by themselves:

[People today become] more at ease in the midst of this bombardment of blips — the ninety-second news-clip intercut with a thirty-second commercial, a fragment of song and lyric, a headline, a cartoon, a collage, a newsletter item, a computer printout. [...] Rather than trying to stuff the new modular data into the standard [...] categories or frameworks, they learn to make their own, to form their own 'strings' out of the blipped material shot at them. (Toffler 1980: 166)

Another often emphasised feature of digital society is that it compresses time and space and makes them less important. For example, when we send texts, chats, or emails to each other, there is no need for us to be in the same place to be able to communicate. The exchange need not be instantaneous either, as we can respond to digital messages whenever it suits us. In Chapter 4, I will discuss such transformations in more depth. But for the time being, let's just ask ourselves whether these characteristics of computer-mediated communication really are that revolutionary? Haven't we already since ancient times — since the first symbolic language, actually — been able to get past limitations of space and time through various forms of mediated communication, ranging from rock carvings and pen and paper to the printing press and the telephone? This is a question of whether the coming of information society marks a *gradual difference*, or if it signals the transition into a *completely new form* of society. But more about that in later chapters.

In either case, Bell argued that the changed conditions for everyday micro-interaction brought on by digital technology contributed to profound social transformations. The power and influence of territorially based bureaucratic and political authorities would lessen, as would that of history and tradition. The punch clocks, schedules, and timetables that so strongly grounded and confined industrialism in space and time were to be replaced by other notions of time and space that were more fluid and dynamic — and that made physical presence less important.

Bell and Toffler generally thought that this development was steeped in opportunities, and they were both very optimistic about what was supposed to happen in the future. There would be no more manual work; people would become more intellectual and friendly; there would be an end to 'radical politics' (which they thought was a good development). Even though the high volumes of information floating about could sometimes be frustrating, and in spite of the stresses of blip culture, they both hoped — in Toffler's (1980: 2–3) words — for 'the death of industrialism and the rise of a new civilization'. Society was to become 'more sane, sensible, and sustainable, more decent and more democratic than any we have ever known'. People would no longer be reduced to numbers, or analysed only in terms of how much income they could generate (this is interesting in relation to debates today about people being reduced to data more than ever). We would all live in a communal society where the environment, care, and education were the priorities, at the cost of individualism, capitalism and competition (Bell 1973: 220, 283). There would be a sort of consensus democracy where no dictator could survive.

In <u>Chapter 9</u> of this book, I will return to such issues of new forms and patterns of authority in digital society. But aside from the need to evaluate the actual consequences of these changes, there is also a debate about whether digital society ('the information society', 'postindustrial society') has happened at all. Of course, there is no denying that much of the assertions of these theorists are true. We need only look to our own daily lives to find plenty of proof that digital tools, platforms, and information are immensely important to most of us. Digital technology is an integrated and important part of a huge number — if not the majority — of common social activities. Banking and payments, travel and communications, culture and entertainment, cooking and cleaning, business and commerce. One can think of nearly any sector or activity, and quite easily realise how digital information is a rather vital part of things that go on there. We buy our train tickets in mobile applications, we stay up to date with global news on tablets, our cars and tumble dryers have smart microchips in them, environmental activists mobilise with the help of social media platforms, and so on. In short, it is very easy to make the case that we live in a highly digitised world which is abundant with information.

This is so obvious that even those who might be critical of the theories about the information society still agree that digital information plays a very important role today, and might do so even more tomorrow. For example, there are some Marxist theorists who were quite in opposition to Bell's ideas about post-industrialism. Some of them suggested that we instead speak of 'post-Fordism' (Lipietz 1987), referring to a transition from an era marked by mass production to an era of 'flexible specialisation' (Piore & Sabel 1984). While such writers argued that capitalism, like in the industrial society, were to remain being the dominating force, they identified a number of changes similar to those discussed, for example, by Bell and Toffler. They said information processing had become more important, and that an increasing share of workers were now doing things with information, like analysing and manipulating symbols, managing ideas, and constantly retraining themselves to deal with the increased flexibility and globalised character of social reality. Similarly, theorists who have described the late 20th-century social transformations in terms of 'post-modernity' also argue that the new age is marked by increased symbolic complexity and intensified flows of information (Lyotard 1984).

Towards Something New: Evolution, Revolution and Crises

But even if everyone seems to agree that we now live in a society where 'information', in its broadest sense, is crucial, does this automatically mean that the social and cultural changes which have followed from the technological innovations in these areas have been enough to allow us to say that we have a *new* society? Are the changes comparable to what happened during the industrial revolution? While some writers obviously argue that this is the case, quite a few others remain sceptical. Critics, such as, for example, the Marxists mentioned above, have said that digital information technologies might have changed many things, but not the fundamental continuity of capitalist industrialism. After having convincingly argued in several ways that we indeed live in a society where flows of information are at the very centre, sociologist Manuel Castells (1996: 520) writes:

However, this evolution towards networking forms of management and production does not imply the demise of capitalism. The network society, in its various institutional expressions, is, for the time being, a capitalist society. Furthermore, for the first time in history, the capitalist mode of production shapes social relationships over the entire planet.

In making this point, Castells speaks of a *network society* rather than an information society. While these ideas are largely overlapping, I will deal in more detail with the idea of network society in <u>Chapter 5</u>. In either case, information society theorists like Bell and Toffler have been attacked by many for being historically short-sighted. Those who have denounced the 'information revolution' have argued instead that the developments during the latter half of the 20th century did not cause any dramatic shift, but was rather the culmination of trends in communication which stretch way back into the past. For example, sociologist and historian James Beniger (1986: 435) has suggested that we are dealing with a 'control revolution' that had already started in the mid-1800s:

The Information Society has not resulted from recent changes [...] but rather from increases in the speed of material processing and of flows through the material economy that began more than a century ago. Similarly, microprocessing and computing technology, contrary to currently fashionable opinion, do not represent a new force only recently unleashed on an unprepared society but merely the most recent installment in the continuing development of the Control Revolution.

Beniger's argument is that 'control crises' followed from the acceleration of society's entire processing system in the wake of the industrial revolution. In these crises, information-processing and communication technologies had a hard time keeping up with the speed of society. Thus followed the control revolution — a series of rapid technological changes in the arrangements used for collecting, storing, processing, and communicating information. These tendencies are in fact rather similar to what is happening around the phenomenon discussed these days as *big data* (but more about that in <u>Chapter 12</u>). So what may appear to be the

advent of a new informational society, Beniger argues, is rather a digital intensification of industrialism.

Throughout the following chapters of this book, I will deal with a number of research areas where studies have been made that, at least in some respects, can shed light upon whether the 1970s and 1980s prophecies and prognoses were right or wrong about what the emerging information society would entail in terms of social and cultural consequences. In most cases, we will see that the answer is neither a clear yes nor a definite no. As the digital society plays out in practice, things turn out to be quite a bit more complicated than those futurologists expected. In the end, it is not that important really whether one should label our present-day society 'post-industrial', 'post-Fordist', 'post-modern', or as an 'information society', 'network society' or a 'control society'. Such debates might be interesting for theorists who want to lay claim to having 'discovered' and named a certain era. In the end, however, one must be very careful with such labels. Sociologist Krishan Kumar (2009: 29) writes:

Labels, like rumours, can take on a life of their own. The labels of intellectual discourse are no exception. Once sufficiently established, they can govern reality [...], at least scholarly reality. They inspire conferences, books, television programmes. They can create a whole climate of critical inquiry which, especially in these days of academic entrepreneurship and the multinational scholarly enterprise, feeds on itself. 'The lonely crowd', 'the affluent society', 'the technological society', 'the hidden persuaders', 'the power elite': these are all well-known examples of labels which in recent decades have generated much activity of this sort.

Indeed, there might also be ideological reasons for choosing certain concepts for describing things. 'The information society', and some of its related notions, actually fit quite well with Western neoliberal thinking. The idea that innovation and technology leads to a richer and hence better world maintains a faith, similar to that of the enlightenment, in progress and rationality. It is of course no secret today — with debates about surveillance, digital labour, consumer profiling, targeted advertising, and internet governance — that the information society idea is related to big business and large-scale politics.

In this book, I use the notion of digital society to refer roughly to all of these developments. The concept is just as awkward as any alternative, but I think it is important not to be blinded or constrained by concepts that carry a lot of historical baggage. I use 'digital society' in a pragmatic way, as a neutral label, when dealing with social and cultural uses and consequences of digital media, and this relates to realised, as well as unrealised, potentials for transformations at both micro and macro levels.

Digital tools and platforms

There are many ways of collectively naming the interactive activities and environments that people engage in online. When writing about these, I have tried to vary the words used to a certain degree, while at the same time keeping with a somewhat fixed set of formulations. You will see that I write of the environments as sometimes 'internet and social media', sometimes 'digital media' or 'digitally networked media', and sometimes as 'digital tools and platforms'. With these interchangeable wordings, I mean to refer quite generally to things such as computers, smartphones and tablets, and to services such as email, texting, Skype, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, blogs, forums, and so on. With these digital tools and platforms, people do things among and between each other. I will write about how people 'communicate' or

'interact', that they are engaging in 'computer-mediated communication', and that this happens 'online'. This underlines that in digital society, people in general are increasingly networked an interconnected through the internet.

The Internet

Before moving on to a more specific discussion of what digital *media* might mean, we must focus first on one of the key inventions of digital society — namely, the internet. This global network of computers, which enables and structures an unmeasurable amount of social activity around the world, feels today as if it was always there. But in fact, it only became widely available in the mid-1990s, through the invention of a protocol for something called the World Wide Web. In reality, the history of the internet goes quite a bit further back than the 1990s, and it is important to keep in mind that its emergence was shaped by a number of specific circumstances. The web didn't just materialise, it was the product of certain efforts and projects.

In 1959, at the height of the Cold War, Paul Baran, a computer scientist at the RAND Corporation, a US military think tank, was given the task of creating a communications system able to withstand a nuclear attack. At least that's how the story goes. The strategy was to establish a computer network that did not rely on centralised command, and thus was not vulnerable to attacks targeting central hubs (Galloway 2004). Baran's network was based on the technology of packet-switching, through which messages are distributed in small fragments to be reassembled at the receiving end. The system was finally realised at the end of the 1960s through funding from the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), President Eisenhower's response to the Soviet Sputnik launch. The agency's ARPANET, the first computer network based on packet-switching, was used by the military and by academics to transfer and exchange information. Castells (2002: 24-25) describes how the Network Working Group, which was doing most ARPANET design in the late 1960s, consisted mainly of graduate students who had studied in the same secondary school in Southern California, later to become students of Leonard Kleinrock at UCLA. The so-called RFCs introduced in 1969 by one member of this group – Steve Crocker – became important for the subsequent development of the internet as a space for open communication: RFCs (Request for Comments) were memos about work in progress, and their 'intelligent, friendly, co-operative, consensual attitude [...] set the tone for the way the Net developed' (Naughton 1999: 135). The young ARPANET developers, and the student culture of which they were part – as well as the wider context of late 1960s counterculture – had a great impact on how the global internet came to emerge. Castells (2002) writes that the birth of the internet happened at the rather unlikely intersection of science, military interests, and libertarian culture. It is a common misinterpretation that the internet was created solely as a military command-and-control mechanism, when it was in fact co-opted already from the start by academics (and others).

'E-mail', which was initially called network mail, was introduced in 1972, and the term internet itself appeared in 1974 as an abbreviation for 'internetworking'. Control of the network was transferred from the Department of Defense to the National Science Foundation by the end of the 1980s, and then to commercial telecommunications interests in 1995. The fact that a global telecommunications network was already in place increased the efficiency by which the network could be distributed globally. The previously mentioned user interface called the World Wide Web was developed in 1991 by programmer Tim Berners-Lee, at the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (CERN), which had adopted connections to IP addresses internally in 1985 and externally in 1989. The first graphical browser, Mosaic, was released in 1993, and by 1998, all countries worldwide were part of the network.

Since then tools using the internet infrastructure — such as the web, social media, and mobile apps — have become a crucial part of how people today obtain information, communicate, and interact. This digital and cultural ecosystem provides us with a language for relating to each other and the world around us. In that sense, the internet is a medium.

Exercise

You have read about the history of 'the Internet' as a military/academic project started in the 1960s. Since the mid-1990s, the internet has become increasingly commercialised and widespread. Today, it is ever present to the point where it is nearly transparent to its users. It tends to feel like part of our lives to the extent that we don't think about when we are 'on the internet' or not. Try to think of situations when the internet, as a technology, becomes visible to you. What types of situations are these? What do you think about them? How do you deal with them? What about when you hear of 'surveillance scandals'? What about when you are in situations when you can't access the internet for some reason? Try to think of other examples of when the net comes into view.

Media as Environments, Environments as Media

From the perspective of *media ecology*, the internet — as an intrinsic part of digital society — is a medium because it is an environment. And conversely, it is an environment because it is a medium. Media ecologists such as McLuhan (1964) and media theorist Neil Postman (1970) have maintained that media must be defined as something more wide-ranging than the traditional informational devices, such as radio, television, newspaper, movies, sound records, computers, and so on. Instead, they argued, a medium is any symbolic structure, or social environment, that in some way, and under certain circumstances, defines human interaction and the production of culture. From this perspective, a newspaper is a medium because it provides us with a certain way of relating to the world — through print text, still images, and certain journalistic genres and conventions. It also establishes limits, as a conventional old school newspaper does not allow for things like moving images, sounds, and online reader comments. In a similar way, from a media ecology perspective, coffeehouses, bowling alleys, and classrooms are also media, for the same reasons: they offer certain ways of relating to the world, while at the same time establishing boundaries for what can be said, done, expressed, learnt, or achieved. Sociologically speaking, this means that media, like the internet, are social structures.

According to sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984), social structures consist of two dimensions: first, the rules implicated when social systems are produced and reproduced; second, resources — symbolic and others — that people can draw upon while doing things in society. This is also similar to what social psychologist Erving Goffman (1959) wanted to say with his so-called 'dramaturgical' perspective on interaction. People in society enter different roles and stages, while performing socially with a degree of agency, but always in relation to certain limitations or expectations. The environment of the interaction thus affects what we do, and how we do it. From the perspective of media ecology, media — such as the internet and its various incarnations and platforms — are such environments: symbolic structures within which we are situated and through which we engage.

This situatedness and embeddedness happens on two levels. First, there is the sensorial level, where things like a Facebook page, a Twitter profile, or an Instagram feed each employ our senses in different ways, much like reading is visual, radio is auditory, and video games are visual and auditory, as well as tactile. In a way, the reality we sense is constructed or reconstructed through the medium at hand. Famously, McLuhan (1964: 35) defined media as 'extensions' of our senses that decide how people experience and become aware of the world around them. This also relates to what McLuhan meant when he, even more famously, declared that 'the medium is the message'. Switching from one medium to another reconfigures our senses and alters the ways in which we comprehend and reconstruct the world around us.

Second, there is the symbolic level, at which every medium is constituted by a certain systematic set of rules and codes in the form of vocabulary, grammar, and other conventions. While a director creating a film has to master and relate to certain cinematic vocabularies, posting an Instagram photo might similarly require knowledge of conventions such as using hashtags and applying filters. And this is not mainly about knowing *how* to apply the filter or type the hashtag, but about mastering the social rules for *when* to use them and how to make them *mean* certain things. As we learn these skills or attitudes, we are at the same time socialised and acculturated into the symbolic environment of the medium. In this sense, a

medium is quite similar to a language or a culture that is used to make sense of the world.

Media ecologists talk of some major changes throughout history and how these introduced crucial social transformations. The shift from a culture of talking to a culture of writing meant that the elders' role as experts and unique sources of knowledge diminished. The introduction of the printing press meant a further democratisation of information, and the arrival of electronic media contributed even more to balancing the temporal, spatial, and symbolic constraints for who could speak, where and when, and to whom. Today, we live in a world with a growing number of co-existing media, which means that we relate not to one, but to a combination of several environments. It is not sensible to conceive the internet as part writing, part still image, part moving image, part sound, part computer, part telephone, part television, and so on. Rather, it must be approached as a whole, and then as a whole that might be more than the sum of its parts.

While the content of radio, television, or the internet might be a football game or a political debate, the *message* — in McLuhan's terms — of each of these media is not that. The message is instead equal to the social changes that a medium generates. He wrote (McLuhan 1964: 20) that 'the "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs'. He also argued that the content of a medium is always another medium: the content of television might be the medium of a theatrical play, the medium of football, and so on. He wanted to make the point that by just studying the content, we risk becoming entangled in this spiral of media within media within media. It was therefore better, he thought, to instead focus on understanding media in terms of the ways in which they transform the social.

The user

The word 'user' might have a negative ring to it. And this is not only in those cases when it is related to drugs and addictions. In computing, there is the concept of the 'end user' who stands in contrast to the expert developers, programmers, or hackers who command the system, product, or service to be used. The end user is assumed to be less competent than the experts. In discussions of 'media use', the notion of usage tends to evoke an image of audience behaviours where something is served up for people to use, in order for them to get various forms of gratifications. The user, then, appears not only to be less knowledgeable, but also less resourceful and creative. In media studies during the last few decades, however, there has been increased talk about users being active. They have been shown to be just as competent as the creators of content. Their expertise is sometimes of a different kind, and comes into expression in how they make use of media content in smart and unexpected ways. But more and more often they also create entirely new things by and for themselves. Because of this, words like prosumer or produser or participant have become more popular than 'user' in some contexts. In this book, I have still opted for the word 'user' in many cases. I do this from a pragmatic perspective as I think it is a neat word which is easy to use (!) and understand, and because using things may indeed also mean using them to produce or create something other or new. I definitely agree that users of digital tools and platforms may indeed draw on these tools and platforms in their own production and circulation of things (tweets, blog posts, video clips, remixes, manifestoes, etc.). They may use them to participate, and they may use them in ways that alter their intended or current meanings and functions.

Entangled Media

This leads us further onto a set of interrelated theories about remediation, mediatisation, and media logics – theories which all deal with different and overlapping aspects of the increased complexities of how media affect, and are affected by, our everyday lives. Writing about remediation — how digital media continuously absorb and repurpose other forms of media -media scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) felt that McLuhan's notion of media nested within other media might not be refined enough to describe the direction that this process has taken in digital society. On the one hand, they show how this nestedness or layering can contribute to a sense of immediacy. A computer user might be so familiar with a particular interface that, when using it, it becomes transparent to him or her. Likewise, a gamer might be so immersed in a particular world or story that he or she forgets about the mediated aspects of how the story is told. Thus, the content of digital media might be experienced in very immediate ways. On the other hand, Bolter and Grusin write about 'hypermediacy' which is, in a way, the opposite. This is what occurs when the interface is instead very obvious and visible, allowing for the user to interact with it, as, for example, on a website where different views can be selected or toggled, or with any platform where profile photos and info are added, where templates are customisable, and so on.

Digital media also affects the social by playing a large role in processes of *mediatisation*. Mediatisation describes how media have become an increasingly entangled part of our realities, a process that is accentuated by digital technology. This is not only in terms of how the mere quantity of media platforms and communication tools have increased. It is just as much about qualitative changes in how media communication is dispersed in new ways — temporally, spatially, and socially in digital society. Technologically mediated communication is now accessible all the time, at any place, so that more and more social settings are affected and shaped by communication through media.

The process of mediatisation is in turn linked to what has been called *media logic*. Media researchers David Altheide and Robert Snow (1979), who are considered to be the originators of the concept, presented the theory of media logic as a critique of the one-sided focus in mass communication research on the effects of media content on audiences. Instead of looking at the media as 'variables of impact', they argued that one must comprehend the *contextualised* role of media. How does a medium function as a form of communication, and how do they change our ways of seeing, speaking, and acting? This is similar to what McLuhan said.

To describe what media logic is, Altheide and Snow referred to classic sociologist Georg Simmel, who was interested in what he called *social forms*. Social forms, such as domination, conflict, or exchange, could be studied, Simmel (1971) said, separately from the actual content of specific occurrences of such forms. In other words, the interesting thing for a sociologist is the 'form' of, for example, conflict as it might occur and re-occur throughout times and places, rather than the specific content of any one conflict, and so on. Similarly, Altheide and Snow (1979: 15) said that a media logic consisted of a certain form for transmitting information. This means that the media researcher looking at such logics is interested not in specific content, but in how media operate as forms for organisation, presentation, and communication. Therefore, a media logic is a 'processual framework through which social action occurs'. Studies of for example sports events, protests or politics, using data from digital media communication, can be carried out within fields like sports studies, social movement studies, and political science, without necessarily being what I, in this book, call digital social research, and which is described in detail in <u>Chapters 13–16</u>. This is because digital social studies, relatively independent of the particular topic of communication, is interested in the (media) logic by which digital media alter social circumstances around, and for, sociality, communication, and interaction. Media scholar Stig Hjarvard (2013: 17) provides a clear definition:

The term 'media logic' is used to recognize that the media have particular modus operandi and characteristics ('specificities of media') that come to influence other institutions and culture and society in general, as they become dependent on the resources that the media both control and make available to them. [...] The logic of the media influences the social forms of interaction and communication, such as how political communication is performed in the media [...] and media logic also influences the nature and function of social relations, as well as the relationships between sender, content, and recipient of communication.

From this perspective, the analysis of a blog would not have to be mainly about the actual topic of the blog — what it is specifically saying about fashion, racism, heteronormativity, or gaming. It *could* be about that, but in order to qualify as digital social research it would definitely also have to be about how the medium of the internet, and/or the web, and/or user-generated self-publishing, and/or blogs as platforms affect how social relations are constituted, and how they function. It would also have to ask questions about what this particular medium does to the relationships between what is said, by whom, to whom, as compared to how those things work in other media or environments — following other 'logics'.

So as you can see, thinking in terms of media logic does not have to mean that all media follow one, unified rationality. This might be the case in some studies of media logic, where focus has largely been on the meaning production of mainstream news (preferably on television). More generally, however, the notion refers to a variety of ways of working ('modus operandi' as Hjarvard has it) that different media might have. Different media distribute resources differently, and adhere to different formal and informal rules, opportunities, and limitations.

So, while politics in the 1980s were mainly confronted with processes of medialisation in having to adjust their ways of speaking to get the maximum impact in newspapers and on television, politics today in digital society can meet a wider range of different media logics: that of mainstream corporate media, that of citizen media, that of viral messages, that of the likes of social actors such as Anonymous and Wikileaks, and so on.

About this Book

While terms can differ — one might speak of online media, new media, 'new new media' (Levinson 2012), networked media (see <u>Chapter 5</u>), social media (see <u>Chapter 2</u>), participatory culture (Jenkins 2006), spreadable media (Jenkins et al. 2013), smart mobs (Rheingold 2002), networked publics (Varnelis 2008), etc. — what has been called digital media in this chapter is seated at the centre of an ongoing process of social transformation. This process is not only about zeroes, ones, and technology, but about the societal changes that result from, enter into, and work through the software and hardware. These changes include new textual experiences in terms of genre and form, new ways of representing the world, new relationships between people (producers and consumers, teachers and students, politicians and citizens, and so on), new conceptions of the relationship between the body, nature, and technology, as well as new patterns of organisation and production.

This book is about digital society — what has been thought and said about it, what it is and what it could be, and how it can be researched and analysed from a social perspective. In this first part of the book, about *theories*, I deal with the concept of *social media* (Chapter 2), and with the debates about whether the internet and social media are good or bad for society (Chapter 3). I also provide a framework for understanding how digital media have contributed to altering the parameters for how people interact and for how society is held together. In general, while analogue things tend to be fixed in time, space, and materiality, the digital tends towards a state of flux. It can move instantly across space and place; it can be edited, re-edited, and re-mixed. The digital also offers novel, low-threshold tools for the creation and circulation of content. It potentially enables new or transformed social roles and relationships (Chapters 4 and 5).

In Part II, on *topics*, I deal with a set of thematic areas at the intersection of the digital and the social. I discuss how the internet and social media might introduce new ways of seeing and feeling — or being seen and felt (Chapters 6 and 7). I also discuss how digitally networked media can contribute to challenging, altering, or potentially giving rise to new forms of participation, power, and politics (Chapters 8, 9, and 10). One chapter (Chapter 11) is devoted to how space and place are construed in partly new ways because of the central role played in digital society by mobile media, and yet another (Chapter 12) deals with the increasing social role of software, data, and algorithms. These themes are presented in order to provide an overview of a number of key topics within the social scientific study of digital media and society. Sociologists David Beer and Roger Burrows (2007) identify three interrelated areas that especially require sociological engagement. These are:

- The transformed relationships between the production and consumption of content.
- The increasing amount of private information posted in the public domain.
- The emerging new rhetoric about democratisation and participation.

Beer and Burrows call for a renewed interest in sociological description, and think that social scientists must start reconsidering how they conceptualise current technologies, practices, and behaviours.

<u>Part III</u>, about *tools*, is about studying digital society empirically. As more and more people participate in an increasing amount of production of digital content, posting it to a number of networked platforms, huge amounts of data about strategies, choices, sentiments, views,

preferences and so on are also registered and made available — to varying degrees — to researchers. While this development relates to problems of data ownership and the exploitation of these data for marketing or surveillance purposes, it also generates new opportunities for research. In the methods part of the book (Chapters 13–16), I will discuss the importance of mixed methods approaches when analysing emerging and rapidly changing phenomena such as those at the intersection of digital media and social transformations. Attention will also be devoted to some of the specific challenges — ethical and others — that are introduced when working with data from the internet and social media. I will introduce a framework for *digital social research* that rests firmly on an ethnographic foundation, but which also branches out into other techniques for mapping and mining digital society. In the concluding chapter of this book (Chapter 17), I present a theory about digital media and social change.

Further Reading

Ceruzzi, Paul (2012). Computing: A Concise History. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

This book offers a broad account of the history of computing from its very early days up to today's smartphones, and also gives a background to the internet, the web, and social media.

Webster, Frank (2006). Theories of the Information Society. London: Routledge.

Webster provides an introduction to several of the different theoretical perspectives on the information society, but also argues in favour of looking beyond ideas of a dramatic historical shift and instead looking at how social patterns that are long-established persist but become 'informatised'.

McLuhan, Marshall (1962). *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. London: Routledge.

Meyrowitz, Joshua (1985). No Sense of Place. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Castells, Manuel (1996). The Rise of the Network Society. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

These books by McLuhan, Meyrowitz, and Castells are examples — from the 1960s, the 1980s, and the 1990s, respectively — of scholarly writing about new media and social change.

Altheide, David (1995). An Ecology of Communication. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

In this book, Altheide, one of the originators of the notion of 'media logic', discusses how changes in communication media alter social processes, relationships, and activities. He underlines the importance of not just analysing the content of media, but also the different social environments created through different media.

2 Social Media
Key questions

- How have the currently popular forms of social media developed through the stages of web 1.0 and web 2.0 in the history of the internet?
- How can classic sociological theories help us understand the *social* in social media?
- What are networked publics? Why are they important and how do they relate to social change?

Key concepts

Social media * web 1.0 * web 2.0 * social facts * social actions * social cooperation * self-presentation * networked publics * user-created content

In this chapter, I discuss how the internet and its uses and applications, have developed in an increasingly social direction, especially over the last fifteen years. I go back to a set of classic sociological theories to shed light on how we can conceive the social dimension of what is popularly known today as *social media*. Society is held together by structures in relation to which we perform social actions — cooperate, form our individuality, and interact with others in innumerable ways. The internet and social media help us do these things in partially new ways. While classic theories might explain some of the things that are going on online, the transformations in the media ecosystem also introduce changes that demand new perspectives to make sense of people's social strategies and relations. One such theoretical concept is that of *networked publics*, which describes how the changes brought on by digitally networked media have connected and mobilised people in new ways across social spheres, cultures, and nations, globally (Ito 2008). The world now functions according to a logic that internet researchers Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012) call networked individualism (see <u>Chapter 5</u>): people relate to each other through individually centred networks that are looser, more open, and more diverse than those of previous historical periods. In those networks, important parts of the interaction happen through digital media.

Digital Tools and Platforms for Being Social

Those of us who remember starting to use the web in the 1990s will recall the experience of quite static forms of content, and of a relative lack of two-way communication. A few years into the 2000s however, there was increasing talk of a transition from an early form of web — web 1.0 — to something that was called web 2.0. The latter is a concept with several dimensions. First, it was a buzzword used in business lingo when gurus made promises that where people uploaded videos to YouTube, 'liked' stuff on Facebook, and blogged about their favourite brands there was also unthinkable amounts of money to be made. Second, it referred to certain technological solutions and innovations — blogging platforms, RSS feeds, wikis, social network sites — that encouraged participation, networking, and creativity among peers. Third — and most importantly from a sociological perspective — it related to a certain frame of mind and action which is about different forms of making and connecting (Gauntlett 2011).

The epitome of the 1.0 era was the traditional web 'page' which allowed for very little interaction, maybe just a clickable link to send an email to the creator of the page. Popular sites that emerged in the 2.0 era are Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, and these differ largely from the old web as they are designed to allow for new levels of user interactions, and to fill very different functions altogether. They also introduce a whole new sociological dimension to digital media through notions such as those of friends, groups, likes, and so on. As the idea of a web 2.0 was popularised, especially through the talks and writings of tech entrepreneur Tim O'Reilly (2007), the essential difference between the old and new web came to be defined in terms of the latter being focused on any participant being a potential creator of content. So while web 1.0 technologies and services assumed and promoted that the vast majority of users just consumed content passively, web 2.0 included lots of tools to maximise the potentials for *user-created content*. People can do stuff by themselves, and enhance them together. Computer scientists Graham Cormode and Balachander Krishnamurthy (2008: n.p.) describe how democratisation, creativity, remix, interaction, and complex networking are central aspects of web 2.0:

The democratic nature of Web 2.0 is exemplified by creations of large numbers of niche groups (collections of friends) who can exchange content of any kind (text, audio, video) and tag, comment, and link to both intra-group and extra-group 'pages.' A popular innovation in Web 2.0 is 'mashups,' which combine or render content in novel forms.

In other words, web 2.0 technology enabled and encouraged a number of social activities that were not as prominent with web 1.0. The web 2.0 was developed in order to realise the interactive and collaborative potentials of the internet in better ways than web 1.0. With innovations like blogs, social-networking sites, wikis, tagging, and sharing, 2.0 emphasises social interaction, creativity, and the production of knowledge among peers. It also enables the co-creation and constant editing by multiple users of multimodal content, that is, content which mixes several modalities (written text, photographic images, videos, sounds, etc.). When we speak of online platforms for such types of interaction, networking, and creativity today — Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube, Instagram, etc. — we tend to call them social media. But this does not mean that people didn't socialise, create, and share things through media before. Web 2.0 should be seen rather as an extension than a transformation of

social phenomena that existed way before it — much like social networks among friends who liked each other existed long before social networks on the internet among 'friends' who 'like' each other, in the Facebook sense (Baym 2011: 386).

As discussed in the <u>previous chapter</u>, media are tools for making sense of the world around us, and it would thus be fair to say that all media are social. On the other hand, no media are social in themselves, unless people use them in social ways. The things that we call social media are both preceded and surrounded by many other tools that enable online sociality, engagement, and community-building. In spite of hailing from the days of web 1.0, things like online forums, email, and instant messaging are also still used widely. But digital social platforms like YouTube and Facebook have definitely contributed to a major transformation of the information and communication ecosystem. We have acquired new infrastructures for social exchange, and these infrastructures are getting more and more sophisticated.

The history of social media

All media have a social aspect to them, but if we look specifically at the tools and platforms that are talked about as 'social media' since around the mid-2000s, their pre-history is with BBSs and Usenet.¹ BBSs, bulletin board systems, were a form of independent computer servers that functioned as meeting places where users could download files or games, as well as post text messages to one another. BBSs, popular from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, were accessed with modems over the telephone line, and were mostly run by hobbyists and often with a focus on technology-related interests. Other precursors to the social internet as we know it were USA's CompuServe (1969–2009) and France's Minitel (1978–2012), both being pre-web online services that, among other things, included chats or functionality similar to that of web discussion forums. Usenet, popular around the same time as BBSs, is a similar system, but without a central server, where users can post entries in a wide variety of categories (newsgroups). In the United States, the paid online service AOL (America Online) also offered, in the 1990s, member-created communities with searchable member profiles.

¹ An example of a summary of the history of social media can be found at <u>http://historycooperative.org/the-history-of-social-media/</u>. Another one is available at <u>www.digitaltrends.com/features/the-history-of-social-networking/</u>.

After the mainstream breakthrough of the internet and the web, the first social media site that was similar to the things that we call social media today was Six Degrees (1997–2001). Named after the theory of 'six degrees of separation' (see <u>Chapter 16</u>), it was based on users creating profiles and 'friending' each other. This was similar to what American users had been able to do with former classmates on the Classmates.com site since 1995. After this, the social internet was dominated for a few years by blogging. Blogs (short for 'weblogs') emerged in 1998–99 with platforms such as Open Diary, LiveJournal, and Blogger. Blogs are social media in the sense that the blogging platforms connect blogs socially through links and comments into a 'blogosphere'. Aside from blogs, instant messaging — with clients like ICQ, AOL Instant Messenger, and MSN Messenger — was also popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The first surge in what we know now as social media came with the launch of Friendster in 2002, and more massively with MySpace (launched 2003). These were both social network sites as we know the format today. LinkedIn, a networking site for businesspeople, was also launched in 2003. The following year, Mark Zuckerberg famously started Facebook — first as TheFacebook.com, and then only for Harvard students — from his dorm room. Facebook now has around 1.6 billion monthly active users worldwide, and is seen by many people as synonymous with 'social media'. Twitter, sometimes labelled a 'microblog' service, was created in 2006, allowing users to post 'tweets' that can be responded to and recirculated ('retweeted'). Twitter now has more than 300 million active users.

The key characteristics of social media, in this sense, is that they are based on users having accounts or profiles through which they can 'friend' or follow each other, and that content can be liked/favourited, commented, and shared. After Facebook and Twitter, the social media logic has been applied in a growing and evolving number of services like Flickr and Instagram (for social photo sharing), YouTube (for social video sharing), and variations like Tumblr, Pinterest, and Snapchat. Today, social media is best seen as a name for the complex ecosystem of many different social media platforms that serve similar purposes, but in different ways and with different flavours. Each user will use her or his own combination of tools to connect and interact. Some will stick to email and instant messaging, while others will be on sites and apps like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat all at the same time.

An important aspect is that users of social platforms are identifiable and present through some sort of 'profile', which allows for a certain amount of experimental work with who we want to be and how we want to present ourselves to others. The actual visibility of the profile will vary, as Facebook makes it possible to elaborate our personae rather extensively while Snapchat only hints at who the user is, thereby demanding that people have some extra knowledge about who they are interacting with. Apart from the profiles, there are also often functions for reacting to, or interacting with, content by liking it, disliking it, sharing it, commenting on it, responding to it, and sometimes editing or remixing it. In this case as well, the availability and design of functions will differ between platforms. Most social media platforms also include some sort of messaging or chat function, by which users can communicate one-on-one or in groups aside from the more public flow of communication.

Media and creativity researcher David Gauntlett (2011) appropriately concludes that social media are seldom easily defined as tools, but rather as broad platforms. For Gauntlett, YouTube is a prime example of a digital creative platform because of three things:

- It is a *framework for participation*. The wide range of types of video that are uploaded by people ranging from poets and skateboarders to medics and engineers illustrates that this is 'just' a platform. There is nothing about it which prescribes what types of things should be performed on its stage. The technological features might promote certain behaviours (such as liking, responding, etc.), and rules like the ones prohibiting pornography and piracy definitely set some limitations. But generally, the platform is open to a very wide range and variety of content.
- The platform is *content-agnostic*, which means that it neither knows nor cares about all of the uploads, experimentations, and innovations that its users might be doing. YouTube as such does not care whether a big news corporation registers an account to post its professionally produced features, or if an 'ordinary person' goes on the site to share gaming walkthrough videos.
- The platform has *community features* by which users can communicate and connect to promote their own videos, to share knowledge and skills, to entertain or support each other.

Digitally networked social media — whether they are social network sites, social apps, forums, or blogs — are about sociality. In a sociological sense, they are about what Georg Simmel (1950: 10) called 'sociation', that is, they enable processes of mediation by which individuals become 'connected by interaction' to form groups and, by extension, build society. Sociation and society, however, can mean many different things. Therefore, let us turn to some of the classic sociological theories about social action, interaction, community, and cooperation for some help with delineating and untangling things. I will return to a detailed discussion of communities and networks, more specifically, in <u>Chapter 5</u>.

Social Facts

Like I said, we can get a more refined understanding of how to understand the sociality of digital media by going back to some of the classic sociological theorists. In a similar endeavour, social media researcher Christian Fuchs (2017: 39–46) turns to Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Karl Marx. While all of their perspectives help us interpret the social characteristics and impact of digital media, I would also like to add Georg Simmel and Erving Goffman to the mix. This is because their perspectives focus on some of the processes that I see as key to the ways in which people interact in digital society, namely the fragmentation of our social beings (which Simmel talks about) and the corresponding symbolic management of our selves and identities (which Goffman talks about).

Classic sociologist Durkheim discussed the social in terms of *social facts*. In his book on *The Rules of Sociological Method*, he explained this notion by giving a series of examples of how society — the social — imposes itself upon us. When we do things, it is not always because we want to do these things ourselves, but rather that we somehow know that we ought to do these things. Durkheim (1895/1982: 50) writes:

When I perform my duties as a brother, a husband or a citizen and carry out the commitments I have entered into, I fulfil obligations which are defined in law and custom and which are external to myself and my actions. Even when they conform to my own sentiments and when I feel their reality within me, that reality does not cease to be objective, for it is not I who have prescribed these duties; I have received them through education. [...] Similarly the believer has discovered from birth, ready fashioned, the beliefs and practices of his religious life; if they existed before he did, it follows that they exist outside him.

In other words, society is not only the sum of what individuals do, but rather something more or larger than that. Something which is super-individual — that exists above and beyond the different individuals that are the building blocks of society. Society has got properties of its own in the shape of collective systems of meaning and communication that we draw upon to function together as an organism. Today, the internet and social media are no doubt part of this super-individual realm. When reading social media from a Durkheimian perspective, Fuchs notes — as I discussed earlier — that media can be seen as social to the extent that they are products of social processes between people. Social structures are built into and expressed through them. So when someone posts a picture of their lunch onto an online photo-sharing service, or when a person sets up the design for their blog, or composes their profile for an online dating site, he or she does this in relation to the social structures that exist — independent of individuals — in and through social media. Already back in 1895, Durkheim (1895/1982: 51) made a similar point:

The system of signs that I employ to express my thoughts, the monetary system I use to pay my debts, the credit instruments I utilise in my commercial relationships, the practices I follow in my profession, etc., all function independently of the use I make of them. [...] Thus there are ways of acting, thinking and feeling which possess the remarkable property of existing outside the consciousness of the individual. Not only are

these types of behaviour and thinking external to the individual, but they are endued with a compelling and coercive power by virtue of which, whether he wishes it or not, they impose themselves upon him.

As discussed in the <u>previous chapter</u>, theorists like Giddens and Goffman remade the point that the social consists of systems of rules and resources that are constantly produced and reproduced by people. So, when we see the internet and social media in McLuhan's terms as extensions of ourselves, this can be seen, from a Durkheimian point of view, as the individual using these tools for extending into the realm of the social.

Exercise

If you are regularly using more than one social media platform, such as, for example, Facebook and Twitter, or Twitter and Instagram, etc., think about how your social behaviour differs because of the platform as such. Are you showing or expressing different parts of yourself depending on the possibilities of the platform? What are the differences between platforms as regards what behaviour they encourage? To what extent can you act freely with the platform as a tool, and to what extent do you feel restrained by the platform, or even forced to act in certain ways?

Social Actions

If we turn to Weber, one of his key concepts was *social action*. He said that social relations are constituted by a certain form of actions (i.e. social ones) that are meaningful interactions between people. An action is social when the person acting does something which 'is oriented to the past, present, or expected future behavior of others' (Weber 1922/1978: 22). In other words, much of the things we do on social media, such as sharing, messaging, liking, subscribing, inviting, and so on, are indeed very likely to be social actions. Weber makes clear, however, that all things that crowds do — and the internet is definitely full of crowds, as in participants, publics, followers, commentators — are not social. He writes:

Social action is not identical [...] with the similar actions of many persons or with every action influenced by other persons. Thus, if at the beginning of a shower a number of people on the street put up their umbrellas at the same time, this would not ordinarily be a case of action mutually oriented to that of each other, but rather of all reacting, in the same way to the [...] need of protection from the rain. (Weber 1922/1978: 23)

In other words, much of the discussions of whether the internet should be seen as a social force for empowering people, making the world a better place, and bringing about a new public sphere, relate to the tension between social actions — in Weber's terms — and other types of (crowd) actions. Some have suggested that digital social media mostly promote *clicktivism*, that is, quite mindless crowd behaviours, rather than actions with a genuine social foundation and impact (Morozov 2013). Others have argued that even though clicktivism does not follow the traditional pattern of socially impactful action, it might still be of great importance to society (Halupka 2014). It is important to think about whether interaction through social media gives rise to entirely new types of actions, which we must interpret according to other criteria than those we are used to. These things are dealt with in more detail in <u>Chapter 4</u>.

Social Cooperation

Tönnies, with his notion of *Gemeinschaft*, and Marx, speaking of 'co-operation' as fundamental for human existence, contribute to an understanding of the social in terms of collaboration. For Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft* is what holds society ('*Gesellschaft*') together. Society is merely people coexisting, but community ('*Gemeinschaft*') is the language, the ways, the mores, and the beliefs that bring about social coherence and unity. This state can be described in terms of kinship, intimacy, and togetherness:

(1) Relatives and married couples love each other or easily adjust themselves to each other. They speak together and think along similar lines. Likewise do neighbours and other friends. (2) Between people who love each other there is understanding. (3) Those who love and understand each other remain and dwell together and organize their common life. (Tönnies 1887/1974: 55)

Returning to Durkheim, one might say that what makes society into more than the sum of its parts is the same magical ingredient which *Gemeinschaft* adds to *Gesellschaft*. According to Marx and Friedrich Engels, writing about cooperation, something becomes 'social' when it entails several individuals working together to produce something:

The production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relation — social in the sense that it denotes the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end. It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage, and this mode of co-operation is itself a 'productive force'. (Marx & Engels 1932/1998: 48–49)

So, while Tönnies was more focused on intimacy and emotions, and Marx and Engels rather on material production, both of their perspectives on the social are unified by their emphasis on the importance of people doing creative things together. These questions about connections and community among people are dealt with further in <u>Chapter 5</u>.

Social Presence

Georg Simmel, another one of the classic sociologists, saw sociality in terms of the movement of individuals towards communal forms of thinking, talking, and acting. He argued, however, that society is not the result of people giving up their individuality completely, nor can individuals exist in isolation outside society. Rather, we are 'composed out of reciprocal relationships to others', while existing neither as purely 'natural objects', nor as mere 'societary beings' (Simmel 1910: 385–386). One aspect of this interplay between individual and society is that the full complexity of a person can never be fully represented within the realm of society. There is always something more, or something else, to the individual than what he or she displays in relation to others. This means that our social presence is different from, but often overlapping with, our individual persona. When we interact socially, we are always understood by ourselves and others in ways that are altered, sliced, or distorted by the 'mask' that we are wearing in the presence of others. Therefore, Simmel claims, all social beings are fragments:

We are all fragments, not only of the universal man, but also of ourselves. We are onsets not merely of the type human being in general, not merely of the type good, bad, etc., but we are onsets of that not further in principle nameable individuality and singularity of our own selves which surrounds our perceptible actuality as though drawn with ideal lines. The vision of our neighbor, however, enlarges this fragment to that which we never are completely and wholly. He cannot see the fragments merely side by side as they are actually given, but as we offset the blind spot in our eye so that we are not conscious of it, in like manner we make of these fragmentary data the completeness of an individuality. (1910: 379–380)

With this, Simmel points to an irreducible difference between the essence of an individual on the one hand, and his or her expression in society on the other. Social media communication relies to a large extent on small bits of communication — tweets, status updates, Instagram images, snapchats — and in Simmel's terms we can see these bits and pieces as fragments of individuality that make up increasingly important parts of the social selves of many people in the world. His perspective can be read in hindsight as a criticism of the structural inability of society — or social media — to fully represent individuals. Even though the tools and platforms that we have at hand to express and represent ourselves may be powerful in many ways, Simmel also warned about a form of alienation following from the fact that a human being's move towards society can never be complete.

Exercise

It is impossible to give a complete image of ourselves through social media. Like social interaction more generally, the digital platforms that we use allow for only some aspects of our personality to be expressed. The things we express may differ from platform to platform, and depending on who we are interacting with. Try to think about any discrepancies between what you feel to be your 'real self' and your 'online self'? Are these selves multiple and, if so, how do their variations relate to different platforms that you use? Is there in any way a tendency to portray 'ideal selves', in order to show what we think is expected in a given setting? Can social media be an esteem booster, or is it the other way around? Is there a risk that social media gives people a false or inflated sense of self?

Writing about 'the tragedy of culture', Simmel concluded that every social setting or culture bears something tragic; namely that the very same tools and means that allows people to develop their individuality further are at the same time limited in ways that make it impossible to ever really, fully, represent oneself. There might be a risk with social media and web 2.0 technologies, which rely so heavily on certain templates and styles, that 'the abstract person' mediated through our profiles and the content we create and circulate obscures 'the real person' (Lanier 2010: 70). There is a complexity 'outside' society (or media) that can never be fully or entirely or universally expressed 'inside' it. As Goffman (1959: 1–2) puts it:

Many crucial facts lie beyond the time and place of interaction or lie concealed within it. For example, the 'true' or 'real' attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his avowals or through what appears to be involuntary expressive behaviour. Similarly, if the individual offers the others a product or service, they will often find that during the interaction there will be no time and place immediately available for eating the pudding that the proof can be found in. They will be forced to accept some events as conventional or natural signs of something not directly available to the senses.

This idea about the social resting on a number of tacit and sometimes even random and floating presuppositions is similar to the ideas later popularised within the post-structuralist theoretical tradition about the impossibility of fixing definite meanings of things. Reality has an infinite number of possible meanings. But some of these meanings — which are always in some sense temporary compromises, or the effect of some form of symbolic violence where some meanings are imposed at the cost of others — become dominant and held to be 'true' in certain times, places, or cultures.

Self-Presentation

This irreducibility of the outside gives rise to a number of social strategies and tactics. Goffman (1959) described how such strategies for *self-presentation* in social interaction develop. He did this by famously drawing on a set of dramaturgical metaphors. In our social lives we enter into various roles on different stages, acting in relation to different scripts. People around us in society are like an audience that reacts to our performance. Similar to the above notion of an inside and an outside of society, Goffman thinks in terms of the stage as a 'front region' in relation to which there is also a 'back region' — a backstage dimension where we can get rid of our assumed or ascribed roles or identities.

On a digital and social photo sharing platform like Instagram, for example, users prepare their performance (snapping the photo, deleting it, snapping a new one, cropping it, filtering it, captioning it, tagging it, etc.) in a back region which is not visible to the audience. Once edited and composed, the performance that is the Instagram photo is presented in the front region. But access to the front region is also controlled as regards who is supposed to take part of the performance as all performances do not address all thinkable people in society. In the case of Instagram, these things will be decided by things like whether the user has a public or private account, who is a follower, who has been blocked, whether users follow a hashtag that has been used as part of the performance, and so on. Goffman (1959: 152) writes that 'access to these regions is controlled in order to prevent the audience from seeing backstage and to prevent outsiders from coming into a performance that is not addressed to them'.

This process will look different depending on the social setting as different settings will offer different tools for interaction. This has been conceptualised in terms of 'affordances'. This concept was introduced in research on digital media to balance between, on the one hand, seeing technology as causing certain social actions and, on the other hand, seeing technology as completely shaped by social actions (Juris 2012). The theory of affordances, as formulated by psychologist James Gibson (1977), sees technologies in terms of the 'action possibilities' that are latent — and can be realised depending on the abilities of the individual — in a given environment, tool, or platform. A chair allows for sitting, a touchscreen for manipulating content by touch, a video camera for capturing moving images and sound, and so on.

Similar to how people in society must relate to social conventions, expectations, cultural norms, rules, and laws, when carrying out their actions, anyone who uses a medium has to relate to the functional and relational aspects of that very medium. Goffman's idea that we draw on different sorts of 'expressive equipment' to perform our personal front goes well with this. He calls the work we do with this 'impression management' (1959: 49). In different social contexts — a book club, the workers in a factory, a thread in a discussion forum, followers, and users of a certain hashtag — people work together to define and make sense of this particular social situation or setting. This entails agreeing — even if tacitly — on certain rules of interaction. Which assumptions is the interaction resting on? Which things are important and which are not? What is seen as good and bad behaviour? This idea of Goffman's is in fact very similar to what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) later described as the 'logic of practice' in different social 'fields'. Among certain social groupings, there will exist varying degrees of familiarity and solidarity in relation to such agreements. Also, in different fields, or different settings, the agreements between participants over how one should act will vary. There is, however, a tendency among participants 'to accept the

definitional claims made by the others present' (Goffman 1959: 4). People are social beings who communicate, interact, and care about what others think and do.

In other words, we 'make' the social together. As we have learned from the classic theories that were discussed above, the social is also more than the sum of the individuals who come together socially. This is because people create communities and negotiate rules and come to formal or informal agreements. People cooperate and work reflexively on their identities by mirroring themselves in those around them. The result of such activities is social structures, the systems of formal and informal rules and agreements that define the various social settings that we enter into. When we add media technologies to this, the structures are still social but at the same time technological, where different technologies — much like social settings — have different possibilities for action. Thus, settings and media — the town square, the football match, Instagram, Twitter, the phone call, the first date, the touchscreen, and so on — all enable a field of possible social action. Our next question, then, is what specific field of social possibility we enter when it comes to digital media.

The Rise of Networked Publics

Today, as our online connections with old and new friends and strangers merge together through networked technologies, the social landscape is restructured. This leads to the emergence of what cultural anthropologist Mimi Ito (2008) calls *networked publics*. She discusses how, during the 1990s and early 2000s, the dominant metaphors that had been used previously to describe the digitisation of the media landscape and the internet changed from being about things like artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and cyberspace, to being about networking and communication between real and actual people.

In line with what I have discussed above, she sees a connection between the technological changes and a number of important shifts in society and culture. Networked publics, therefore, is a term that refers to a set of social, cultural, and technological transformations that have followed from the transition to a society where digitally networked media are central to communication. Ito notes that the media as such, as well as patterns of media use and consumption, have not changed completely. There are still lots of quite passive — non-creative — ways of taking in media, and the mass media communication model where one, or a few, speak to many is still predominant in many areas of social and cultural life. What surely has changed, however, is the way in which people today are 'networked and mobilized with and through media' (Ito 2008: 2).

By using the word 'public', rather than 'audience' or 'consumers', Ito wants to put the more engaged stance of people interacting with media in digital society in the foreground. In talking about the publics as 'networked', she emphasises how we — in the age of social network apps and portable gadgets connected to the internet — communicate increasingly through large and elaborate networks that may go in any thinkable direction, such as bottomup, top-down, or side-to-side. Furthermore, participants — Ito prefers this label ahead of users or consumers or audience members — are actively (re-)making and (re-)distributing content in emerging systems of many-to-many communication and interaction. These systems co-exist with, and often route around, the conventionally commercial forms of media distribution such as television, film, and professional news reporting. This is not to say, however, that new digital media can never be commercial. A key component of the networked media ecology is personal media (Lüders 2008). While it is hard to maintain a strict division between mass media on the one hand and personal media on the other, an important difference is that the latter — such as email, discussion forums, and social network sites — are more symmetrical. In contrast to news, TV series, or films, personal media don't only enable but in fact require that participants, at least to some degree, are active as both receivers and producers of the content in question.

This shifting of roles, where the reader is also the writer, the student is also the teacher, the citizen is also the politician, and the novice is also the expert, is maybe the most fundamental point made by those who believe that digitally networked media has made — and will continue to make — the world a better place. This point has been repeated many times and in many forms. McLuhan and Barrington Nevitt (1972: 27) wrote that 'we live in an age of simultaneity rather than of sequence. We start with the effects before the product. The consumer becomes producer.' As mentioned in <u>Chapter 1</u>, Toffler (1980: 266) wrote about 'what might be called "prosumers"', people that are 'neither producers nor consumers in the usual sense', and about 'the rapid spread of the market or exchange network — that maze of channels through which goods or services, produced by you, reach me and vice versa'.

Similarly, digital media researcher Axel Bruns (2008) has used the concept of 'produsage' when writing about the social and cultural move towards collaboratively driven forms of user-created content, where information is never static but always changing and evolving.

User-created content

Since the mid-2000s, there is increasing talk of 'user-generated' or 'user-created' content. This refers to the transformation of the media landscape by which ordinary people increasingly put in an effort to create stuff — text, photos, videos — which is posted online. In the age of newspapers, radio and television, media audiences had very little direct power by which to shape media content or to take the stage. Content was produced by professionals, and record companies, publishing houses, and big media corporations were regulating who was seen and heard. The digital environment leads to an expansion of the reach and the scope of what users can create and publish. Blogs and tweets challenge traditional news reporting, television channels are struggling while 'regular' kids achieve world-wide celebrity on YouTube, and so on. The rise of user-created content signals a possible democratisation of media and thereby the public sphere. I discuss this more in <u>Chapter 8</u>. At the same time, the increased commercialisation of most social media platforms comes with a risk that large companies start making money off the back of the 'free work' put in by the users. Internet researcher Nancy Baym (2011) aptly points out that the early internet was indeed highly user-created, but that the new thing since web 2.0 and social media is that for-profit businesses run most of the platforms. I discuss this more in <u>Chapter 9</u>.

Ito argues that these, increasingly symmetric and participatory, media ecologies are becoming more and more prominent in our daily lives, even though we are still obviously in a moment of change and transition. Also, it is important to remember, always, that old and new ways of communicating and getting information and knowledge tend to coexist rather than replace each other completely. The networked publics are groups and constellations of people who may be located in different physical places but who are connected to each other. They can also be seen as examples of what theorist Benedict Anderson (1983) called *imagined communities.* He was talking about the social construction of nations, and argued that they were imagined as communities because most people who consider themselves as part of a nation never hear about, meet, or get to know the majority of the other members. But, as he poetically put it, 'yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (1983: 6). These connections and feelings of community in networked publics are built with the help of social media, and other emerging technologies, both as platforms and tools. The best way to conceive of networked publics is to see them as spaces. They are spaces where people using digital social platforms express, perform, manage, or create identities (see Chapter 4), and connect (see Chapter 5).

Throughout <u>Part II</u> of this book, I will deal with topics that relate to a number of questions about this, alleged and debated, transition towards a society organised around networked publics. As mentioned in <u>Chapter 1</u>, Rainie and Wellman (2012) have described a triple revolution towards what they call networked individualism (see <u>Chapter 5</u>), which is an idea quite similar to that of networked publics as it emphasises the move away from longstanding hierarchical, bureaucratic, and tightly-knit social arrangements in favour of looser, more fragmented and diverse, but increasingly networked ways of connecting, communicating, and exchanging information. This system is not necessarily more ego-centric in the sense that people become more narcissistic (even though that might sometimes be the case) or selfish (even though that too can of course happen), but it is a system based on individualism because each individual is at the centre of her or his own network. As internet researchers Nicole Ellison and danah boyd (2007) argue, the proliferation of digital social platforms shifts the focus of the social matrix away from communities and interests towards people and

connections. I will discuss this transformation at some length in <u>Chapter 5</u>. The key point for the time being is that the social world is now made out of networks rather than groups.

That insight has certainly opened up new avenues and areas for research that considers questions about the characteristics and modes of functioning of digital society. What is special about it? What are the similarities or differences between online and offline behaviours and phenomena? How are activities and relationships changed when they are moved into, mediated by, or otherwise intersecting with digital media? Much of the early internet research in the 1990s dealt with questions like these in a rather straightforward fashion, assuming that there was an online 'virtual reality' or 'cyberspace' on the one hand and a 'real' and material offline sphere on the other. Since then, digital media have become increasingly entangled in our everyday lives with ubiquitous wireless connectivity, portable gadgets (laptops, smartphones, tablets, wristbands, watches), and an ever more complex ecosystem of platforms. Therefore, focus has shifted towards seeing the online and the offline as overlapping, inseparable, or even indistinguishable. Digital media definitely play a role in many of our 'offline' activities, while at the same time many purely 'online' activities like anonymous forums, viral tidbits, and snippets of information — like memes — or multi-user roleplaying games are both influenced by and influencing the 'offline' activities.

What are memes?

The word 'meme', put forward by biologist Richard Dawkins in the 1970s, derives from the Greek mimema, which means 'something which is imitated'. But while the term has existed since before internet culture, it has risen in popularity as a word to refer to a certain type of product of online user creativity. Internet memes are images, videos, pictures, concepts, formats, or catchphrases that are passed along to the point where they evolve bit by bit into becoming a social phenomenon which is shared by large numbers of people (Shifman 2014). It is quite hard to explain what these things are in writing to a person who has no knowledge of them, as they are often drawing on a rather bizarre form of humour. I am assuming the phenomenon is somehow known to most readers of this book, however. They are like in-jokes for the digital masses, and can be exemplified by phenomena such as photo fads, flashmobs, LOLCats, and other image macros.² Social media platforms offer express paths by which memes can be diffused. Internet memes also tend to reproduce as people often repackage them by mimicking or remixing them in various ways. Communications researcher Limor Shifman (2014) argues that while 'viral' phenomena — things that spread exponentially and fast online — tend to be single units (one photo, one video, etc.), memes are always a group of digital items that have certain characteristics of content, form, or stance in common. These items were also created in relation to, and with a certain awareness of, each other.

² <u>http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/photo-fads;</u> <u>http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/flash-mob; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lolcat;</u> <u>http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/image-macros</u>.

This is why there has been increasing talk in digital social research and media studies about how the dimensions that we previously talked about as online and offline, digital and material, are coming together in hybrid forms (Lindgren 2014). It is important to remember that this is not to say that people's realities become less real or that nothing means anything. Basically, it just states that we now use digital media in ways that make it more and more difficult to see that use as a clearly delineated activity which can be analysed in isolation from 'non-digital' things and activities. This very entanglement is at the centre of a social transformation where digital social platforms connect people, through their interaction, giving way to the emergence of networked publics that challenge the entire 'social operating system' (Rainie & Wellman 2012). This transformation is not new as such, but has been happening gradually throughout the last fifty-or-something years with the concurrent development towards a world marked by increasing individualisation where new forms of social relationships take shape in an increasingly networked and global system of communication.

Further Reading

Gauntlett, David (2011). *Making is Connecting: The Social Meaning of Creativity, From DIY and Knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gauntlett's book is about creativity and making, and the role of the internet for those things. Drawing on a variety of cases and theories, he discusses the ethos and approach of web 2.0 as a social platform for creativity. Importantly, Gauntlett broadens the perspective to see if the idea of web 2.0 and user-created content also works with bigger issues that span both offline and online activities.

Ito, Mizuko (2008). Introduction. In Kazys Varnelis (Ed.), *Networked Publics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Ito's introductory chapter to the edited volume *Networked Publics* offers a great overview of several key issues and concepts related to social media, social change, and new 'user' behaviours.

Fuchs, Christian (2017). Social Media: A Critical Introduction (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

This book by Christian Fuchs is an introduction to what social media is, and to how it can be analysed from the perspective of critical theory. It is a good example of how 'old' theories can be fruitfully applied to 'new' media. The book emphasises going beyond the hype surrounding much of social media, instead being critical and focusing on the power structures inherent in them.

Goffman, Erving (1959). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. New York: Doubleday.

Goffman's classic from 1959 is about how people use 'impression management' and other strategies to navigate how they are perceived by others as they craft their social 'performances' in everyday life. It is interesting to read the book while trying to translate the points made by Goffman to digital society.

3 Cyber Debates

Key questions

- What are the main arguments of those cyberoptimists who think that the internet and social media will make the world better? What are the counter-arguments of cyberpessimists?
- What is technological determinism, and how is it affecting both the optimistic and the pessimistic perspectives on digital media and social transformation?
- How can one find a middle ground perspective that manages to balance between cyberoptimism and cyberpessimism?

Key concepts

Cyberoptimism * cyberpessimism * technological determinism * internet centrism * communicative capitalism * technological solutionism * collective intelligence * peer production

In this chapter, I will introduce the debate and relevant literature on how the internet has been thought to transform society. There are two main perspectives: one optimistic, one pessimistic. Different aspects of these tend to be mobilised at different points with various aims in a range of contexts. But digital technology does not have uniquely positive or negative effects on society. As I have argued elsewhere (Lindgren 2013), the most sensible approach to the division between these optimistic and pessimistic perspectives is a pragmatic position in between. By seeing and analysing how things actually work socially on the internet, we can tell that sometimes the potential of something good happening is realised, and sometimes those who expect the worst are correct. Most of the time, it's a little bit of both.

Cyberspace

In the 1984 book *Neuromancer*, science-fiction author William Gibson popularised the term 'cyberspace'. This was his name for a 'non-space', a 'consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators' of 'every computer in the human system' (Gibson 1984: 128). It can also be defined as 'the notional environment in which communication over computer networks occurs'.¹ In other words, things that are 'cyber' relate to the imaginary and non-physical (sometimes called virtual) place where digital media communication and interaction happens. It is the non-space where the message is when it passes from sender to receiver. Such views contribute to a mystification of digital media. Having been 'understood' in science fiction before its breakthrough in the real world, the internet and its related social activities have often evoked people's imagination. This means that both hopes and fears have been connected to it.

¹ <u>www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/cyberspace</u>.

Digital Revolution

Like many other new media in their time, the internet was surrounded by an aura of magic during the first period of its expansion. In some respects, it has yet to wear off. In the 1990s, tales about what the net was, and what it would become, told stories about large-scale social change. The internet was claimed by many to be set to revolutionise most areas of social life as we knew it. The digitally networked social reality instigated by the internet would lead to a new economic system where everyone could take part. It offered new and efficient ways of putting suppliers, producers, and consumers in contact with each other. Innovation would be democratised and disruptive, while the playing field between big corporations and small startups would be levelled. The internet was also said to be destined to embody a new form of global democracy, based on mutual understanding and respect between people, no matter where they were from. Such predictions resonated with McLuhan's (1962: 8) vision that '[t]he new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village' where the 'entire human family' is sealed 'into a single global tribe'. This would, the internet optimists thought, make people more knowledgeable about, and therefore more tolerant towards, one another.

As media researcher James Curran (2012a: 3) puts it: 'the internet would be an unstoppable force: like the invention of print and gunpowder, it would change society permanently and irrevocably'. But today, many people, including some of those who were previously more optimistic, have become increasingly sceptical and pessimistic about the effects of the internet on society. Some of the utopian predictions have been realised, at least in part, but they have also come at the price of 'dotcom bubbles', economic crises, increased surveillance, and censorship. Large corporations and already powerful political and other social actors are dominating and controlling most parts of the net.

One reason for the initial strong optimism is that as the net became part of mainstream culture and society, it brought with it some baggage from its subcultural days. Notably, it carried dreams of a utopian existence in the science fiction of 'cyberspace'. Because of this, stories about the rise of the internet are often 'celebratory chronicles' or narratives about heroism (Curran 2012b: 35). As described in <u>Chapter 1</u>, the design of the early internet during the Cold War was influenced by military objectives that were mediated and interpreted by computer scientists in universities. In addition to the military-scientific influences that led to the internet infrastructure being flexible and modular, as well as based on exchange of information, it was also shaped by the ideals of 'hippy' values among countercultural groups who were early adopters of the network during the 1980s and 1990s. Tim Berners-Lee (1996), the creator of the World Wide Web, was also driven by ideals of public service, since he wanted to make a 'shared information space'.

Furthermore, when the public internet began to be commercialised from 1991 onwards, its technical aspects were simplified and made increasingly user-friendly. This is the development discussed in relation to the notions of web 1.0 and 2.0 in the previous chapter. So around the year 2000, everything about digital society seemed to be fantastic and transformative. The dynamic mix of academic, countercultural, and public service influences had given rise to a seemingly open, decentralised, and diverse public space. However, porn and gambling, rather than 'creative works of minority artists', seemed to be the easiest things to sell on the internet. And when more intense and developed forms of online commerce took off, many were forced to realise that this came at the price of ever more intrusive forms of

advertising and spamming. At the same time, wealth was concentrated in the hands of huge corporations like Apple, Microsoft, Google, and, later, Facebook. The internet was progressively commercialised as big media companies with fast-growing fortunes established websites which looked and functioned better than anything non-commercial actors could yet create, and as search engine companies started to harvest data for advertising purposes, they also ushered new forms of commercial surveillance technologies into the mix. Around the same time, legislation strengthening intellectual property rights on the internet was passed in several countries.

Technological Determinism and Internet Centrism

In parallel to the development towards increased commercialisation and control, a countermovement was deployed through what Curran (2012b) calls 'the revolt of the nerds'. This consisted, in a first wave, of computer scientists and programmers during the 1980s and 1990s who resisted the idea that software should be restricted by patents and copyright. Instead, in the hacker tradition of open disclosure of information, they created and promoted free and *open source* software that could be used, distributed, and changed by anyone.

In a second wave of the nerd revolution, the revival of user participation was spearheaded by the launch of Wikipedia in 2001. This openly editable and collaborative encyclopaedia soon became hugely popular as a source of information, and also quite popular among certain groups as a place to edit and contribute. This was around the same time that social media platforms such as Facebook (2004) and YouTube (2005) exploded onto the web 2.0 scene. While these, and most other popular platforms, are still free to use, they have subsequently either evolved into, or have been acquired by, big corporations. While, as Curran (2012b) contends, these platforms have been successful in renewing the communal do-it-yourself tradition of the early web, commercialisation might also threaten this. On the other hand, the radical tactics of the early web has found, and continues to find, expression through activities such as those of the online piracy movement (Lindgren & Linde 2012), WikiLeaks (Lindgren & Lundström 2011), and Anonymous (Stoehrel & Lindgren 2014). However, in spite of the constantly renewed resistance from recalcitrant users towards centralisation and commercialisation of the net, the balance between top-down and bottom-up is essentially fluctuating.

Digital divides

The perspectives described in this book generally reflect the Western narrative of the history of the internet. While some thought in the 1990s that digitally networked media would make the entire world a more democratic place without dictatorships, there has been much to suggest that this was an overblown thesis. Internet diffusion and adoption has been uneven globally, inevitably leading to *digital divides* on several geographical, cultural, and social levels. Furthermore, repressive governments can censor and monitor the net, and use it to manifest and strengthen their power. Digital media, like any other media, are entangled in a mesh of identity politics, permeated by race, gender, sexuality, place, nationality, and numerous other stratifications. As discussed in <u>Chapter 1</u>, media use is always contextualised and situated. The world is an unequal place divided by economics, language, class, gender, race, national borders, access to technology, and electricity, as well as conflicts over values, beliefs, and interests. Indeed, massive forces such as global capitalism, flows of migration, religion, the environment, international tourism, peoples' identities, and so on — that exist regardless of 'the digital' — shape society.

The predictions in the 1990s that the internet would make the world a much better place were based on the wrongful assumption that technological changes and shifts in human relationships to these technologies were bound to generate certain forms of progressive social, cultural, and political change. This form of thinking is known as *technological determinism*. This concept fits well with a Western history of thought, which emphasises development, enlightenment, and scientific rationality. But, as argued by writer and researcher Evgeny Morozov (2011: 291):

Throughout history, new technologies have almost always empowered and disempowered particular political and social groups, sometimes simultaneously — a fact that is easy to forget under the sway of technological determinism. Needless to say, such ethical amnesia is rarely in the interests of the disempowered.

Countering technological determinism, one must realise that technologies are merely tools rather than agents, and that tools can always be used for both 'good' and 'bad' purposes. For example, it is just as possible that the internet works to promote ignorance as it does to promote knowledge. As argued by computer philosopher Jaron Lanier (2010: 49), technology is dependent on what is put into it:

Some of my colleagues think a million, or perhaps a billion, fragmentary insults will eventually yield wisdom that surpasses that of any well-thought-out essay, so long as sophisticated secret statistical algorithms recombine the fragments. I disagree. A trope from the early days of computer science comes to mind: garbage in, garbage out.

Similarly, social psychologists Katelyn McKenna and John Bargh (2000: 6) use the example of television to once again make the point that the context and motivations of users — rather than technology in itself — decide what social effects the internet will have. They write:

Television can link a world together and help bring down the Berlin wall, but it is also fertile ground for the cultivation of couch potatoes. The Internet can bring people of like interests and minds together in ways heretofore unseen, but those similarities can range from a past history of sexual abuse among people in great need of anonymous social support, to virulent hatred of other racial groups.

The 1990s prophecies also assumed that the technological properties of the internet specifically — its global reach, its interactivity, its relative uncontrollability — would be of particular importance. This concept is known as *internet centrism*. This backgrounds the more gradual historical development of several other media technologies, such as the telephone, television, the VCR, or the fax machine. These technologies may also have contributed to lowering barriers to obtaining knowledge and the establishment of social connections. Morozov (2011) underlines the importance of letting go of internet centrism in order to save the internet from 'authoritarianism'.

The two factors of technological determinism and internet centrism were important reasons why the prophecies of an internet-based 'brave new world' were never fully realised. In spite of the complexities and changing character of the relationship between internet and society, there is strong evidence which points to the firm conclusion that society in general shapes the internet more than the other way around (Curran 2012a). This explains why most predictions about society based on technological changes are not fulfilled: they are based on inference from the digital technology as such, rather than from evidence about what people actually do with technology, and vice versa.

Bursting Bubbles

In the late 1990s, when cyberoptimism was running high, shares in the emerging IT companies were predicted to guarantee everyone's wealth and prosperity in the future, and became incredibly popular investments. Starting around 1998, stock markets in the industrialised nations of the Western world saw the nominal value of the NASDAQ index soar to extreme levels, and there was much talk of a 'dot-com bubble'. This bubble burst, as the stock market collapsed in the late winter of 2000, and the value of equities reached their low point in 2003. Some tech companies died, while a lucky few survived. Since then, of course, many new IT companies have entered the market, and it is no secret that from time to time, there is still quite some optimism over digital business opportunities.

A few years ago, internet scholar Geert Lovink (2011) argued that yet another bubble had now burst. He referred to the overblown idea of the internet as a completely open, unregulated, and exceptional sphere. Lovink pointed to other critical theorists, such as Jodi Dean, who have also argued that social media might not actually be the new frontier of free speech. Where many had expected to see these technologies establish new forms of direct democracy, increased participation and creativity, and the destabilisation of old hierarchies of power, there were instead areas where a proliferation of social control and commercialisation emerged, as users found themselves inside the 'echo chambers' of *communicative capitalism*. Communicative capitalism, says Dean (2010), is a social system where lots of content is indeed produced by people freely and openly, yet this lacks any substantial potency to transform society and drive it in a better direction. Lovink (2011: 1) proclaimed that 'the forgettable Web 2.0 saga has run its course'.

While there had been hype surrounding social media during large parts of the 2000s, the turn of the decade around 2010 saw a sea change in discourse about the internet and social media. Discussions became much more conflict-ridden in the wake of surveillance scandals, targeted advertising, increased commercialisation, and debates over net neutrality. As you can see, the pendulum of cyberoptimism and cyberpessimism swings back and forth. We have witnessed this throughout history at every point during which a new technology has been introduced within wider society. It encourages polarisation – there are those people who see all of its advantages, as well as people who see nothing but problems and risks. This cycle has repeated itself many times: when assembly-line production replaced mechanised agriculture, when new means of transportation by water, rail, road, or air have been introduced, when steam power was challenged by electric power, and then nuclear power. Similar attitudes have been seen with new advances within medicine (such as vaccination, surgery, and cloning), as well as communications technologies, from the earliest use of the telegraph and the telephone, through radio and television, and on to the digital. Technology and media researcher Adam Thierer (2010: 61) writes that:

The cycle goes something like this: A new technology appears. Those who fear the sweeping changes brought about by this technology see a sky that is about to fall. These 'techno-pessimists' predict the death of the old order (which, ironically, is often a previous generation's hotly-debated technology that others wanted slowed or stopped). [...] [The optimists], by contrast, look out at the unfolding landscape and see mostly rainbows in the air. Theirs is a rose-colored world in which the technological revolution du jour improves the general lot of mankind. If something must give, then the old ways

be damned!

Indeed, the efforts by researchers, writers, and public intellectuals to make sense of the evolving digital society fall into two broad positions: one celebratory and one sceptical. I call these 'positions' as, although some people clearly belong firmly within one of these camps, some of them have spent time in both (McChesney 2013: 4). I also think that many people considering the impact of digital media on the social can switch between the different positions depending on the context under consideration.

The Surrender of Culture To Technology

The clash between cyberpessimism and cyberoptimism can be traced back to two books published in the early to mid-1990s: *Technopoly* (1992) by Neil Postman and *Being Digital* (1995) by Nicholas Negroponte.

The subtitle of *Technopoly* was *The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, and within its pages Postman presented a very negative outlook on the emerging digital society and what would become of it. Reading his book presents the image that he did not like technology at all, and neither did he like those who glorified it. He certainly believed, however, that it plays an important role in society:

New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think about. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think with. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop. (Postman 1992: 20)

These attitudes towards technology are clearly in line with Postman's media ecological perspective (as discussed in <u>Chapter 1</u>). Similar to McLuhan, Postman saw media (technologies) as 'extensions of man' — as what we think through and with. But in his 1992 book he feared that this extension would take us over completely. When writing about 'technopoly' he defines it as 'the submission of all forms of cultural life to the sovereignty of technique and technology' (1992: 52). In his dystopian vision of what would happen if the technologisation of society was to advance unfettered, he painted a grim picture where technology commands culture, the defences that protect us from the masses of information 'generated by technology' have crumbled, and where we turn to technology itself to protect us from the monster.

This critique of the mindless embracing of digital solutions to systemic problems was later to be echoed in Evgeny Morozov's book *To Save Everything, Click Here* (2013), in which he warns of the dangers of *technological solutionism*. Back in 1992, Postman worried that people had started to believe that technological progress was the same thing as human progress. One of his main concerns was that technopoly would erase the moral centre of society and replace it with a one-sided focus on efficiency and economic advancement. He wrote (1992: 179) that it 'casts aside all traditional narratives and symbols that suggest stability and orderliness, and tells, instead, of a life of skills, technical expertise, and the ecstasy of consumption'.

In stark contrast to Postman's ideas of a technopoly, Negroponte's *Being Digital* stands as one of the early key texts of cyberoptimism. Programmatically, Negroponte formulated many of the positive and hopeful ideas about digital media that were floating around at the time. He stated (1995: 230) that when people are 'being digital', 'previously impossible solutions become viable'. Decentralisation would become the organising principle and defining logic for all of society, and a participatory mindset would flood every corner of the world. Society was to become harmonised: there would be collaboration instead of competition, and everyone — so it seemed — was to become empowered. For Negroponte, there are three key components to this recipe for success: access, mobility, and the ability to effect change. He wrote that being digital was not simply about retrieving various types of information from

online repositories. Instead, it was much more about the emergence of communities that would create 'a totally new, global social fabric' 1995: 183).

Digital natives?

In a famous article, education consultant Marc Prensky (2001) coined the term 'digital native'. His main point was that young people at the time, people born in the early 1980s and later, were 'native speakers' of the 'language' of digital platforms — computers, video games, social media, etc. Prensky argued that there would be clashes between the digital natives and members of older generations — the 'digital immigrants' — in the home, in schools, and in the workplace. He said that this poses challenges for education in the 21st century.

There are some obvious flaws with this line of reasoning. For example, one can't be sure that a person's digital skills are the sole result of which generation he or she belongs to. Many other divides, such as education, social class, geographical place, and so on, may play just as big a part. It is not necessarily the case that people born before the 1980s will be generally slower in mastering the digital. Early exposure to a given technology is no guarantee that you will be highly skilled at it. Still, Prensky's conceptual pair underlines the important social division that some people were in fact born into a world where the internet already existed, while others were not. I expect many readers of this book to be 'digital natives' in Prensky's sense, and to you some of the debates introduced in this chapter may seem outdated. I will argue, however, that these disputes still live on today to put their mark on digital society.

Similar to Postman, Negroponte was sure that computers and the internet — 'like a force of nature' — would bring about unprecedented social and cultural transformations, whether we like it or not. The difference between these authors is that Negroponte (1995: 227) did not see this as a bad thing, even though he concedes that 'every technology or gift of science has a dark side'. He writes about the 'ultimate triumph' of the digital age and envisions how:

your right and left cuff links or earrings may communicate with each other by low orbiting satellites and have more computer power than your present PC. Mass media will be redefined by systems for transmitting and receiving personalized information and entertainment. Schools will change to become more like museums and playgrounds for children to assemble ideas and socialize with other children all over the world. (1995: 6)

He also envisaged that we would interact with human-computer interfaces that are like:

a well-trained English butler. The 'agent' answers the phone, recognizes the callers, disturbs you when appropriate, and may even tell a white lie on your behalf. The same agent is well trained in timing, versed in finding the opportune moments, and respectful of idiosyncrasies. People who know the butler enjoy considerable advantage over a total stranger. That is just fine. (1995: 150)

From Negroponte's perspective, which is clearly very different from that of Postman, the aggregated power of the growth and advancement of technology will make the world a fantastic place where there will be no contradiction between work and play, love and duty, self-expression and group work.

Monkeys Running the Show

There is a clearly identifiable genre of literature following in the Postman technopoly tradition. The writers of these books generally conceive digital media as contributing to a number of negative things: An abundance of information will be generated as an end in itself, in volumes that people will not be able to process. The digital platforms will most likely be (mis)used for abusive purposes. Society will become more fragmented and polarised. In his book *Digital Vertigo* (2012), Andrew Keen writes about how social media have not actually empowered people. Rather, they have contributed to weakening and dividing us. He argues that being connected through the often superficial networks on social media platforms only makes us lonelier.

A similar view was expressed more than ten years earlier by Clifford Stoll in the book *High-Tech Heretic* (1999). Here, Stoll claims that the use of computers and the internet will make people isolated, addicted, unhappy, and generally dissatisfied with life. What connections we make online might merely be illusions of any real companionship. Technology researcher Sherry Turkle writes in *Alone Together* (2011) about how mobile phones and other gadgets make people focus on their devices instead of face-to-face interactions, even when they are in physical places 'together' with other people. She writes that digital communication used to be a substitute for other more direct forms — we could send an email instead of talking to someone directly if they happened to be unavailable at the time. Today, she argues, digital communication has become the mode of choice even for communication within families or among people who share the same office space.

Exercise

In the early days of the internet, it might have been easier than today to claim that the odd nerds who were glued to their bulky computers risked becoming isolated from the real world. In the age of social media and smartphones, however, it has become increasingly difficult to legitimately claim that being online is an asocial activity. But more recently, researchers such as Turkle have argued that other aspects of always-on social media and gadgets disconnect people from true togetherness. Think about your own experiences of these things. In what ways is your social life extended and enriched through digital tools and platforms? To what extent do you risk missing out on important things in life because of social media and the internet? What ways are there to balance your use to make it as rewarding as possible?

The pessimistic perspective also assumes that the potential for bottom-up mobilisation through digitally networked media will be thwarted by the dominance of proprietary models of production. Keen has written about this more recently in *The Internet is Not the Answer* (2015), and while he recognises that the internet and the web were consciously designed to be without a centre, he argues that money and power has made it possible for the 'alien overlords of our digital age' to make the digital future as hierarchical as the analogue past (Keen 2015: 301). Morozov (2011) also discusses how authoritarian strategies may thrive on the internet. He argues that, while the internet's decentralised character might have made it much harder for governments to censor what people say, it may at the same time have made propaganda much more effective.

But Keen does not only warn about the internet giants. In a previous book, *The Cult of the Amateur* (2007), he also argues that the rising tide of user-created content and its rapid circulation will undermine the authority of experts and professionals, and thereby destroy both our economy and our societal values. When no one is filtering the information available online, and upholding certain moral and intellectual standards, we are in a situation where the 'monkeys are running the show' (2007: 9).

Being an amateur, as in non-professional, creator of content is not something that all people see as negative; neither does everyone think that undermining established expertise is always a bad thing. So saying that 'the monkeys are running the show' is of course a provocative statement. Lovink (2011: 7), for one, thinks that Keen 'comes off as a grumpy and jealous representative of the old media class'. Yet Keen seems quite convinced that web 2.0 is a negative force, as it challenges mainstream media with its relativism. Where the cyberoptimist perspective sees social media as a potential contributor to democratisation, participation, and the emergence of a new public sphere, Keen (2007: 68) feels that:

The YouTubification of politics is a threat to civic culture. It infantilizes the political process, silencing public discourse and leaving the future of government up to thirty-second video clips shot by camcorder-wielding amateurs with political agendas.

While proponents of the optimist perspective would claim that 'amateurs with political agendas' will in fact revitalise and save, rather than threaten, civic culture, Keen is clearly of a different opinion. Eli Pariser is also worried about the future. He writes in *The Filter Bubble* (2011) of how the evolution of Google and social media, with their underlying algorithms (more on algorithms in <u>Chapter 12</u>), offers people a personalised and filtered version of

reality where all search results and other information that they are served reinforces their already existing values as well as their view on the world. This compartmentalisation and customisation erodes the common ground that people need to share in order to build community and to engage in democratic politics. The 'googlisation' of social reality comes with a lot of problems, one being that the things that we hold to be true are seldom challenged, which reduces our drive and desire to try to understand others and to incorporate alternate ways of thinking and seeing. An element of randomness is needed if we are to discover new things (Jarvis 2009; Vaidhyanathan 2011).

Furthermore, the possibility of being anonymous, the liberating potential of which is celebrated within the optimist perspective, is seen from the pessimist perspective as contributing to a debasement of culture as it removes personal accountability. Some of these criticisms echo century-old worries over the proliferation of a superficial and consumerist 'mass culture' that will dumb down people and make them into nothing more than passive consumers. This is the topic of Nicholas Carr's book *The Shallows* (2010), in which he argues that our brains and minds are reshaped in a negative way by 'the crazy quilt of web content'. He writes that we will develop shorter attention spans, become more distracted, and therefore also less able to experience 'actual' things such as love, hate, compassion, and pleasure. Similar to Max Weber's dystopic imaginary of a future in the 'iron cage' of ice-cold rationality, Carr predicts that 'calculative thinking' will marginalise all other ways of thinking. The frenzied development of digital technologies — similar to that of other technologies preceding them in history — poses a risk that the very essence of humanity, in the form of empathy, contemplation, and reflection, is suffocated. He raises a warning that maybe we shouldn't welcome the digital 'frenziedness into our souls' (2010: 222).

In his book *You Are Not a Gadget* (2010), Jaron Lanier is also concerned about the loss of humanity within the digital machinery. He fears that real people will be replaced by abstract automated functions, and that we will stop being individuals, and instead be dissolved into 'numb mobs' which will exist in 'the lifeless world of pure information'. Lanier (2010: ix) writes that the unfortunate fate of any digital content we produce today is that it will be:

minced into atomized search-engine keywords within industrial cloud computing facilities located in remote, often secret locations around the world. They will be copied millions of times by algorithms designed to send an advertisement to some person somewhere who happens to resonate with some fragment of what I say. They will be scanned, rehashed, and misrepresented by crowds of quick and sloppy readers into wikis and automatically aggregated wireless text message streams. Reactions will repeatedly degenerate into mindless chains of anonymous insults and inarticulate controversies. Algorithms will find correlations between those who read my words and their purchases, their romantic adventures, their debts, and, soon, their genes. Ultimately these words will contribute to the fortunes of those few who have been able to position themselves as lords of the computing clouds.

With this, Lanier sums up many of the main points of the cyberpessimist perspective: atomisation, information overload, detachment, commercialisation, speed and sloppiness, automation, aggregation, degeneration, mindlessness, anonymity, controversy, capitalism. And while one might not agree with all of the pessimist arguments, Lanier's bottom line poses a relevant provocation to the social media economy of compulsive visibility and circulation: 'You have to be somebody before you can share yourself' (2010: xiii).
The Wisdom of the Crowd

Just as this variety of cyberpessimistic literature has flourished in the wake of perspectives such as that of Postman, a variety of predominantly optimistic accounts have been published following Negroponte. The perspectives presented in these books are generally about how digital media are effective tools for liberation, empowerment, self-actualisation, and participation. The authors of these books often acknowledge the 'dark side' of the internet and social media to some extent, but their main focus is on embracing amateur creativity, the openness and 'smartness' of digital networks, and the idea that everything will be better if we just let people connect with each other to get, as well as generate, knowledge. Those in opposition to this view often claim that it is 'uncritical' to simply assume that all of these fantastic things will magically happen as long as the tools are in place. Sometimes cyberoptimist writers are mockingly called 'evangelists' and their message is said to be bordering on, in the words of Morozov (2011: 276), 'quasi-religious discourse'.

Philosopher and media scholar Pierre Lévy (1997) is known for using the term *collective intelligence* to refer to the product of people pooling their resources, in the form of knowledge and agency, online. In *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2004), James Surowiecki drew further on Lévy's key idea and argued that collective thinking will always give better results than individual thinking. He argued that no matter how brilliant or skilled a person may be, insights, solutions, and decisions will always be better if we are thinking and acting collectively. People connect and share resources and creativity to generate what writer and consultant Clay Shirky (2010) calls a *cognitive surplus*.

Collective intelligence

When defining 'collective intelligence', Pierre Lévy (1997) starts from the idea that no one knows everything, but everyone knows something, and argues that this collective knowledge can be harnessed through digital media. When people are networked and share things, it results in a form of intelligence that, according to Lévy, is universally distributed, coordinated in real time, and constantly enhanced. This enables an effective mobilisation of people's skills for political as well as other creative purposes. Lévy's vision is similar to what actually seemed to become a reality some four years after the publication of his book, when Wikipedia was launched. The open and collectively editable online encyclopaedia is in several respects a prime example of his vision. Lévy wrote that digital media would make people members of a shared virtual universe of knowledge that they would foster together. The social tie was to become the most important currency in the society of the future. He argued that collective intelligence will disrupt the power of government and lead to a diversification of knowledge and motivations. The utopian result would be a form of real-time democracy, where knowledge is no longer 'padlocked like a treasure' but instead 'pervades everything, is distributed, mediatized, [and] spreads innovation wherever it is found' (1997: 212). This prophecy may or may not have become a reality in different settings in digital society throughout the last couple of decades.

Obviously, this view flies in the face of that of Keen and the like. In Lévy's, Surowiecki's, and Shirky's view, having 'the monkeys running the show' seems to be the best outcome that could occur. Surowiecki's argument means that we must get past the focus on experts and professionals. When crowds make wise decisions, there is a tendency to give a few prominent or smart individuals of the group credit, when the power and wisdom actually comes from the crowd itself. So, this perspective turns the fear of 'amateurs' taking over on its head, and legal scholar Cass Sunstein's book *Infotopia* (2006) does the same with the dread of

information overload. Sunstein predicts a revolution as information is aggregated and knowledge is accumulated online. He acknowledges that people's online strategies may indeed lead to problems — extremism, errors, complacency, withdrawal into 'information cocoons' (cf. the filter bubble), etc. — but he maintains that the internet has made it possible for diverse groups of people to participate in creative processes that will benefit everyone. For Sunstein, open source science is a central aspect of this, which programmer and scientist Michael Nielsen develops in *Reinventing Science* (2012). Here, Nielsen promotes the notion that we are entering an entirely new era with regards to how knowledge is generated. This decentralised networked logic will affect all of society.

All of these perspectives that I have outlined above are related to an increased focus in the debate on society being based on participation with the help of media, rather than on people's passive consumption of media. The power comes from the ways in which the digitally networked tools, and the participatory mindset that is assumed to come along with them, become embedded in our everyday lives.

Clay Shirky has said that the tools become socially interesting at the point when they become technologically boring.² Shirky conceives the introduction of the internet and social media as one of the great communication revolutions in our history. It is the first medium that has far-reaching support for many-to-many communication, rather than one-to-one or one-to-many communication. In this ecology, the audience can be become producers. We can note the connection here to previously discussed concepts such as Toffler's (1980) 'prosumer' and Bruns' (2008) 'produsage'. This is important for things such as creativity and cultural expression, but also for society in general. When events or disasters happen today, be it earthquakes or protests, governments often learn from citizens about these events through digital media, rather than the other way around. The digital communication tools enable swift, smart, and virtually unstoppable coordination among the networked users. As Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams, authors of *Wikinomics* (2006), write: 'Mass collaboration changes everything.'

² <u>www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cellphones_twitter_facebook_can_make_history</u>.

Even though the internet might not change literally everything, at least it can bring about some important changes in how people can create, communicate, and network. David Gauntlett, in *Making is Connecting* (2011), discusses how web 2.0 tools have provided people with free or inexpensive easy-to-use platforms that enable them to share and circulate their creations online. The architecture and user-base of popular platforms, such as YouTube, WordPress, or Flickr, makes it easy for like-minded people to find each other. In addition, functions that allow for commenting, liking, responding, or subscribing, facilitates making connections and building relationships or collaborations. While Gauntlett's main focus is on 'makers' from an arts and crafts perspective, the logic is certainly valid for all connections made through digital media platforms. We see new forms of participatory patterns spreading throughout society.

During the last decade, this has obviously happened more than once, for example in those cases where ordinary citizens stage rapidly coordinated street protests (Shirky 2008: 310). It happens in any context where evolving digital communication technologies are used for agile real-time coordination. Technology writer Howard Rheingold calls these groups *smart mobs*. These groups use 'swarming' strategies, and he exemplifies this by referring to how anti-globalisation activists used mobile phones in the protests during the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999:

Individual members of each group remained dispersed until mobile communications drew them to converge on a specific location from all directions simultaneously, in coordination with other groups. (Rheingold 2002: 162)

In summary, then, the cyberoptimistic perspective focuses on the good and beneficial things provided by the use of the internet and social media, such as affordances for helping people connect their different resources, skills, and knowledge in empowering ways. Networked publics are enabled to think and act collectively within a communication infrastructure that encourages participation, creativity, and sharing. The subjects and information that are circulated may also pose challenges to traditional ways of doing things. The division between experts and amateurs is challenged in all fields of society as a result of the positive impact of digital technologies. Connections, sharing, participation, peer production, coordination, creativity, mobilisation — these are some of the buzzwords crucial to the optimist view on how the internet and social media will change society for the better. As networks grow larger, as more people own smartphones, as the tweets keep coming, humanity will harmonise into a global community, where everyone is a creator and where everybody has a voice.

Peer production

In his book *The Wealth of Networks* (2006), legal scholar Yochai Benkler describes the changes in terms of a more general development towards a form of 'peer production'. He argues that this form of non-professional and non-market production has been enabled by the digitally networked environment. The internet and social media enable 'radically decentralized, collaborative, and nonproprietary' forms of production wherein individuals that are loosely connected with each other make things together, beyond things like 'market signals or managerial commands' (2006: 60). People have always been engaged in non-market production, but the significantly lowered thresholds for acquiring the tools to do so, as well as connecting with large numbers of other people, sees a huge upscaling of this phenomenon. Networked publics can perform much more complex tasks than their analogue predecessors. People participate and contribute based on their own interests, as they are motivated not by money, but by social and psychological forces. They think that it's fun, exciting, or in other ways rewarding. Naturally, the motivations and rewards can differ widely from contributor to contributor. According to Benkler, the quintessential example of this form of production can be found in the free software and open source movements, but Wikipedia is also a good example. Today, the peer production model is expanding into every domain of economy, society, and culture. Benkler predicts that peer production will change the dominant mode of market production.

Phenomena such as Wikipedia, the Occupy Movement ('we are the 99%'), and the overthrowing of dictatorships through alleged Facebook and Twitter revolutions are often referred to as evidence — 'exhibits A and B through Z', communications researcher Robert McChesney (2013: 8) writes — that all of the optimistic predictions are true. In this light, those turning instead to the pessimist perspective are Luddites and technophobes. So again, we are stuck in the dead-end of technological determinism. Optimists will say that if we just add digital, we can rest assured that everything will be fine. Quite famously, Wael Ghonim, who was one of the most prominent activists during the Egyptian revolution in 2011, said in a television interview:

if you want to liberate a society, just give them the internet. If you want to have a free society, just give them the internet.³

That view might be true to some extent, in specific historical settings, and in relation to some specific media ecologies. But we also know that if the communication of the revolution goes on Facebook, the power to shut Facebook down, and the communication of the revolution with it, lies in the hands of a small number of people with the right credentials. Writers such as Morozov (2011), Rebecca MacKinnon (2012), and Virginia Eubanks (2011) remind us that the use of digital platforms will not necessarily lead to democratic revolutions all over the world. Similarly, just because it is easy to start a blog, this does not make everyone a blogger. And if blogs start to become a significant part of the public sphere, it is likely that this excludes many, many more people than it gives voice to. If everyone in the world was on Twitter, and everyone was an avid and literate user of hashtags, we might have a case. But only a small fraction of the global population is on Twitter, and the majority of people there don't use hashtags with any particular agenda in mind. One might legitimately ask: The wisdom of which crowd? The intelligence of what collective?

³ <u>https://youtu.be/JS4-d_Edius</u>.

Exercise

In the <u>next section</u>, I will argue — maybe not very surprisingly — that the reasonable perspective on the internet and social change lies somewhere in the balance between the pessimistic and optimistic positions. But before reading that, give some thought to your own views on this. Do you agree firmly with one of the perspectives, while clearly disagreeing with the other? If not, which aspects of the respective perspectives do you find the most compelling and why? Do you find the debate obsolete or antiquated? Is one perspective more relevant than the other in some cases or contexts, and if so, how and when?

Middle Ground

As with all sociality, the effects of the internet come down to the individual, relational, and contextual aspects of the interaction. Robert McChesney (2013: 4) agrees that both the celebrants and the sceptics are heading down a dead-end street, when they instead could just take the best of what each position can offer. This is of course a sensible and pragmatic position.

Due to its decentralised structure, and because of the volume of its networked publics, the internet has an enormous potential for transforming society. But sometimes this potential is undermined leading to what McChesney (2013: 5) describes as 'a world, at worst, where one could logically wish the computer had never been invented'. Morozov (2013: 21) presents a similar argument, pointing to the problem that 'the Internet' is all too often treated as a mythical entity:

As it happens, Internet skeptics and optimists share quite a lot of common ground; both depend on some stable notion of 'the Internet' to advance their arguments. Remove that notion, along with its simplistic assumptions about the inherent benefits of openness or publicness, and the pundits are suddenly forced to confront complex empirical matters.

Morozov definitely has a point here, and it is not only internet centrism which is problematic, but also the technological determinism that both the optimistic and the pessimistic perspective are often guilty of. Like McLuhan, who saw the medium as being the message, many writers and commentators often seem to disregard — or at least place within brackets — the crucial fact that digital media are themselves mediated. They are filtered and shaped by the context in which they are put to use, by culture and by ideas. Digital media are shaped by society. Castells (1996: 5) writes:

Indeed, the dilemma of technological determinism is probably a false problem, since technology is society, and society cannot be understood or represented without its technological tools.

So he means that we have to deal with media as environments and environments as media, as I have argued in the <u>first chapter</u> of this book. We must then deal with quite 'complex empirical matters', as Morozov pointed out in the quote above. Counterintuitive as it might seem, the digitisation of society is just as much a social and cultural process as it is technological. As Castells (1996: 2) writes, the 'social changes are as dramatic as the technological and economic processes of transformation'.

In his book *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It* (2008), legal scholar Jonathan Zittrain is both optimistic and pessimistic about this. He is optimistic because the internet can be 'generative'. By this he means that the internet, both at the level of individual users and at the network level, has a capacity to 'produce unanticipated change through unfiltered contributions from broad and varied audiences' (2008: 70). But this was mainly because the early internet had a 'chaotic design' which fostered innovation and disruption. Today, Zittrain

(2008: 3) says, the internet is becoming a network of control with 'sterile appliances' tethered to it. Commercialisation and regulation has made it harder for people to identify as contributors and participants. Similarly, Lanier celebrates the early internet for giving rise to unique and special expressions of identity, not like the formulaic and template-driven identity expressions promoted by web 2.0. Everyone's Facebook page looks roughly the same, while personal homepages in the late 1990s were much less uniform. Today, there is a risk that we lose the individual human dimension to our online selves (Lanier 2010). Both Zittrain and Lanier do indeed like the internet, but not the direction of its development. Zittrain (2008: 150) argues that the 'mainstream success' of the internet has brought in people without connection to 'the open ethos' that was characteristic of the early web.

Legal scholar Lawrence Lessig also identifies the increased regulation of the internet as the main threat to its future. In his book *Code* (2006), he writes that while it was true that the original internet could not be controlled or regulated, since then, innumerable systems for identification, authentication, and for managing credentials have contributed to pushing the internet along a regulatory path. His conclusion is that, even though one might be optimistic about the potentials of the internet, it is becoming more and more regulated, not least under the influence of commerce. Tim Wu, another legal scholar, describes how information technologies have typically progressed throughout history from being somebody's hobby to becoming somebody's industry. This means also, he claims, that media typically go from being 'a freely accessible channel to one strictly controlled by a single corporation or cartel' (Wu 2010: 6). Digital media is no exception, since it is also in the process of transitioning from being an open to a closed system. Such transitions do not always have to be linear either, because media systems may be cyclically opened, and closed again.

Thierer argues that many of the perspectives introduced in the debates over the internet are elitist. Many of them tend to overstate the severity of the problems they identify, and thus formulate static rather than dynamic views. Instead, Thierer (2011) suggests that a perspective based on 'pragmatic optimism' is best. He argues that the future is always messy, unstable, and unknowable, which means that we must embrace not exactly knowing what will happen. We must try to downplay extreme optimism as well as extreme pessimism in order to formulate a sensible perspective on when and how digital media contributes to a transformation of the social.

Further Reading

Lindgren, Simon (2013). *New Noise*. New York: Peter Lang.

In my 2013 book on developing a perspective on what I call 'digital disruption', there are lots of theoretical discussions and case studies that relate to balancing between cyberoptimism and cyberpessimism. My main argument is that the issue of how digital media affects society (and the other way around) must remain an empirical question, the response to which can vary from context to context.

Lanier, Jaron (2010). *You Are Not a Gadget*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Lanier's manifesto is still, after some years, very readable and thought-provoking. He provides a criticism of web 2.0 in the form of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and of things like Wikipedia, citizen journalism, and file sharing. While pessimistic, its prose about how 'computing cloud overlords' will exploit a vast majority of 'digital serfs' who are uploading content for free — and of how the standardised identity templates of social media sites are ruining our souls — is a good example of well-argued cyberpessimism.

Morozov, Evgeny (2013). To Save Everything, Click Here. New York: Public Affairs.

Morozov's claim to fame was his book *The Net Delusion* (2011), in which he argued strongly against technological determinism. His point was that technology is what people make of it. In the book recommended here, he criticises 'internet centrism' and 'technological solutionism' — the underlying ways of thinking that make 'the net delusion' possible.

4 Interaction and Identity

Key questions

- What is unique about computer-mediated communication when compared to other modes of communication?
- What are the key issues in the social psychology of digital society?
- How do the internet and social media change the conditions under which we form our identities?
- What is the role of relative invisibility and anonymity for how people interact and form their identities online?

Key concepts

Interactivity * interaction * disembodiment * online identity * asynchronous communication * online disinhibition * invisibility * anonymity * hyperpersonal interaction

In spite of the debates that were described in the <u>previous chapter</u>, the internet and social media, the key technologies of digital society, have in any case hugely transformed the conditions for mediated communication between people. This goes for one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, and many-to-many communication. The changes, however, have not only been quantitative, but also qualitative. In this chapter, I will focus on how computer-mediated communication introduces a number of new features into the ways through which individuals and groups function together.

From the perspective of consumption, the internet and social media have given rise to new textual experiences, through new genres and forms such as online multiplayer computer games, YouTube clips, tweets, memes, and animated gifs. Mobile phones, digital cameras, touchscreens, and so on, also offer new ways of representing the world around us. As discussed in previous chapters, digitally networked media also alter patterns of social organisation and production, of distributing and consuming content, and contribute to a range of other dislocations and transformations in society.

As we shall see in this chapter, digital society also changes the parameters of *social interaction*. While the internet and social media might share some characteristics with earlier media, such as words written on paper or telephone conversations, they also bear specific characteristics that contribute to altering how we see ourselves and how we act when we socialise with others. While I have already touched upon these issues in previous chapters, this chapter sees us diving deeper into the social psychology of digital society.

Active Users, Mutual Relations

When computer-mediated communication is defined in relation to older and other forms of communication, the characteristic that is most often highlighted is its *interactivity*. Media that are interactive offer their users the ability and potential to directly intervene in the content in different ways. Traditional mass communication is not very interactive at all, whereas telephone conversations are highly interactive, but with a very small audience. In digital society, the internet and social media enable interactive forms of communication among a large number of people.

First, people can interact with the content of digital media. Even though the internet has plentiful content that can simply be passively absorbed, it also offers a variety of content that enables, or even demands, that the user actively does something with it, or to it. The things that we can do range from navigating, playing, experimenting, and exploring, to actually creating things such as images, edits, status updates, comments, tags, and so on.

Interaction

Interaction is one of those concepts which are often used, but seldom very well defined. From a sociological perspective, as stated by classic social psychologist George Herbert Mead, interaction is what goes on when people do things in relation to each other. Social actions were defined by Weber (see <u>Chapter 2</u>) as behaviour that is oriented towards the behaviour of others. Mead (1934: 45) draws on that perspective when writing about 'the social act' as 'the interaction of different forms, which involves, therefore, the adjustment of the conduct of these different forms to each other, in carrying out the social process'. In other words, interaction medium is structured, from the communication setting, or from how users think and act. Interactivity will be seen in somewhat different ways, and is studied from different perspectives, depending on which of these dimensions one is interested in. If we use the perspective introduced in <u>Chapter 1</u> on media as environments, and environments as media, these dimensions flow together. In sum, when a communication environment is interactive, it implies that participants can control — modify the form and content of — the environment, and that the roles of sender and receiver are interchangeable.

Even if the word 'interaction', or 'interactivity', might be used to refer to things like humancomputer interaction, and in fields such as multimedia and game design, I use it in this book to refer to a change in the nature of media 'audiences' or users. Because even if people in the pre-internet age could have interactive relationships with analogue media such as books, films, radio shows, and television programmes, the coming of digital media extends this interactivity. In other words, we focus here on the 'social interactivity' of digital media their ability to enable groups and individuals to communicate with, and relate to, each other (Baym 2010: 7). New media researcher Martin Lister and colleagues (2009: 50) write that even though different users will not all share the same experience of any specific content, they collectively construct 'the text' through their discussions about it. The internet and social media enable such processes of making meaning to include larger groups of people and ever more refined ways to transform the content.

Furthermore, people can interact with each other in new ways through digital media. In 2004, just before the major breakthrough of social media including YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, informatics scholar Mikael Wiberg wrote about the emergence of an 'interaction

society'. He felt this to be a more fitting description of the present times than 'the information society'. This was because the focus of computing was shifting around the turn of the last century from information, storage and processing towards social interactions. The major shift was that the use of digital tools and platforms as a clearly delimited activity, as well as a field of expertise, started to become a pervasive and everyday activity. Wiberg (2004: 4) writes:

While computing in the 1970s was about several persons working together around one single machine to make it produce an exact result, today's computing is about several persons interacting with each other via several computers and, as such, it enables them to maintain and develop their social networks. Here, it becomes clear that also the role of the technology has changed from being in the frontline of our attention to now becoming a more pervasive technology that enables us to do new things without directing our attention to the technology *per se*. How many people think about how the phone operates 'under the shell' while they are having a phone conversation?

Users were increasingly making connections, managing contacts, and coordinating and collaborating with each other, through new technologies such as mobile phones, pagers, email, and instant messaging systems. Obviously, these technologies are what was soon to evolve into what we talk of today as social media (see <u>Chapter 2</u>).

From Body to Content

These interactive patterns are key to understanding how the widespread use of digital media and the internet changed the fabric of society around the end of the 20th century. This was obviously the case, even though perspectives differ on how dramatic the change was, and whether it was and is a good or a bad thing (as discussed in <u>Chapter 3</u>). I have also shown how this transformation was not only about the tools and platforms — email, online forums, chatrooms, blogs, social network sites, the web, etc. — but about the emergence of new social and cultural phenomena and patterns. While people have always been communicating, and, for example, emails are quite similar to analogue letters in many ways, phenomena such as 'the online forum', 'the social network site', 'the tweet', 'the link', and 'the like' are purely digital, which have changed the nature of communication, and thus culture and society.

Exercise

Think of things that you do online digitally and what their offline or (old media) counterparts would be. For example, an email is sort of a letter, a Skype conversation fills many of the functions of the traditional phone call, and watching a video on YouTube is somewhat similar to watching TV. What other parallels can you think of? What about tweets or blog posts, or things such as 'likes' or favourite markings? This exercise makes you reflect on what things the internet just enhances or simplifies, and what things are unique to it. The bottom line is: Which social things that you do in digital society would you *definitely* not be able to do in *any way whatsoever* in a non-digital world?

Sociologist Tim Jordan (2013: 1) writes about how internet technologies have given rise to 'different identities, bodies and types of messages'. In society before electronic media, people who communicated at a distance — while not being face-to-face, that is — used written language on a variety of media. Things like signatures, personal seals, particular salutations, or recognisable styles of handwriting and language use compensated for the physical body not being tangibly present. Once the telephone was introduced, new means of substituting for the presence of a physical body became relevant, such as the sound, intonation, or other characteristics of someone's voice. Jordan explains how these methods stand in contrast to what happens with communication through digital media. He argues that in communicative practices that are dependent on the internet, the identity markers, and the traces of the non-present body are much more unstable.

While the handwriting or voice of a person has a natural connection to their physical body, things like email addresses, Twitter usernames, or forum nicknames do not. In this context it becomes more and more important to be able to decipher the style of messages. The symbolic content, Jordan says, becomes more important than the physical body (or stand-ins for it) for stabilising the communication. Newly evolving forms of 'internet speak', or the use or non-use of things like emoticons, become more and more important for identifying who is the sender and receiver of a message. In the case, for example, when someone's email is hijacked by spambots, it will most of the time be rather easy for human recipients who are familiar with the owner of the mail account to decode this. If one suddenly starts getting body-part enhancement or Viagra advertisements from someone we know not to normally send across such things, the style of communication, content themes, the visual and textual form, and other markers and means for stabilising communication will reveal the hijacking.

The key social shift which is identified here is that from the body and the voice to style and content. Pre-internet communication and social interaction used the body, or substitutes for it, to validate the mediated interaction between people — to make sure that one knew who one was communicating with. On the internet, however, messages are legitimised through the style and content of communication. In today's society, both of these potentially dissonant communicative practices coexist. When we meet people face-to-face or talk to them over the phone, we recognise them by their body and voice. But when we text or email the same people, we recognise them by the style and content of what they communicate digitally.

Because of this difference, early accounts of interaction on the internet often had a tendency to focus on the *disembodied* character of the medium. The point was repeatedly made that the internet made it possible for people to make believe that they were anyone, or anything, they liked. It was also largely assumed that anyone receiving the communication lacked the information or resources needed to validate the identity of the person(s) they were engaging

with.

No One Knows You're a Dog

In the 1990s, Sherry Turkle wrote about how we were increasingly constructing our identities in a 'culture of simulation'. Her point was that:

[people online] become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction. [Digital media] provide worlds for anonymous social interaction in which one can play a role as close to or as far away from one's 'real self' as one chooses. (Turkle 1995: 12)

A very often cited cartoon from *The New Yorker* magazine in 1993 depicted two dogs in front of a computer and the caption: 'On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog'. Wikipedia credits the cartoon as being a key moment in the introduction of the internet into the minds of people other than government engineers and academics.¹ The disconnect between 'real' and 'virtual' identities was indeed crucial to early understandings of digital online interaction. The main idea was that as users of digital media leave their physical bodies behind, they can freely choose and construct their *online identities*. This also allows users to escape any expectations and norms that are tied to our offline selves. Philosopher Sadie Plant (1997: 46) wrote in her book *Zeros* + *ones* that:

¹<u>https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Internet, nobody_knows_you%27re_a_dog.</u>

Access to a [computer] terminal is also access to resources which were once restricted to those with the right face, accent, race, sex, none of which now need be declared.

Donna Haraway, a scholar of science, technology, and gender, had made similar points in her 1991 'cyborg manifesto' when she suggested that since the late 20th century, we are all 'fabricated hybrids of machine and organism' (Haraway 1991: 150). Writing from a feminist standpoint, she even claimed that we might now be living in a 'post-gender world'. Like Jordan, she argued that identity is no longer manifested with reference to anything 'natural'. Instead, *cyborg identities* are 'permanently partial' and contradictory (1991: 154). In general, then, communication on the internet was seen as establishing a distinction between an embodied self and disembodied — potentially multiple — digital selves or identities. Some have also claimed that the connection between the two sides can be very fluid. Cultural critic Mark Dery wrote in *Flame Wars* (1993: 2–3) about:

the upside of incorporeal interaction: a technologically enabled, postmulticultural vision of identity disengaged from gender, ethnicity, and other problematic constructions. Online, users can float free of biological and sociocultural determinants, at least to the degree that their idiosyncratic language usage does not mark them as white, black, college-educated, a high-school dropout, and so on.

If one looks at the ways in which many people use digital media today — to connect with each other and share things on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube — it is easy

to see that our identities are not as free-floating after all. We tend to communicate and interact quite a lot with people that we already know outside the digital setting, and our offline identity is often obvious from our profiles. The story was a bit different, however, a few decades back. Internet researcher danah boyd (2014) describes how the early adopters of the internet and the web (in the 1980s and 1990s) often entered online spaces without knowing the other people there. This was before social network sites with systems for 'friending' or 'following' certain individuals. The dominant forms were instead things like chatrooms, newsgroups, and bulletin boards, all of which were organised by topic rather than by if participants knew one another or not. Depending on whether you were interested in computer programming, electronic music, or football, you would enter a different space largely to connect with likeminded strangers. This is still the case today when people use open forums and chatrooms. In such settings, there has always been some room for experimentation by entering into different social roles and identities. Today, however, platforms that are organised around connections between individuals rather than topics have taken over much of people's activity online. As boyd (2014) has it, it was around 2003 with the major breakthrough of blogging and social network sites — that the online landscape shifted from being topically organised to being organised around social connections between people. In pre-social media online forms of communication, such as bulletin boards and forums, people were brought together by shared interests even though they might not share any other connection either online or offline. In the age of social media, however, connecting with friends rather than interests came to the forefront.

I have underlined in previous chapters that digital media and their uses today are embedded in 'real-life' social settings, and boyd's description is yet another illustration of that. While early internet sociality was more about entering chatrooms and forums with a more exploratory mindset or even at random, today's internet is increasingly anchored in the physical world. As the internet has become ever more used, the uses are more and more founded on social and economic processes that were pre-existing. This means that the anonymity afforded by the digital world does not really facilitate the creation of fantasy selves. Instead, it forms a foundation for making connections, building trust, and establishing relationships in the 'real world' (Hardey 2002: 583). In other words, if people don't know whether you're a dog or not, they might be less interested in interacting with you.

Out of Sync

Even though people's interaction over digital media today mostly is not as disembodied or fluid as some might have expected, social interaction on the internet and through social media still differs from other forms of interaction. With audio and video long since being an integral part of the internet, and with services such as Skype, Facetime, and many others enabling real-time audio and video communication, it can be argued that the online and digital interaction of today can indeed be very similar to offline and analogue interaction. Computer-mediated communication may now happen in real time, and you can potentially see the person(s) you are talking to, so that you are able to take in non-verbal cues and so on. This is all very good and practical, but it does not replace all of the traditionally 'internet' ways of relating to each other, such as the use of written language online, emoticons, digital imagery, and tags, or by liking and sharing on platforms that are much less embodied. Indeed, the parameters of interaction are altered to some degree when it happens through the natively digital forms of things like forum posts, blog posts and comments, likes or shares. So what, then, does the digital do with sociality?

One of the first things that tends to be brought up when it comes to characterising digital sociality is the fact that it is *asynchronous* — it does not really happen in real time. Even if people may use texting, chats, direct messaging, emails, and discussion forums for communicating at a steady pace, or to respond to each other the very moment that they receive a message, these digital communications do not have to take place in real time, in the same way as an offline conversation or an online video call must. The digital tools and platforms allow for delays. In some contexts, one might respond within seconds or minutes, while at other times one may take hours, days, months, or even forever to reply. These possibilities for asynchronicity lead to a 'conversational relaxation' (Walther 1996: 26). This gives users time to be more strategic about what they say, and how, which also enables more refined forms of self-presentation and self-censorship. An important aspect of digital asynchronicity, however, is that communication is still comparably guite fast. It has all the advantages of postal mail, but generally without the associated days or weeks of waiting. It may be worth reflecting upon how the liberating aspects of asynchronous communication that they allow for responding whenever it suits *us* — at the same time can be anything but liberating as they tend to increasingly demand that we respond swiftly on all of the occasions when it suits others.

The space of flows

A crucial concept in Manuel Castells' definition of 'the network society' (see <u>Chapter 5</u>) is 'the space of flows'. It refers to the fact that as communication technologies develop, being in the same place at the same time becomes less important for social interaction. We no longer need to share places and moments in time. We can still do things together. This is because physical places, and moments, are now 'connected by electronically powered communication networks through which flows of information that ensure the time-sharing of practices processed in such a space circulate and interact' (Castells 2009: 34).

Asynchronicity makes it possible for very large groups of people to have sustained interaction. This is what happens on social network sites and in various online forums and communities. Asynchronous communication also means that we don't have to deal with the immediate reaction of those we are interacting with. Psychologist John Suler (2004: 323)

argues that this makes users disinhibited. The possibility of moving in and out of a conversation — returning when we are ready and prepared — and the absence of 'a continuous feedback loop that reinforces some behaviors and extinguishes others' enables us to feel safer, and to formulate our thoughts more freely.

Online interaction can also be more democratic than face-to-face interaction. It can contribute, at least in some contexts, to minimising the role played by status and authority. Suler argues that this has to do with how authority figures express their status through their physical presence — 'in their dress, body language, and in the trappings of their environmental settings'. When we communicate online, those cues are largely absent, meaning that the impact of the authority is reduced. Suler (2004: 324) continues:

Even if people do know something about an authority figure's offline status and power, that elevated position may have less of an effect on the person's online presence and influence. [...] Although one's identity in the outside world ultimately may shape power in cyberspace, what mostly determines the influence on others is one's skill in communicating (including writing skills), persistence, the quality of one's ideas, and technical know-how.

A similar point was made in a study of video teleconferencing in the 1970s, where the conclusion was that status hierarchies and informal leadership emerged much faster and clearer in face-to-face groups than in mediated groups (Strickland et al. 1978: 593). Suler's overarching argument is that people will say and do things online that they would not say and do in offline and face-to-face settings. He writes of *the online disinhibition effect* — the effect that people tend to be less restrained and to express themselves more openly online. Obviously, this has its advantages and disadvantages: it might enable blatant hate speech, as well as it may promote participation, intimacy, and self-disclosure. So once again, digital communications bear the double-edged sword of potentially bad versus potentially good outcomes, which you will recognise from <u>Chapter 3</u>.

Exercise

Think about situations when you choose between different modes of communication to interact with friends, businesses, teachers, experts, politicians, etc. What influences your choices? When do you rather text than phone up your friend, and when is it the other way around? When would you rather chat online with your doctor than have a face-to-face appointment? Would you tweet or email to get the attention of a political leader? Such questions help you identify what is useful about different tools and platforms. For example, a group of internet researchers found in a study of Snapchat that the platform gave users emotional rewards, while it did not offer them any deeper social support. The participants in the study viewed Snapchat as a lightweight platform for sharing experiences spontaneously with people that they already trusted (Bayer et al. 2015). What other characteristics of other platforms can you think of?

Out of Sight

Another idiosyncrasy of digital sociality, especially when communication is text-based, is that it makes us largely invisible. When we use services such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, we often cannot be seen by others, nor can we see who else is there at the same time. Similarly, people who happen to be reading the same blog or looking at the same Instagram photo at the same time are also largely invisible to one another. Even though some sites, platforms, and services have indicators that display whether people are online or not, one is still physically invisible (even though sometimes represented by a profile photo or other avatar). According to something called 'social presence theory', the sense of awareness of an interaction partner is very important for the social effects of any communication medium. The theory suggests that increased social presence leads to a better perception of the person with whom we are communicating (Short et al. 1976). As discussed earlier, the lack of non-verbal cues and of other information about the communication partner, and the social context of interaction, has been thought by some to increase uninhibited communication, such as being aggressive or using foul language (Culnan & Markus 1987: 429). Still, it is a general insight from previous research on digital media that people often disclose more intimate and private things in computer-mediated communication when compared to face-to-face communication (Joinson 2001).

In contrast to how interaction happens in a classroom, for example, online invisibility means we don't have to worry about our physical appearance or the sound of our voice as we post a message. As McKenna and Bargh (2000: 64) put it: 'physical appearance does not stop potential relationships from getting off the ground'. In online interaction, other and less superficial aspects — such as similarity of values and interests, or conversational style — can determine attraction to a larger extent than in some cases of face-to-face interaction. In the best of worlds, relationships that would never have come to be in 'real life' can be fostered through the internet. McKenna and Bargh were also able to show in a study that people who had met on the internet before they met face-to-face liked each other better than people whose first encounter was face-to-face.

Likewise, we don't have to deal with verbal or non-verbal cues or reactions from our audience. No frowns, no shaking heads, no sighs, but, on the other hand, no big smiles, oohs and aahs, or applause either. Still, as in a confessional box, or much as the traditional psychoanalyst is supposed to be positioned behind the client, the lack of eye contact and face-to-face visibility alters the social psychology of the interaction context. As Suler (2004: 322) writes: 'Text communication offers a built-in opportunity to keep one's eyes averted.'

In addition to the fact that digital interaction can enable invisibility — a form of visual anonymity — it can also warrant other forms of *anonymity*. One such form is discursive anonymity, which is the situation when things that are written and posted can't be attributed to any specific and known source (Qian & Scott 2007). Of course, digital interaction is not the only mode of communication where it is possible to avoid identification. But the multitude of communication channels on the internet, in combination with the separation of users in space and time, makes it relatively easy to evade identification. With anonymity as a protective cloak, people tend to take more risks, and to express more directly what they truly think or feel. Once again, that online disinhibition. With identities concealed, we may share more intimate confidences earlier in potential relationships, and develop closeness faster than we would in face-to-face offline relationships. In fact, a number of studies undertaken in the

1990s demonstrated that people tended to forge strong friendships based on high levels of self-disclosure on the internet (Henderson & Gilding 2004: 490). Yet the same mechanism — the fact that we feel less restrained by social norms — might also lower the thresholds for expressing views and behaviours that are racist, sexist, homophobic, and so on. Anonymous interaction can be liberating, but positive as well as negative beliefs might be acted out and reinforced under such conditions.

In the Dark

Anonymity can definitely be both good and bad for social interaction. As experimental psychologist Philip Zimbardo showed in the infamous Stanford prison experiment, anonymity in groups can lead to de-individuation — the process by which individuals unknown to each other, and with concealed identities become immersed in a group dynamic — a state where people can be impulsive, blatantly aggressive towards one another and even sadistic (Zimbardo 2007). On the internet, the 'illusion of large numbers' might make us overestimate how many people share our views (McKenna & Bargh 2000: 64). We might see, for example, the number of views of a YouTube video or the number of times a tweet has been retweeted and make a rough translation between such numbers and the general legitimacy of the content.

When anonymity removes personal responsibility and generates a perceived loss of individuality, it can also lead to people becoming more altruistic and more willing to help others. In digital society, then, anonymity can be a force of unity and solidarity as well as of fragmentation and nihilism. This is a longstanding debate. Some claim that anonymous interaction in digital media is a major cause of hate speech, racism, sexism, etc., while others like to focus on how anonymity online can facilitate things like grassroots political action in places where censorship and surveillance make such mobilisation difficult. The bottom line is that de-individuation is not necessarily bad; it just makes people more affected by external cues. If the impulses coming from outside are bad, people may behave more badly if they are anonymous than if not. Similarly, if the cues are good, the behaviour can be good too.

In the evocatively titled paper 'Deviance in the Dark' from 1973, experimental social psychologists Kenneth Gergen, Mary Gergen, and William Barton explored how people function together under conditions of 'extreme anonymity'. They put the people who took part in their experiment in a dark room for about an hour. The participants did not know or see each other before the experiment, and they were not introduced to one another afterwards. Their interaction was recorded with infrared cameras and audio tape recorders, and the participants were interviewed about their experience afterwards. Then the researchers repeated the experiment with other groups and with the lights on. The results were that people in the light room found places to sit at 'appropriate' distances from one another. They kept these positions for the entire hour, and kept a continuous and focused conversation going. Many respondents reported that they became bored after a while. In the dark room, on the other hand, people were moving around fluidly and entered into a more explorative mindset. These subjects were less bored, and more open. Many of them reported afterwards that they had been talking about 'important' things. They had felt 'free' and 'serious' at the same time, half of the subjects had hugged someone, and nearly everyone had accidentally touched someone else. In a variation of the experiment, where people in the dark room were told that they would be introduced to each other once the session was over, subjects were less explorative and more bored. The researchers (Gergen et al. 1973: 38) found that these results challenged previous studies that had shown that anonymity fed aggression. They wrote:

Both laboratory and field studies have demonstrated that when a person is without markers or personal identity, when he or she becomes deindividuated in the researchers' terms, the stage is set for increased aggression. Faceless people are more likely to harm each other [...] Yet few of our subjects found anything displeasing about the experience

of anonymity. Most gained deep enjoyment [...] Anonymity itself does not seem to be a social ill. When we are anonymous we are free to be aggressive or to give affection, whichever expresses most fully our feelings at the time. There is liberation in anonymity.

This insight is quite similar to what Howard Rheingold (1993: 27) wrote about cyberspace twenty years later. He claimed it was

a place that people often end up revealing themselves far more intimately than they would be inclined to do without the intermediation of screens and pseudonyms.

In Simmel's classic essay 'The Stranger' from 1908, he wrote about a social form which unifies closeness and remoteness. This makes for a certain form of interaction. As the stranger is not bound by constituents and predispositions, (s)he

often receives the most surprising revelations and confidences, at times reminiscent of a confessional about matters which are kept carefully hidden from everybody with whom one is close. (Simmel 1971: 145)

This tension between closeness and remoteness is indeed a trait of many relations in digital society as well. On the internet, there are several possibilities to maintain anonymity at the technological level. Users might connect via servers that conceal their actual IP address, use anonymous email or messaging services, or use other forms of anonymity-enabling hardware and software. With some of these methods it is next to impossible for anyone, even with the right expertise, to reveal the true identity of someone. With others, the protection might not be as secure as the user would hope.

However, from a sociological perspective, the most interesting part of online anonymity is that even those who interact online with little to none of these protective layers tend to feel that they are quite anonymous as well. This is because when we post on a forum — even if it is easy to see the IP address behind our username — or when we upload a tweet — even if we have information about who we are on our Twitter profile — we might feel two things. First, that our activities will be drowned out by the multitude of other interactions going on at the same time, and second, that no one will bother to investigate us further, at least, not very thoroughly.

Exercise

Think about this interesting contradiction. On the one hand, some forms of social media use are celebrated for making it possible for people to come together as swarms where individuality is obscured. The coordinated actions of groups like Anonymous or Occupy illustrate this. But even aside from such movements, the relative anonymity of some digital social platforms make for powerful forms of counter-power deployed by consumers, workers, young people, and so on. On the other hand, some forms of social media use are lauded because they enable people to express their individuality and manage their identity. This is the contrary of being anonymous. So, reflect upon whether you feel that social media is primarily an anonymous or a non-anonymous set for tools for communication. How do you navigate between different degrees of disclosure depending on context? When you *feel* anonymous, do you think that you really are anonymous, technically speaking? And what about the other way around?

Hyperpersonal Interaction

Anonymity as such is of course not new, but before digital society, people generally only had the opportunity to be anonymous in random, occasional, and impersonal forms of interaction. On the internet and in social media, anonymity can be maintained in interaction that is not just brief and on a one-time-only basis. In some online environments, people can communicate over a period of time, get to know each other well, and share intimate things, while still keeping their true identities concealed. Furthermore, there is also an ongoing debate about whether the internet and social media offer any real anonymity, as users are increasingly mapped, tracked, and watched by governments, as well as corporations, who use the data for purposes ranging from surveillance to marketing.

Anonymity is not definite, since it might vary in degrees, and is shaped by the technology used to communicate. The legal name and address of a person can identify her or him uniquely, while a picture accompanying a name is more limited. With access to nothing but a nickname, identification is even harder, and so on. Media researchers Hua Qian and Craig Scott (2007), writing about blogs, make a distinction between being anonymous, pseudonymous, or identifiable. This sliding scale of disclosure means that communication in digital media allows much greater flexibility in how we construct our identities when compared to what is possible in face-to-face encounters (McKenna & Bargh 2000: 62). The ability not to have to deal with face-to-face interactions opens up many possibilities for tweaking and altering the ways in which we present ourselves to others.

Another point to explore is, as discussed previously, that the rise of web 2.0 has arrived with a decrease in the importance of anonymity online. Social media, when compared to the earlier forms of internet sociality, are more based on users being visible to each other, where our identities tend to be grounded to a larger extent in relationships with the offline friends that we also have contact with online. In the 1990s, when the web was new, the theories that were developed about online identity tended to focus on anonymity, fluidity, and openness. In line with this, behavioural scientists Samantha Henderson and Michael Gilding (2004: 492) argue that 'there is enormous scope for fabrication of appearance on the internet'.

However, it is more and more obvious today that people's online identities are not separate from their 'real identities'. So, maybe what we do on the internet and in social media can extend or augment, rather than replace or fully alter, our offline personas. Communications researcher Allison Cavanagh (2007: 121) argues that in order for the internet to function as a social network — as it does to a considerable extent today — the identities of participants need to have a certain degree of stability. This is how trust is built between people online. In Henderson and Gilding's (2004) study it was actually found that people rarely maintain anonymous identities online. Instead they use pseudonyms (the same username across platforms and over time), or their real identities, and build a reputation around that. People tend to guard their pseudonyms (nicknames) and treat them as a form of intellectual property, which they develop and maintain.

Joseph Walther, a researcher of the social and interpersonal dynamics of computer-mediated communication, also plays down the fluidity and looseness of social interaction through digital media. In the 1990s, he claimed that the difference is not that computer-mediated communication conveys less social information than face-to-face interaction, but that the difference is in the rate at which such information is conveyed. Even though it takes longer,

relationships, and other social things such as norms of conduct, can be developed online just as well as offline (Walther 1996).

Walther also found that what he called *hyperpersonal interaction* could be developed online. This is a notion which may account for why some forms of interaction though digital media sometimes are marked by higher levels of emotional intensity and self-disclosure than face-to-face interaction. He explained that people communicating digitally — with fewer cues than in face-to-face communication — might succumb to over-reliance on the information that they have. We might assume that the people we are interacting with are more similar to ourselves than they actually are, which may in turn generate feelings of closeness and lead to an idealisation of them as people. As discussed earlier, at the same time we also tend to manage our identities online in order to optimise the public image of ourselves. Because of this, Walther (1996: 27) claims, an intensification loop of 'behavioral confirmation' can be set in motion. When we idealise our interaction partner, (s)he will respond to this by further optimising their self-image, and so on. This might explain why some communications online with what ought to be seen as relative strangers might become surprisingly intimate. Walther (1996: 28–29) writes:

At the level of the sender, CMC [computer-mediated communication] partners may select and express communication behaviors that are more stereotypically desirable in achieving their social goals and transmit messages free of the 'noise' that otherwise comes with unintended appearance or behavior features. At the other end, CMC receivers take in these stylized messages, construct idealized images of their partners and relationships, and, through reciprocation, confirm them. These processes may be further enhanced when the minimal-cue interaction is also asynchronous; freed from communicating in real time, users are released from the pressure to meet.

In other words, computer-mediated communication seems to be able to make interaction either impersonal, or increasingly (hyper-)personal, and possibly anything in between. Walther writes that digital media alone do not decide which one of these forms of interaction are realised in any given situation. Rather, the internet and social media afford opportunities for people to communicate as they like.

Writing Ourselves Into Being

The affordances of social media enable us to document, display, and share our lives, and to do this in more than one fixed and specific way. Identities are always open to negotiation and, as discussed in <u>Chapter 2</u>, a key element of being in society is the management of our identities in relation to others — showing some aspects, hiding others — depending on audience, context, and situation.

Furthermore, in today's world, identity is generally more of an open issue than in many previous historical eras. Of course, identities are always formed in relation to what position the individual has within the larger cultural and economic framework of society, and they are constrained by dominant sorting systems that might be rooted in class, gender, race, sexuality, (dis)ability, and so on. Still, with interaction on the internet being potentially disinhibited, anonymous, and thus free and open, there is considerable room for people in digital society to construct and perform different features (and even versions) of themselves. This is due to the relative fluidity of the digital environment, because, as McKenna and Bargh (2000: 62) write:

it is quite difficult for a person to effect changes in his or her self-concept when the surrounding social environment (i.e., one's network of acquaintances, colleagues, family, and friends) remains static. When an individual attempts to make such changes, his or her peers may be unwilling to accept, acknowledge, and provide validation for these new self-aspects, and unless and until they do so, the new role or identity does not become real for the individual [...] Thus, interacting with others on the Internet may provide individuals with the opportunity to successfully implement wished for changes in their self-concept.

On the internet and in social media, people have the social opportunity and the technological tools for 'writing themselves into being' (Barton & Lee 2013: 84). By posting text, images, or video, by commenting on the posts of others, and when creating profiles, and so on, we are actively constructing who we are, or at least who we want to be seen as by others. The relative openness of many online settings allows for the projection of new or alternative identities, and for the extension of our offline selves in different ways. In practice, our identities will move between the online and the offline context in ways that blur the boundaries between the digital and face-to-face. Depending on which online context we interact in — which forum, which service, which mode of communication, which site, etc. we might target our identity performances towards different audiences (actual or imagined). Managing and working with identity in such ways can be seen as 'a process of exploring and discovering new aspects of the self' (Barton & Lee 2013: 85). It is important to note, however, that our own self-presentations are not the only information that is available about us online. We may also be liked, tagged, mentioned, or discussed by others. This means that anyone looking someone up with a search engine will find 'a mix of what the person has put online and information placed there by others' (Baym 2010: 112). These dynamics are further complicated by the interesting tension between what the 'old' internet was and is — largely an *archive* of traces — and new forms of ephemeral media, such as Snapchat snaps that only live for seconds, consisting not of traces, facelessness, or asynchronicity, but of pure *erasure*.

Further Reading

Baym, Nancy (2010). Personal Connections in the Digital Age. Cambridge: Polity Press.

One of the pioneers of internet research as we know it, Nancy Baym presents in this book an overview of how core relational issues between people have been disrupted by the internet and social media. She looks at things like language and non-verbal behaviour while asking whether mediated interaction can be warm and personal, and addresses issues about trust and honesty online.

Turkle, Sherry (1995). *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Turkle's modern classic from 1995 is a key reading about how people interact with computers and what the effects are of that interaction. It reads partly as a historical document, with discussions about artificial intelligence, and the relationship between humans and machines, that are very characteristic of the 1990s. Still, her analysis of multi-user online environments spawns ideas that are still useful, about misrepresenting oneself, and about the relationship between online and offline.

McKenna, Katelyn Y. A., & Bargh, John A. (2000). Plan 9 from Cyberspace: The Implications of the Internet for Personality and Social Psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 4(1), 57–75.

Henderson, Samantha, & Gilding, Michael (2004). 'I've Never Clicked This Much with Anyone in My Life': Trust and Hyperpersonal Communication in Online Friendships. *New Media & Society*, 6(4), 487–506.

Suler, John (2004). The Online Disinhibition Effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321–326.

These three papers are important for understanding the social psychology of digital society. McKenna and Bargh analyse how social interaction, social identity, and relationship formation may be different on the internet than in real life. They focus on anonymity, and on the lessened importance of appearances, distance, and time. Suler lists and discusses the different factors of online communication that interact to create a disinhibiting effect. And Henderson and Guilding specifically explore the issue of how trust is developed in online communication.

5 Communities and Networks

Key questions

- What are (online) communities and what social needs can they fulfil?
- What are (social) networks?
- What are the key differences between communities and networks?
- What is the social network revolution and how does it relate to digital media?
- How do the notions of 'network society' and 'networked individualism' overlap and differ?

Key concepts

Communities * networks * imagined communities * third places * network society * social network sites * networked individualism * mass self-communication

As we saw in the <u>previous chapter</u>, the key technologies of digital society have transformed the conditions under which people interact with each other. However, society is not only comprised of one-on-one connections between individuals. Individuals also function together in groups, communities, and networks.

People have connected and clustered together in groups since the beginning of time, and sociologists have been thinking about patterns of social relations and about how technological changes affect social cohesion since the early days of the discipline in the 19th century. Communities and networks as such are not new things, but the internet and social media have enhanced and altered the processes by which they are formed, and also enabled some new mechanisms of human association. The internet and social media offer new opportunities for people who do not share a common locale to form relationships of collaboration and bonding. Online, one does not have to look far to realise that many users clearly strive to go beyond the narrowly private sphere, reaching out to each other in different ways to create, or affiliate with, a variety of online groups. There has been much debate in internet research whether the groups that people form with the help of digital tools and platforms can be seen as 'real' social groups.

These discussions question whether 'online communities' can have similar characteristics and fulfil social functions equal to those of 'real communities'. Critics have argued that the large-scale, fragmented, asynchronous, non-face-to-face character of online interaction (see <u>Chapter 4</u>) make online communities more isolating and less genuine than their offline counterparts. The philosopher of technology Albert Borgmann (1999: 165) likened the early internet to life in a log cabin — small-scale, coherent, transparent, comprehensible, intimate — and the developed internet to a skyscraper:

Many of the intimate engagements that a log cabin enforces are not just unnecessary but entirely impossible in a highrise building. You simply cannot take the stairs to your office, haul all the water you need, make your own heat, nor even open a window. Like the coherence and intimacy of the log cabin, the transparency and comprehensibility of [early computer-mediated communication] are distant memories.

But even though some critics have argued that the internet cannot foster 'real' communities, others have claimed otherwise. Similar to the things discussed in the <u>previous chapter</u>, about how digital media might foster closeness and intimacy, many online groups tend to develop a strong sense of belonging and group membership. Groups of individuals that interact through the internet and social media, situated around shared interests, and in which the sense of unity and support is strong, have been called online communities, or sometimes virtual communities. Such 'colonies of enthusiasts' are driven by passion for the common interest at hand (Rheingold 1993: xxi). In this chapter, I discuss perspectives on online communities and their relationship to the notion of social networks. Even though the two concepts are sometimes used interchangeably, they have some important differences.

While communities are more closed, bounded, and embedded with a significant number of members knowing each other relatively closely, social networks are more fragmented, open, and partial. Communities are focused on a certain topic, interest, or identity, while social networks are centred on the different sets of connections that can provide an individual with things like information, friendship, support, and social status. If one looks at the field of digital media research, it becomes clear that the distinction between communities and networks is largely dependent on perspective: 'Communities' can be analysed as 'networks', and 'networks' can be conceptualised in terms of 'communities'. Over time, however, some researchers have claimed that society at large has come to function increasingly according to a logic of networks, rather than one of communities, and that computer-mediated communication has played an important — but not crucial — role in this shift.

Cosy Realities

As you will remember from <u>Chapter 2</u>, Ferdinand Tönnies saw '*Gemeinschaft*' (community) as a vital part of human existence. Society ('*Gesellschaft*') is merely a lifeless aggregation of individuals, unless a sense of community holds people together. The glue, he argued, was created through common languages, common beliefs, and common interests, which generated feelings of kinship and togetherness. Community is defined in different ways in different contexts and by different writers, but Tönnies' basic idea is at the centre of most theories about community. This basic idea is that the mere existence of a form, forum, or place for people to interact is not enough to be sure that community exists.

For community to emerge, an element of warmth, sincerity, or even cosiness is required. The classic cultural studies figure Raymond Williams wrote that 'community' is a 'warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships' which 'seems never to be used unfavourably' (1985: 76). Likewise, echoing Tönnies, geographer and sociologist James Slevin (2002) defines communities as 'cosy realities' of social relationships based on fellowship, understanding, locality, and shared responsibilities. In a similar vein, sociologist Lori Kendall (2011: 309) states that community has a 'feel-good fuzziness' about it. It evokes thoughts on shared values, empathy, affection, and consensus. Sociologist Amitai Etzioni and computer scientist Oren Etzioni (1999: 241) define community as having two vital attributes:

First, it is a web of affect-laden relationships that encompasses a group of individuals — relationships that crisscross and reinforce one another, rather than simply a chain of oneon-one relationships. [...] Second, a community requires a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, mores, meanings, and a shared historical identity — in short, a culture.

Communities have existed just as long as humankind, and throughout history, technologies (railways, radio waves, airplanes, cellular networks, etc.) and media (the alphabet, paper, video cassettes, television, etc.) have facilitated the creation and maintenance of these communities. The evolution of the internet and social media are no exception. Going online as networked publics (see <u>Chapter 2</u>) makes it possible to establish and nurture shared symbols, to transmit shared stories and histories, to manifest our interconnection, and so on.

Imagined communities

Benedict Anderson (1983) famously wrote about nations as 'imagined communities' and thereby wanted to underline that a sense of community relies largely on people 'imagining' — as in feeling, thinking, and talking about — their communities into existence. The point he made, and one to underline here, is that the strength of a community is derived from the ways in which its members maintain the sense of their community through symbols and language. As most community members will never know of most of the other members, and are even less likely to meet them in person, community mainly exists in people's minds. Social reality tends to be quite messy, but we are disposed to imagine that communities are more clearly delimited and bounded than they really are. Anderson also thought that we, in our imagination, overstate a sense of comradeship in our communities, while understating inherent inequalities, exploitation, and hierarchies. This is an important point, because it is easy to see that all communities are imagined in one sense, at least to the extent that they are produced, maintained, and reproduced through a

range of symbolic strategies (feelings, flags, stereotyping, traditions, etc.).
Creating Online Colonies

In his seminal book *The Virtual Community*, Rheingold (1993: xx–xxi) sees the emergence of communities online as a natural and inevitable process:

[W]henever CMC [computer-mediated communication] technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as microorganisms inevitably create colonies [...] CMC enables people to do things with each other in new ways, and to do altogether new kinds of things — just as telegraphs, telephones, and televisions did.

For Rheingold (1993: xx), an online (or virtual) community is the type of social aggregation that emerges on the internet when 'enough people carry on [...] public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships'. Online communities can be defined simply as groups of individuals who interact around a common interest, where the interaction is mediated or supported by internet technology. Such communities can differ from one another due to a variety of contextual factors. Relationships between members may be of different types and strengths (friendship, exchange, unequal, mutual, etc.). The content and character of the communication will also vary, as will the motivations of members to be part of the group.

A general motivation for joining and staying in online communities is fulfilment of the basic social need of feeling part of a group, being gratified by the sense of emotional and cognitive connection. In other words, no matter what the topic or profile of the online community, people enjoy hanging out there because they get a sense of attachment and belongingness through their shared communication practices. Through such practices, social norms will by necessity emerge, be negotiated, and then transmitted through shared behaviours. This means that power structures and hierarchies will also take form. Indeed, it might also be a motivating factor for some members to join online communities that they might get status through their membership, and can influence, or even dominate, others. In some cases, one and the same community will be able to help with a wide variety of things. In other situations, people will turn to different communities for different types of information and support. These may be communities of which they see themselves as members, or not, or of which they aspire to become part. The availability, and feeling of relative anonymity (see <u>Chapter 4</u>), of online communities offer the opportunity for people to turn to others for comfort, security, or to boost their self-esteem during stressful times. At the same time, community members that are able to support others might be gratified by this activity. Helping others leaves you with a feeling that you are needed.

Constance Elise Porter (2015: 168) lists a number of motivations that people might have for being part of online communities. One such reason is to just relax, hang out, play around, and have fun. Another motivation might be the opportunity to engage in identity experimentation and self-expression, as was discussed in <u>Chapter 4</u>. Yet another driving force is to acquire certain forms of information, which can be useful for solving problems and making decisions. People may turn to communities on the internet for information about anything ranging from crucial life decisions such as that of moving across the world, becoming a parent, or making a gender transition, to more everyday things such as cooking, working out, or how to change

the desktop background on their computers.

Another reason to seek out online communities might be to build relationships through interaction with others. Such relationship-building will often be a by-product of other types of interaction. Some communities might indeed be solely focused around people socialising and befriending each other. But more often, some of the people who seek out a community with a certain focal interest — say a sports team or computer programming — will gradually build productive relationships that go deeper than, and beyond, the initial focus for membership.

Third Places

In the early 1980s sociologists Ramon Oldenburg and Dennis Brissett introduced the notion of 'the third place'. They defined the home as people's 'first place' and their workplace as the 'second place'. They argued that there was a decreasing range of arenas for social participation in society, and that people were stuck in an everyday loop of flitting back and forth between the two places. They wrote that: 'Neither place, nor even the two together, seems to provide satisfying experiences and relationships for people' (Oldenburg & Brissett 1982: 266). In the highly specialised industrialised society, they claimed, people of narrow interests and abilities were brought together in impersonal settings. Oldenburg and Brissett (1982: 267) felt that people were in need of 'third places' — places outside the home and the workplace that could provide people 'with a larger measure of their sense of wholeness and distinctiveness'.

Such third places could be, for example, coffee-houses, barber shops, gyms, libraries, parks, or streets. Oldenburg and Brissett emphasised that simple escape from the demands of family and work — something that might historically be easier for men than for women to achieve — was not the main point for the use of these places. Rather, the goal of using third places is that they are primarily about socialising with each other. They are based on what Simmel (1950: 43) called 'sociation'. He wrote that:

Certainly, specific needs and interests make [wo]men band together in economic associations, blood brotherhoods, religious societies, hordes of bandits. Yet in addition to their specific contents, all these sociations are also characterized, precisely, by a feeling, among their members, of being sociated and by the satisfaction derived from this.

The point here is that people really enjoy hanging out, just for the sake of hanging out. Simmel, as well as Oldenburg and Brissett, write in a way that seems to assume that the third places are for men exclusively. Simmel writes of 'brotherhoods' and Oldenburg and Brissett about 'fraternal orders'. This sexist perspective can, at least in part, be explained by the prevailing structure of labour market and family patterns and polices at the times when they were writing — Simmel in the early 1900s, and Oldenburg and Brissett in the 1980s. Today, of course, even though gendered power structures have not been eradicated, people of all genders access third places. Furthermore, when people come together outside the home and the workplace, social roles and qualifications become much less important. Simmel (1950: 46) continues:

Wealth, social position, erudition, fame, exceptional capabilities and merits, may not play any part in sociability. At most they may perform the role of mere nuances.

Oldenburg and Brissett (1982: 278) describe third places as creating a free space for expression. While we are taught that conflict does not belong in the family, and that we must stay balanced and professional at work, third places 'encourage and, indeed, thrive on emotional expressiveness'. Furthermore, third places have an unpredictability and diversity

that first and second places often lack:

One can never be certain exactly who will be there; can never predict what the chemistry of a particular 'mix' of people will create. One can, however, count on it being lively for the third places are arenas for active participation with others. (1982: 274–275)

Beyond Pseudo-Community

Third places are theorised, in other words, similar to communities, as being sincere, emotional, and free. Oldenburg and Brissett developed their theory while worrying — much like Robert Putnam in his hit sociology book *Bowling Alone* (2000) — that social changes (globalisation, mobility, generational shifts, etc.) and media (predominantly television) caused a dramatic decline in community involvement. Putnam (2000: 408) says that society desperately needs communities and public space that 'will encourage more casual socializing with friends and neighbours'. He is not very optimistic about what the internet can achieve along these lines, but what he asks for is obviously similar to Oldenburg and Brissett's third places. Putnam largely blames disengaging media for the decline in community. This is in line with the literature about so-called pseudo-community, which claims that mediated connections between people are impersonal. James Beniger (1987: 356) writes of how 'mass media have fostered the growth of pseudo-community over the past quarter century'. His perspective, even though formulated in the late 1980s, seems to assume that with the development of new interaction technologies we will increasingly

experience the superficially personal relationships of pseudo-community, a hybrid of interpersonal and mass communication — born largely of computer technology. (1987: 369).

Exercise

The theories about online community argue that it is possible to build close relationships online with people that we have never met in person. They also claim that we can achieve a 'real' sense of being in a 'place' when using the internet and social media. In our everyday lives we mostly move about our different networks of offline as well as online connections without analysing this any further. But, as an experiment, try to think about the relationships that you may have with people online but with whom you have never been in the same physical location. Or think about 'places' you go digitally — blogs, sites, forums, feeds. Ask yourself: Is it clearly the case that all such relationships and places are less genuine, rich, intimate, or sincere than your offline ones? If yes: why? If no: why? Compare your purely digital friendships and places with their offline or hybrid counterparts. What does the digital mode of interaction remove, or add, to a relation or setting? Are there any satisfactory ways to compensate online for the lack of in-person interaction?

In a study of multiplayer online roleplaying games Constance Steinkuehler and Dmitri Williams found that hard-core gamers who had reached a stage where long-term collaborative activities and large-scale collaborative problem-solving endeavours were the main activities, gaming was in fact quite work-like for the participants. For the more casual gamers, however, the games seemed to function as 'new (albeit virtual) "third places" for informal sociability' (Steinkuehler & Williams 2006: 903). They argue that those who claim that computermediated communication can't foster 'real' community are wrong. This is because such a view fails to see the nuances in what 'community' can mean. So while these researchers found that online multiplayer games can potentially function as third places, one might ask whether this goes for social media in general. Can the likes of Facebook, Twitter, online forums, and so on, be third places? Obviously they have the potential to be, but that potential is not always realised. If one enters into a bar or goes to church, one makes the choice to participate to some degree — or at least to be seen by others. Online, however, as discussed in <u>Chapter 4</u>, we can choose to be invisible. And if we don't participate, we don't further any sense of community, or contribute to creating a milieu as a third place. Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter (2005) claim that:

In the information society passivity rules. Browsing, watching, reading, waiting, thinking, deleting, chatting, skipping and surfing are the default conditions of online life.

If they are right, perhaps only a minority of people will create — because it takes active creation — third places for themselves on the internet and on social media. A Facebook group, a Twitter hashtag, or a discussion thread on a forum might be a third place for one user, while it is nothing even close to that for another. So, once more, the key to understanding the actual societal effect of digital media is an understanding of the wider context of their use. Sociologist Craig Calhoun (1998: 373–374) writes that:

CMC [computer-mediated communication] is an enormously powerful bundling of technologies, rich in possibilities. It is convenient and also generative, giving rise to new practices of social interaction, new patterns in the production and dissemination of culture. [...] But not all technological possibilities become social realities, and the directions of actual change depend a good deal on existing institutions and distributions of power and resources.

Online versus offline community

Critics of theories of online communities have argued that many such perspectives are too much focused on what happens online. Because of this, the critics argue, they fail to see that most interaction that happens on the internet involves both an online and an offline component. For example, some research has shown that while participating on the internet and in social media can increase the feeling of community online, it does not necessarily compensate for the lack of offline community (Kendall 2011: 320–321). While online communities can bring together people who share a common interest, they do not make it any easier for people to get to know others 'in the multiplicity of their different identities' (Calhoun 1998: 392). To get a complete picture, one must look at how interactions on the internet fit together with all the other parts of people's lives. This is because computer-mediated communication does not happen in a separate reality. Rather, we bring with us all of our social baggage — our gender, our socio-economic status, our cultural resources, our age, our offline connections with others, etc. — to our online interaction with others. This complexity raises questions about whether 'online community' really is viable as a concept. On the other hand, perhaps part of the criticism fails to see what Rheingold emphasised already in 1993, that digital media breathes a *new* form of life into a *new* form of community. Perhaps digital media are not as good at resurrecting old forms of community as they are at giving rise to entirely new social forms. Some perceive online community as less 'genuine' than offline community, but maybe 'our notions of the "genuine" are changing' (Jones 1998a: 21).

The Turn to Networks

In the early days of the internet, being part of a group online meant connecting to chat rooms, BBSs, newsgroups or being a member of an email list. These places were separate from each other, and sometimes required quite elaborated processes to connect to, for example, through dial-up modems and dedicated software. Under such circumstances, it is easy to see how the notion of online, or even 'virtual', community became popular. Going online meant entering a certain 'room' of your choosing by logging on, then staying in that room for a period of time, and then logging off. Today, the boundaries between online and offline are increasingly fluid, thanks to the advent of web 2.0 and the arrival of social network sites like Facebook, microblogs like Twitter and Tumblr, and sharing sites like YouTube and Pinterest. The online and the offline have also become ever more entwined because of the revolution in wireless connectivity, and portable devices such as smartphones and tablets.

When we examine how people socialise through digital media today, we decreasingly see a gravitation towards communities with clear boundaries and an obvious home base on a particular website or service. Communities are perceived by researchers to have some sense of permanence or consistency, but as the landscape of digital and social media is everchanging and increasing in complexity, the notion of online community seems less and less fitting for describing the means through which people connect with each other digitally. Should any aggregation of people on any social media platform be seen as a community? At what level are communities formed? Is Twitter a community, or is it a hub for thousands of communities? Is every user's Facebook home feed a representation of a community? Questions like these point out that a clear definition of community is hard to maintain in today's dynamic media landscape.

Because of this, internet research in recent years has tended to be more interested in talking about social networks than about communities. This does not mean that a sense of community, as discussed above, is nowhere to be found online. People can indeed cluster together in formations that foster common norms and where close bonds are established between individuals. But when we talk about the overarching logic of the internet and social media, 'networks' is often a more fitting concept than 'community'. In practice, less than spending time in bounded social spaces, we use tools like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, messaging, and email to maintain different sets of relations and interact with loosely knit sets of ties. This multitude of connections can provide us with different things — a sense of community being one. In today's digital society, people tend to relate to a number of fragmented social networks, rather than being embedded in clearly delimited social groups.

Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman point out that there is a tendency to see the world either in terms of groups (as in the community perspective) or as individuals. Either people belong to relatively tight social formations, or they operate mainly on their own. In between, Rainie and Wellman (2012) argue, is the important middle ground of social networks. A social network perspective is focused on socially connected individuals and the patterns of their relations. A social network, then, is seen as a set of two or more entities, such as individuals or organisations, among which some form of exchange — of friendship, ideas, information, etc. — is going on. This, of course, does not have to be a digital network. An individual is often part of many different networks. These networks in turn have structures which influence the ways in which both individuals and the network as a whole behave. Rainie and Wellman (2012: 40–41) write that:

In all but desert islands and laboratory situations, people are constantly entering and leaving networks, and these networks are complex structures with clusters, cleavages, and separate ties.

So, even if people often feel and think that they are acting quite independently, they really are embedded in, and influenced by, social networks that provide different constraints and opportunities. This means that these networks are 'environments' or 'structures', as discussed in <u>Chapter 1</u>. Social network analysis as a research method (see <u>Chapter 16</u>) is interested in phenomena such as whether a network is hierarchical or democratic, and in mapping the flow of information among members to measure the influence of particular members over others.

Human Webs

Like communities, social networks have been around as long as society has existed. This is because they are a product of the basic human desire to form various types of associations, or groups. Obviously, this applies to many animals as well, and even at a microbiological level, in metabolic or neural networks. Networks are a fundamental part of nature. Historians J. R. and William McNeill (2003) have shown that 'human webs' have existed throughout the history of human life. First, in the form of exchange between hunter-gatherer tribes, and later, in the continuous local interaction between agricultural settlements, around 12000 years ago, and in the first metropolitan cultures, around 6000 years ago. Those connections were made through things like transportation, handling animals, and the exchange of goods.

The human web was spreading even further, and became tighter, with the rise of the bureaucratic empires in places such as India, China, and the Mediterranean. Technologies such as hub and spoke wheels, better roads, writing, and ships with larger capacity, contributed further to the establishment of these webs. The period between 1450 and 1800 saw a dramatic rise in urbanisation, and information circulated much faster and much cheaper than before. In the last century and a half, the global web has been thickened with the increasing volume and velocity of communication, and more efficient means of transport. First, there was the evolution of a 'mass society' — marked by the mass audiences of early mass media — and later, a network society where internet and social media are merely the latest technologies for making connections. Communications scholar Jan van Dijk (2006: 23) writes of this latest period of the human web:

It is no longer only quantitatively extending across the globe and becoming more voluminous, but it is also qualitatively changing the infrastructure and working of current societies. This comes to rest upon social and media networks of all kinds and at all levels of society.

Simmel: Classic network sociology

Simmel was the first sociologist to write explicitly in terms of social network dynamics. He did this in his comparison of 'dyads' (groups of two people) and 'triads' (groups of three people). He wrote that two-person groups were different from groups that were of larger sizes. Dyads are marked by more intense emotions and fragility, while triads are more emotionally modulated, and can persist even if a member leaves and is replaced. Simmel's main theoretical contribution was that social structure, in network terms, is important by itself regardless of the particular individuals that compose the groups. He wrote:

Where three elements, A, B, C, constitute a group, there is, in addition to the direct relationship between A and B, for instance, their indirect one, which is derived from their common relation to C. The fact that two elements are each connected not only by a straight line — the shortest — but also by a broken line, as it were, is an enrichment from a formal-sociological standpoint. Points that cannot be contacted by the straight line are connected by the third element, which offers a different side to each of the other two [...] Yet the indirect relation does not only strengthen the direct one. It may also disturb it. (Simmel 1950: 135)

I shall return to these ideas from a more methodological perspective in <u>Chapter 16</u>.

Social network analysis as a theory and method started to gain momentum in the 1960s, and there has been a surge in such research in the last few decades (see <u>Chapter 16</u>). But generally, social networks are not new. Craig Calhoun (1998: 380) wrote:

The Internet is the latest wave of new communications technology to bring dramatic predictions of transformation in community and political activity. Its importance is unassailable, but we misunderstand it [...] if we exaggerate its novelty rather than situate it within a continuing series of transformations in communication and transportation capacities that have shaped the whole modem era.

What Rainie and Wellman (2012) call *the social network revolution* is not a result of digital media. There has been a broader change in society, they argue, in how people relate to each other more generally. Throughout the last hundred years or so, people have become less and less restricted by things such as nation, village, and neighbourhood, as they gravitate more and more towards a multitude of different social networks. Rainie and Wellman (2012: 22) write that group boundaries have weakened, and that 'flexible manoeuvrable connectivity' has increased. Once again, this is not about the internet and social media in particular. Rather, a number of things — such as wider-ranging travel, a growing number of mass media channels, secularisation, the transformation of work and the labour market, and demographic patterns (smaller families, fewer marriages, etc.) — have contributed to this transformation.

Network Society

Taken together, it has led to a situation where clearly defined and bounded groups and organisations have been supplanted by informal networks of involvement that are more *ad hoc*. There has been a shift from group-centric societies, in which the majority of one's friends are likely to know one another, to a network-centric society, where most of our network connections don't know each other. Sometimes we overlap the different networks of which we are part, and sometimes we handle things by keeping some of our relationships compartmentalised and apart from each other. Some scholars have seen this shift as being of equal importance to that of the shift from agrarian to industrial society. As you might remember from <u>Chapter 1</u>, Manuel Castells has popularised the notion that we live in a *network society*. His definition of the network society goes as follows:

A network society is a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies. By social structure, I understand the organizational arrangements of humans in relations of production, consumption, reproduction, experience, and power expressed in meaningful communication coded by culture. (Castells 2004: 3)

Even though, Castells argues, networks constitute the fundamental logic by which all kinds of life function, with technological change, and the evolution of communication technologies, networks have become more efficient than the 'vertically organized command and control structures' that dominated in the pre-digital age (2004: 5). According to Castells, it is because of computers and the internet that network society becomes fully realised. Previously, networks were an important part of social life, but now they have become *the* most important part. In Castells' view, this goes way beyond a social network revolution where people start to connect in new ways. For him, it is about the whole of society. Industrialism, he writes, is 'subsumed by informationalism' — a new form of social organisation where all human activity, economy, politics, warfare, social movements, etc., follow a networked logic (2004: 8). And while the internet and computer-mediated communication shifts society into overdrive, none of it would have happened had it not been for a number of other social processes. In Castells' description, the network society is the result of:

the accidental coincidence, in the 1970s, of three independent processes [...]: the crisis and restructuring of industrialism [...]; the freedom-oriented, cultural social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s; and the revolution in information and communication technologies. (2004: 15)

The network society, in Castells' interpretation, is not only about the increasingly networked character of people's social connections. It is also about a large-scale and complete transformation of how society is organised. Network society is organised around globally interdependent networks of production, consumption, business, politics, and so on. He writes of a 'grid of networks organizing/dominating the planet' that includes some individuals, groups, nations, or regions, while excluding others (2004: 24). Anyone who wants to exercise control over others in this world of networks must be able to command two basic

mechanisms: the ability to 'program' (affecting the goals and modes of operation of networks), and the ability to 'switch' (connecting different networks to ensure their cooperation). The real power-holders, however, are the networks themselves. Successful programming and switching will lead to the emergence of a new form of subject, which operates in ways similar to those theorised by philosopher of science Bruno Latour (2005: 46) in actor-network theory, the key point of which is that 'an actor is what is made to act by many others':

An 'actor' in the hyphenated expression actor-network is not the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it.

Simply put, networks aggregate people's actions thereby becoming a form of aggregated actors in their own right.

Online Social Networks

Social networks were not invented together with the digitalisation of society. But social networking demands some sort of mediation in order for our relationships to stretch beyond the local realm of connections that we can make and maintain through the medium of face-to-face speech. The written word, the telegraph, and the telephone are examples of media technologies that have been important for maintaining social networks since their invention and popularisation. The internet and social media obviously extend and amplify the reach of people's connections. As internet researcher Steve Jones (1998b: xv) put it, the internet is 'a "backbone" through which networks link up with each other'. Online networks that provide a material environment for social networks make new forms of sociality possible.

In short: the internet supports social networks and social networking. The very point of the internet is that it consists of computers that are networked together. This makes for a suitable infrastructure for communication in social networks too. In the early days of the internet, computer-supported social networks were already emerging among individuals who were interacting through networked computers. So indeed, the online communities discussed earlier in this chapter can be seen as networks as well. In fact, Rheingold, a key theorist of online communities, wrote in the second edition of *The Virtual Community*, about Wellman, a key theorist of online social networks:

If I had encountered sociologist Barry Wellman and learned about social network analysis when I first wrote about cyberspace cultures, I could have saved us all a decade of debate by calling them 'online social networks' instead of 'virtual communities'. (Rheingold 2000: 359)

The networked character of online interaction became even more visible and pronounced with the major breakthrough of social network sites such as Friendster in 2002, LinkedIn and MySpace in 2003, and Facebook in 2004 (see <u>Chapter 2</u>). In a seminal paper, Ellison and boyd (2007: 211) define *social network sites* as:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

They agree, however that the specific parameters and terminology will vary between different sites. These platforms make it possible for users to articulate their social networks and to make them visible to themselves and to other people, who may or may not be part of these networks. They call the sites social network sites — rather than social networking sites — as they argue that the primary activity is not to engage in networking to find new connections, but on simply self-presenting one's already existing social network. Not everyone agrees with this, but claim instead that people actually also do networking on the sites, initiating new relationships. Porter (2015: 166) argues that the socio-technical features of social network(ing) sites allow members to articulate and maintain as well as establish and extend

their network of relationships. This is because these platforms have both a 'connection capability' (to invite and be invited to networks) and a 'communication capability' (to provide, view, and manage content).

While social network(ing) sites have these specific characteristics, it is hard — and unnecessary — to maintain a distinction between these sites and online communities. Indeed, many online communities are of a networked character, and in many social networks, at least in parts of them, a sense of community might be present. Porter argues that many online social networks, at least the ones that are sustainable, are becoming more and more community oriented. It seems that, like social bonds, sharing and mutuality is needed for online social networks to survive for longer periods of time.

Not too much, not too little

In an interesting study, digital media researcher Petter Bae Brandtzæg (2012) found that neither the most active, nor the least active, users of social networking sites — this is what he chose to call them — were unable to reap the potential rewards of the platforms. In a series of surveys, 'Sporadics' (low-level users) and 'Lurkers' (passive users who did not contribute or interact) reported low levels of face-to-face interaction and offline acquaintances as well. The most intense users ('Debaters' and 'Advanced' users), especially males, reported high levels of loneliness. The in-between category of 'Socializers' (those using the sites mainly for interaction with family and friends) felt less lonely, and were more engaged in face-to-face interaction as well. Brandtzæg's conclusion was that social networking sites work best when they build on strong and pre-existing offline relationships.

The Individual at the Centre

The quantitative and qualitative evolution of the human web, together with the emergence of the internet and social media have brought about, Rainie and Wellman (2012) argue, a new *social operating system*. They use the metaphor of an operating system because, similar to computer systems, societies have networked structures for how people connect, communicate, and exchange information. These structures provide opportunities and constraints (see <u>Chapter 1</u>), procedures and rules, and through these, shape society. The operating system in mass society was concentrated around units like communities, households, and workgroups. The new social operating system by contrast, is personal. They call it *networked individualism*, as it puts the individual at the centre of the different networks that she or he draws on in different contexts, and for various uses and gratifications. Rainie and Wellman (2012: 12) write that:

people are not rugged individualists — even when they think they are. Many meet their social, emotional, and economic needs by tapping into sparsely knit networks of diverse associates rather than relying on tight connections to a relatively small number of core associates.

Networked individualism

Networked individualism, as defined by Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012), reflects the social transformations which have taken place throughout the 20th and 21st centuries in the developed world, where people have increasingly shifted away from tightly knit communities. In networked individualism, each person sits at the centre of her or his own set of networks. Rather than being members of external entities such as a church or political organisation, networked individuals command their own unique and egocentric networks. These networks are unique in the same way that every person's experience of a social network site such as Facebook will be individualised in the form of a personal feed. If Facebook was a traditional community, all members would share the same space, and have the opportunity to interact with all others in the community. Yet, in spite of the individual customisation, the content that any one individual sees on Facebook will largely overlap with what *some* others can see. Many connections are shared, but everyone is in the middle of their own networks. That the networks are *egocentric* — with the individual at the centre of a personalised set of networks — does not necessarily mean that people will act in egoistic ways.

The networked individual lacks any one 'home' community, but has partial membership in multiple networks, meaning that there are a variety of social ties to rely on (Rainie & Wellman 2012). Therefore, the new operating system demands that people develop new skills and strategies. They must network actively to maintain ties, forge alliances which are useful, and remember which parts of their networks can be mobilised for what ends. People must also deal with the instability and volatility of networks, since there is frequent turnover and change. In other words, networked individualism is liberating, since it loosens the grip of communities that might be limiting, but it also takes effort. Rainie and Wellman are optimistic, however, that the internet and social media will help the networked individual to maintain and nourish their social ties. Geert Lovink (2008: 241–242) also believes that networks don't automatically become powerful. He argues that the informality of online networks is often celebrated, but that they must be actively organised to function in productive ways. In what he calls, 'the age of disengagement', 'the default user is the lurker'

and 'engagement is the state of exception'.

Exercise

If you have an account on a social network site like Facebook, use that as a starting point to think about which different networks you are connected to. Looking through your list of friends, you might be able to identify people as belonging to certain networks, such as family, childhood friends, classmates, neighbours, people you work with, or have worked with, friends from an organisation that you are a member of, friends that you have found online due to some common interest, and so on. Reflect on the different roles of these networks in your life. For what needs do you turn to the different connections that you have? Are there any overlaps between the networks, or are they largely separate from one another? Do you have any key friends that bridge your different networks? A web search for 'visualise your facebook network' or similar will help you find different tools for analysis that might add an extra dimension to this exercise.

Like Rainie and Wellman, Castells also sees the individual as being at the centre in the network society. He claims that the horizontal networks built around the internet enable what he calls *mass self-communication*, where everyone is a sender as well as a receiver of messages. He construes this in political terms arguing that:

the greater the autonomy provided to the users by the technologies of communication, the greater the chances that new values and new interests will enter the realm of socialized communication, so reaching the public mind. Thus, the rise of mass selfcommunication, as I call the new forms of networked communication, enhances the opportunities for social change, without however defining the content and purpose of such social change. People, meaning ourselves, are angels and demons at the same time, and so our increased capacity to act on society will simply project into the open who we really are in each time/space context. (Castells 2009: 8)

If we return to Castells' terms 'programming' and 'switching', what he says in the quote above is that mass self-communication enables more powerful acts of programming. People can affect society, but the outcome might be good or bad, depending on what is put in. The power of mass self-communication comes, observes Castells, from the possibilities of manyto-many communications on the internet. It also has to do with the flexibility of being able to communicate in real time or at a chosen time, and by switching between one-to-one communication, narrowcasting (to only parts of an audience), or broadcasting (to everyone), depending on needs and intentions. Mass self-communication is both mass communication it has the potential to reach a global audience — and self-communication, because we choose ourselves the content and how it is posted and directed. Castells seems to be very optimistic as he thinks that a creative audience emerges because the internet has decentralised the communication network. This will lead to increased freedom and autonomy for any actor engaged in communication. But he is also quite pessimistic, at least for the time being, because 'there is an unequal competition between professionalized media production and our low-quality home videos and blog gossip' (2009: 422). As discussed in Chapter 3, the jury is still out as regards whether 'low-quality' might in fact be just as powerful as 'high-quality' and whether the networked 'gossip' is always just gossip, or if it might represent a new form of viral micro-politics.

Fields of Togetherness

Ultimately, the most important question is not whether 'communities' or 'networks' best describes how people interact online. As you will have realised when reading this chapter, the notion of community was more popular in early internet research, while thinking in terms of networks has become more common in recent years. This has to do both with changes in how society, the internet, and social media function, and with a more general trend in research toward an intensified interest in networks. In practice, as pointed out by communications researcher Maria Bakardjieva, a continuum of different forms of being and acting together is constantly emerging online. For some aspects of this *virtual togetherness*, thinking in terms of the boundedness and emotional exchange of communities are more fitting, while others will be better understood by employing the perspective of fragmented and sprawling networks. In order for research to move forward, we must also stay open to the construction of entirely new concepts for understanding new and unexpected variations of digital media use that will emerge in the future. Bakardjieva (2003: 310–311) writes:

Users approach the medium [...] from a variety of situational motivations, needs and ideologies. In doing that, they generate a rich repertory of use genres, each of which needs careful consideration and evaluation on its own merits.

Similarly, anthropologist John Postill (2008) thinks that there are problems with the dominance of 'the community/network paradigm'. Instead, he suggests that turning to, and developing, theories about *social fields* might be the way forward. The important point that both Bakardjieva and Postill are making is that the either-or of community versus network may be limiting for research. Concepts like community, network, togetherness, or fields might be helpful to a varying degree, in different situations, to help make sense of how people interact and connect in digital society. But in the end they are just theories. As I have argued in another book, it does not really matter what we call our object of study, as long as we are able to map and understand it in practice:

The only way to comprehensively deal with technological, cultural, and social aspects of the Internet without remaining in a purely philosophical domain is to empirically analyze what actually happens. (Lindgren 2013: 143)

Further Reading

Rainie, Lee, & Wellman, Barry (2012). Networked. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

In spite of its rather one-sided empirical focus on the United States, Raine and Wellman's book *Networked* is one of the most excellent recent books about the internet and society. The two researchers write in an accessible way, with lots of everyday case examples, and yet manage to develop new theory with their ideas of a new social operating system driven by networked individuals.

Castells, Manuel (1996). The Rise of the Network Society. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Castells' book from 1996, actually the first volume in a massive trilogy, is a seminal work about

the rise of the network society fuelled by the growth of computers and the internet. The book introduces a range of theoretical concepts for discussing the global and large-scale transformations that are brought about through the coming of an 'informational economy' which leads to new forms of social exclusion and polarisation. Castells writes of a world organised around digital media where basic categories such as time and space are renegotiated.

Ellison, Nicole B., & boyd, danah (2007). Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 210–230.

One of the most cited research articles in the history of internet research, written by Nicole Ellison and danah boyd, was actually an introductory paper to a themed set of papers in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* in 2007. The authors describe the key features of social network sites, give a historical overview, and propose a definition. The social media landscape has changed since 2007, but the article is still useful, and effectively a classic.

Part II Topics

6 Digital Visuality and Visibility

Key questions

- How does the evolution of digital society relate to visual culture?
- In what ways have selfies introduced new elements into social interaction?
- What does it mean that selfies are a 'technology of the self'?
- What are 'videos of affinity' and what is their social use?
- How can the social meaning of images and videos online be analysed?

Key concepts

The visual turn * postmodernity * videosphere * selfie * media panics * technologies of the self * performativity * affinity spaces * videos of affinity

This chapter is about how being on social media today is largely a visual experience. While early social media tools and platforms such as BBSs, Usenet, and the early web were largely text based, images and videos are key to today's digital society. On platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, we also enter our personal photos into flows that blend private and public boundaries. The volumes and variety of such content is enormous and growing. But the specific focus of this chapter is on visuality and visibility in relation to user-created content that fills functions of social expression and connection.

n her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997: 153), digital media researcher Janet Murray writes of how 'the interactor, whether as navigator, protagonist, explorer, or builder' makes use of a 'repertoire of possible steps and rhythms to improvise a particular dance among the many, many possible dances'. This is her poetic way of saying that on the internet, people engage in a vast number of different subgenres where different *narrative pleasures* are developed. From one perspective, services like Instagram, and video sites like YouTube, are simply online archives where one can find virtually any type of photo or video. But there are some subgenres on there that are of specific interest in relation to the topic of this book — how people relate to each other, and the world around them, in digital society. Two examples of such genres are selfies and personal YouTube videos, both of which we shall explore in more detail in this chapter. The latter will be approached using anthropologist Patricia Lange's notion of 'videos of affinity'.

The Frenzy of the Visible

There is sometimes talk of a *visual turn* in the social and cultural sciences, meaning that there has been increased interest in how images and visuals, photos and videos affect how we experience culture, and how we interact with each other. Writer and film director Jean-Louis Comolli wrote (1980: 121) about how society is driven by representation:

If the social machine manufactures representations, it also manufactures itself from representations — the latter operative at once as means, matter and condition of sociality.

He felt, in other words, that society — 'the social machine' — is thriving on the production and consumption of images and depictions. He claimed even that this was the very basis of sociality. Images, paintings, symbols, and visualisations are what hold society together, and has done so since the very beginning. But Comolli (1980: 122) further argues that 'the second half of the nineteenth century lives in a sort of frenzy of the visible'. This is the same point made by many theorists of the postmodern, such as sociologist Jean Baudrillard, who used concepts like *hyperreality* and *simulation* to argue that representation and reproduction were key mechanisms in postmodern society. The idea being that since the last few decades of the 20th century, there has been an explosion of visual culture, where pictures and video have assumed a dominant position. This is a consequence of the development of film and cinema, television, colour printing, advertising, video, computers, and so on.

Postmodernity

Postmodernity is what happened when modern society, as we knew it during the 19th and 20th centuries, entered into a form of cultural crisis during latter parts of the 20th century. Things like the 'grand narratives' of history, the idea that things could only get better, and the belief that there was always only one truth no longer seemed convincing to many people. Still, no viable alternative had emerged. This led to culture becoming ironic and artificial. Communications scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff (2013) claims that it was specifically a *visual crisis of culture* that made the postmodern condition emerge. While modern society had a strong tendency to picture and visualise things, the spoken and written word were still privileged as illustrations of ideas during that era. In postmodern culture, the increased focus on the visual challenges this hegemony. Mirzoeff (2013: 4) writes that:

While print culture is certainly not going to disappear, the fascination with the visual and its effects that was a key feature of modernism has engendered a postmodern culture that is at its most postmodern when it is visual.

In digital society, the interaction and communication between people through the use of images on social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat and through videos on sites such as YouTube are prime examples of this cultural tendency towards a prominence of imagery. Digital cameras and smartphones have thoroughly changed the role of visuals in everyday life, as well as in culture and politics. Sociologist Kiku Adatto (2008) says that we live in 'the age of the photo op'. Just as with other social forms, such as the communities and

networks discussed in the <u>previous chapter</u>, the focus on capturing, watching, and sharing images and audiovisual content is not something entirely new. But rather, the pattern has been intensified in digital society.

Ever since photography and film were invented in the 19th century, their realism has fascinated people. As these have become widely used technologies, and as photos and videos have become increasingly easy to capture, reproduce, and circulate, (audio)visuals have become more and more prominent elements of society and culture. But today it is not necessarily the realism of imagery that fascinates us. Adatto (2008: 7) writes that: 'Today we pride ourselves on our knowledge that the camera can lie, that pictures can be fabricated, packaged, and manipulated.' She argues that in a mediated culture, people even come to develop an affection for the artificial element of what they see, as they start to appreciate images as images (see the discussion of memes in <u>Chapter 2</u>). This is even more valid, as we also live in the age of image editing software, where 'photoshopping' has entered our vocabulary as a lexical verb. Easy-to-use tools allow anyone to alter images with fast results, for purposes ranging from humour to deception.

Adatto maps the history from TV shows like *Candid Camera* in the 1960s — where the camera was hidden — through *America's Funniest Home Videos* in the 1990s and onwards — where most filmed subjects were aware of the camera's presence. Today, on social media, a popular format for online photos is the 'mirror selfie' where the subject is not only conscious of the camera, but where the camera(phone) itself is clearly seen in the image — sometimes styled with smartphone covers that express identity.

The visual turn demands that new perspectives are developed to understand the new modes of expression, as the model of textuality might no longer be working. Philosopher Régis Debray sees the history of society in terms of 'mediaspheres' — the environment where messages are transported. Debray (1996: 26) argues that each 'mediological period' has its 'collective personality or psychological profile'. We live now, he says, in the 'videosphere', an era of computer graphics and audiovisual content which is marked by an 'instantaneity/ubiquity of messages' (1996: 28). In this age, which has come after the logosphere of speaking and writing, and the graphosphere of printing, we are 'rediscovering the values of the bodily' (1996: 36).

Exercise

You have just read about how philosopher Régis Debray said that in the age of the 'videosphere', we are rediscovering the possibility of expressing things with our bodies after a long historical phase where words and letters have been dominant. In addition to this, one can also claim that the smartphone age means that visuals are increasingly captured in everyday settings and in places like bathrooms, bedrooms, and kitchens. The traditional media photography shots of talking heads in news studios, or of styled and prepared presenters or actors, is challenged by a rich stream of personal and vernacular photos and videos. Now, look up some popular genres on YouTube with searches like (for example): 'shopping haul', 'competitive eating', 'fails', or 'pranks'. Think about the role of the body in the videos you find. Why do you think things relating to bodily stuff are relatively prominent in so much social media content? Think of different explanations, such as beauty cult, sexualisation, gender ideals, shock, humour, politics of censorship, stretching boundaries, etc. Reflect upon what may be the 'narrative pleasures' of such videos. To what degree are we just watching random craziness, and to what extent are such videos bearing witness to important social changes?

Welcome to Selfie City

As discussed in previous chapters, digital society has brought along changes in how people express themselves. This development is intensified as networks sprawl and technology becomes increasingly portable. One such new form of self-expression is the *selfie*, a photographic self-portrait shared on social media. Selfies have rapidly become popular and ever-present in the last few years. The coming into being of the selfie is based on hardware — smartphone cameras — as well as software — social media platforms — that sit at the centre of today's social world.

Visual culture researcher Brooke Wendt (2014) found that more than 130 million posts to Instagram — the most popular platform for sharing selfies — had been hashtagged with the word 'selfie'. Adding a set of related tags (#I, #me, #myself, #self, #selfportrait), the number was as much as 439 million. The popularity of selfies might have to do with the more general tendency towards visual fascination, as described in the previous section of this chapter. It could also be interpreted as an expression of today's culture as being individualistic, focused on identity work, superficial, or even narcissistic. But the explosive growth of the phenomenon also has to do with the global saturation of phones with cameras, and with the large-scale introduction of front-facing cameras on such phones. In fact that feature, occurring for the first time in 2003, was originally intended for video calls but was soon adopted by users also for taking stills at arm's length. The first use of the word selfie is said to have been in Australia. In September 2002 a young man posted a photo of his damaged bottom lip, writing in a forum post on the site of public broadcaster ABC: 'sorry about the focus, it was a selfie'.¹

¹ www.abc.net.au/news/2013-11-19/selfie-beats-twerk-as-word-of-the-year/5102154.

Of course, self-portraits as such, are not new. People have depicted themselves through various techniques and media since the beginning of time, and, naturally, even users of the very early cameras in the 19th century sometimes turned the lens towards themselves. But these photographic self-portraits were still mostly random events, at times simply taken to use up the last frame of a roll of film. As a recognisable and codified genre, however, the selfie is a product of digital media, and it has introduced several new elements into social interaction.

The Oxford Dictionaries named selfie as the word of the year in 2013, defining it as 'a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website'. Their editorial director Judy Persall explained that 'selfie' had already emerged as a tag on the social photo site Flickr back in 2004, but the word became widely used in mainstream media around 2012. She also explained that the usage of the –ie suffix likely has to do with the term having been conceived in Australian English.² Communications researchers Katharina Lobinger and Cornelia Brantner (2015: 1848) argue that selfies have indeed 'become their own genre of visual self-representation with its own conventions, representational techniques, and poses'. Photographically speaking, the recognisable attributes of selfies — such as the often visible arm of the photographer bearing witness to how the photo was made — make their production process visible. From an art perspective, selfies have a sort of meta-character to them, as they can be compared to what happens when a comedic actor partly breaks out of character to look directly at the filmor TV-camera to make a face.

² http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/press-releases/oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-2013/.

Exercise

Communications researcher Aaron Hess talks about the selfie as an 'assemblage' — a grouping together — of four different elements. First, the self. The photos present a version of ourselves, whether staged or not. Second, physical space. The place where they are shot — at home, at school, at a restaurant, outdoors — also expresses something. Third, the device. The actual camera(phone), the perspective, the way we hold our arms, and so on, also affects the selfie. And fourth, the network. Selfies presume that a networked social media audience will receive it, and thereby it invites us to liking and sharing it. Now, go to selfiecity.net, the website of an exciting research project about selfies. Explore and play around with their archive of selfies from five cities across the world and think about them as assemblages. Try to find selfies that are more or less spontaneous versus staged. Can you identify the physical space of selfies, and how does that affect your interpretation of the photo? To what degree can the process of making the selfies be seen (visible phones, arms, angles, etc.)? Do these differences make selfies mean different things? In what different ways do selfies 'ask' for responses (likes, reactions, etc.)? Try to speculate about different things that might motivate people to take and share these pictures of themselves. In a sociological sense: What does the selfie 'say'?

Selfies As Social Actions

Selfies are no doubt a form of social action (cf. <u>Chapter 2</u>) that happens in some form of social context with some sort of intention. As you have seen, it is a crucial trait of selfies that they are shared through online social networks. One might therefore say that the selfie is social by definition. And as it is fundamentally social, it also has to do with people's need for affirmation — something that can only be fulfilled in interacting with others (Ehlin 2015: 22). In comparison with traditional self-portraits, selfies are also generally much more spontaneous and casual. The latter are predominantly taken and shared by people who we would not conventionally define as artists. Selfies, therefore, are a form of folk 'art', in the sense that they are created by and shared among 'ordinary' people.

The selfie is consciously social. It is created to be viewed, in the present, and when we look at a selfie, we are aware of this intention. Internet researchers Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym (2015: 1589) write that it is part of the character of a selfie that it initiates a number of relationships. The most obvious of these is the one between viewer and viewed, but they also point to how selfies set in motion relational processes between images and the software used to filter and share them, between users and the architecture of social media platforms, and between the subject as simultaneously being photographer and the photographed.

Selfies offer many possibilities for people — human actors — to be active, in selecting, framing, filtering, and so on. But selfies also engage what Latour (2005) would call non-humans. The creation, display, circulation, and monetisation of selfies occur through a number of technological artefacts such as cameras, servers, algorithms, screens, and so on. Senft and Baym (2015: 1589) argue that once a selfie enters the internet, it instantly becomes part of an infrastructure that detaches it from its original time and place of production.

Encoding/decoding

Using the words of cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall (1972), the selfie is 'encoded' by its sender in a certain way (drawing on thoughts, aspirations, attitudes, posing, filtering, and so on), to be 'decoded' by its receivers in either preferred, negotiated, or oppositional ways. Such decoding can happen just in the mind of the receiver, or by responses in the form of actions that are digitally social, such as likes, comments, or remixes. In other words, taking and sharing selfies entails a whole complexity of looking and framing both inwards and outwards.

We might think of selfies in the first instance as pictures of lone individuals. Indeed, celebrities who are active on social media — and whose celebrity largely rests on this fact — have contributed to shaping the genre. But the social aspects of selfies also go beyond the mere sharing of solo images. For example, taking selfies together with others — with one person holding the camera and one or more individuals sticking their heads into the frame — can be used as a means of showing which groups one belongs to. Political and religious leaders figure more and more often in shots with other authority figures, as well as with 'ordinary' people. Visually framing and sharing one's relations with school friends, family, celebrities, or authority figures, in the form of selfies, is a type of self-presentation which is unique to digital society.

Selfie Panic

In December 2013, Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt took a selfie with UK Prime Minister David Cameron and US President Barack Obama during Nelson Mandela's memorial service. A news photo of her doing this sparked a series of intense reactions across media that became nicknamed 'Selfiegate'. Miltner and Baym (2015) have analysed the debate and found that it included several different aspects of social norms: Who can take a selfie? When and where is it appropriate to take them? More generally, there has been a debate over the inappropriateness of selfies taken in some places and situations, such as at grave sites, the Anne Frank House, the Holocaust Memorial, at Chernobyl, in front of burning houses, hostage situations, together with homeless people, and so on. Have a look, for example, at selfiesatseriousplaces.tumblr.com or make a web search for 'tasteless selfies'. Such selfies have been questioned since the often playful and humorous character of selfies fits badly with the seriousness of the settings, thereby giving the impression that the creator wants to diminish or ridicule them. Similarly, it has been questioned what the allure of the selfie might do to 'serious' politics. Some pundits have worried that selfies are 'turning politicians into teenagers',³ and that 'the tyranny of selfies' will transform the political climate for the worse.⁴

³ <u>http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2014/04/are-selfies-are-turning-politicians-into-teenagers/</u>.

⁴ www.wyff4.com/politics/clinton-laments-tyranny-of-the-selfie/37310932.

Such reactions have to do with selfies being a relatively new phenomenon around which no clear social norms have yet formed. A new genre like this might need new perspectives altogether to be fully understood. Still, it is natural that we initially react by falling back on norms that have been formed around other forms of photography. Media psychologist Pamela Rutledge writes that 'the sheer volume and publicness of selfies defies any models we have', so we tend to think that they 'violate social rules of self-presentation and therefore something's wrong'. She continues:

If the people in selfies aren't famous or being paid to pose, then it must indicate a moral failing and they are labeled bragging, attention seeking, self-focused or narcissistic.⁵

⁵ <u>www.psychologytoday.com/blog/positively-media/201307/making-sense-selfies</u>.

Like Rutledge, social media researcher Anne Burns (2015) thinks that a 'common sense' understanding of selfies is that they are narcissistic. The very word 'selfie', she writes, hints at a form of egotism. Furthermore, people tend to understand selfies in terms of their subjects being vain and overly preoccupied with their appearance. McLuhan (1964: 41) anticipated this when writing about how people in the age of electronic media 'become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves'.

Part of why selfies have been seen as a social problem has to do with generational divides. Media technologies, platforms, and practices that are new to us often set in motion *media panics*. Therefore each generation of adults will question the media use of younger

generations. Young people's media use is different from the forms that were known before, and therefore it can generate worry. Much like popular print media in the 19th century, film in the early 20th century, rock music in the 1950s, and so on, selfies today are seen by some researchers and commentators as potentially dangerous to society. Media panics are polarising reactions that blow the possible consequences of the new technology out of proportion. Drawing on sociologist Stanley Cohen's (1972) theory of so-called 'moral panics', media researcher Kirsten Drotner (1999) traces the history of media panics from the 18th century and up until the age of the internet. The panic reactions, Cohen writes, emerge when some phenomenon becomes 'defined as a threat to societal values and interests'. The nature of the phenomenon then tends to be 'presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion', as 'socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions' (Cohen 1972: 9).

Exercise

Selfies have been said by some to be more commonly created by people who are narcissistic psychopaths (Fox & Rooney 2015). Other observers have argued that selfies can have many positive functions, such as helping in self-exploration, making connections, and balancing beauty ideals.⁶ Still, it has also been claimed that selfies are related to body dysmorphic disorder,⁷ and news media have highlighted the phenomenon of 'selfie deaths' — following from people taking risks in trying to capture the perfect selfie in front of a train, on top a building, at bull runs, and so on.⁸ Now, think about selfies in terms of a 'media panic' possibly surrounding them. Try to find research or news reports that point out risks, dangers, or moral problems with selfies. Also, look for perspectives that emphasise the positive aspects of selfies. What do you think seems like an adequate perspective, and in what sense? Many of the fears that were connected to new technologies and behaviours of previous times seem quite ridiculous in hindsight, such as that train travel could make it impossible to breathe, or that listening to the radio would lead to bad results in school. Other fears, such as that of nuclear power, might have been more adequate. Try to imagine how the debate over selfies might be seen when looking back in twenty years' time.

⁶ www.psychologytoday.com/blog/positively-media/201304/selfies-narcissism-or-self-exploration.

⁷ <u>http://mic.com/articles/86287/a-psychiatric-study-reveals-selfies-are-far-more-dangerous-than-you-think#.VIirMuhN4</u>.

⁸ <u>http://mashable.com/2015/09/21/selfie-deaths/#jUUIabtqgkq8</u>.
Subversive Technologies of the Self

So, what is the purpose of selfies? Media and fashion researcher Lisa Ehlin (2015: 13) writes:

If I post a selfie (a shared social media self-portrait) I desire to reach out, enable contact. I watch myself anew in a form of endless self-fashioning. Images are personal, yet implicit.

But selfies do not only show what we look like, but also where we are, what we are doing, who we think might be watching, and who we want to be. Wendt (2014: 8) speculates that: 'Perhaps, our preoccupation with Instagram is simple: it offers us infinite versions of ourselves, as though each picture promises a better version.' In taking and sharing selfies, versions of the images can be created through the different filters included in photo sharing apps, which enable experimenting with different styles that allow us to see ourselves in new or different ways. This can also be associated with the possibility of viewing ourselves from the outside, as digital culture researcher Jill Walker Rettberg (2014: 27) describes how the raw and revealing character of selfies, alongside the practices of running them through retro — and other — filters gives the image 'a distance that makes them new to us':

We see ourselves and our surroundings as if we are outside of ourselves, through a retro filter or in the same poses and layouts as we see fashion models or homes in magazine spreads.

But the openness of the possibilities for being whomever we might want is limited. As with most other visual culture, selfies are definitely associated with the politics of gender. For example, one of the popular selfie poses is the mouth-pouting 'duckface', especially prominent among female subjects. This gendered pejorative term refers to selfie takers who 'suck in their cheeks to highlight their cheekbones, which tends to push the lips out in a manner that appears duck-like' (Katz & Crocker 2015: 1866).

The way in which selfies are used and talked about can contribute to maintaining compliance with gendered social norms, and also govern under what circumstances men or women can participate in social and political settings online. As selfies are part of society and people's construction of identities more generally, not only gender but also other social divisions have an effect as well. Sociologists Apryl Williams and Beatriz Aldana Marquez (2015) have found that many white men don't take selfies as they are seen as 'unmanly'. Latino and black men, on the other hand, were more positive to taking and sharing selfies. Those research results point to selfies having a potential for self-empowerment, as well as for expressing alternatives to hegemony. More generally, selfies, while in part reproducing social stereotypes related to power, can also potentially be used to take control in various ways. Philosopher Michel Foucault (1988: 18) wrote about something called *technologies of the self*,

which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way

of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

Selfies, or social media in general for that matter, can be seen as such a technology that we use for framing, filtering, presenting, and sharing ourselves. While selfies, on the one hand, are enforced by, and enforcing, social power and norms, they may also enable performances that resist such things (Losh 2015: 1649). In other words, that selfies might be seen as superficial photos that express things such as problematic beauty ideals does not exclude the possibility of them being powerfully progressive. Philosopher Judith Butler (1990), one of the originators of queer theory, has argued that identities are performances. Her concept of *performativity* suggests that nothing within our identities is fixed, so people maintain their gender identity, like any other aspect of identity, by repeatedly performing it in similar ways. If people start doing things differently, society can gradually change. The problem is, however, as Butler argues, that the performances are not always conscious, and that some performances are repeated so often throughout culture and media that they appear 'natural' or 'true'. Still, this is just an illusion and the seemingly fixed identities — gendered, racialised, and other — can be subverted and reinvented through the accumulation of alternative performances.

Exercise

It can definitely be claimed that viewing the selfie as merely an effect of consumerism (fashion, makeup, shopping, lifestyle, etc.) and narcissism is a simplistic perspective. If one does not see people as inherently self-absorbed, but rather as having vulnerable selves, our view might change. Lisa Ehlin (2014: 73) suggests, in line with Butler's perspective, that 'the selfie opens up for an ability to mimic and play with social roles, pointing towards potential subversion through awareness and agency, rather than self-objectification'. Now, try to look at a number of selfies that you find online. It might be a good idea to include seemingly superficial and 'standard' selfies, as well as selfies that appear to have some sort of more 'serious' message. Try to look at these from the perspective of them being potentially subversive. In what respects can you argue that these photos are expressions of consumerism and narcissism? In what ways can they be read as opening up for feminist, queer, or other critiques? Can selfies that at face value look like gendered or racialised or sexualised stereotypes also be about criticising such norms as well as about self-discovery, parody, and so on? You can try to challenge the 'meaning' of other user-created visual content online in the same way.

Videos of Affinity

Affinity spaces is a name for a type of social setting that sometimes takes shape online. The term was coined by linguist and educational psychologist James Paul Gee (2005), who suggests that rather than communities (see <u>Chapter 5</u>), we should talk of spaces of affinity in order to capture current forms of digitally social affiliation. In affinity spaces, people come together because of a feeling of similarity or like-mindedness. Gee says that such ways of relating to, and connecting with, each other have become increasingly prominent in today's digital world. Affinity can be defined as feelings of connection between people. Anthropologist Bonnie Nardi (2005: 99) writes:

A feeling of connection, as stated, is an openness to interacting with another person. Affinity is achieved through activities of social bonding in which people come to feel connected with one another, readying them for further communication.

Affinity in this sense is based on other things than broad categorisations such as nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, disability, and so on. In her research on YouTube, Patricia Lange has, among other things, been interested in how the visually enhanced communication through YouTube videos relates to establishing affinities. In a study mapping the patterns and principles by which video creators get the attention of viewers, she introduced the notion of *videos of affinity*. She underlines the social aspects of communication by means of YouTube videos, specifically focusing on how videos are used socially to generate feelings of connection between people. In her two-year ethnographic study, she looked closely at videos that seemed to try to establish some sort of 'communicative connection'. Lange (2009: 71) writes that:

Videos of affinity attempt to maintain feelings of connection with potential others who identify or interpellate themselves as intended viewers of the video.

In order for the creator of a video to be able to 'interpellate' (address) the potential others, he or she needs to capture their attention. However, Lange continues, attention does not come for free. Rather, it is an achievement that requires work, and the point here is that this work is done visually — through video. The definition of videos of affinity is that they are focused on the present, that they aim to create feelings of connection, and that they fulfil the function of maintaining a certain communication channel as open and active. The videos seem to say: I am (still) here! This is what I look like! I am in this room! This is my life at present! You can still subscribe/like/comment on what I do! We continue to be connected! In that sense, these videos are social actions that foster communities or networks.

Is YouTube a social medium?

YouTube is a huge video archive with more than a billion users who watch hundreds of millions of hours of video every day, and who upload 300 hours of video every minute.⁹ Research comparing the behaviours of subscribing versus commenting on YouTube channels has indicated a division between 'social' and 'content' activities within the system (Wattenhofer et al. 2012). This means

that it is largely not the same users who are social on YouTube, that mostly watch YouTube as one traditionally watches TV. The same study found that 25 per cent of the users had one or more reciprocal subscription link. This can be compared to the 100 per cent of Facebook 'friendships' which are mutual by definition.¹⁰ A study of Twitter found that the mutual connections percentage of that service was at 22 per cent, so roughly, then, YouTube is about as social as Twitter (Kwak et al. 2010).

⁹ www.statisticbrain.com/youtube-statistics/.

 $\frac{10}{10}$ However, the site also has a somewhat obscure 'follow' function, <u>www.facebook.com/about/follow</u>.

In other words, videos of affinity are not meant for everyone. Even though anyone can watch them — as long as they are posted as public videos — they typically are interesting only for certain groups of people who desire a connection — who feel an affinity — with the topic, attitude, values, or maker of the video. Lange (2009: 83) writes that these videos often lack any traditional form of content. Such videos are often neither original nor very 'interesting' — in the most common sense of the word. Instead, they tend to be stereotypical, stylised, and draw heavily on in-jokes and other jargon.

Historically, we can think of the genre of home movies — analogue or digital —traditionally recorded by fathers during specific rituals, such as graduations, birthdays, weddings, and Christmases, often simply as a means of remembering the occasions. In some sense, these are videos of affinity: they connect the family members, relatives, and friends who get to watch them. Home movies are also mildly interesting to a wider audience — not counting the genre in its own right created through the wider dissemination of bloopers and fails captured (accidentally or not) in such settings. The proliferation of affordable digital cameras and cameraphones, however, has made it possible to capture more personal things and smaller everyday moments. At the same time, the internet and YouTube have changed the ways in which the videos are distributed. Instead of small-scale home viewing, there is potentially massive global sharing. Personal media can be spread by, and to, heterogeneous and dispersed groups of people. Lange argues that this can disrupt the traditional father-driven patriarchal, middle-class, nuclear family-oriented — forms of home movie making, by showing different locations, identities, and values. Still, young video bloggers and other nonconventional creators are unfortunately and undeservedly often criticised for sharing pointless stuff.

So videos of affinity are not primarily about documenting things in order to be able to remember them in the future. Instead, even though, from a technical perspective, they are recordings of something that has already happened, they fulfil the function of getting across the feeling that a particular moment — which might be large or small — is shared between the creator of the video and its viewers, subscribers, likers, and commenters. This 'work of connection', as Nardi (2005) would call it, might seem meaningless when taken out of context, but is very important in keeping a field of communication open within certain groups.

Online Videos as Social Actions

Lange (2009: 83) says that a video of affinity is not a 'cinematic end point', but rather 'a mediated moment in an ongoing social relationship'. The point of the videos is not their particular content, but their role of maintaining connections between people simply through keeping channels open. And videos of affinity do this largely through visual means, as they tend to revolve around evidence of the live body of their creators.

So even though the creators of the videos may be talking to the camera throughout, the creation of affinity — as Lange shows — relies on a number of aspects of visuality and visibility that are conveyed in the videos. Videos of affinity, often shot in home environments, tend to be spontaneous recordings — or maybe carefully staged to appear spontaneous. They are about sharing informal experiences, and often include laughs, the making of crazy faces, and editing with comic effects. The body is often at the centre of these videos, as they will likely be shot at quite close range, enabling close inspection of the facial attributes and expressions of the speaker. Nardi (2005: 114), referring to social presence theory, writes of how bonding and commitment is best promoted when people meet, and see, each other in person 'with the body in full view'.

In line with this, videos of affinity quite often feature their subjects eating or drinking in front of the camera. Having an apple, drinking water, coffee, or a cup of tea, while addressing the viewers, enhances the casual character of the videos. One will quite often see video bloggers discussing things such as whether they are tired, hungry, bored, whether they had (or need) a haircut, and in other ways providing social 'proof' of their (recorded) bodies. In other words, videos of affinity are social tools — drawing on visibility — that lack any traditional artistic, narrative, or informational content. Instead, they simply 'show' the online presence of individuals in order to establish communicative connections with others. In this sense, like selfies, they are uniquely and natively digital and visual social phenomena. Lange argues further that, while YouTube videos are often analysed around a simplifying division between professional versus user-created content, a focus on affinity allows us to see more interesting dynamics across such categories.

Layers of Visual Sociality

Now let's try to make a closer analysis of the ways in which visual communication among users of digitally networked media can work to establish social connections. One useful way of doing so is to turn to the theory of linguist Roman Jakobson (1990), who famously defined six factors (1–6) of 'speech events' together with six functions (I–VI) of language. He said that in any speech event, there is always (1) an 'addresser' sending some sort of (3) message to (2) an 'addressee'. A video shared online, for example, might be addressed to certain groups of viewers that share the interests of the creator, but this does not preclude that many people who are not the addressees of the content may still watch it. The video will be decoded in different ways, depending on whether it is meant to speak to you or not.

The addresser uses the (I) *emotive function* of language to express his or her attitude towards what he or she is speaking about. Jakobson writes that this function works to create the impression of a certain emotion. Then, there is the (II) *conative function*, which is directed towards the addressee as in 'Please click below to subscribe to my channel!' or 'Post your questions in the comments below!'. The message itself fulfils what Jakobson calls the (III) *poetic function*, which depends on how the addresser uses language (convincingly, playfully, rhetorically, etc.)

Furthermore, the message is always sent in one (4) context or another, which the addressee can grasp and which helps in interpreting what is said. This has to do with the (IV) *referential function* of language in the sense that what is expressed always refers to something. A video of someone having tea and talking about school represents someone having tea and talking about school represents someone having tea and talking about school represents someone having tea and talking about school. The addressee will need to know of the contexts of 'tea' and 'school' — what they mean culturally — in order to understand. There must also be (5) a code — some sort of language or 'language' — shared, at least to some degree, by the addresser and the addressee. The fact that both addresser and addressee know what words, symbols, and things mean fills what Jakobson calls the (V) *metalingual function*. Finally, there must be (6) a contact — meaning some sort of channel of communication through which the addresser and the addressee can enter and stay in communication. Messages serving primarily 'to initiate, extend, or terminate communication' or 'to check whether the channel works ("Hello, do you hear me?" [...] "Are you listening?")' (Lange 2009: 75) fill a (VI) *phatic function*.

Exercise

You have read about Roman Jakobson's theory about 'speech acts' and the functions of language. Look up videos online that you feel might be defined as 'videos of affinity' in Patricia Lange's sense. Now look at one such video in terms of it being a speech act and try to unravel it. How is the addressee using the emotive function? What emotions are expressed and by what (visual) means? Can you identify the conative function being used? Is the addressee of the video talked to directly or indirectly? Videobloggers, for example, might make a habit of talking to their viewers and subscribers as 'you guys' or something similar. Can you decipher who 'you guys' are meant to be? What contextual factors does one need to have knowledge of in order to make sense of the video? In what ways is the video filling the phatic function? You can continue like this, and will probably be able to find other ways of applying Jakobson's terminology as well. After you have done this, try to analyse one or several selfies in the same way.

Further Reading

Rettberg, Jill Walker (2014). *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Feminist new media theorist Jill Walker Rettberg's book about seeing ourselves through technology argues that selfies, as well as other forms of digital self-expression (not only visual), must be taken seriously. This means that they should be understood in a broader context of culture and power. For example, she discusses 'filters' in cognitive, cultural, and technological terms, and discusses how filter and algorithm literacies have become an important part of everyday life.

Wendt, Brooke (2014). The Allure of the Selfie. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.

In this handy little book, visual culture critic and photographer Brooke Wendt analyses selfportraits on Instagram to examine the hold that selfies currently have in society. She defines what a selfie is, situates it historically, and covers several key topics such as poses, hashtags, and filters.

Lange, Patricia G. (2007). Publicly Private and Privately Public. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 361–380.

Lange, Patricia G. (2009). Videos of Affinity on YouTube. In Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Eds.), *The YouTube Reader* (pp. 70–88). Stockholm: National Library of Sweden.

These two papers by Lange are important to the field of YouTube studies. In the first, she explores how participants on YouTube create and maintain their social networks by configuring who has physical and interpretive access to their videos. She makes a conceptual distinction between 'publicly private' and 'privately public' behaviour. The second paper is an introduction to the notion of 'videos of affinity'.

7 Feeling Digital

Key questions

- In what ways has the coming of digital society changed the social dynamics around emotions?
- How can theoretical concepts such as friction, stickiness, and grab contribute to explaining how emotions come to play a part in digital society?
- What are the mechanisms behind hate speech online, and why may digital hate campaigns be hard to battle?
- How can trolling be understood to be based on a new type of affect that is specific to digital society?
- What does the cute cat theory tell us about the role of affect in digital society?

Key concepts

The affective turn * affect/feelings/emotions * affective intensity * friction * flaming * trolling * lulz * cute cat theory * stickiness * grab * resonance * hate speech online

As much as the internet and social media have been discussed in relation to a visual turn in the social and cultural sciences (see <u>Chapter 6</u>) they are also important in relation to *the affective turn*. This turn, which happened in recent years, reflects a growing awareness in research of feelings and emotions for society and culture (Clough & Halley 2007). Of course, emotions have always been absolutely vital to how people function. But cultural and social research has avoided dealing with them for a long time, instead focusing on processes that have been perceived to be more neutral, such as representation, mediation, and signification.

The affective turn allows for new perspectives, some of which are highly pertinent in relation to digital society. While most sociological theories of emotions focus on things that happen between individuals who are co-present in social contexts, emotions are also important in the mediated chains of interaction between people through which norms and a sense of collectivity are formed. Durkheim (1912) aptly argued more than a hundred years ago that 'the force' of the collective is the result of people fixing sentiments (feelings) to things (symbols, objects, events, and so on).

In this chapter, I will look at how sociality in digital society — for example, the circulation and uses of online videos, 'likes', photos, and so on — is largely driven by different forms of affect. Social exchanges take place in networks where the friction between people and technologies gives rise to emotions of varying intensity. I will discuss research that sees *affective intensity* as a key driving force for digital sociality. Covering phenomena such as flaming, trolling, lulz, and cute cats, the chapter introduces the theoretical concepts of stickiness, grab, and resonance, for an understanding of the emotional aspects of digital society.

Networks of Friction

As you have already seen in previous chapters, questions can be raised about to what extent, and how, digital society transforms the previously known ways in which people relate to each other and to society. Naturally, then, one can also ask whether interaction on the internet and in social media changes how emotions are formed and expressed between people. Is it possible, for example, to love or mourn online? And if so, how do the parameters change when such feelings are expressed in digitally networked media? What does it really mean to 'like' something in terms of a 'like' button? And how do things such as asynchronicity and anonymity (see <u>Chapter 4</u>) change the social dynamics around emotions?

When thinking about these things, it is important to remember that questions of emotions and the media are not specific to digital media. It goes without saying that a phone call or something we see on television can make us feel things. But some have argued, however, that questions about mediation and emotions have become more acute in digital society. Sociologists Tova Benski and Eran Fisher (2014: 1) say that this is because the internet allows for 'more elaborate modes of sharing, communicating, performance, and display', which 'all are key ingredients of emotions'. The internet and social media, therefore, generate a new emotional language, new manifestations of emotions, new ways in which feelings bounce between people, and so on.

Affect, feelings, and emotions

The distinction between the words 'affect', 'feelings', and 'emotions' has been debated. Internet researcher Zizi Papacharissi (2015) says that it is essential not to confuse the three. She explains that 'affect' is an experience of intensity that can often be unconscious. It is a particular energy, mood, or drive, which may in turn generate a particular 'feeling' with someone. Possibly, that feeling can subsequently materialise in the form of an expression of emotion. In other words, affect comes before the individual, while feelings are personal experiences of affect. Emotions, on their part, are socially communicated feelings. Sociologist Imogen Tyler (2008: 88) takes another route and says that any absolute distinction between affect, feelings, and emotions must be refused as it is 'critically and politically useless'. So, it might be good to remember that these three words can be taken by some to refer to somewhat different things. There is no clearly established terminological consensus here, though. In this book, I will use them as quite synonymous.

One way of understanding affect in relation to digital society is to use *actor-network theory*, a perspective that was mentioned briefly in <u>Chapter 5</u>. In this view, all subjects, human as well as others (hardware, software, gadgets, language, etc.) become what they are through their connections with others. Basically, actor-network theory argues, as one might tell from its name, that actors must be understood through the networks of which they are a part. The networked connections are what make the actors come into being as such. Internet researchers Susanna Paasonen, Ken Hillis, and Michael Petit (2015) argue that as such networks are in a constant state of interaction, interplay, and becomings, they generate *friction*. That friction, in turn, generates affect, feelings, and emotions. They explain (2015: 10):

An individual looking at a display screen, for example, is connected to a computer, itself an assemblage of hardware, protocols, standards, software, and data. Once connected to an information network by means of modems, cables, routers, hubs, and switches, the computer affords access to other computers, online settings, people, groups, and files. All this entails a rethinking of both human and nonhuman actors and how affect is generated and circulated.

While this sounds a bit abstract, another way of putting it is that things that people do on the internet, and in social media, are largely about affective attachments. Online, people articulate desires, deal with issues of trust, and foster interests, activities, and relationships that might be of deeply felt importance to them. In discussions through digital media, or when taking part in different types of content, we will laugh, cry, get seduced, become furious, or be interested. Paasonen and colleagues argue that online connections, as well as disconnections, are shaped by fluctuating and altering dynamics of love, desire, and wanting. Still, they say, many examples of internet research have presumed that digital tools and platforms are reasonably instrumental and neutral channels, through which the flow of information runs — at least relatively — smoothly. Some approaches also seem to assume that most users are quite rational and enlightened. Paasonen (2015) argues that this has brought about research perspectives that do not bring affect into the equation, and which therefore fail to account fully for the passionate character of many online exchanges.

Exercise

Consider various social media platforms and the different ways in which they are used. Think about the types of encounters between humans and/or non-human actors (images, videos, sets of relations) that may play out here. Try to map out different types of emotions or feelings that drive exchanges. What about social connections with 'friends'? What about online videos, memes, or viral links? In what sense can our engagement with such things be driven by affect? Which emotions can you think of, and in relation to which types of encounters or interactions? To what degree, and how, can you instead map out instrumental exchanges between neutral agents? Also, try to think of how social media platforms as such can be said to configure if and how affect becomes a factor in the interaction. Discuss, for example, differences between Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram.

Affective Intensity

It should come as no surprise that emotions have been an important element of internet use ever since the early days of the medium. Discussion groups, social connectivity in general, and the motivations that make us share and circulate content, are all about intensities and sensations that are created in online encounters between people, digital platforms, images, videos, text, and sounds. But Paasonen (2015) argues that in spite of the crucial role played by affect in our experience of digital society, far too little research has been done in this area.

It is an important point for Paasonen that people's uses of social media are generally driven by a search for intensity. We are looking for some kind of 'affective jolt'. This desire for intensity, Paasonen argues, is what makes users of digital tools and platforms interested and motivated to move across sites, networks, and discussions. Interestingly, she also points out that even though the thrills we seek are often not delivered, there is in fact also an element of affect to the very boredom that might keep us moving steadily from one item of content to another, as we search for something. Paasonen argues that interactions in digital society are driven by what she calls *affective intensity*. Affect is a force that attaches people to certain communities, networks, topics, tools, and so on. It is affect that makes people use social media and pulls them back for more. Calls for support, aggressive outbursts, descriptions of harm and hurt, or waves of sarcasm or amusement, are the types of actions and experiences that knit digital society together.

Paasonen makes this argument by referring to feminist researcher Sara Ahmed's (2004) notion of *stickiness*. In Ahmed's view, things might be sticky both because of enjoyment and antagonism – both positive and negative affect. But some commentators, such as Grusin (2010), have claimed that social media is generally biased towards fostering only positive affect. A good example of this would be that Facebook has a like-button, but no corresponding dislike-button (although YouTube has one). According to this perspective, social media operate in order to minimise expressions of negative affect, such as fear, shame, and disgust. Grusin further argues that the positive jolts of merriment and surprise generated by cute and odd cat videos are symptomatic of the relationship between social media and emotions more generally.

Stickiness

Sara Ahmed (2004: 11) has formulated the very useful concept of 'stickiness' to describe how some of the objects that are shared and circulated socially 'become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension'. Things can be sticky because they are loaded with affect. And sticky things can obviously stick to other things. Online we might find sticky videos, sticky images, sticky hashtags, or sticky discussion threads. As things go viral they are stuck together by affect. The stickiness of such things might be measured by how often people reply or comment, share or like, or dislike, the content in question. For Ahmed (2004: 45), there is a "rippling" effect of emotions; they move sideways (through "sticky" associations between signs, figures and objects)'.

Paasonen, on the other hand, claims that it is evident that mixed, as well as negative affect, does indeed exist online. She writes that like-buttons might be used in quite ambiguous ways, so that a 'like' is not necessary a like in all contexts and for all users. Furthermore, she emphasises that many memes, or cat pictures, might seem harmless at first glance, but that

they in fact might also have unsettling qualities. Paasonen (2015: 29) states that:

in uses of networked media, positive and negative affective intensities intermesh and cluster in complex ways to the degree that their qualities are difficult to tell apart and their intersections hard to precisely determine.

So, exchanges over the internet are affectively driven, but the type of affect that drives the exchanges can often be ambiguous. People connect, disconnect, share, and react because of emotions that they experience in doing so. These emotions might be both positive and negative, and are often much more intense than many early internet researchers expected. The internet, therefore, is a space where affect is both activated and expressed. Not only does it arouse and transmit emotions, it also influences how those emotions are shaped and displayed.

Exercise

Think about Grusin's view that social media in general tends towards expressing positive affect, and Paasonen's view that much content that might seem harmless can in fact have unsettling qualities. Try to apply these perspectives to your own experiences of social media. Also, think about the balance between thrill-seeking and boredom that might drive or guide our clicking and browsing behaviours online. To the extent that you agree that 'affective intensities' is an important part of digital sociality, what positive and negative emotions can you identify as central to what people do online? Are there emotional grey areas, or even all-new types of emotions, which can be experienced online?

Fanning the Flames

Online social actions that express affect in the form of aggression, insults, and hatred towards other users are sometimes called *flaming*. Back in the 1990s, cultural critic Mark Dery (1993) defined flaming, or 'flame wars', as 'vitriolic' online exchanges that are conducted in public. He identified this type of discourse in discussion groups and emails, and argued that there is a 'wraithlike' nature to digital communication, which tends to make hostility escalate much faster online than in face-to-face situations. He wrote that 'disembodied, sometimes pseudonymous combatants tend to feel that they can hurl insults with impunity (or at least without fear of bodily harm)' (Dery 1993: 1). This is, of course, in line with the perspective discussed in <u>Chapter 4</u>, that the reduced social cues in computer-mediated communication can disinhibit people.

Aligning with the criticisms raised in relation to Suler's disinhibition perspective (see <u>Chapter 4</u>), other scholars who have researched flaming have underlined the importance of not jumping to the conclusion that it is a direct effect of computer-mediated communication as such. Communications researcher Joseph Kayany (1998) argues that flaming, rather than being an antisocial consequence of simply using communicating through computers, has to be understood from the perspective of social context and group norms. Some political, religious, or otherwise 'sensitive' topics may have a tendency to bring out uninhibited expressions of hostility, and Kayany made the point that this is a facet of human communication in general, not just one found on the internet. Furthermore, there is the issue of definition, as according to communications researcher Philip Thompsen (1996: 302), 'a flame is not a flame until someone calls it a flame'.

In an experimental study, computer scientist Peter Moor (2007) analysed the role of perceived social norms on flaming behaviour in the context of posting text comments online. He found that users flamed more often when the commenters before them had done so. He concluded from this that people tend to conform to norms of flaming, meaning that if one person starts doing it, others will follow in their footsteps. Similar patterns of imitation, peer pressure, or even escalation, may of course happen in the same way offline. But in many online settings, a fair amount of people will write just one comment and never return to the discussion again. This disables accountability, and might also contribute to people being extra aggressive, since they don't have to wait around to take the consequences of anything they have said.

As we find in offline life, some forms of flaming can be done jokingly, as a form of friendly online 'trash-talking'. Even though the flames expressed can be received in different ways, whatever the intentions of the flamer (see the discussion about encoding/decoding in Chapter 6), the things said are not necessarily rooted in deeper sentiments of hate. However, they might still be, and regardless of the intentions of every individual person who is vilifying or attacking someone, these comments can sometimes add up exponentially to massive hate campaigns. This has to do with the specific dynamics of online debates more generally. When emotions are expressed in computer-mediated and networked modes of communication, the specific affordances as well as limitations of the platforms seem to easily contribute to making affect sharper, while also reducing people into stereotypes.

Love online

Love, romance, and sexual attraction are among the feelings that are often discussed in relation to the internet and social media. Research on online dating and cybersex has generally argued that online relationships, if compared with their offline counterparts, tend to be more intimate and emotionally more intense (Ben-Ze'ev 2004). Consequently, different aspects of love online have been explored in a number of studies. A main focus for that research has been on self-presentation strategies in online dating, and many results have confirmed similar patterns to those discussed in <u>Chapter 4</u>; namely that people can reveal a surprising amount of intimate details, as well as build trust, through computer-mediated communication.

The Faceless Multitude

We must remember, however, as discussed in previous chapters, that these same affordances that can bring out affect sharpened into aggression can at the same time be essential for some people's opportunities and possibilities to peacefully express their identities and their views on the world. Law professor Danielle Keats Citron (2014: 61) argues that it is not necessarily the case that the internet fuels hate or brings out the worst in us. She emphasises the importance of anonymity for empowerment:

Political dissenters document governmental abuse on micro-blogging sites because they can disguise their real names. Teenagers share their concerns about coming out to family and friends on LGBT sites because they are not worried about being identified. Under the cloak of anonymity, new parents are more willing to be honest about the difficulties of raising children without worrying about being labeled a bad parent.

At the same time, networked digital tools and platforms can obviously also facilitate the emergence of cyber mobs. Various extremist groups were indeed among the very earliest users of the first incarnations of the internet. Still today, it seems that people are more inclined towards antisocial behaviour, and joining bigoted mobs, when interaction happens online — relatively anonymously, asynchronously, and so on. Things may also get further amplified as online communication tends towards group polarisation. People who are inclined to turn to radical groups are 'nudged to greater extremes' if participation in such groups takes place online (Citron 2014: 63).

The same processes can contribute to making people who are generally not very radical or extreme in their views move towards more relentless views online. According to Citron, using the internet can thus radicalise people, pulling fence-sitters into either/or positions. Furthermore, the networked and viral character of online communication can significantly worsen the damage made by spreading the abuse both far and wide. There is also, Citron argues, a tendency to trivialise the feelings of people who become targets of hate and harassment online. In the 'Wild West' zone of free speech, which the internet is sometimes believed to be, anyone feeling hurt risks being seen as a hysterical 'drama queen' unable to realise that threats and attacks might be 'just words', satire, or a way for the alleged haters to simply pass time or beat boredom.

The so-called Gamergate controversy in late 2014 was an illustrative example of the emergence of a cyber mob. The controversy sprung from a longstanding debate over sexism versus progressivism in computer gaming culture. According to Wikipedia, this hate and harassment campaign started in August of 2014, when game developer Zoë Quinn — creator of the critically acclaimed game DepressionQuest — was aggressively accused in a blog by a former boyfriend of having, among many other things, cheated on him with a gaming journalist in exchange for media coverage.¹ Soon, other people joined in, on IRC (Internet Relay Chat), Reddit, 4chan, and other forums, spreading the accusations further. Some think that the widespread support for the harassment campaign had to do with many traditional gamers not liking the 'artsiness' of her creations. People who dared to joke about or criticise the attackers, such as game developer Brianna Wu and feminist cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian, soon also became targets of extreme hate speech, and increasingly disturbing

threats. It did not stop there, however, as other female game creators and journalists were targeted as well, some leaving the industry and others being driven from their homes by a series of violent and extreme threats.

¹<u>https://thezoepost.wordpress.com</u>.

These events quickly developed into a full-scale internet culture war over the presence of women in the gaming sector, both as in-game characters, and as gamers or developers. This war, said *The Washington Post*, was taking place between 'a motley alliance of vitriolic naysayers: misogynists, anti-feminists, trolls, people convinced they're being manipulated by a left-leaning and/or corrupt press, and traditionalists who just don't want their games to change', and 'independent game-makers and critics, many of them women, who advocate for greater inclusion in gaming'.² However, Gamergate was something more than a mere consumer movement or an expression of subcultural drama. It tapped into a larger conflict over gender, misogyny, visibility, and inclusion. Many of the tens of thousands of people who contributed to the controversy still claim that it was just about ethics in gaming journalism. Such claims, however, did not fit with the rape and death threats Quinn received, as well as the posting of Quinn's personal information (her address, nude photos, etc.) online. For anyone claiming the controversy to be less about ethics, and more about sexism, there was a high price to pay.

² www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/14/the-only-guide-to-gamergateyou-will-ever-need-to-read/.

In February 2016, as Quinn's ex-boyfriend's court hearing drew closer, Quinn became hesitant. Her ex-partner had become an internet celebrity, and the hate mob had grown more powerful. The court case appeared to intensify the threats, so she decided to drop the case, as she felt that the legal justice system would be unable to protect her from the online hate campaign. The ex-boyfriend was not the worst of the harassers, and very far from being the only one. The meticulous documentation kept by Quinn, Wu, and Sarkeesian 'suggested a faceless multitude, who together were profoundly more frightening and disruptive than [the initial] blog post ever was'. In a video interview,³ Quinn explained how she did not 'think the courts are ready to even deal with this' and because of that 'it doesn't feel like a battle worth fighting'. Citron agrees that there is a huge lack of support available to victims of online abuse. In one case, unrelated to Gamergate, the police called the harassment in question 'annoying and immature Internet communications [that] did not meet the criteria for criminal prosecution' (Citron 2014: 88). Speaking specifically on Quinn's case, Citron said: 'At some point, it becomes too much for the system to bear. You can't nail down criminal liability in a case like Zoe's, where there's such a huge number of actors' (2014: 88).

³ www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/02/17/in-the-battle-of-internetmobs-vs-the-law-the-internet-mobs-have-won/.

Exercise

Look for traces of Gamergate on the internet — in blogs and news sites, on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and so on. Make sure to get an insight into the types of threats and attacks that the targets were subjected to. Try to analyse the controversy by drawing on previous discussions about anonymity (see <u>Chapter 4</u>), networked publics (see <u>Chapter 2</u>), networked individualism (see <u>Chapter 5</u>), and the notions of affective intensity and stickiness in this chapter. Generally, try to identify what elements of these events are due to social mechanics that are unique to digital society. Which of these things could not have happened without the internet and, most importantly, why?

Trolls and Lulz

It might not be very surprising that people love, hate, befriend, and fight each other on the internet and in social media. As society is increasingly also taking place in online settings, it seems a natural consequence that basic social forms such as sociability, conflict, and dominance come along with it. However, as I have discussed in previous chapters, digital society also gives rise to social forms that appear to be more specific to its modes of interaction. One such phenomenon is that of *trolling*. The existence of this ambiguous practice of posting inflammatory remarks, wrongful information, false accusations, or other content which aims to stir up emotions and generate strong reactions, underlines the complexity of online interaction.

Trolling is different from flaming, which translates into hostility, aggression, and insults. Trolling is a form of intentional provocation, entailing a broad repertoire of more nuanced practices: posting opinions that one does not really hold, being intently categorical, making comments that are abruptly off topic, and so on. Internet researcher and literary scholar Whitney Phillips (2015) is interested in this grey area of ambiguous behaviour online. She argues that many digitally mediated interactions fall somewhere in between play — crass joking, identity experimentation, etc. — and hate — systematic bullying, hate speech, and other behaviours that are obviously damaging. So, while far from all encounters on the internet can be defined in terms of trolling, the phenomenon nonetheless brings into view a hinterland of social practices, which can also contribute to wider understandings of how digital sociality works.

The roots of trolling

In her book on trolling, Whitney Phillips (2015) describes how the roots of the phenomenon were in newsgroups such as alt.tasteless and in the proliferation on the early internet of so-called shocksites. Such forums nurtured a nihilistic attitude towards content, and fostered a culture of pointing unknowing web surfers to shock-images that 'can't be unseen', or to completely pointless stuff. Subsequently the infamous /b/ discussion board — a subset of the anonymous online forum 4chan — became a steady breeding ground for trolling. /b/, a 'random' board with a 'no rules' policy, became an incubator of sorts for making trolling into a coherent and recognisable practice. Internet researcher Lee Knuttila (2011) describes the 'dirt and ore' of /b/:

The derogatory specter which haunts /b/ stems from its habitually unpleasant discourse. There is minimal regulation of /b/, beyond the posting of personal information, images of child pornography and discussion of 'raids' on other Web sites. Even these nominal rules are regularly flouted. /b/'s enigmatic in-jokes, disparaging language, distressing gory images and unbound arguments are often matched with glimpses of astute political discussion, heartfelt moments of virtual friendship and sparkling banter.

The origin of the notion of trolling has been debated. The word 'troll' can make us think of the trolls of Scandinavian folklore. At the same time, 'trolling' may describe the fishing technique by which a lure is dragged behind a moving boat. Obviously both the mischievous character of mythological trolls and the activity of luring someone are functioning metaphors for the practice in question. Phillips found that internet trolls are a diverse group, ranging from individuals seemingly lacking in any form of empathy, or those being explicitly racist, sexist, or homophobic, to individuals who can be surprisingly respectful, even though they also engage in trolling.

Trolling refers to a whole spectrum of occasional as well as persistent behaviours, where some are very aggressive, and would legally count as harassment, while others are relatively harmless acts of misleading others for humorous purposes. In her research, Phillips found that in spite of a wide variety of trolls and trolling behaviours, there are still some consistent markers of what trolling is. First, she argues, a troll always self-identifies as a troll. In other words, there is no accidental trolling. Simply provoking others, simply flaming, or simply expressing racist, sexist, or homophobic sentiments does not as such constitute trolling. Nor does the act of disrupting online discourse with stupid questions. According to Phillips' definition, trolling is something that a self-identifying troll sets out to do.

Second, trolls are motivated by 'lulz'. This is a variation — or a corruptiona⁴ — of the internet slang acronym-cum-word for laughter (lol). Lulz refers to a certain kind of laughter that is unsympathetic and ambiguous. It 'celebrates the anguish of the laughed-at victim' and expresses 'amusement at other people's distress' (Phillips 2015: 26). Trolling is done 'for the lulz'. The only reason for trolling is to extract lulz from a situation. But even though this means that trolls don't mean to do any real harm, Phillips (2015: 36) still underlines that 'lulz are predicated on asymmetry' as their pursuit means that trolls' targets become objectified pawns.

⁴ <u>https://encyclopediadramatica.se/Lulz</u>.

Trolling is based on the idea that nothing should be taken seriously. It revels in the attachment-free aspects of the internet and social media. Behind 'the mask of trolling' users are free to choose to what extent the things that they say and do reflect their actual personal beliefs or not. On the other hand, trolling depends on its targets not being anonymous, or at least being willing to disclose some of their offline vulnerabilities and attachments. While trolling as such is obviously both ideologically and ethically fraught, it still expresses something crucial about the mechanics of online interaction.

It might seem easy to dismiss trolling as aimless, immature, and unnecessary. But at the same time, trolls also develop skills in manipulating flows of communication or people's reactions — trolls are 'agents of cultural digestion' (2015: 10). Trolling can also make us aware of overlaps that may exist between what we feel to be negative or positive, threatening or desirable. Phillips (2015: 11) argues that:

trolls are born of and embedded within dominant institutions and tropes, which are every bit as damaging as the troll's most disruptive behaviors.

So, trolling points to the complexities of social actions online. People will do things with different motivations or aims, and these actions can get aggregated through networked media, and get intended as well as unintended consequences, which can be good and creative, as well as hateful and destructive.

Grab and Resonance

In order to account for the complex relationship between digital media and emotions, Paasonen suggests a shift away from a one-sided focus on representation. She means that if one only studies social exchanges and experiences from a textual perspective — just analysing written or other symbolic traces of what people have said or done — the sensory and embodied aspects of being digitally social are framed out. Therefore, she says, we must avoid 'logocentric' views, because they rely on linguistic models for understanding social life. So, instead of only looking at the posts that people have made, the photos they have uploaded or viewed, and the videos that they have created or watched, we must also think about how the content *affects* the users. This, however, is easier said than done, since it poses a delicate analytical challenge.

In media research and criticism more generally, there has historically been a tendency to devalue popular genres such as sentimental 'weepies', thrillers, and low comedy. This might have to do, some say, with the fact that such genres tend to be bodily felt rather than intellectually experienced. The same goes for many genres in internet culture. Paasonen (2011) makes her point in relation to a case study of online porn, which in spite of its widespread use, is still conspicuously under-researched. It is consumed by at least a quarter of all Western internet users, and was crucial for how the internet as such developed into a commercial medium. It is everywhere, but somehow still seen as marginal. This can at least in part be explained by its strong affective charge.

As Paasonen (2011: 2) explains: Pornography attaches 'the viewing body to its affective loop: in porn, bodies move and move the bodies of those watching'. Furthermore, people's encounters with online porn involve intimacy. That intimacy can be desirable, surprising, unwanted, disturbing, and so on. But it is still intimacy. And this mechanism in digital society is applicable not only to the example of porn, but also for things ranging from pictures of cute cats that make our hearts melt, to shock sites with horrendous depictions of gore, which we can't erase from our minds. The content is physically experienced, and this poses problems for researchers who need to keep their analytical minds straight. Rather than watching content on the internet, Theresa Senft (2008: 46) argues, people are 'grabbed' by its content. Senft writes of 'the grab' as a specific dynamic of spectatorship and participation that is characteristic of digital society:

By 'grab,' I mean to clutch with the hand, to seize for a moment, to command attention, to touch — often inappropriately, sometimes reciprocally. To grab is to grasp, to snatch, to capture. Grabbing occurs over the Web in different ways during each stage of production, consumption, interpretation, and circulation.

Being influenced by Senft's notion of the grab, Paasonen agrees that doing things with the internet and social media is quite different from engaging with television or cinematic fiction. In her studies of porn, Paasonen explains that from the narrow perspective of representation — what story it tells, what imagery is shown — online porn is largely the same as pre-digital porn. The difference now is in the technological makeup and the related modes of engagement:

Users do not merely choose a video to watch, as one might do with VHS, DVD, or a pay channel. Instead, they search, browse (through sites, listings, and directories), bookmark, click, download, upload, leave comments, rate, log in, and compare. (Paasonen 2011: 259)

Such things render engagement with social media a stronger visceral character than many other, and previous, forms of media use. It is not that books, music, films, and television, doesn't move us emotionally. Indeed, all of these media often do. Loud live music is certainly felt in the body, as is what we experience when watching a stunning 3D movie at a cinema. But many of the visceral experiences of non-internet media also happen at the representational level. In those cases, we are moved by identification — with the story of a book, the lyrics to a song, the symbolic power of a photograph, and so on. But in some settings — especially so with digitally networked and interactive media — something more happens. Paasonen suggests that we use the concept of *resonance* to describe this. Once again, using online porn as an example, resonance describes not only the force and grab of porn, but also how users attach themselves — stick — to the content. Resonance, for Paasonen, is about connections between affective content and affective audiences and how they resonate, or dissonate, with each other.

Aww!

The largely popular social news and entertainment site Reddit is organised into special interest pages that are called 'subreddits'. As of 2015, the site has several hundreds of millions of visitors that take part in submitting text, images, and videos, and in 'upvoting' or 'downvoting' content on these pages. One of the default subreddits — this means that everyone who is creating a user account is automatically subscribed to it — is 'Aww'. Its focus is to 'post pictures, videos and stories of things that make you go, "Aww!" from utter cuteness'.⁵ The subreddit abounds with pictures and videos of adorable puppies, bunnies, kittens, and so on. It is allowed to post pictures of humans as well, but images of young and/or small furry animals are by far the most popular items to share.

⁵ <u>www.reddit.com/r/aww/wiki/index</u>.

Aww is one of many examples of how cuteness, as argued by Japanese Studies scholar Mio Bryce (2006: 2265), has become a 'powerful cultural medium'. This is expressed in relation to Japanese pop culture in the form of anime and other genres, expressions, or things that can be described as 'kawaii' (a specific form of cuteness), but also in the fact that there is an over-abundant interest in things that are cute in internet culture more generally (Wittkower 2012). Cuteness is, for example, an element of some internet memes, and most prominently of so-called LOLCats (Miltner 2011). The LOLCat meme, an image macro (see <u>Chapter 2</u>) of one or more cats with humorous, misspelled, or grammatically incorrect captions, draws at least in part on an 'affective appeal of cuteness' (Shafer 2012). For some reason, images and videos of cats are in heavy circulation all over the internet. In many social media contexts, it might indeed seem as if it is 'kittens all the way down' (Lobato & Meese 2014).

Civic media researcher Ethan Zuckerman (2015: 134) has written that the contemporary internet was even designed 'in no small part, for the dissemination of cute pictures of cats'. Of course, he does not really mean that the internet was conceived as a vehicle on which to share cat photos. He uses cute cats as a metaphor for user-created day-to-day content, and he argues that the post-web 2.0 internet is, on the whole, a space for regular people to make and circulate a mix of everyday things. Being interested in civic uses of digital media, Zuckerman argues that the social networks that are established and maintained among people who create, share, like, and comment on 'cute cats' has a latent capacity to be mobilised for political activism, should the need arise. This idea — sometimes called the *cute cat theory* — points out that publishing platforms that were designed to be used by activists or other specialists are often less effective than more widely used digital tools and channels:

Internet tools designed to let ordinary consumers publish non-political content are often useful for activists because they are difficult for governments to censor without censoring innocuous content; because censorship of inoffensive content can alert nonactivist users to government censorship; and because activism using consumer tools can tap the 'latent capacity' of non-activist users to create and disseminate activist content. (Zuckerman 2015: 132)

Another important dimension here, which is beyond the scope of Zuckerman's argument, is that this latent capacity often comes from the 'cute' stickiness — returning to Ahmed's

notion — of the content that is circulated. The underlying potential for forceful action relies, in other words, on the affective appeal of the communication infrastructure. And apart from infrastructure, maybe it is also about the affective intensities stuck to the cute cats in themselves which are mobilised for political purposes in these cases. As communications researcher Zizi Papacharissi (2015: 93) puts it, the platforms are already 'affectively disposed', and when this is the case *affective publics* can be mobilised.

In her research on political activism, Papacharissi argues that the internet and social media facilitate political expressions and formations that are grounded in affect. In line with the discussion above about the cute cats, Papacharissi says that people become connected by discourses that are affectively charged, and that feelings about both private and public issues and things are very important driving forces for networked publics. In other words, Papacharissi, like Paasonen, sees affect as a key element of digital sociality. Drawing on research that has been described previously in this book, about the means through which social media can facilitate people's feelings of engagement, Papacharissi argues that networked technologies create affective connections among people. This happens when 'affective gestures' call networked publics into being. Such affective gestures can take the shape of cute cat pictures as well as of explicitly political discourse – the point being that affect is not a bearer of any agenda, but simply of intensity.

Thus, affective attunement demonstrated through liking a post on Facebook, endorsing an item in a news aggregator, uploading and sharing a YouTube video, or using a meme generator to create and share a simple message via a photograph is indicative of civic intensity and thus a form of engagement. (2015: 25)

So, while the internet and social media can function as a space in which to express virtually any type of emotion — love, hate, anger, or the heart-warming feeling of looking at an adorable furry kitten — it is also interesting to think about what the affective character of digital media means more generally. Learning from perspectives such as those of Ahmed, Paasonen, Papacharissi, and Zuckerman, one conclusion would be that the very fact that people keep channels open by circulating everyday or random content that sticks, creates a powerful latent potential for mobilising networked publics for a variety of social and political reasons and aims.

Exercise

You have read in this chapter about how online sociality is driven by affective intensities. Such intensities can come from feelings of 'aargh' (as in flaming), 'lulz' (as in trolling), 'eww' (as in being shocked or disgusted), or 'aww' (as in cute cats). As you have seen, some researchers think that there is a family resemblance to the emotions evoked by things ranging from the shocking to the cute. Now, go to a site such as imgur.com and browse through some of 'the most viral images on the internet'. To what extent can the images you find be understood in terms of affective intensity, grab, and resonance? What different emotions do the images seem to evoke? Can you construct a typology of the most common emotions? Try to reflect upon what function content like this has for social interaction and society more generally. You could also search the internet for 'reaction videos' — an emerging genre in its own right which documents and shares emotional reactions to content — and approach them from a similar perspective. Think about the social action of sharing reactions. What does it mean?

Further Reading

Papacharissi, Zizi (2015). Affective Publics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Papacharissi's book about 'affective publics' looks at how political expressions online — both everyday, casual ones and massive movements — are enabled by social media. This is because social media are a particularly good fit for expressing feelings of engagement. Affective publics, driven by storytelling, can feel their way through digital society.

Hillis, Ken, Paasonen, Susanna, & Petit, Michael (Eds.) (2015). *Networked Affect*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

In this edited volume, a group of researchers address the relationship between networks and affect. Rooted in the emerging field of 'affect theory', the book covers how our interactions with websites, apps, forums, gifs, and the like, allow us to experience a variety of sensations. It is about affective online encounters and the often contradictory and complex feelings that they may arouse.

Phillips, Whitney (2015). This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Phillips' book on the relationship between trolling and mainstream media is the best book to date about the phenomenon. She argues that trolling is not as deviant as it is made out to be, but that it fits rather well with how the contemporary media landscape works. Trolling, she argues, can also be seen as a form of cultural critique.

8 Digital Citizenship

Key questions

- How do people's different resources affect to what extent they can exercise digital citizenship?
- What are the main arguments in the debate over whether the internet and social media constitute a new public sphere or not?
- In what ways do the theories about 'cybersalons' (Dean) and 'the private sphere' (Papacharissi) extend and alter the theory about 'the public sphere' (Habermas)?
- How does citizen journalism transform public debate and reshape flows of information?

Key concepts

Digital citizenship * internet competence * cybersalons * second-level digital divide * the public sphere * the private sphere * monitorial citizens * citizen journalism * blogosphere * twittersphere

Being a citizen means being a legitimate and participatory member of society. But what does it mean to be a citizen, not in a nation state, but in something as fluid and abstract as digital society? A functioning democracy demands that people are able to play an active part in society, being informed, critical, and responsible. The arrival of digital society has transformed the conditions surrounding participatory processes like these in several ways. As discussed in <u>Chapters 4</u> and 5, people interact, develop their identities, form communities, and connect to networks in ways that alter many of the pre-digital social conditions around civic engagement and citizenship. Today, the rapid technological and social changes in the media landscape have added greater complexity to political issues, spanning the local and global. People's identities have become more complex, overlapping, and sometimes in conflict, and this has added to the blurred boundaries between the public and the private spheres.

The internet, and its social tools and platforms for interaction and communication, has contributed to changes in what sociologists have called *the public sphere*, and in political behaviours and activity in general. Craig Calhoun (1998) explains that these changes, however, must be understood as part of a continuing series of transformations. You might remember Rainie and Wellman's (2012) view, discussed in <u>Chapter 5</u>, that 'the social network revolution' is not only about digital media, but about more longstanding social transformations of communication and social relations. In this Chapter, I discuss the notion of digital citizenship, and the related idea of *internet competence* — a set of skills that are related to people's capabilities and opportunities to make political use of the internet and social media. We will also look at Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere and discuss its relevance for digital society. Several tweaks and fixes have been suggested for how to update his theory for a digital age, such as the notions of cybersalons, private spheres, and public sphericules. We will discuss these, as well as the future challenges presented by the complex issue of civic participation in digital society.

Citizenship

Aristotle said that a citizen was a person who had a share in both ruling and being ruled. *Citizenship*, then, refers to some form of status with accompanying rights and duties. Historically, there is a strong connection between the notion of citizenship and important social aspects such as liberty, justice, and democracy. A citizen is someone who is a member of the political community — someone whose voice is heard. Citizenship, therefore, is about formal and informal access to civic society and the public sphere, and about participatory skills held by the individual.

Digital Citizens and Divides

It has been claimed that under the right circumstances the internet and social media can give people better opportunities to participate in society and politics. But while the internet may enable some people to be more politically active, online as well as offline, it might raise barriers for others. This is related to a debate about what has been called *digital citizenship*. The idea of digital citizenship refers to the opportunities and resources that a person has to participate online in society and politics. These resources are a combination of having access to the tools of participation, as well as having the right skills or literacy with which to use them.

In digital society, digital citizenship is turning to an increasingly large part of political citizenship altogether. So, in digital society, people's different degrees of access to digital citizenship can have important consequences for democratic participation. Just as public education has long been a facilitator for people to stay politically informed and active, networked digital media platforms are increasingly important to fulfil a similar role today. In many countries, there is a movement towards *e-government*, which means that government information and services are increasingly delivered over the internet. Furthermore, many political campaigns, as well as day-to-day discussions of political issues among citizens, now take place online. Researchers have also shown that there is a positive relationship between online activity and political participation more generally. For example, internet use in general makes it more likely that a person will vote in elections.

Political scientists Caroline Tolbert and Ramona McNeal (2003) argue that the internet and social media — whether we see them as news media or as a set of communication platforms — might have the power to update political institutions and to improve citizens' trust in governments. At the same time, they also worry that these same platforms have the potential to be biased, so that they expand the voter turnout rates only among people who are already politically engaged, thereby magnifying existing disparities in the electorate. The internet can function as a new form of civic arena, but it is one where all people are not equally present. We must remember, however, that the historical counterparts, in the form of non-digital arenas, did not have equal representation across the social spectrum either. The question is: Is the internet any better?

Political scientist Karen Mossberger (2009) is among those researchers who have shown that systematic inequalities in the capacity to use digital tools — along dividing lines of education, income, race and ethnicity, age, and so on — persist in spite of the exponential increase in internet use. While she builds her argument on American data, similar patterns exist across the globe. The fact that someone has access to the internet does not mean that they have the skills to find or use information effectively, nor does it mean that they can harness the potential political power of these technologies for their own political, or other, goals and purposes. Being a digital citizen demands not only regular access to the internet, but also that the technology is put to effective use. Mossberger (2009: 173–174) writes:

Digital citizens can be defined as those who use the internet every day, because frequent use requires some regular means of access (usually at home), some technical skill and the educational competencies to perform tasks such as finding and using information [...] and communicating with others.

This means that fostering political debate and civil dialogue online demands us to be wary of who really gets the opportunity to take part. Sociologist Eszter Hargittai (2002) wrote in the early 2000s about what she called a second-level digital divide. The first-level *digital divide* is the division between those who have access to the internet and those who don't, and between those who actually use it and those who don't. While interesting, such evaluations become less and less relevant as more and more people gain access to the internet, and as more and more people use it actively. Focusing only on patterns of access and usage is a form of technological determinism (see <u>Chapter 3</u>), which fails to account for the big differences in use which actually exist among people who all have access to the internet. So, the second-level digital divide is the division between people who have access to, and use, the internet, but who have different levels of skill in its use. On one level there is the very technical access (physically having the gadgets, the software, and the connectivity), and on the other there is the social access (the knowledge needed to benefit from those things). The social access, that is the skills which contribute to the division of people into groups of savvy and not-so-savvy internet users, has political consequences.

Internet Competence

Hargittai and her sociologist colleague Paul DiMaggio (DiMaggio & Hargittai 2001) have suggested that digital divides can exist along five different dimensions:

- Technical means
- Autonomy of use
- Skill (internet competence)
- Social support
- Different uses

So, the first is that of *technical means*, as the quality and adequacy of hardware, software, and connections can limit the ways in which people put the internet to use. Users with slow connections and old devices will simply be unable to access certain information and spaces. The second dimension is that of *autonomy of use*, as different people will have different degrees of control over their use of digital social tools and platforms. Whether one accesses the internet at home, at work, in public places, and so on, will affect how autonomous and free the user is to do various things. Different contexts will permit different types of use. Formal and informal social rules may regulate the uses, and hard-wired things such as filtering or monitoring content can be in play in various ways, depending on the access point.

Third, there is the dimension of *skill*, mentioned in the <u>previous section</u>. Different users will vary in their knowledge and understanding of the logic of different types of tools and platforms; of how to navigate and interact effectively, and how to troubleshoot the variety of related problems, which always tend to arise. Taken together, DiMaggio and Hargittai call this 'internet competence'. Those with a higher degree of internet competence will have more political leverage as digital citizens. There is also a mechanism by which those who are already skilled in the use of digital technologies will become even more skilled, and vice versa. This is because internet competence is related to the degree of satisfaction that a user gets from using the tools. The extent to which the experience is found stressful or rewarding will naturally affect how much one persists in continuing to use these technologies and to acquire more and more skills.

The fourth dimension discussed by DiMaggio and Hargittai is *social support*. This is related to the degree to which users are able to draw on social support from more experienced users when they have reached the limits of their own skills. So, whether a user is embedded in a community or network (cf. <u>Chapter 5</u>) where peers can provide guidance and reinforcement will affect the extent to which they develop their own internet competence. Finally, the fifth dimension has to do with *different uses* of digital technology. Factors such as income and education, among others, will affect the range of purposes the internet is used for, and all uses are not equal. As DiMaggio and Hargittai (2001: 12) put it:

The Internet prophets who foresaw that the Web would empower citizens, increase social capital, and enhance equality of opportunity probably did not have gambling or pornography sites in mind when they made these predictions.

Because of this, they argue, it is important to consider how different determinants, such as

social class, race, ethnicity, age, and other identity elements, may affect why a person uses the internet. Some might be driven by economic factors (employment opportunities, education, consumer information, etc.), others by enhancing their political or social capital (e.g. following news, gathering relevant information, or engaging in civic dialogue). Others 'simply' use the internet for entertainment and recreation.
Exercise

In a report from the Reuters Institute of Journalism, researcher Colin Byrne (2015) explored the role played in the 2015 UK General Election by digital social tools and platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Vine, and Instagram. Expectations were high that this election campaign would largely be won online, so both Labour and the Conservatives spent large sums of money on social media campaigning. Social media companies themselves, such as Facebook and BuzzFeed, also worked consciously towards the election. From several different case studies, Byrne concluded that even though the new digital platforms were not without effect, traditional broadcast media remained more influential. He said that perhaps by 2020 we will finally have *the* social media election. This pattern can also be recognised in other countries and elections. The specifics may differ, but generally there has been much hype about the role of social media before elections, but conclusions in hindsight have been similar to Byrne's. Naturally, one major reason for this could be that change plain and simple takes time, as people generally tend to do things in the ways that they always did. But now, try to think about the failures of 'social media elections' — as well as the social media successes of some perspectives in publicised events such as the Brexit referendum or the Trump presidency — from the perspective of different types of digital divide. In evaluations, the electorate is often referred to in homogenising ways as if all people in it were part of the digitalisation-process on similar terms. Consider how divides in terms of (1) technical means, (2) autonomy of use, (3) skills or internet competence, (4) social support, and (5) different uses, might affect whether elections are fought on social media or not. Perhaps it is not just about the sheer amount of activity, but the quality of it. It might be helpful to construct hypothetical user positions — haves and have-nots in relation to the five dimensions — in order to be able to reflect about these things concretely. Overall, what do you feel is the outlook for political citizen participation online? Could the internet contribute to the strengthening of existing divides? Can it give voice to groups and individuals that would be without one in a world without the internet? Are there still advantages to traditional mass media?

The Public Sphere

The discussion of democratic deliberation in civic society, and the question of who has the opportunity to participate, are rather longstanding issues within social and political science. Sociologist and critical theorist Jürgen Habermas is famous for his discussion of the concept of a *public sphere*. According to Habermas (1989), the public sphere is a social realm that channels civil society. It is an arena for conversations, exchange, and the formation of ideas and views. He developed his theory in the book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which was published in German in 1962 and translated to English in 1989, but the issues that it discusses have become relevant again because of the internet.

Habermas said that there had historically been a division, in language and philosophy, between two spheres: the public and the private. Before the 1700s, the focus in most societies was on 'representative publicity', a system where a king or lord was the only public person while all others were considered as private spectators. In England in the 1700s, however, the rise of capitalism brought on an increasing degree of 'rational-critical debate' among the literate public. People were responding to new cultural forms in literature and art, and discussed such things in coffee-houses and salons. Even though one did not talk about explicitly political issues, Habermas felt that this was a way for civil society to articulate its interests. He described the emerging 'bourgeois public sphere' as an arena mixing the two sides of private and public, as 'private' people joined together to form a 'public'. The public sphere, then, is a part of the private world that moves into the public domain. While there was an inclusive atmosphere in the salons and coffee-houses, access was still filtered by gender, class, race, education, and property ownership.

These citizen forums developed, according to Habermas, into a fully political public sphere which was institutionalised in the 1800s through the European constitutional states. But this incorporation of the public sphere into the democratic systems of states was not positive. Habermas saw this as the beginning of a process that was eroding and even erasing the public sphere. Media became cheaper and more powerful, and seemed to aim simply at the production of consensus rather than critical debate. Instead of an actual public sphere, there were instead manipulated media audiences.

In his book, Habermas wrote about how rational-critical debate among citizens had disappeared. The public sphere had been colonised by media, advertising, and entertainment. But, he contended, society needs a strong public sphere to keep top-down power and domination in check. 'Ordinary people' must be able to talk to each other and develop their opinions, as democracy demands an informed and critical public. At the time of his writing, Habermas was hoping for the return of a functioning and strong public sphere. And since then, the arrival of the internet and digitally networked social media has given some hope that we might be witnessing such a development. But as you will remember from <u>Chapter 3</u>, views differ as to whether this is really something to hope for. The internet and social media certainly blur some of the boundaries between the public and the private (which is not good according to Habermas), but they are also potentially a user-driven social realm for conversations and exchange (which is very good according to Habermas). Similar to how Habermas described the means by which discussions of art and literature in the salons in the 1700s gradually became political, Henry Jenkins (2006: 257) is hopeful when writing:

Right now, we are learning how to apply these new participatory skills through our relation to commercial entertainment — or, more precisely, right now some groups of early adopters are testing the waters and mapping out directions where many more of us are apt to follow. These skills are being applied to popular culture first [but] may quickly get applied to political activism or education and the workplace.

So, the question can be raised here as to whether one can in fact see all of the often playful and seemingly non-political things that people do online as a precursor to an emerging public sphere in the Habermasian sense.

Master–Slave Architectures

In an analysis of Twitter, Christian Fuchs (2017) poses the question of whether this specific example of social media can be seen as a public sphere. What he finds is that there is relatively very little political discussion going on on Twitter. Instead, the space is dominated by entertainment. The twittersphere is governed by celebrities, and the politicians who are prominent are those who are already established and who have lots of resources. Political agents that are critical of the status quo are much less visible and have fewer followers. Analysing a large number of tweets in relation to significant political events, Fuchs concludes that the critical public debate that Habermas imagined is simply not achieved on Twitter as it looks today. He then raises the question of whether the short message format of Twitter and similar platforms really provide good opportunities for meaningful political debates at all. He worries that the brevity of the communication on the platform may lead to simplistic arguments. More generally, according to Fuchs's perspective, social media as public sphere risks falling into Habermas's (1989: 162) category of 'pseudo-public spheres', a form of public sphere that is hollowed out and rendered powerless by mass media and culture consumption.

Evaluating whether something is a public sphere or not, from the Habermasian perspective, can be distilled to two key criteria. First, that everyone has access, and second, that participants can confer in an unrestricted way. Obviously, however, not everyone has the same access to the internet. As of 2016, the internet penetration rate was at around 90 per cent in North America and Western Europe, and around 25 per cent in Africa and South Asia.¹ Furthermore, also in the parts of the world where access to the internet and social media is at a high level, there is a hierarchy of different ways of reaping the participatory advantages. You will remember the discussion of internet competence and skills from earlier in this chapter. At one end of the spectrum, the highly active user can be found, who comments on, and engages with, content through whatever channels are available. This is a person who would probably be active in formal and informal networks of discussion and information sharing even in a pre-digital society. At the other end of the spectrum is a passive, isolated, mass audience member who may indeed use the same platforms, but predominantly for the consumption of content rather than for engagement and contribution.

¹ <u>www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/</u>.

Communications researcher Allison Cavanagh states that the central question for evaluating whether the internet can function as a public sphere or not is to what extent the digital tools and platforms represent a break with traditional ways of relating to media. Television, for example, is not largely interactive, and is associated with being used for passive viewing, or even as background noise. Television is a mass medium built on the model of broadcast centres pumping out content to allegedly passive receivers, in a sort of master–slave architecture. By comparison, being on the internet at least means a minimum level of activity, as the user is to some degree forced to 'act' by clicking, making connections, and generally deciding what they want to do. This is in contrast to a passive television viewer. In the dystopia of the passive and dumbed-down mass audience, the internet, with its higher degree of interactivity, gives hope. Cavanagh (2007: 68) says:

[The internet] appears as a redemptive force, offering the possibility of breaking through

the walls which segment the audience from each other, and requiring participation above and beyond passive presence. However, this vision of the audience depends on ascriptions about the behaviour of people online which may or may not be warranted.

So, Cavanagh thinks — as was discussed in <u>Chapter 3</u> — that we can't be sure that just because the infrastructure is in place that people will start harnessing it for democratic ends. Furthermore, in line with Fuchs's concerns, Cavanagh states that even though there might be the possibility for new audience behaviours, the internet is largely colonised by mass media content. Even though people have the opportunity to take part in grassroots forums, and to engage with different forms of alternative media, much internet activity still looms towards traditional media content produced by newspapers, corporate television channels, and other well-established content providers.

There is a risk that the commercial centre of gravity of the internet draws interactive and creative users in its periphery towards the less dynamic 'mass centre'. This is related to the 'rich-get-richer' mechanism, which exists in all networks (see the discussion of power law distributions in <u>Chapters 9</u> and <u>16</u>). Because of these factors, one must be careful in assuming that the internet has given birth to large numbers of 'cybercitizens' who are all politically aware, civically involved, committed to libertarian ideals, anti-authoritarianism, and who believe in rational debate. You will recognise from <u>Chapter 3</u> how many cyberoptimist perspectives seem to rely on such assumptions.

Exercise

In spite of everything that has been said thus far in this chapter, some would claim that politics is not what most people first come to think of when they consider the internet. For a majority of people, digital tools and platforms are used for socialising, recreation, and entertainment, or as part of carrying out their jobs, or undertaking tasks such as buying tickets or paying bills. Find some statistics on digital media use. Try, for example, to find statistics on the most watched videos on YouTube, or the results of surveys of people's online habits. Reflect upon and discuss to what extent it might be true that politics is a minority activity online? Reflect on how you define 'politics' when making your assessment. What do you think of Jenkins' prediction that skills developed in relation to commercial entertainment could 'quickly get applied' to more serious, political, matters?

Cybersalons

Introducing the notion of *cybersalons*, Jodi Dean (2001) argues that the internet and social media might in fact — under good circumstances — function in ways that are similar to what Habermas imagined. She says that we must remember, however, that people come together in different ways online when compared to the salons and coffee-houses in the 1700s that Habermas described. This way of thinking is key to all research and theorising about digital society. On the one hand, we must remember to be careful with the extent of our cyberoptimism, but, on the other hand, we must also consider whether things might not be so bad after all, if we make the effort to actually also see the new things in new ways. Dean identifies how communication in cybersalons happens among people who are linked by their ability to use networked interaction, rather than by proximity or tradition. We need this new concept, Dean argues, because Habermas's notion of the public sphere is unable to deal adequately with the networked complexity in how people exchange information, communicate, and interact in digital society. She explains that this does not mean that networked interactions online can't possibly be good for democracy. The fact that social media fail to live up to Habermas's definition of the public sphere rather, she thinks, illustrates the limitations of his very concept.

As we saw, for example, in the discussions in <u>Chapter 7</u> about digital culture phenomena such as trolling and cute cats, there are affective ambiguities and complex political potentials to the internet that are hard to grasp with concepts that were developed in a pre-digital world. Dean says, in line with this, that the internet resists being compiled into a normative vision of what politics and the public sphere is. So, if our definition of politics and the public sphere is too narrow, we will fail to identify any signs of emergent novel forms of politics or civic dialogue. Dean argues that if we rely on an understanding of democratic deliberation which is unitary and top-down, this will hinder identifying and conceptualising new terrains of contestation and debate. The disconnection between bodies and words in computer-mediated communication, as discussed in Chapter 4, is one of the factors that point to the inapplicability of the traditional notion of the public sphere in digital society. Online interaction draws on disembodiedness, plurality, and an uncertainty of identity. And as people on the internet and social media are not always certain what type of exchange they are engaged in, this changes the parameters for the type of public sphere that can emerge. For example, Habermas's ideal public sphere largely relies on being inclusive. This is a key part of his definition, signalling that without inclusivity, there can be no public sphere as such. Dean (2001: 260), however, emphasises that in cybersalons there is no decisive or universal 'we'.

Although some wide-eyed cyber enthusiasts celebrate the Net for its inclusiveness, this kind of naïveté has dwindled in the last few years as enthusiasts and critics alike have dealt with the issues of encryption, surveillance, modem speeds, incompatible protocols, the difficulty of finding useful information amid all the Net clutter, the problematic dominance of English, the comparatively fewer numbers of ethnic minorities online, and the basic economic inability of large numbers of people to take advantage of networked resources.

Because of such things, Dean says that we must pose the questions of inclusion in the public

sphere anew, in a different way from how they were posed in the pre-digital age. While the social identities of those attending the salons and coffee-houses that Habermas talked about were stable and easy to verify, things are different online. As I have discussed in <u>Chapter 4</u>, the internet and social media enable more fluid and multifaceted identities. This is because there are more opportunities of presenting oneself in different ways in different contexts, for different audiences. So, while Habermas's view was premised on the notion that subjectivity was singular, Dean says that when theorising cybersalons we must account for a variety of confrontations between different kinds of subjectivity, rather than interactions between clear-cut individuals.

Rather than simply being included in a 'salon', digital society demands other things from individuals in order for them to take part in shaping politics and opinions in the public sphere. The technological possibilities produce societal pressures towards mobility, adaptability, and conformity. This means that different people will have very different social experiences, with increased freedom for some, while others will have their opportunities and liberties curtailed. Dean thinks that the issue must be raised as to whether one can convincingly conceive of any single universal subjectivity upon which the public sphere can rely. Furthermore, in digital society the space of interaction extends beyond the nation-state, as people meet in a variety of spaces. Therefore, Dean says, politics is by necessity about unequal exchanges among people who will have very different views and ways of reasoning.

The Private is Public

Also drawing on Habermas's theory of the public sphere, Papacharissi (2010) argues that we must not forget about the role of its counterpart in the form of a private sphere, especially not in digital society. As you might remember, Habermas felt that it would diminish the power of the public sphere if it got too mixed up with the private. Being in public means that at least parts of the private must be hidden away or kept out of view. Literary critic and social theorist Michael Warner (2002: 23) explains that, according to dominant understandings, 'being in public is a privilege that requires filtering or repressing something that is seen as private'. Topics that are unofficial and which belong to the personal domain did not, as Habermas saw it, belong in politically useful mainstream discussions. But in the face of this, many internet researchers have shown how the boundaries between the public and the private are eroded in digital society.

Papacharissi is eager to underline that from digital culture's increased focus on intimate and personal, or even seemingly ego-centric, things it does not automatically follow that there is a low level of civic engagement more generally. Rather, she argues, new ways of being active in society are emerging along with digitally networked tools and platforms. Today, people are doing highly political things in a variety of contexts, but just not in ways that we would have ever thought about before the internet and social media. Political engagement now happens in many different spheres, and not only the clearly political ones. Seemingly private acts that are digitally enabled and self-motivated can indeed have a public political effect. This hybrid dynamic is unique to digital society, as these private acts can be carried out in personal, familiar, and autonomous spaces but still have the same potential audience as a public act.

So, from the complex relationships between technology, social practices, and new types of social spaces, a private sphere is opening up as an arena for people to express entirely new forms of participation and citizenship. Under this new paradigm of civic engagement, Papacharissi contends, people discuss politics mixed up with other topics. So, things that in the Habermasian model belong to the public sphere (politics) are dealt with in new — potentially even more powerful — ways within a hybrid sphere, which encompasses both public and private aspects of an individual's social existence. Digital civil society therefore consists of a variety of atomised actions that happen in a range of different spaces which may be both public and private. This is similar to the point made by Warner (2002: 30) that:

Because the contexts overlap, most things are private in one sense and public in another. Books can be published privately; a public theater can be a private enterprise; a private life can be discussed publicly, and so on.

And even though Warner makes this point more generally, this is especially the case on the internet. In the hybrid publicly private and privately public spaces online, people can link political issues to their own everyday concerns and actions. This changes the whole logic of civic engagement: people in digital society can do politically relevant things privately. You may recognise the idea that 'the personal is political' from the famous radical feminist slogan, so that line of thinking is not entirely new as such. But the internet offers a tangible infrastructure for mobilising private considerations politically. With the help of digital tools and platforms, political events, social issues, and news coverage can be aggregated and

commented on by individuals on their various social — private — accounts. This, says Papacharissi, can be interpreted in part as a boycott of mainstream discourse, from which many users might feel alienated. Making political comments in private spaces is not necessarily without value in comparison to committing political actions in public spaces.

This all sounds good and exciting, but it is still no guarantee that such a private sphere will be any more democratic than the public sphere. Late modern societies, as well as the internet, also abound with apathy, scepticism, disillusionment, and political disinterest. So why should people bother with politics? On the other hand, perhaps the comparably greater interest in social news sites, blogging, and online activism bears witness to the fact that people are not disinterested in politics, when seen from a wider perspective, but are simply fatigued by the mainstream conventions of politics and political debate. However, yet again, there appears to be a big risk that online spaces will be increasingly commercialised, marked by unequal access, and that there will not be enough communicative reciprocity. Papacharissi makes an important point: even though one may feel politically empowered while tweeting or blogging because of the potentially huge audience, the democratic character of the technology does not equal democratisation.

Poised for Action

Another aspect of how civil society and public debate are changing in the age of the internet and social media relates to news reporting and journalism. First, the development of new platforms, and the emergence of new audience behaviours, have changed the context of news production and the conditions under which media companies and journalists operate. They increasingly have to adopt new editorial workflows, adapt to altered practices for newsgathering, and to a speeded-up production cycle. In digital society one must see news production as a collective effort between journalists and members of the public. Today's participatory media culture has brought about a change of the relationship between news media and their audiences from being about one-way communication to being increasingly dialogical. People in digital society can be described as *monitorial citizens*. Journalism researcher Michael Schudson (1999: 310–311) has introduced this concept:

Monitorial citizens scan (rather than read) the informational environment in a way so that they may be alerted on a very wide variety of issues for a very wide variety of ends and may be mobilized around those issues in a large variety of ways [...] The monitorial citizen engages in environmental surveillance more than information-gathering. Picture parents watching small children at the community pool. They are not gathering information; they are keeping an eye on the scene. They look inactive, but they are poised for action if action is required. The monitorial citizen is not an absentee citizen but watchful, even while he or she is doing something else.

People today, in other words, are in constant connection with a number of streams of information. By way of a passive–active form of citizenship they can stay informed, networked, and ready for action. When needed, the public can burst into what Howard Rheingold (2002: 175) calls 'sudden epidemics of cooperation', which can be expressed in the form of 'peer-to-peer journalism'. In his 2002 book *Smart Mobs*, Rheingold envisions such a future. He asks the reader to imagine the impact of the 1991 Rodney King video, consisting of citizen witness footage of police brutality in Los Angeles, and to multiply the powerful impact of that video with 'the people power' of Napster (a file-sharing service popular at the time of writing). The result of such a calculation, we know now, is what has become known as *citizen journalism*.

Citizen journalism as a phenomenon goes back to the online posting of information in relation to the Clinton–Lewinsky sex scandal in 1998, to the breakthrough of web-based journalism during the war in Kosovo in 1999, and to people's sharing of eyewitness accounts, photographs, and video footage on 9/11 in 2001. The role of the online networked circulation of events of citizen witnessing in these cases proved the power of participatory storytelling in times of drama or trauma. On 9/12 in 2001, *The New York Times* quoted internet activist Rogers Cadenhead as saying that:

This unfathomable tragedy reminds me of the original reason the Internet was invented in 1969 — to serve as a decentralized network that couldn't be brought down by a military attack. Amateur news reporters on weblogs are functioning as their own decentralized media today, and it's one of the only heartening things about this stomach-

turning day.²

² www.nytimes.com/2001/09/12/national/12ONLI.html.

Obviously, digitally networked communication and user-created content in times of crisis have contributed largely in shaping citizen journalism into what it is today. Journalism researcher Stuart Allan (2009: 18) cites the aftermath of the South Asian tsunami of December 2004 as a defining moment, as the first-person accounts documented with mobile and digital cameras — many of them posted online — became a unique addition to the coverage that mainstream journalism was able to provide. Citizen journalism is about the capacity, largely afforded by digital technology, of ordinary people to bear witness to and comment on things that happen in the world, big or small. It has developed from those occasions when 'ordinary people' find themselves in situations that urge them to temporarily enter the role of a journalist, communicating what goes on around them. And as digital technology and the internet has increasingly made it possible for people to act upon such impulses, citizen journalism from being seen as a domain exclusive to professional participants.

Exercise

One must be careful not to overestimate the power and potential of citizen journalism. This is because people in general may not be very interested in contributing news content online. Furthermore, most blogs tend to be about topics far removed from public affairs issues. And online news sites that are perceived as being independent often rely on reports from traditional newsrooms. As discussed earlier, citizen journalism may be especially powerful during crises and emergencies. It has also proven to be effective in remote areas, and in totalitarian regimes, as a tool for monitoring governance and exposing abuses. Take a closer look at some recent big news stories and evaluate, in relation to these, to what extent citizen journalism has been able to challenge the domination of mainstream news media. Can you identify any particular patterns regarding in relation to what types of stories, and how, citizen uses of the internet and social media can have an effect on the public debate?

Continued Structural Transformations

When Habermas wrote about the structural transformation of the public sphere, he was referring to how the salons and coffee-houses of the 1700s were replaced by a *public sphere*, which was in turn replaced by the heavily *mediatised public sphere* around the beginning of the 1900s. He said that the coming of mass-circulated newspapers and radio removed the more direct forms of debate and deliberation from the public. But there have also been continued structural transformations since the 1960s when Habermas wrote his book. In most countries, there is no longer a total dominance of a small number of media organisations. Instead, there is a wide range of media forms and platforms. Most prominently of course, there has been a shift away from traditional broadcast and print towards online content. Axel Bruns and his internet researcher colleague Tim Highfield (2016: 57) argue that:

News and public affairs reporting as it presents itself to the everyday user has thus transformed from a largely oligopolistic media environment, dominated by a few major public and commercial media organisations providing mass market news products for general consumption by a domestic audience, to a diverse, complex and even confusing media ecology.

So, while the public's attention might not have been as uniform as is sometimes assumed, even in the golden days of mass media, there is no doubt a vastly greater complexity today. Therefore, there is a need for updated concepts that can help account for an increased fragmentation of the public sphere, which now consists of a range of diverging publics. There is sometimes discussion, for example, of arenas such as the *blogosphere*, or the *twittersphere*, to indicate the existence of platform-specific sub-spheres. Furthermore, Bruns and Highfield point out that other researchers have suggested conceptual solutions for this. Some have envisaged that the public sphere is separated into different domain publics (a political public sphere, a cultural public sphere, an economic public sphere, and so on) (Hartley & Green 2006), while others have talked about a *networked public sphere* (Benkler 2006), or *public sphericules*, which are a form of mini-public spheres with small groups, following a similar logic to the Habermasian public sphere (Bruns & Highfield 2016). Habermas himself has also mentioned updating the original concept along similar lines. He wrote (2006: 423) that:

the Internet [...] counterbalances the seeming deficits that stem from the impersonal and asymmetrical character of broadcasting by reintroducing deliberative elements in electronic communication. The Internet has certainly reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers. [But] the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics.

In sum, the potential of the ever evolving social media ecology for civil society will most likely continue to be debated, as it continues to challenge understandings of what a public sphere — whether in the singular or plural — may be. Calhoun (1998: 383) reminds us that:

like other technologies, the Internet mainly makes it easier for us to do some things we were already doing and allows those with the resources to do some things they already wanted to do. [...] The more a particular possible use of the Internet depends on social organization and the mobilization of significant resources, the more it will tend to be controlled by those who are already organized and well-off.

This echoes the cyberpessimist perspectives addressed in <u>Chapter 3</u>, but Calhoun also remains optimistic that 'more radically novel uses will be found over time'.

Further Reading

Habermas, Jürgen (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas' book is not about digital society, but his historical discussion as well as his ideas about what characterises an ideal public sphere are still useful to read. The book is a classic and anyone studying public debate or social deliberation won't get far without knowing its main points.

Dean, Jodi (2001). Cybersalons and Civil Society. *Public Culture*, 13(2), 243–265.

Calhoun, Craig (1998). Community without Propinquity Revisited. *Sociological Inquiry*, 68(3), 373–397.

These are two important papers about digital media, civil society, and the public sphere. Calhoun wrote about whether 'virtual community' has a capacity to enhance the power of citizens. He argued that digital media have ambiguous effects on democracy. For example, they can facilitate mobilisation, but can also foster categorical identities. Dean's paper is about the need to rethink the public sphere in the age of the internet. She says that 'cybersalons', computer-mediated discussion among people brought together by shared interests, provides a conceptual tool for thinking about democracy in digital society.

Allan, Stuart, & Thorsen, Einar (Eds.) (2009). Citizen Journalism. New York: Peter Lang.

Allan and Thorsen's book provides both a conceptual discussion and a history of citizen journalism, as well as a large number of case studies spanning a wide range of perspectives from different countries and political systems around the globe. The book also addresses the limits of the term 'citizen journalism' as a name for a range of different types of citizen communication.

9 Digital Power and Exploitation

Key questions

- How can network science help us understand why social networks tend to be hierarchical?
- How can power and authority emerge in an open and flat infrastructure such as the internet?
- In what ways can the theories about 'digital labour' alter the dominant understanding of the meaning of social media use?
- What is the relationship between gender, race, identity, and power in digital society?

Key concepts

Power law * scale-free networks * preferential attachment * authority * online tribalism * charismatic authority * the precariat * playbour * digital labour * data commodity * cyberfeminism * identity tourism * cybertyping

The internet has been seen by some — in different ways during different parts of its evolution — as a 'Great Equalizer'. The cyberoptimists described in <u>Chapter 3</u> expected digital media to challenge and redefine power structures by enabling people's self-liberation, bonding, organisation, and empowerment. This chapter is more specifically about the issue of whether and how such hierarchies and barriers that we recognise from the offline world transform or dissipate online. Communications researcher Bosah Ebo (1998) has questioned whether the truth about digital society is that it is a liberatory 'cybertopia', or if it is a 'cyberghetto', with the same in-built biases of race, class, and gender as the offline world. Are we talking about an internet or an 'outernet'?

In this chapter, I discuss different aspects of dominance, discrimination, and subordination in digital society. For example, scholars of network science have been able to show how the internet — at the structural level — is far from randomly connected. Rather, there is a *rich-get-richer* logic to its evolution, whereby those who have many followers, readers, or friends, will quickly get even more. Those users who are marginalised will have a tendency to remain unimportant. Furthermore, with sociological theories about how social groups, per definition, demand some sort of social structure — and thereby some kind of, at least informal, leadership and *authority* — the outlook seems rather poor for the creation of completely open and democratic spaces online. While digital tools and platforms allow for a certain amount of renegotiation of the prevailing norms, values, and social stereotypes, there is a big risk — so many scholars warn — that we overlook new forms of dominance and exploitation that might be on the rise, in the shape of phenomena such as *playbour* and *cybertyping*.

Those Connected Get More Connected

When the internet and the web were first taking shape, network scientists had quite simplistic ideas and expectations about the type of structure they would find if they analysed this emerging social system in closer detail. Physicist and network researcher Albert-László Barabási explains that when he started his research in the late 1990s, examining how webpages pointed to each other with clickable links, he thought that most sites would be equally popular. As with many other phenomena, he expected to find the classic bell curve structure, according to which most observations centre on an average value, and extreme highs and lows are very rare. Instead, however, he discovered a pattern where the majority of websites had very small numbers of links pointing to them, while a few extremely popular sites were referred to by an extraordinary large number of links. Barabási also realised that this pattern (a typical 'long tail' curve, as discussed in <u>Chapter 1</u>) followed a mathematical expression called a *power law*. Barabási (2003: 67–68) explains:

a power law is a continuously decreasing curve, implying that many small events coexist with a few large events. If the heights of an imaginary planet's inhabitants followed a power law distribution, most creatures would be really short, but nobody would be surprised to see occasionally a hundred-feet tall monster walking down the street. In fact, among six billion inhabitants there would be at least one over 8,000 feet tall. So the distinguishing feature of a power law is that there are many small events but that the numerous small events coexist with a few very large ones. These extraordinarily large events are simply forbidden in a bell curve.

Another example of a network which relies on a typical bell curve is a road map. A large number of cities will have a reasonable amount of connections, while a minority will have very few or very many. By contrast, an airline routing map illustrates a power law: most cities have few connections, but some of them — the hubs — will have many, many more than the rest. It might be surprising to learn that Barabási's discovery that the internet was what he called a 'scale-free network', organised around a number of influential hubs (popular websites), was quite a revolution in network science. Previous network theories had largely seen networks as randomly connected, but the model developed by Barabási, together with his colleague Réka Albert, demonstrated that many networks may in fact have a set of large hubs that will be crucial to defining the topology of the network. While it is not very surprising from a sociological point of view that inequalities in terms of an uneven distribution of power, for example, will emerge in a relational system, this insight was novel from the perspective of network science.

In the real world, linking is never random

The Barabási–Albert model, recognising the importance of hubs (centres of power), departed from two of the existing models that were popular before. Both the Erdős–Rényi (Rényi & Erdős 1961) model and the Watts–Strogatz (Watts & Strogatz 1998) model focused on the random connection of nodes and viewed all nodes as equal (even though nodes could of course be connected in various, random, ways). Barabási and Albert's key genius idea was, in all of its simplicity, that 'in real networks linking is never random' (Barabási 2003: 86). Instead, networks, such as those established through the internet and social media tend to self-organise as they grow and evolve.

The focus on growth and evolution was also new, in relation to the Erdős–Rényi and Watts– Strogatz models which saw networks as static. Those previous models did not account for new nodes being added to a network over time.

The process whereby a network grows is marked, Barabási and Albert argue, by *preferential attachment*. This means that nodes with more connections have a higher chance of getting new connections. According to this theory, a YouTube video with many views is more likely to get even more views, and a channel with millions of subscribers is more likely than other channels to get even more subscribers. Likewise, a tweet that has been retweeted a huge number of times will probably become retweeted even more, and a Twitter account with many followers will attract even more new followers. Barabási uses the example of film actors in his work, and points to the fact that actors with many connections in the industry (having been in many good films with other good actors) have a higher chance of getting new good roles. On the other hand, there is a catch-22 situation – an actor needs to be known to get good roles, but needs good roles in order to be known. This is also applicable for the scientific community, where highly cited papers are much more likely to be cited even more, and so on.

Exercise

In <u>Chapter 1</u>, you will have read about the concept of 'the long tail', according to which small things will survive easier in digital society. Because of the networked multitude of people and interests, it has become less important — it was argued — to align with majority groups, dominant ideas, and popular taste preferences. The concept of power laws and preferential attachment, which was discussed in this chapter, states that people's linking and clicking on the internet has a tendency towards the most popular things. Try to reflect on how these two notions can coexist. Is it possible to have a society where majorities and leaders both matter and don't matter at the same time? Is one of the perspectives right and the other wrong? Also, research the rankings of the most followed and subscribed social media accounts: What groups in society, what categories of people, are represented in these social media elites, and what consequences do you think this has?

So, from the perspective of network science, the internet and social media have structural properties which encourage different forms of uneven distribution — of visibility, of clicks, of likes, links, and other social resources. As you will remember from the cyberoptimist perspectives that were discussed in <u>Chapter 3</u> of this book, the internet is believed by many to be a more equal environment than many other social settings. This is because it is then believed to promote social networks where all nodes are equal (as in the Erdős–Rényi and Watts–Strogatz models). Those who subscribe to this view generally argue that in digital society people can engage more freely in social and political interactions and acts of sharing. They also say that, even though there might be some inequalities in access and skills, the online world is largely an arena where people can express themselves and organise in bottom-up, non-hierarchical structures, marked by participation and cooperation. In other words, the internet is sometimes believed to be incompatible with hierarchy and automatically geared for democracy. However, the suggestion outlined above that those who are connected often seem to get even more connected is one of the reasons some people have questioned whether these assumptions about democratisation are really true.

Authority in Online Tribes

Digital communications researcher Mathieu O'Neil is among those who claim that the internet is in fact full of hierarchies. And this is not only because online networks are often scale-free. More importantly, O'Neil (2009) says, authority is a hugely important element of the social interaction in digital online networks. First, in order to be able to organise and express themselves, participants need to exercise some sort of quality control over what they are doing, and organise their activities. Otherwise, he says, it will become 'an incoherent Babel'. He agrees, in other words, that online organisation is impossible without some sort of hierarchy emerging. So while Clay Shirky, whose cyberoptimistic views were discussed in <u>Chapter 3</u>, gave his book *Here Comes Everybody* (2008) the subtitle *The Power of Organizing without Organizations*, O'Neil argues instead that in order to organise with some power, at least some traces of organisational (power) structure will, by necessity, emerge.

Second, there is the issue of trust and reliability, which was discussed in <u>Chapter 4</u>. It is O'Neil's view that for online self-expression and organisation to work, participants also need to be able to somehow determine who is reliable and who is not, and understand which contributions are relevant and important. Third, he argues, the building of trust will in turn decide who should be part of the group, as issues of inclusion and exclusion need to be dealt with. O'Neil's explanation of how *authority* emerges online, in spite of the 'stateless' character of the internet, lies in his notion of *online tribes*. Such tribes are online formations based on direct forms of grassroots democracy, and on a feeling of closeness to others. But, because of the reasons presented above, authority is still an important dimension of such tribes.

O'Neil draws here on the classic sociology of Max Weber, whose view was that authority is a fundamental feature of all complex systems of human relationships —such as the internet. In Weber's view, the authority of a person is the result of other people agreeing that this person has a legitimate right to exercise power. Weber (1922/1978: 36) defined an authority as someone who 'is held to be legitimate and therefore meets with compliance'. O'Neil made the point that it is wrong to assume that just because the internet has a horizontal structure, which encourages many-to-many communication, it abolishes authority. Rather, he says, new forms of power and domination have arisen online. He updates Weber's classic take on the bureaucratic systems of modern industrialism, and suggests that power online is conferred through a new type of organisational arrangement which he calls *online tribal bureaucracy*.

This arrangement can be used to explain the structures of governance in groups that might seem at first to be anti-authoritarian. There is an interesting contradiction here between the dual requirements of an environment wanting to remain completely open, non-bureaucratic, and without hierarchies, but which at the same time needs some sort of system to achieve its goals. For example, Wikipedia is a peer-production project which is focused on an open opportunity to contribute, and which seems to reject all forms of traditional bureaucracy. But O'Neil (2009: 172) explains:

In reality, Wikipedia is clearly rules-based; it keeps written records of every possible transaction; and it is meritocratic [...] in the old-fashioned way: through the recognition of effort. All these traits correspond to the bureaucratic model.

This is but one example in digital society that illustrates the point that even though democratic, peer-to-peer groups may aim to challenge or provide an alternative to different forms of domination, some form of authority always emerges from interaction. A key question, then, is how digital society can rest upon autonomy and authority at the same time

Exercise

Is it really true that we can't have groups without having leaders? Think of different social circles, ranging from less to more formalised ones, that you are, or have been, part of when interacting through digital media: friendship networks on Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat, channels on YouTube, forum discussions that you contributed to, and so on. You can also think of offline social settings. Can you identify cases when interaction has been truly non-hierarchical and completely horizontal? In those cases, if any, what contextual factors do you think made that possible?

Cyberchiefs and Charisma

O'Neil (2009) makes the argument that whatever utopian hopes we might have for the internet and social media, groups will always need or have leaders of some sort. These are the *cyberchiefs* of the online tribes. However, O'Neil uses the concept of bureaucracy in a way that emphasises that such systems are not always centralised. Networked and collectivist initiatives may still be bureaucratic. In traditional bureaucracies, a key defining element is the separation between the organisational role and the concrete person. But, as O'Neil says, the new and unique characteristic of online tribal bureaucracy is the combination of what Weber called *charismatic authority* with the bureaucratic structure, thereby re-establishing the connection between roles and persons.

Charismatic authority

In his theory about social domination, Max Weber suggested that there are three types of authority. The definition of these types is based on what it is that makes them legitimate. He explained, first and second, that authority could be made legitimate either on a rational-legal or a traditional basis. In the first case, someone becomes powerful because they are appointed a title or hold an office of some sort (teachers, priests, CEOs, presidents, and so on). In the second case, it is tradition that legitimises authority (kings, queens, religious leaders, etc.). The third, and most famous, type of authority that he discusses is based on a person's charismatic qualities. This is a very powerful, yet temporary and unstable, form of authority, which will inevitably become 'routinised' and lose its attraction. Weber (1922/1978: 1112) wrote that people who emerge as charismatic leaders:

were neither appointed officeholders nor 'professionals' in the present-day sense [...] but rather the bearers of specific gifts of body and mind that were considered 'supernatural' (in the sense that not everybody could have access to them).

So, applying this view on interaction on the internet and in social media, one can imagine how certain 'charismatic' individuals — or even topics or issues — emerge with authority in certain contexts, and for certain amounts of time. One might imagine this to be anything from YouTube stars with millions of subscribers, and hacktivist icons such as Edward Snowden, to individuals who launch a briefly very successful hashtag or viral video, or someone who becomes a key person in the micro-social setting of a specific discussion thread somewhere on the internet.

So, while online projects (ranging from full-on activist campaigns to other social 'projects', such as a hashtag or a single discussion thread in a forum) centre around charismatic leaders, who affect many and inspire them to follow, they still manage to maintain a formal equality between participants. Furthermore, digital society in O'Neil's view is marked by 'permanent conflictuality', a recurring sequence of action that proceeds in this way:

a claim is made, the facts are examined, deliberation ensues. Eventually a resolution is reached and accepted. [...] Online tribalism has an equalising effect and systematically questions presumptuousness. (O'Neil 2009: 181)

In sum, O'Neil provides a rare and elaborated attempt to explain and bypass the deadlock between cyberpessimism and cyberoptimism. On the one hand, he demonstrates that there is an inherently democratic character to social interaction and organisation in digitally networked media. It has 'an equalising effect' where resolutions are 'reached and accepted'. This is similar to what was supposed to happen in the idealised public sphere envisioned by Habermas (see <u>Chapter 8</u>). On the other hand, there is still no escape from the necessarily 'bureaucratic' character of social projects as such. There has to be some sort of structure and some sort of leadership — however widely defined — to create or achieve something.

So, when it comes to power and dominance in digital society, it is unavoidable that leaders and authorities emerge, even though some have optimistically imagined otherwise (cf. <u>Chapter 3</u>). But in fact, it is all but unexpected that digital media can support this timeless social form. Some sort of power structure or leadership is unavoidable. When writing of the forms of the social, Simmel argued that 'a group upon reaching a certain size must develop forms and organs which serve its maintenance and promotion', and furthermore that 'the structure of the group requires a certain quota of its members for leadership' (Simmel 1950: 87 and 107).

Playbour and Exploitation

Aside from the fact that any pure democratisation is very hard to achieve because leaders and authority always tend to emerge, a number of scholars have also shown how digital society enables old forms of structural dominance to inhabit new forms online. One such old form of dominance is the capitalist exploitation of the value created by people's work. Indeed, the whole industry of digital media hardware and software is based on accelerated forms of global capitalist production, which include many different forms of labour and exploitation. For example, there are the low-paid digital 'knowledge workers' in the 'information industry' — programmers, technical writers, systems analysts, researchers, and so on (Drucker 1959). These are part of what economist Guy Standing (2011: 13–14) has called *the precariat*: a heterogeneous working class — a precarious proletariat — without any job security:

The teenager who flits in and out of the internet café while surviving on fleeting jobs is not the same as the migrant who uses his wits to survive, networking feverishly while worrying about the police. Neither is similar to the single mother fretting where the money for next week's food bill is coming from or the man in his 60s who takes casual jobs to help pay medical bills. But they all share a sense that their labour is instrumental (to live), opportunistic (taking what comes) and precarious (insecure).

There are also, for example, all the highly exploited workers — and the slave workers — in developing countries who extract the minerals used as raw materials in producing digital hardware, as well as work under horrendous conditions in electronics factories, such as those run by Foxconn (Chan & Pun 2010). These are pressing issues that relate to the development of global capitalism more generally. Marxist media and information scholar Nick Dyer-Witheford (2015: 13) writes that 'the global economy depends on [...] informal, bonded, [and] slave labour, and other forms of shadow work, many of which, we would add, do not occur on digital networks'. But aside from all such labour, there is also the labour carried out by all users of the internet and social media.

Digital labour and 'playbour'

Some researchers argue that everyone who generates clicks and 'produces' things such as status updates, blog posts, tweets, Wikipedia entries, and YouTube videos — can also be seen as part of an exploited workforce. Writers and researchers such as Christian Fuchs (2017) and Trebor Scholz (2013) have made the point that when users engage in creating content on Facebook, Twitter, in blogs, on various social content sharing sites, and so on, they carry out a form of *digital labour* which creates value, which can in turn be exploited by capitalists. Even though the users often do these things because they want to, because it is rewarding for them in one way or another, or simply because it's fun, it can still be seen as work. It is fun and work at the same time — a form of play labour, or *playbour*.

The logic suggests that the clicks and the content of users become a form of *data commodity* — a set of information about what users say and do online — which can be sold by social media companies to advertising clients, who can target their ads to the desired users accordingly. We have all experienced something along the lines of googling for a hotel in a certain place, or a shirt with a certain design, and soon find ourselves bombarded with ads for

similar services and products wherever we turn online. Communications and economics researcher Dallas Smythe (1977) wrote about this in terms of the *audience commodity*. He argued that people reading newspapers, listening to the radio, and watching TV, were contributing 'work time' for which they were not paid, but which enabled media corporations to sell advertisements.

The proponents of the digital labour perspective suggest that the idea that the internet and social media provides a participatory, creative, and democratic environment is wrong. Fuchs (2017) argues that not only is it wrong, but it is even facilitating an ideology that celebrates capitalism. He argues that it is corporations and their capitalist logic that dominate digital society, which is definitely still a capitalist society. With a set of empirical examples, Fuchs also shows how this is the case: the most viewed videos (mostly music videos) on YouTube are produced by transnational media corporations, while politics on YouTube definitely is a minority interest. Political Facebook groups revolve around politicians who are already powerful, rather than around alternative political figures. Search results for 'political news' on Google yield results that are dominated by corporate news organisations. The most followed Twitter accounts belong to celebrities, and the short format of tweets promote simplistic arguments. Fuchs (2017: 127) concludes that:

Such examples make clear that corporations and their logic dominate social media and the Internet and that the Internet is predominantly capitalist in character. [...] Social media do not automatically constitute a public sphere or participatory democratic space in a capitalist world. The dominant tendency is that corporations and capitalist logic colonize social media. Multimedia companies, celebrities and advertising dominate attention and visibility. Politics is a minority issue on social media.

But these things are not always visible to the user, who will gladly use his or her time to do fun things online, which will in fact mean that at the same time, they are being exploited. The boundary between play and labour has become fuzzy and there is an increased exploitation of play labour. It is a challenge for research and theories to grasp such complexity, and to try to come up with new knowledge about, and new perspectives on, these processes. As David Gauntlett has argued, while the exploitation thesis is true on the macro level of digital society, it is much harder to evaluate this at the individual level. People may in fact be happy to freely create and share things, and few would probably themselves see what they do on social media as 'work' that they would expect to get paid for. Gauntlett (2011: 188) writes that much of this labour is rather 'like the act of putting together a photo album, to show to friends, or the act of recording some music that you have composed, so that you can replay it to a fellow enthusiast'. So the idea of labour or even slavery may not be the best description of what most people experience when doing these things.

Exercise

The digital labour perspective is one of those critical theories which say that people are somehow oblivious to the true nature of social reality — that they are indoctrinated or brainwashed, or at least that they have a wrongful perception of the character and consequences of what they are doing. At the same time, it is also one of those theories that appears to be right. Indeed, the analysis that a person posting content to a social media platform generates value for the companies who own the platform is correct. But Gauntlett is also right. Most people who create their own content don't feel that they have been cheated or enslaved. Rather, they may be rewarded in many ways by their creative process, big or small. Think of your own experiences with these things, and remember that even small things such as just posting a brief update or comment are considered creative work (or labour) in this respect. How does this equation come together? Once again, we are in the situation where digital society seems to be two seemingly irreconcilable things at once. Who and what decides how the enslavement/creativity scale tips in each particular situation when someone makes something online?

The Emancipatory Politics of Technology

As discussed in <u>Chapter 4</u>, a common view of the internet and social media is that they enable people to create and maintain fluid and flexible identities. Social relations in the online world have been predicted to be increasingly fleeting, transient, and fragmented, and this might potentially make things such as gender, race, sexual identity, ethnicity, (dis)ability, and so on into being something which is freely chosen to a large degree. But, looking for example at digital media usage patterns, lots of research has shown that existing, traditional, gender norms and other stereotypes — relating to dimensions such as race, ethnicity, social class, and age — align well with the many different uses of digital technology (Hargittai 2012).

Furthermore, aspects of technological design — including a wide range of features, but perhaps most famously that of mainstream video game characters, where there may be a lack of options that speak to a female audience — also support assumptions and norms about gender, race, and so on. Writing specifically about gender, sociologist Deborah Lupton argues that the military connection in the early development of the internet (see <u>Chapter 1</u>), the gendered character of 'nerd', 'geek', and 'hacker' culture, and the old idea that you have to be good at maths (which is stereotypically seen as a male-gendered skill) to deal with computers, are all masculinised things that have had an effect on women's relationship to digital technologies. The idea of the archetypal computer user as a white (sometimes Asian) middle-class young man is a stereotype in itself. Computer 'geeks' are assumed to be physically unattractive, friendless, and socially awkward. This idea is limiting for some men and boys, and works to exclude many women and girls.

The arrival of social media and mobile devices has made digital technology widespread, ubiquitous, domesticated, taken-for-granted, and readily available in ways that have definitely removed most of its previous mystique. Yet still, 'actual' computer science is still largely a male domain. And while many people do not fit the stereotypes, and many are able to think beyond them, the bottom line is that a more nuanced understanding of inclusion and exclusion in digital society is generally needed. As we have seen in this and previous chapters, it is premature and wrong to assume that social relations and identities have become entirely plastic and freely shapeable. The digitalisation of the social might have changed many things, but not the fact that mediated interactions are always embedded in social structures that exist before, after, below, and above the digital.

Using the example of feminism, the internet and social media have definitely contributed to the ongoing historical struggle to enhance women's agency. These technologies have opened up new possibilities for equality through a variety of emancipatory uses. This process has been documented by *cyberfeminist* scholars such as Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant, who were both mentioned in <u>Chapter 4</u>. However, sociologist Judy Wajcman is among those who are not impressed by the utopian idea that cyberspace is a virtual space of freedom and transcendence from the body, including gendered (and other) identities. She describes what she feels to be the utopian view of cyberfeminists (Wajcman 2004: 66):

The message is that young women in particular are colonizing cyberspace, where gender inequality, like gravity, is suspended. In cyberspace, all physical, bodily cues are removed from communication. As a result, our interactions are fundamentally different, because they are not subject to judgements based on sex, age, race, voice, accent or

appearance, but are based only on textual exchanges.

You will recognise this as an alignment with the cyberoptimist perspectives from <u>Chapter 3</u>. Wajcman warns, however, that even though this idea of freedom and transformation may be exciting, we must make sure not to become hypnotised by it, since that may exaggerate its significance. She thinks that cyberfeminism seems to want to simply replace the need for thought-out programmes for promoting social and political change with technology alone. This is an example, Wajcman says, of the problem with technological determinism (see <u>Chapter 3</u>). She argues that

an emancipatory politics of technology requires more than hardware and software; it needs wetware — bodies, fluids, human agency. (2004: 77)

The cyberfeminist perspectives may have been an important reaction to some more pessimistic views that construed technology as an inherently and hopelessly masculine domain. Instead, writers like Haraway and Plant stressed women's agency and subjectivity, and also the pleasures and playfulness that are immanent in digital technologies. But unfortunately, Wajcman says, this does not reflect reality. In reality, she says, empirical studies show that the most visited websites by women are shopping and health sites, and that women's use of social media reaffirms traditional views of femininity (focusing on things like beauty, fashion, family, and children).

While such patterns may not be universal and unchanging, Wajcman makes the point that it is impossible to generalise about women's experiences. However inspiring cyberfeminist ideas may be, she thinks that technology can still reproduce or even reinforce gender norms. And this goes for norms and divisions relating to other social categorisations as well (race, ethnicity, sexual identity, disability, age, and so on). The freedom to rework identities grounded in gender, race, and class, for example, must not be mistaken for the erasure of all kinds of divisions and equalities that may still be related to them.

Cybertyping and Binary Switches

In mainstream research and theorising about digital society there is often a lack of acknowledgement of the significant differences in uses which take form at the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, and so on. This risks that the way in which we view the digital may in fact conceal existing inequalities. Sociologists Eileen Green and Carrie Singleton (2013: 36) argue that 'rather than becoming dazzled by the shiny new vista that the digital age appears to open up', one must focus on the broader structural inequalities and the localised differences in how the digital works. Instead of repeating that things like gender and race do not matter in the digital age, we must look at how such things matter, in potentially new ways. According to the theory about *the social shaping of technology*, technology is (re-)shaped by the social while the social is (re-)shaped by technology (Williams & Edge 1996). It is from such a perspective, Green and Singleton argue, that we must look closer at *the gendering of digital society*, or *the racialisation of digital society*, and so on.

Digital tools and platforms are socially contextualised and shaped by interaction and relations. This is as applicable to their design and development, as to their utilisation and domestication. Some of the platforms may indeed allow for engagement in what cultural theorist Lisa Nakamura (2002: 14) calls *identity tourism*. This is a process whereby one can temporarily appropriate identities different from one's own in online settings (in games, for example). Nakamura says, however, that such tourism is not really about honouring diversity, but rather about playing with identities as 'amusing prostheses to be donned and shed' without any real consequences. It is obvious that gender, race, and other categorisations will continue to play a part in digital society. But it will do so in new ways. Nakamura thinks that instead of looking at 'stereotyping', we must focus on the process of *cybertyping*.

Cybertypes should not be understood simply as cultural stereotypes from pre-digital society, which have been translated into new media. Instead, they are the result of internet-specific processes where the cybertypes are created and defined collectively. But they are no less the product of hegemonic and regulating cultural norms. In her research, Nakamura has shown that when offered 'machines that offer identity prostheses to redress the burdens of physical "handicaps" such as age, gender, and race', people still 'produce cybertypes that look remarkably like racial and gender stereotypes' (2002: 5). A similar point — but referring to religious architecture — is made by sociologists of religion Stefan Gelfgren and Tim Hutchings (2014), who found that churches in virtual worlds were designed in strikingly traditional ways. They found that a minority of virtual churches had rejected conventional church architecture.

Given a 'free' choice on how to present oneself — or others, or things — there is a strong tendency to make choices within the range of existing hegemonic discourses. It is more likely that someone will present as a horny geisha — which aligns with an existing orientalist stereotype — than as a three-legged owl-skunk — which would be something completely new and unexpected. So the binary of 'cyberspace versus the real world' is not nearly as clear as it is sometimes made out to be. In spite of utopian rhetoric to the contrary, race, gender, and other social categorisations, matter no less online than they do offline. All of us who spend time on the internet are already shaped by how these categorisations work in society and culture at large. We bring our knowledge, and experiences, and values with us to the keyboard. This means that even if some minorities or discriminated groups may have the appropriate digital tools to assume 'fluid' identities, most are still often rudely pulled back in

to the material realities of prejudice and discrimination. There seems to be a tendency towards either reaffirming pre-digitally existing stereotypes or making attributes like gender and race invisible altogether:

Cyberspace is an environment comprised entirely of 0's and 1's: simple binary switches that are either off or on. No in-between. No halfway. No shades of gray. All too often, when it comes to virtual culture, the subject of race seems to be one of those binary switches: either it's completely 'off' (i.e., race is an invisible concept because it's simultaneously unmarked and undiscussed), or it's completely 'on' (i.e., it's a controversial flashpoint for angry debate and overheated rhetoric). (Kolko et al. 2000: 1)

In summary, then, no matter how digital we become, there is good reason to believe that the problem of social inequality and discrimination, of domination and subordination, will persist. However, this does not change the fact that the digital can alter our understandings of these processes, as well as give rise to entirely new forms of inequality.

Seen and Not Heard

Even though there have been utopian hopes of unlimited democratisation connected to the internet, we have had to realise that the online is not so very different from the offline. As we can find in any social setting, social structure will emerge also online, and this means that we cannot escape hierarchies, or the fact that different people will be ascribed different types and degrees of social status. As discussed earlier, while O'Neil has shown that no matter what the platform, there will always be 'leaders', others have similarly pointed out that the digital will not redeem us from inequalities and discrimination either. Still, some people used to believe that a digital society where things like gender didn't matter would be possible, and maybe some still do. Feminist author Laurie Penny (2013: n.p.) has explained that not so long ago people of the same ilk as the cyberoptimists discussed in <u>Chapter 3</u> believed that the internet would mean a liberation from gender altogether:

Why would it matter, in this brave new networked world, what sort of body you had? And if your body didn't matter, why would it matter if you were a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, or something else entirely?

Penny argues, in line with what has been said in this chapter, that this soon proved not to be the case. But while gender actually matters quite a lot on the internet, it does so in more than one way. As already discussed in <u>Chapter 7</u>, misogyny and sexual bullying is in part enabled by the internet and social media. But the same tools and platforms also allow groups, who are not middle-class men, access to if not the public sphere (see <u>Chapter 8</u>), then at least to some form of public space where they can communicate freely and share stories across borders, while working to change their realities. In line with Judith Butler's perspective, as discussed in <u>Chapter 6</u>, new contexts for 'performing' gender open up in digital society. One might imagine how the 'virtuality' of many digital platforms can enable performances that are possibly not in as strict adherence to prevailing norms as performances in face-to-face situations. There is the possibility for more playful and subversive expressions that might have the potential to undermine existing perspectives on gender.

But on the other hand, people, in the end, are often required or pressed to reveal their 'real' identities, which tend to be in line with stereotyped gender positions. Even though identity play may be going on, there is a strong tendency that the standard expectations of femininity and masculinity still get attached to such identities. In reality, people in general also largely tend to post and blog and share things that relate to their actual 'offline' lives, rather than play about with completely fictive and transcendent identities in imaginary 'virtual' worlds. There may in fact be quite little room for the unconventional, or for experimentation.

So, once again, there is the duality between how digitally networked technologies enable both bad and good things to be carried out in viral and effective ways. Still, Penny says, women and girls are largely excluded from building or influencing this 'universe of infinite possibilities'. She says that even though parts of the internet, which is of course not a monolithic space, have facilitated new communities and conversations around gender issues, 'the brave new world' still looks far too much like 'the cruel old world'. The internet tells women that they are always potentially being watched, and that there is always the risk of violence and harassment. 'Welcome to the world of your tits on screen the next day', Penny

(2013: n.p.) writes. In general, the age-old misogynist stereotype that 'women should be seen and not heard' is becoming more pronounced in parts of the internet and social media.

Further Reading

O'Neil, Mathieu (2009). Cyberchiefs. London: Pluto Press.

This book questions the celebrated self-organisation and autonomy of collaborative web 2.0 platforms by looking at how they actually work. Horizontal organisations and autonomy is celebrated in digital society, but any project must have rules and leaders in order to be efficient. O'Neil introduces the concept of 'online tribal bureacracy' as a name for a type of organisation which is unique to the internet. A key question for the book regards how autonomy and authority can coexist on the internet.

Nakamura, Lisa (2002). *Cybertypes*. New York: Routledge.

Starting from the insight that 'cyberspace' will not be an online utopia free of any discriminating social categorisations, Nakamura's book uses her notion of 'cybertypes' to examine how race, ethnicity, and identity play out on the internet. Cybertypes are understandings which are determined in turn by stereotypical understandings of different social categorisations in the 'offline' world. Race continues to matter online, partly in the same ways that it always did, and partly in new and evolving ways.

Penny, Laurie (2013). *Cybersexism*. London: Bloomsbury.

Penny's powerful extended essay gives an eloquent and rigorous account of misogyny in digital society. She has crafted a manifesto that wants to put a stop to the ongoing normalisation of the degradation of women on social media. A key point that she makes is that the division between online and offline is false, and that internet space is real space where real things happen to real people.

10 Digital Activism
Key questions

- In what ways do social movements in digital society differ from previous social movements in history?
- What is the relationship between online activism and offline protests?
- What do new theoretical concepts such as 'personal action frames' and 'connective action' add to our understanding of how social mobilisation works in digital society?
- Under what circumstances can the internet and social media make activism more powerful?

Key concepts

Disruptive spaces * networked social movements * communication power * personal action frames * connective action * peer-production * repertoires of contention * tactical media

It should be clear by now that the effects of digital media on society are neither universal nor unambiguous. As discussed in <u>Chapter 3</u>, and repeatedly throughout the other chapters, views vary widely with regard to the extent to which the internet has transformed society, as well as in what direction this has occurred. As reflected in Chapters 8 and 9, the consequences of digital society for democracy, and openness more specifically, are also a complex matter. However, research on more explicit forms of bottom-up digital activism — in the form of uprisings, revolutions, and protests — has demonstrated quite convincingly that digital tools and platforms *can*, under the right circumstances, be used successfully to challenge, provoke, and even overthrow prevailing power structures. In other words, in spite of the trial of strength between cyberoptimism and cyberpessimism, enough research has been undertaken on the subject of digital activism to claim that the internet and social media have some sort of capacity to create networks of resistance, in order to counter dominant power structures. Digital media have contributed to the alignment of disparate social movements, and to challenge traditional forms of political representation. As poet and author Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1970: 15) wrote, the 'electronic media' can make people 'free as dancers' and 'surprising as guerillas'. Elsewhere, I have used the notion of *disruptive spaces* to describe those 'emergent online spaces that may function as a springboard for movements' (Lindgren 2013: 2).

A Manifesto for the Analysis of Digital Disruption

Adapted from *New Noise* (Lindgren 2013: 143–145)

Disruption is noise — a 'disturbance in the orderly sequence' (Hebdige 1979: 90). In digital society, an increasing number of online socio-cultural spaces are celebrated for being disruptive. Groupings and discourse stemming from these spaces may have the power to circumvent dominant flows of communication, to subvert preferred meanings, and to challenge power structures. An important task for digital social research is to evaluate the conditions under which this power is realised, or not.

Disruptive spaces are emergent online spaces that embody more or less conscious attempts at obstructing or providing an alternative to prevailing power structures. Sometimes these attempts are successful, and sometimes they are not. At best, the disruptive spaces are building blocks of an alternative public sphere. At worst, they are idealised technodeterministic fantasies.

The key to realising the potential of disruptive spaces lies in deploying what Enzensberger (1970: 26) calls *emancipatory use of media*. We need decentralised structures of communication where each receiver is also a transmitter, and where interaction and collective production creates a self-organising social system that mobilises people. As researchers of digital disruption, we must look for traces and examples of such media use.

The study of disruptive spaces demands that we adopt a *cyber-realist* perspective. This means acknowledging that in digital society there is a constant struggle between networks of domination and networks of liberation.

In this chapter, we look at a set of key concepts in relation to how the internet and social

media can be, and have been, used as platforms from which to challenge the social order through radical politics. I give a background to how digital media have been used by activists, and discuss concepts such as 'communication power' and 'connective action'.

The Meme of Protest

In the years around 2010, a wave of protest and revolutionary social action seemed to roll across the globe. This was, some said, a new wave of social movements that were different from the ones we knew from before, such as the workers' rights movement, the environmental movement, peace movements, and women's movements. In some ways, they also appeared more powerful than their predecessors. Journalist Paul Mason (2012) wrote about how a series of protests, movements, and wars 'kicked off' in 2009–2011. Manuel Castells (2015: 1) said that at this moment in time 'in a world darkened by economic distress, political cynicism, cultural emptiness and personal hopelessness', suddenly 'dictatorships could be overthrown with the bare hands of the people'.

The title of Mason's book was *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere*, and it was preceded by a blog post in 2011, where he listed a number of reasons why things were indeed kicking off.¹ Among these were the increased formation of 'ad-hoc networks', the rejection of 'hermetic ideologies', and that technology — 'from the contraceptive pill to the iPod, the blog and the CCTV camera' — has expanded people's power and space. Furthermore, access to social media had made it possible for people to express themselves in ways that kill vertical hierarchies. Protest as such, Mason argued, had become a 'meme' (see <u>Chapter 2</u>) that was sweeping the world.

¹ ww.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/paulmason/2011/02/twenty_reasons_why_its_kicking.html.

The various movements that emerged around this time — including the uprisings during the so-called Arab Spring, the Indignados anti-austerity movement in Spain, together with similar movements in other countries, as well as the world-wide Occupy protests against social and economic inequality — are all examples of what Castells (2015) calls *networked social movements*. These movements have a common approach: they ignore political parties, distrust the mainstream (news) media, do not recognise any traditional forms of leadership, and largely reject formal organisation. Importantly, many of them also started in social networks on the internet. Such networks, Castells says, are 'spaces of autonomy' where participants can coordinate, debate issues collectively, and come to different forms of agreements and decisions.

The networks that engaged citizens and activists, formed by connection and interaction on the internet and in social media, are therefore autonomous, and potentially disruptive, spaces. This is because they are beyond the control of those governments and corporations that have monopolised most communication channels throughout history. Looking back once again at Chapter 3, we can see that Castells is a cyberoptimist in the sense that he thinks that the internet and social media as such will make the world a better place: these platforms offer a free public space for connecting with each other, and to envision projects in networks where people's other personal views or attachments are backgrounded. He concedes, however, that even though many present-day movements started on the internet, they then moved out into the streets. Social movements need to carve out public spaces, he says, that are not limited to the internet. This is why many of them occupy urban space through protests and manifestations. He describes the historical moment around 2010:

From the safety of cyberspace, people from all ages and conditions moved towards

occupying urban space, on a blind date with each other and with the destiny they wanted to forge, as they claimed their right to make history — their history. (Castells 2015: 2)

Similarly, political scientists Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012) argue that contentious action is always, in important ways, enacted and embodied by people on the ground. But before they took to the streets, the protest movements were able to spread by contagion — through a rapid, viral diffusion of ideas and images — in a digital society networked by ubiquitously wireless, and increasingly portable, technologies.

Exercise

Castells defines 'networked social movements' as movements that lack traditional leadership and formal organisation. Furthermore, as you will remember from the <u>previous chapter</u>, it can be argued that, without any formalisation (leadership, structure, etc.), it may be hard to mobilise or organise a group at all. In addition, the notion of 'digital disruption', as discussed above, suggests that the various 'disruptive spaces' around digital society can function as building blocks that add up to an alternative public sphere. So, the power of digital activism may come from the fact that it draws on fragmented and informal guerrilla tactics. What do you think of the possibilities for loosely structured grassroots initiatives to destabilise centralised and conventional power structures? Think of recent examples of such disruptive movements or campaigns that have used the internet and social media. Paraphrasing Enzensberger: Is it possible for activists to be 'free as dancers' and still make a real impact in society?

Why Governments are Afraid of the Internet

The potentially strong impact of these digitally networked social movements can be explained with the help of Castells' (2009) theory of *communication power*. It suggests that power relationships are constitutive of society, because those who are in power will always construct social institutions according to their specific interests and worldviews. Power, in turn, can be partly exercised in a violent manner, by coercion and hands-on control. But power built on coercion alone will, by necessity, be short-lived. The fundamental struggle, Castells explains, is the struggle over the construction of meaning in people's minds, which happens through 'symbolic manipulation'. This is what Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci meant when he wrote about the concept of hegemony, which refers to the process by which subordinated groups in society are made to accept the leadership, ideas, and values of the dominant group, without being forced. Gramsci (1971: 12) defined hegemony as being established through:

The 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.

According to this view, dominant groups in society maintain their dominant positions as a consequence of a consensus among both dominating and dominated groups that the unequal pattern of dominance is legitimate. Put simply, those in power stay dominant because everyone thinks that this is fine, even if they are being dominated themselves. Such consensus is built in the process by which humans create meaning through interaction with their social environment. This happens through communication — the practice by which people share meaning through exchanging information. Returning to Castells, he argues that the ongoing transformation of communication technology in the digital age has given rise to new ways of constructing meaning.

You will remember from <u>Chapter 5</u> that Castells' name for the new mode of interaction in digital society is 'mass self-communication'. And now, because people are able to autonomously self-produce and self-select content, this mass self-communication has the potential to reach a huge multiplicity of receivers, as communication networks have become increasingly horizontal. Furthermore, as Castells points out, digital communication is multimodal — it is embedded in a complex system of networked text, images, video, and relationships that allows for users to constantly reference a 'global hypertext' of content. Such digitally networked content can be reused and remixed by users according to many different specific needs and ends. In sum, mass self-communication offers a technological platform for the construction of autonomous social actors, both individual and collective. Castells (2015: 7) states that 'this is why governments are afraid of the Internet' and 'why corporations have a love—hate relationship with it and are trying to extract profits while limiting its potential for freedom'.

Historically speaking, social movements have always been dependent on the existence of different forms of communication mechanisms, such as rumours, sermons, pamphlets, and manifestos. These were spread by the movements involved, through whatever means of

communication were available. And in digital society, the tools at hand are the multimodal, horizontal networks of communication that offer the possibility for largely unfettered deliberation and coordination of action.

Exercise

Governments may be afraid of the internet, but, as will be discussed in <u>Chapter 12</u>, people are increasingly monitored online as fast-growing amounts of data on the behaviours and preferences of groups and individuals are registered. During political uprisings around the world, governments have repeatedly used strategies such as monitoring, censoring, or blocking the internet and social media. Does this mean that activists — or citizens in general — should also be afraid of the internet? As the same government strategies can be used in work to prevent terrorism and other crimes, should we instead feel safer knowing that someone is always watching? Should the internet always be entirely open? When does it need to be controlled, and who should control it?

Personalised Politics

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have explained the new modes of contentious action in examples such as the Arab Spring, Indignados, and Occupy in terms of the proliferation of what they call 'personal action frames'. They argue that all of these movements are unified by the fact that they use digital media in ways that go far beyond the mere sending and receiving of messages. The protests that they deployed operated with little to no involvement from conventional social movement organisations. Instead they relied on digital peer-to-peer communication in densely layered networks. It was also striking, Bennett and Segerberg say, that even though these new movements appeared to be quite loose around the edges, and organised in highly informal ways, they were able to sustain themselves, even gaining some extra strength as time went on. Generally, these movements all communicated that they were leaderless, and that they wanted labour unions and political parties, as well as more radical groups, to stay at the margins.

The power of the movements was a result of them organising in quite invisible ways, but not affiliating or branding their actions with any particular organisations with conventional forms of memberships. Historically, social movements have largely shaped identities and actions by thinking in terms of a homogeneous collective 'we' — drawing on collective action frames. But these new movements were instead using personal action frames. They function by casting a net of public engagement that is much broader, by drawing on easy-to-personalise action themes. Similar to Castells' concept of mass self-communication as an enabler for the wide circulation of personal ideas, Bennett and Segerberg argue that these new movements are characterised by people's digitally social sharing of very personalised accounts, as memes. One such example is the 'we are the 99 per cent' slogan that was widely used in the Occupy movement, and which was spread rapidly through online social networks of individuals.

At the same time, politics has increasingly become an expression of ideas, hopes, and grievances, which are highly personal. The issues dealt with by these new political formations may in many cases resemble older and well-known concerns of previous movements or parties — such as environmental issues, civil rights, trade fairness, gender equality, and so on. But in digital society, Bennett and Segerberg say, the mechanisms according to which action is organised are much more personalised. They are no longer based on strict group identities, formal membership, or shared full ideologies. People may indeed still join in on causes in large numbers — even larger than before — but the movement identity can be very heterogeneous and is the result of diverse forms of personal expression at a large scale, rather than of identification with a common group or ideology.

Personal action frames

Digitally networked movements often spread their ideas in the form of easily personalised and meme-like (see <u>Chapter 2</u>) little pieces of activist raw material. An example of this is the wide and multifaceted adoption of the phrase 'Je suis Charlie' (I am Charlie) in the aftermath of the 2015 massacre at the offices of the French weekly magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. First used on Twitter, the slogan shortly became circulated in the form of placards, stickers, banners, and hashtags in many languages and contexts. Such personal action frames are inclusive, and enable a large variety of different individual reasons that people may have for manifesting or contesting something. Digital society also offers a variety of personal communication technologies that make it possible to share

such themes in the form of text, images, tweets, status updates, profiles, remixes, or mashups. Collective action frames, by contrast, demand that individuals share much more far-reaching common identifications in order to be able to act under the same banner.

Looking back at what was discussed in <u>Chapter 5</u>, this development in the field of political activism is related more broadly to the decline of social capital and traditional forms of community, and the emergence of networked individualism. Our present time is marked by individualisation as well as structural fragmentation, and the increased emphasis on personal action frames is certainly one aspect of this more general development. Fragmentation and individualisation may not sound like a good breeding-ground for collective action, but personal action frames have proven to be quite successful. Compared with conventional movements, in which traditional membership organisations have led the way, the more personalised and digitally mediated forms of collective action have often proven to scale up faster, and be more flexible in bridging different issues and tracking moving political targets.

The Logic of Connective Action

The power of personal action frames can, at least in part, be explained by the fact that it is much more demanding to build and spread collective identifications than personalised ones. Producing commonly shared ideas and identities requires us to put more pressure on the socialisation of members and potential members. This, in turn, means that such forms of activism need to be formally organised, and cost more in terms of time, effort, and money. Conventional collective action also demands that people make more difficult choices. Joining traditional types of social movements entails the adoption of more self-changing social identities. Joining a movement such as Greenpeace may require a larger lifestyle change than engaging with more personal action frames on the internet and in social media. This illustrates the emergence of an alternative to the model of collective action, in the form of what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) call *connective action*.

Connective action is an increasingly common form of political engagement in digital society, where many formal organisations are losing their influence over individuals, and where conventional group ties are replaced by networked individualism. Connective action happens, Bennett and Segerberg explain, when communication becomes a dominant part of the organisational structure. Collective action relies on high levels of organisational resources that are devoted to forming collective identities, while connective action is based on people's personalised sharing of content across media networks. An important point here being that movements that are based on collective action can indeed use digital tools and platforms, but in such cases they do not transform the core dynamics of the action which is carried out. In movements based on connective action, however, they do. Here, the very logic of sociality in social media becomes the organising agent. As you may remember from <u>Chapter 3</u>, Yochai Benkler (2006) wrote about this logic in terms of peer-production. As Benkler proposes, the parameters of collective action are altered as people participate and share things online with people who, in turn, recognise their efforts and therefore do the same thing — take part and share. This becomes a self-motivating participatory system.

Bennett and Segerberg conclude that when digital social platforms coordinate and scale the networks of action, something similar to collective action — but without formal organisation — can become the result. This is connective action — a mode for activism and contention, drawing on people's co-production and co-distribution of ideas.

When people take action, or contribute in other ways, within the logic of connective action, their acts of personal – but not necessarily self-centred – expression becomes part of a powerful aggregated whole. So, while a problem with collective action may be to get individuals to contribute, the contributions of individuals are the very starting building blocks of connective action. Conventional movements face the challenge of making supporters, and potential supporters, internalise and personalise the ideas, the imagery, and the essence of the movement. Movements built on connective action, to the contrary, come into their very being by connecting (yes!), via social media, personal – already internalised – ideas and resources with networks of others. Therefore, such movements are highly empowered from the start, because they already live in the hearts and minds of the participants, who now also connect in large-scale networks.

Counter-Protocological Forces

The perspectives that have been discussed so far in this chapter agree that digital tools and platforms, under the right circumstances, can enhance or transform activism, making it more powerful. But what factors decide such circumstances? What regulates whether the circumstances are right or wrong? Digital media researcher Alex Galloway discusses such issues in his book *Protocol* (2004), in which he asks how 'control exists after decentralisation'. If digital media can potentially enable mass self-communication and powerful forms of contention, how is it decided whether this potential is realised or not? Galloway approaches this by focusing on how the creation of a number of 'protocols' have been crucial for the creation, as well as for the continued development, of the internet and the web. He explains that internet communication demands the implementation of a whole package of different protocols – common languages for computers on the network. Digital society, according to Galloway (2004: 111), is a society in which 'protocol becomes the controlling force in social life'.

In other words, protocols are at the centre of all digital tools and platforms that use the internet. For example, protocols developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (WC3), such as Hypertext Markup Language (html) and Cascading Style Sheets (css), decide how much web content works and how it is displayed. And other actors have created many other protocols, for a wide range of purposes. Referring to the relationship between the protocols of TCP/IP and DNS, Galloway (2004: 8) suggests that the internet rests on 'a contradiction between two opposing machines'. He explains how the former — the one assigning IP addresses to devices — distributes control among a huge number of autonomous agents. But the latter — the one translating IP addresses into URLs — organises control rigidly into a centralised and hierarchical database.

This is part of the reason why governments and businesses can strike back against protesters and other activists by censoring, blocking, or shutting down internet services. In fact, anyone controlling a root server has the power to remove entire countries or continents from the web with the stroke of a delete key. This means that the internet can work in many different ways, as it is built on protocols which involve a complex set of forces, some reactionary, some progressive. Even though its distributed network structure marks an attempt at the level of code and technology to eliminate hierarchies, the internet is still structured around control and command. So, returning to the issue of contention and social movements, in order to successfully leverage the affordances of digital tools and platforms, activists must be able to deploy 'counter-protocological forces'. This is done through what Galloway (2004: 176) defines as *tactical media*:

those phenomena that are able to exploit flaws in protocological and proprietary command and control [...] to sculpt protocol and make it better suited to people's real desires. [...] Tactical media propel protocol into a state of hypertrophy, pushing it further, in better and more interesting ways.

While Galloway's discussion relies heavily on the role of code in how machines interrelate, the argument can definitely be extended into the sphere of social action. He gives the example of how cyberfeminism, as a form of tactical media, has been a successful movement

because it has been able to 'disturb' protocol. Much like computer 'bugs' are disturbances in code, cyberfeminism — or other forms of activism — can be seen as metaphorical bugs in the social system. Successful digital activism can be likened to the bugs, crashes, and viruses, which can disrupt protocol and can propel technology (or society) in new and interesting directions. In other words, successful activist tactics in digital society may be best performed by 'liminal agents' that are 'at once inside protocol and outside its reach' (2004: 186).

A Digital Repertoire of Contention

Sociologist Charles Tilly wrote about the means through which social movements rely on different *repertoires of contention*, which means that these movements have different sets of tools and methods that are available to them, and through which they can create their actions. He wrote that 'every means of collective action [...] at a given point in history [...] belongs to a familiar repertoire of collective actions which are at the disposal of ordinary people' (Tilly 1977: 493). Tilly said that in the mid-19th century, a traditional repertoire that had shaped collective action up until then was replaced by a modern repertoire. A characteristic of the modern repertoire was that it enabled movements to be more enduring — lasting longer across space and time — for example, like the green movement, or the women's movement. But both repertoires demanded that members of a movement were co-present, and that the tactics that they used were seen as a coherent means to a clearly identifiable end. Both repertoires also assumed that movements were politically oriented, and focused on what could be seen as 'important' issues in society.

In digital society, however, Earl and Kimport (2011) identify a rupture in this historically persistent pattern. A new *digital repertoire of contention* is emerging. The internet and social media have made collective action possible without participants being in the same place or time. Movements in digital society are mostly disconnected from larger, conventional social movements, and they can be short, sporadic, and episodic, just as easily as they may be of an enduring nature. Digital contention, furthermore, is not necessarily about politics in the narrow sense, or even about 'important' issues. The same tactics that are used for serious concerns can be used in a wide range of areas. As costs of activism are lower, perhaps the stakes can sometimes be lower too. This means that we might see a completely new form of activism emerging, which is more based on swarms, seeming (or actual) randomness, or fragmentation, yet with a new sense of coordination.

Exercise

Traditionally, when talking about collective action, there has been a tendency to see organised social movements as good, while messy and unpredictable crowd behaviours have been seen as insignificant, bad, or unwanted. But this does not have to be the case when drawing on the new digital repertoire of contention. Now, there can be rapid, short-lived, explosive bursts of viral activism. In transient rushes of ephemeral participation, internet users can be 'five-minute activists' and still make an impact. Sceptics might say that this is an 'easy-come, easy-go' kind of politics. If people drift between issues and support various causes with little commitment or even thought, their behaviour ends up being 'clicktivism' (see <u>Chapter 2</u>) without any genuine social foundation. What do *you* think? Is clicktivism a problem for democracy, or is it rather a new form of activism that can indeed be powerful?

Further Reading

Enzensberger, Hans Magnus (1970). Constituents of a Theory of the Media. *New Left Review*, 64, 13–36.

Enzensberger's essay from 1970 about how citizens can use 'electronic media' not only for consumption but also for production is very commonly cited. It includes some amazingly apt insights that he made before the age of the widely available internet and social media. He wrote of the potential of new network-like communication models to reverse the ways in which media circulated: 'a mass newspaper, written and distributed by its readers, a video network of politically active groups'.

Bennett, W. Lance, & Segerberg, Alexandra (2012). The Logic of Connective Action. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 739–768.

This article, published in 2012, really put its mark on the scholarly discussion about digital media and political activism. Bennett and Segerberg coin the notion of 'connective action' (as opposed to collective action) to refer to the organisational dynamics that emerge in organisations built on communication. Conventional collective movements will be less able than new connective ones to harness the power of digital media to enable personalised public engagement.

Earl, Jennifer, & Kimport, Katrina (2011). *Digitally Enabled Social Change*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

This book by Earl and Kimport discusses the differences between online political activity and more traditional types of activism. The authors work through a number of empirical cases and discuss aspects of the new 'digital repertoire of contention'. They identify the two key affordances of digital media – that they reduce costs and bridge physical distance – and argue that the more these are leveraged the more transformative the activism will be.

11 Mobile Culture

Key questions

- What can internet research learn from mobile communications research?
- In what ways have mobile phones, and practices such as texting, transformed the fabric of society?
- What new social opportunities for controlling whom we interact with, how, and when have been introduced through mobile communication?
- How can the notions of 'micro-coordination' and 'hyper-coordination' help us understand how mobile phones have transformed social interaction?

Key concepts

Hyperconnectivity * texting * approximeetings * micro-coordination * hyper-coordination * apparatgeist * perpetual contact

The history of digital society can be divided into different stages or periods in many different ways. One is to see it in terms of four crucial technologies that have been introduced throughout its evolution. First, the widespread diffusion of the use of computers among ordinary people. Second, the introduction of the internet to a wide and global public. Third, the evolution of web 2.0 technology, user-created content and social media networking. Fourth, the arrival of portable devices with ubiquitous access to wireless networks — laptops, tablets and, most prominently, mobile phones. Starting out as part emergency services tool, part sci-fi fantasy, the mobile phone entered the wider consumer market during the 1990s, presented as a lifestyle accessory for business people and celebrities, and developed into an ever-present and taken-for-granted common object in the early 2000s.

Generally speaking, mobile phones have altered the parameters of daily life for huge numbers of people globally, to such an extent that the mobile phone can be thought of as an 'agent of social change' (Nurullah 2009: 19). This is at least in the sense that a large number of the things we do to carry out everyday tasks and relate to others is done in very different ways in society after — as compared to before — mobile digital communication. And this development has happened fast. In the early 1990s, owning a mobile phone was something quite extraordinary or at least a bit odd. Ten years later, in the early 2000s, *not* having one made a person stand out.

This chapter is about the means through which the development and evolution of mobile communications — with the mobile phone at the centre — has transformed society and sociality. There have indeed been a number of significant changes, and as a result, mobile communications as a specialised research field has rapidly emerged (Agar 2003; Ito et al. 2005; Goggin 2006, 2011; Baron 2008; Goggin & Hjorth 2009, 2014; Ling 2012). Lots of societal transformations have been mapped out and are said to be the consequence of mobile connectivity. Questions arise about privacy and norms for mobile phone use; the organisational structure of businesses are in flux; relationships between teens and parents — and among teens — are changing; new forms of distancing and intimacy take shape, and various struggles for status and power have shifted to a new ground. In some cases, the effects of mobile communications may be small. Sometimes, however, the effects are much more transformative and change our sociality at its core. For example, the 'mobile revolution' has made it increasingly important to think about the significance of place and context when we research digital society.

From mobile phones to smartphones

While mobile phones, in their early incarnations in the 1980s and 1990s, made it possible to speak to — and also send text messages to — people in other places, their development did not stop there. Rainie and Wellman (2012) explain that this was due to a convergence of different technological advances in the mid- to late 2000s. Computer technology got better, data storage improved, and mobile connectivity became easier and cheaper due to new ways of managing the radio spectrum. These developments gradually led to the invention of today's most common type of mobile phone: the smartphone. Smartphones are light, versatile gadgets with built-in advanced

cameras, and a whole ecosystem of apps that most of us today carry around in our pockets.

Innumerable surveys of people's mobile media use have shown how social sharing functions, such as sending and posting photos and videos, and accessing social media services, have steadily become more and more important as mobile activities. Many people today could not imagine living without their smartphone, and we use our mobile devices for an ever-increasing number of different things: talking, texting, listening to music, taking photos, making video calls, accessing the web, getting directions and other location-based information, gaming, watching video, and so on.

As mobile phones have often been construed and discussed in terms of their novelty, their adoption has often been seen as part of youth culture, with young people as mobile pioneers. In line with this, a study by communications scholar Rich Ling (2002) showed that there was a certain *mobile telephone culture* among adolescents. This culture was characterised by intense use of mobile phones, both through the use of text messaging to maintain social networks, humorous banter to tie the group together, and the physical decoration and staging of the devices in themselves through the use of cases, jewellery, ringtones, wallpapers, icons, and so on. Ling (2002: 44) also found uses to be gendered, and that in the early 2000s, the mobile phone began to change 'from being a gadget for the guys into being more of a social networking tool for girls'.

A New Situational Geography

The greatest affordance of mobile connectivity is that, probably for the first time in history, humans are now able to communicate with each other without having to rely on devices that are fixed to certain physical places or geographical locations. This, in fact, was a realisation of sociologist Joshua Meyrowitz's work from 1985. He believed back then that electronic media would change the *situational geography* of social life and make physical location much less important. He wrote that:

Electronic media have combined previously distinct social settings, moved the dividing line between private and public behavior toward the private, and weakened the relationship between social situations and physical places. (Meyrowitz 1985: 308)

While Meyrowitz referred particularly to the medium of television, mobile communications technology has a much stronger ability to 'break down the distinctions between here and there, live and mediated, and personal and public'. In digital society we get involved in — to use Meyrowitz's (1985: 308) words — 'issues we once thought were "not our business"', and 'physical barriers and passageways' are rendered 'relatively meaningless in terms of patterns of access to social information'. When it comes to the conditions for interaction, people can be in constant touch with each other, no matter where they happen to be located at a particular moment. Many of the social transformations following from this might appear to be quite everyday and undramatic at first glance, and related to how we book meetings, decide where to go for coffee, and when, or to tell someone that we are running late, for example. But if one thinks about this apparent micro-change a little more, it is in fact quite revolutionary at a macro-level. Media researcher Santiago Lorente (2002: 10) writes that, being a 'child of Bell's telephone, for transmitting voice; child of the Morse telegraph, for transmitting text; child of Marconi's radio, for wireless transmitting of voice and texts. And, let us add, child of the first ENIAC computer', the mobile phone is possibly the most complex and transformative communicative artefact to date.

Around 2005, research which explored to what extent mobile computing was changing society and social relations was in a similar stage to where research about the internet had been ten years earlier. Howard Rheingold's book *The Virtual Community* was published in 1993 and brought on a wave of academic interest in social life on the internet. Similarly, his 2002 book *Smart Mobs* propelled research interest in mobile communications. Researchers started drawing connections between internet studies and mobile communications studies, and many researchers moved their operations from the former to the latter. It is important to realise, however, that one can't simply use the established internet research tools and perspectives to achieve a full and adequate understanding of mobile communications in society. Researching how mobile phones and other portable gadgets, such as laptops and tablets, have changed how people relate to each other and to the world demands methodological and theoretical strategies that are quite different from those of internet research more generally. New interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological alliances have been formed, and the field of mobile communications studies is also much more connected across regional and national boundaries than that of internet research.

Contextual Variability

Mobile media has a certain technological geopolitics to it, which is reflected in the associated intellectual thinking as well as the empirical research about the phenomenon. As Ito (2005) explains, mobile communications research has therefore foregrounded the socio-cultural diversity of uses and among users in a way that was not evident — especially not initially — in the field of internet research. One of the most obvious reasons for this is that while the US had dominated both the technological development and the user adoption of the internet, the development and adoption of mobile phones was driven primarily by countries in Asia and Europe. This upset the geopolitics of the evolution of digital society. Ito (2005: 7) writes:

Unlike the Internet, created by a relatively narrow and privileged social band (predominantly educated, white, male, North American), mobile technology owes not only its uptake but its actual form to people more on the social and cultural peripheries: Scandinavian texting teens, pager cultures of Japanese teenage girls, multitasking housewives, Filipino youth activists, mobile service workers.

Keitai culture

There is sometimes talk of 'keitai culture' as a set of uses initially prominent in Japanese mobile phone culture, later to spread out into the world. *Keitai* is the Japanese word for 'portable'. Keitai culture was early about cherishing the phone as an intimate personal object, and it pioneered things such as text messaging, emojis, mobile gaming, and QR codes. But once again, even though such technologies and practices may be transferred from one context to another, there will always be contextual differences. Mimi Ito (2005: 4) writes that 'the development of keitai uses and cultures is a complex alchemy of technological, social, cultural, economic, and historical factors that make wholesale transplantation difficult'. No doubt, however, keitai has been important for the global development where mobiles have promoted that seamless integration of 'the virtual' and the everyday — of the online with the offline.

In internet research, it was widely assumed from the beginning that the internet was a universal and cross-cultural solution that would be implemented and used in the same way everywhere. Only later came the realisation that its uses and effects might differ across the globe. But the early patterns of how infrastructures for mobile communications were implemented meant instead that wireless technology was seen, from the very start, as being located in specific socio-cultural and historical contexts. For example, mobile phones have had a revolutionary effect in many developing countries in the global south. The reason for this is that in many regions, mobile phones are actually the first telecommunications tool that people have ever known. Such insights also helped research on digital society more generally to recognise that the effects of technology are always dependent on the social and cultural setting where it is implemented and used. Rather than assuming that patterns should be universal, and then undertaking research in order to explain differences, one can instead take social, cultural, and technological diversity as a starting point.

Technological systems are not just constructed technologically, but also largely socially, as argued in actor-network theory (see <u>Chapters 5</u> and <u>7</u>). We must get past the perception, Ito (2005: 7) says, 'that we are dealing with a single technology deployed across multiple

settings'. Furthermore, we must realise that the contextual variability is not necessarily moving steadily towards global standardisation. Beyond the transnational alliances that might be pushing for technological standards and unified mobile markets, the social multitude runs much deeper than that. It is 'a symptom of fundamentally heterogeneous and resilient sociotechnical formations that vary across lines such as gender, nation, class, institutional location, and age' (Ito 2005: 7).

As discussed elsewhere in this book, early observers of digital society were often quite preoccupied with defining and theorising the differences and demarcation lines between our online and offline lives and selves, and between the virtual space of flows and the physical space of places. Today, however, there is a rather widespread consensus that the online and the offline are intermingled in various types of intricate relations (Lindgren 2014). This transformation of research interests and perspectives is also a result of the emergence of mobile media studies. The first examples of internet research in the 1990s grew out of a theoretical interest in things like 'virtual reality' and 'cyberspace' (see <u>Chapters 2</u> and 3). It was only later that this kind of research became interested in how the online world might relate to its offline counterpart. In the world of mobile phones, the process went in the opposite direction. Mimi Ito (2005: 8) explains:

The extroverted, out-of-doors nature of mobile communication, as well as its low-profile origins in the pedestrian technology of telephony, has meant that the online component of mobile communications has not been experienced as cut off from everyday reality, places, and social identities. Internet studies have been tracing the increasing colonization by real-life identity and politics of the hitherto 'free' domain of the Net; keitai [Japanese mobile culture] represent the opposite motion of the virtual colonizing more and more settings of everyday life.

So, even if mobile communications studies did not completely invent perspectives that account for context, locality, and place as such, they at least led to a (re-)vitalisation of those perspectives in internet studies. It is important to remember that any technology that is introduced in a social setting will both affect and be affected by the existing structures and practices.

Online All of the Time

An important social change following the development of mobile communications is that many people are now online all of the time. A majority of people throughout the world are constantly capable of looking up information, are available to others, and are able to create and distribute their own content. Many people take their phones to bed, and the small size of mobile phones further enhances the sense of being easily accessible to one's social networks wherever one happens to be. It is as if we are carrying all of our social existence with us in our pocket.

As mobile phones become more and more embedded and entangled in our lives, they change the dynamics of social situations. Even if we see it as quite natural today, it was not very long ago that the arrival of calls at any time and place in front of any number of eavesdroppers and onlookers was a new phenomenon. This has meant that new social conventions and rules of etiquette for such situations have been developed. For example, people have had to develop methods to juggle the fact that one can be involved in two simultaneous situations — one on the phone and another in the physical place where we happen to be. While some people aim for, and succeed, at keeping their interactions discreet, others choose the strategy of what Plant (2001: 49) calls 'stage-phoning'. She explains:

On a train, for example, a mobile can be used as a way of broadcasting a great deal of information to a pretty much captive audience. In some contexts, even the presence of the mobile can be used to inform the audience that this is a person with a life, a person of the mobile world. Calls can be invented for that purpose, in which case the mobile can communicate even when it is not in use.

The ability to handle such disturbances, both on the part of the recipient of the call and those within earshot, has become an important social skill. Furthermore, mobile use in various forms and degrees has come to be seen as inappropriate in certain places: when flying, driving, in hospitals, cinemas, and lecture theatres, for example. Trains have started to introduce 'quiet carriages' and some restaurants have introduced 'no-mobile' policies. Such negotiations reflect the process by which our socio-cultural environment is adapted to mobile media use, and vice versa.

This continuous access leads to, as Rainie and Wellman (2012: 95) suggest, people being nudged into 'an internet-first frame of mind'. If a question arises during a discussion, on- or offline, its answer can often be looked up through a quick search query. And if we have something that we want to publish, like a video, a photo or a status update, the fast access to digitally networked tools and platforms via mobile devices will encourage us to share our content there. Furthermore, the internet-first thinking makes many people prefer to share stories with friends by texting, rather than phoning them up, or waiting until meeting in person. This *hyperconnectivity* brings about far-reaching changes in how individuals and groups in society relate to each other and to the world around them. Time and place, as well as the sense of being socially connected and present, assume new forms and meanings in digital society.

Txt Msg

As we have seen elsewhere in this book, the really interesting effects of digital media often happen when they are put to uses other than the most expected. So when mobile adoption increased in the 1990s and early 2000s, it did not cause much fanfare. But when people started doing 'un-phonelike' things with their devices, this changed. An example of such a thing is *texting* — sometimes still referred to as SMS (Short Message Service) — which existed already in the 1980s, but which became increasingly popular when the 160-character messages were offered at much cheaper rates in the late 1990s. Texting quickly became something that everyone was doing. As noted by science and technology scholar Jon Agar, text messaging, when developed, was in fact considered to be a minor service. Its power came from the ways in which it was discovered and appropriated by users. Agar (2003: 105) writes:

Txt msg ws an acidnt. no 1 expcted it. Whn the 1st txt msg ws sent, in 1993 by Nokia eng stdnt Riku Pihkonen, the telcom cpnies thought it ws nt important. SMS – Short Message Service – ws nt consider a majr pt of GSM. Like mny teks, the *pwr* of txt — indeed, the *pwr* of the fon — wz discvrd by users. In the case of txt mssng, the usrs were the yng or poor in the W and E.

Text messaging was first widely taken up in the Nordic countries, and especially Finland — 'Nokialand' (Kasesniemi & Liikala 2003) — and subsequent messaging cultures developed in places such as the Philippines, Japan, and Hong Kong (Goggin 2006: 74–87). Today, rather than a subcultural phenomenon, texting is an extremely widespread phenomenon which is solidly embedded in the everyday lives of large numbers of people world-wide. People tend to like texting as it is unobtrusive and can be done silently in all sorts of situations.

Texting: New and dangerous?

Approaching texting from the perspective of how it has changed language, linguist David Crystal (2008: 3) argues that there might never have been a linguistic phenomenon that has aroused as much 'curiosity, suspicion, fear, confusion, antagonism, fascination, excitement, and enthusiasm all at once' as texting. Crystal explains that texting is a purely 21st-century phenomenon — a linguistic practice that has emerged in digital society — with its own distinctive style which is full of abbreviations, emoticons, and other deviant ways of using language. Some people have worried that texting may lead to the erosion of linguistic standards, and that it might therefore harm language as a whole. Others have worried not about language, but about texting possibly replacing speech, disturbing our sleep, and fogging our brains in a variety of ways. But, as Crystal also points out, these types of reactions tend to come at any point when new technology is introduced. The printing press was thought by many to be the devil's invention, and the advent of the telegraph, telephone, and broadcasting all generated fears, however short-lived, that the social fabric was threatened. Generally, such fears have turned out to be unwarranted. The same goes for texting says Crystal, as there has never been any clear evidence supporting claims such as those that texting will lead to a decline of language. Rather, it may even help some forms of literacy.

Hyper-Coordination

Texting is a central aspect of the new forms of coordination that mobile phones enable. Rainie and Wellman (2012: 99) write that mobile media have introduced a new choreography of physical gatherings, in the sense that coordinating a date, party, meeting, or other form of rendezvous before the age of mobile phones was 'a formal negotiation yielding firm coordinates'. Previously, one was forced to decide beforehand more or less exactly when, and exactly where, one was supposed to meet up. This state of affairs was a consequence of the industrialisation of society in the 19th century, when public clocks, wristwatches, 'big machines, cities, bureaucracies, stores, and railroad lines running on strict timetables' started to demand that people turn up at exact places and points in time — in contrast to what had been the case in pre-industrial times (2012: 99). Rainie and Wellman write:

This was a profound change from preindustrial village life, where people went to their farms, shops, or pubs according to their needs — not their clocks. To some extent, mobile phones allow us a slight return to this more casual negotiation of time. In the age of mobile connectivity, time is more fluid and people's expectations have changed. (2012: 99)

This, in turn, changes the social rules and expectations regarding when and how one is supposed to be available to others, or when it is acceptable to contact others. As the networked individuals we are today, we rarely ever have to be completely alone, at least not in the social sense, as we can always stay in touch with family, friends, or connections near or far. Conversely, we sometimes use our devices to negotiate not being physically available or unavailable in social situations. People may pretend to be using their smartphone to avoid, for different reasons, being involved in interaction with people that are around them. More generally, Sadie Plant argues, mobile phones make certain physical and psychological demands that have caused people in society to develop new gestures, stances, and bodily movements, which did not exist before mobile media. Mobile phones have, for example, generated new ways in which the body, fingers, and thumbs are used while engaging in mobile interaction. Such actions and positions are part of a new body language, specific to digital society, which is now familiar to observers all over the world.

In digital society, some of our meetings — especially the ones that are informal and with a small number of participants — have become what Plant calls *approximeetings*. This is a name for the gradually fixed agreements that we make when deciding upon when and where to meet someone. If meeting someone for lunch, for example, we no longer have to rely on pre-made arrangements made face-to-face, in writing, or over landline telephones, as mobile telephones make it possible to first decide something roughly, and to decide more details through calling or texting as the event draws closer. While, at first glance, this appears to be a quite modest and practical improvement of how meetings are planned, this is in fact one of the more notable changes to the everyday social fabric brought on by digital technology. Plant (2001: 61) writes:

Loose arrangements can be made in the knowledge that they can be firmed up at a later stage; people can be forewarned about late or early arrivals; arrangements to meet can be

progressively refined. But this kind of flexibility – we can call it approximeeting – can also engender a new sense of insecurity. Everything is virtual until the parties, the places and the moments come together to make it real. In this context the person without a phone becomes something of a liability.

The transformation is part of a wider phenomenon that has been discussed by mobile media researchers Rich Ling and Birgitte Yttri (2002) in terms of a combination of microcoordination and hyper-coordination. They describe the former, micro-coordination, as the activity where mobile phones are used for instrumentally logistical purposes to make things run smoothly. This is the type of coordination that Plant describes in the quote above: people can text or call to say that they are running late, trips that have already started can be modified and redirected, and meetings can be scheduled loosely to gradually become more definite. The latter, hyper-coordination, goes beyond the merely instrumental logistical uses and adds an expressive layer of chatting and gossiping — a cultural dimension of coordination by which social bonds and values are created, maintained, and expressed. So, while micro-coordination is about 'orchestrating each other's movements and positions in the space of flows to the point where they ultimately overlap and merge' (de Vries 2012: 144), hyper-coordination is more about maintaining intimate social bonds. This is similar to the discussion in <u>Chapter 6</u> on the function of YouTube videos to simply maintain an alive and open communication channel. Hyper-coordination is about the constant confirmation of personal connections, and about sharing experiences, staying up to date about each other's lives, and exchanging various forms of symbolic gifts (images, jokes, emoticons, and so on).

Exercise

Now take a look at the text message history on your own mobile device. What examples can you find of micro-coordination and of hyper-coordination? Have you previously reflected on these as two different types of activity? As an experiment, try to think of other modes of communication (phone calls, face-to-face, etc.) that might have worked as a replacement for these acts of coordination. In what respects are they replaceable, and in what respects can they only be undertaken by texting?

Taking Control of Interaction

Language researcher Naomi Baron (2008) argues that one of the most important changes that result from the use of mobile communications is that we now have a growing ability to control when we interact with whom. She explains that even though we have always had options for 'controlling the volume' of our social interactions — crossing the street or pretending to look in shop windows to avoid unwanted interactions, or offering a brief hello to then quickly dash off to made-up engagements — digital, and consequently, mobile communications technology has multiplied these possibilities. Indeed, people have always tried to find ways of controlling when and with whom they interact, but the mechanisms for taking control, and the degree of control possible, have shifted over time. The early landline telephones offered little opportunity to avoid interaction. The very first ones were always on, and the first phones that were actually ringing had to be picked up in order for the ringing to stop. The introduction of answering machines and, later on, caller ID and call-waiting features improved the technological possibilities for screening and choosing among potential interactions, and even blocking some of them. Yet another way of manipulating the context of interaction is to put people on speakerphone, and let others listen in, without the consent of the person at the other end.

Mobile phones, Baron explains, have introduced even more control mechanisms into the equation. In the case of text messaging, people can manipulate their settings so that they appear to be 'away' or offline even if they are not, or to make messages appear to be unread even though they have in fact read them. Text messaging also makes it possible to decide if, how, and when one should respond to an incoming call for interaction. Some messaging platforms enable getting knowledge about people's whereabouts and activities by just reading profiles or away messages instead of directly contacting them. Likewise, sending a text instead of having face-to-face or voice contact changes the parameters for what we say, and how we feel about it. It can be done to save time by eliminating small talk, but topics that feel embarrassing or otherwise sensitive can also be easier to deal with by texting. This type of connectivity transforms the nature of social encounters, sandwiching mobile texting with the face-to-face encounters. People can be in touch before meeting up face-to-face in ways that lower the barriers to interaction when actually seeing each other, as there will exist something common and very recent to reference. And after the face-to-face meeting, mobile connectivity enables the interaction to linger on.

Exercise

One method of identifying the relationship between technology and social change is to try to function socially without a given type of technology. Think through a typical day in your life and consider which things you would have to do differently in a pre-mobile world. Imagine this was 1992 — or something like that — and think of how you would deal with everyday occurrences, such as checking bus schedules, catching up on news, arranging a meeting with a friend, passing your time while waiting in line, and so on. Amazingly, even many of us who have experienced the pre-smartphone world will also be stunned by how many things we now manage in different ways because of mobile technology. Do you think these changes are all for the better?

The Black Box Fallacy

An important part of the development of digital society is the emergence of what digital humanities scholars Byron Hawk and David Rieder (2008) call 'small tech'. This is an umbrella term for the ecosystem of small devices such as portable media players, mobile phones, digital cameras, and other handheld digital devices. Many of these devices were popular in the 1990s pagers, PDAs (personal digital assistants), palm computers — but during the 2000s and early 2010s, they gradually converged into the two popular formats of the smartphone and the tablet. This was because smartphones and tablets — following the rapid development of apps and ever more powerful hardware — became capable of doing things that people previously had to rely on different devices to do. This development is in line with the prediction made by some scholars that in the very near future, all media content will be flowing through a single 'black box'. Henry Jenkins (2006: 14), however, calls this idea 'the Black Box Fallacy'. He claims that it is not true that we use a smaller and smaller number of devices to interact and access content. Instead, he argues, it is the content that converges. We watch the same movies, handle the same emails, and read the same news on a number of platforms, such as TVs, tablets, mobile phones, laptops, paper magazines, cinemas, and so on. This is because 'media convergence is more than simply a technological shift'. It is instead an ongoing process that continually alters the relationship between existing technologies. Jenkins (2006: 16) writes:

Keep this in mind: convergence refers to a process, not an endpoint. There will be no single black box that controls the flow of media into our homes. Thanks to the proliferation of channels and the portability of new computing and telecommunications technologies, we are entering an era when media will be everywhere.

This process is illustrated, for example, with the apparent convergence a few years ago of mobile computing into the triad of laptops, smartphones, and tablets, which is now facing a challenge as fitness wristbands, smart watches, and similar hardware are once again making the gadget ecosystem more complex. Things are constantly brought into new relations as smaller hardware is continuously developed and as pre-existing software is recontextualised. These developments are part of an evolving handheld culture where the development of mobile phones from basic wireless communications devices to very capable computers and cameras — smartphones — is central.

Apparatgeist

In trying to capture the complex types of social changes that mobile technology has brought about, communication researchers James Katz and Mark Aakhus (2002) argue that mobile communications — or, as they call it, *personal communication technology* — gives rise to a particular form of social spirit. They coin the term *apparatgeist* to refer to 'the spirit of the machine that influences both the designs of the technology as well as the initial and subsequent significance accorded them by users, non-users and anti-users' (Aakhus & Katz 2002: 305). In the case of mobile phones, apparatgeist refers to the entirety of how they are designed, how they function, how they are used, how they are not used, and how they affect both those who use them, and others. Different groups of people — ranging from those who use and love a technology to those who reject and hate it — are part of assigning different meanings to the technology in question.

The word apparatgeist comes from 'apparatus' (meaning machine), and the German '*Geist*' (meaning 'mind' or 'spirit'). The theory of apparatgeist brings together all aspects of how technology interacts with the social. Basically, how an 'apparat' puts it mark on the '*Geist*' of society. Aakhus and Katz (2002: 11) explain:

[W]e coin a new term that encompasses the intersections of [...] the social person and the mobile machine. It seeks to encompass both the folk and the expert frameworks; tangible and intangible aspects; material and social issues; and, quintessentially, the machine and 'spirit' elements of flexible interaction with assistive technology.

Digital society, Aakhus and Katz argue, is governed by a logic of *perpetual contact*. While industrial society was driven by an idea of perpetual motion — a steady enhancement of the means of production — information society is driven by perpetual contact, as it has a focus on the means to communicate and interact socially. The theory of apparatgeist aims to explore the relationship between users and their technologies, as well as the relationship between users, technologies, and society. It also aims to account for both the meanings that users assign to the technologies that they are using, and for the social consequences of said use.

Exercise

In contrast to technological determinism (see <u>Chapter 3</u>), apparatgeist theory argues for a less causeand-effect, and instead more mediated, perspective. Its three key points are as follows:

- Technology reshapes social relations (for example, in terms of the boundaries between private and public spheres).
- People don't only relate to technologies through their everyday functionality and use, but also through embracing and actively shaping their '*Geist*' ethos or spirit.
- Even those who are not using a particular technology will still be deeply affected by its apparatgeist.

Try to apply the theory of 'apparatgeist' to other technologies: the wheel, the printing press, the English language, video game consoles, and so on. Think your examples through with the help of the three points above. This will help you explore how different technologies affect sociality.

Further Reading

Goggin, Gerard (2006). Cell Phone Culture. London: Routledge.

Goggin's book is a comprehensive introduction to theories and perspectives related to 'cell phone culture' internationally. He explores how the phenomenon of mobiles contributes to changing social and cultural patterns. Goggin puts the technology in historical and global context and deals with a wide range of topics, such as production, consumption, identity, design, and representation.

Ling, Rich (2012). *Taken for Grantedness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Ling is interested in the sociological impact of technology, and especially in the mobile phone. In this book, he focuses on the embedding of mobile communication into our everyday lives to the degree that it has become taken for granted. He compares the mobile phone with other technologies (clocks, cars, etc.) historically that have also become embedded in society and that have transformed the character of social interaction.

Baron, Naomi S. (2008). Always On. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

In this book, language scholar Naomi Baron discusses how mobile technologies (but also social media platforms more generally) have a profound effect on our uses of language. She also discusses the variety of ways that people use their mobile devices to screen incoming communication as well as to camouflage themselves. As the title of the book suggests, she also engages with the issue of what kind of people we are becoming in a culture where more and more of us are 'always on'.
12 Software, Algorithms and Data

Key questions

- What is the contribution of 'software studies' to more conventional social and cultural perspectives on digital society?
- How can we tease out the sociologically interesting aspects of inherently digital things such as links, likes, and search engine results?
- What social and economic role do algorithms play?
- How can the phenomenon of 'big data' be approached from a critical sociological perspective?

Key concepts

Software * algorithms * the link economy * the like economy * calculated publics * big data

Software is a word most commonly used to refer to computer programs and applications. Software is the set of instructions, the code, which instructs technological objects to function in the desired way, as opposed to hardware, which is the physical technological objects in the form of computers, mobile phones, televisions, or refrigerators. The first published use of the term software in relation to computing was in an article from 1958 by statistician John Tukey (1958: 2):

Today the 'software' comprising the carefully planned interpretive routines, compilers, and other aspects of automative programming are at least as important to the modern electronic calculator as its 'hardware' of tubes, transistors, wires, tapes and the like.

His point, then, was that not everyone who uses hardware gadgets has to learn all the details of what goes on 'under the hood', and of course, this is still the case. When we use a computer, mobile phone, or a social media application, we generally do not think very much about the logic that governs these things. We just use the things without reflecting on the details of how they were programmed or why. Even though those details and choices may have a huge effect on what we can do with the tools, and how we do it, it becomes impractical to consider their underlying logic.

In recent years, however, researchers have become more and more interested in looking at *software* in a more general sense, as software has become a force that structures and enables much of our contemporary world. New media theorist Lev Manovich (2013: 6) writes that software is 'the engine of contemporary societies'. Friedrich Kittler, a media theorist and literary scholar, said in an interview (Griffin et al. 1996: 240) that software had become increasingly important for understanding culture. He said:

I can't imagine that students today would learn only to read and write using the twentysix letters of the alphabet. They should at least know some arithmetic, the integral function, the sine function — everything about signs and functions. They should also know at least two software languages. Then they'll be able to say something about what culture is at the moment.

In a vein similar to that of Aakhus and Katz's theory of apparatgeist, discussed in <u>Chapter 11</u>, Kittler underlined the importance of critical analysis of the 'essence' of computers as a complex phenomenon. First, he wrote that 'software does not exist as a machine-independent faculty'. This means that software can't be studied in separation from hardware. Second, he claimed 'there would be no software if computer systems were not surrounded any longer by an environment of everyday languages'. This means that software is not strictly confined to computers. Its logic and effects bleed out into the rest of society — and vice versa.

In this chapter, I discuss the emergence of the research field of *software studies*. Until recently, the social sciences and the humanities have largely ignored the phenomenon of

software — the underlying code of digital society — and instead focused more broadly on the social and cultural effects of digital media, as discussed elsewhere in this book. Recently, however, there has been an increased interest in the critical analysis of different aspects of how software enables and limits various social practices, and how software, defined as a general system of signs and functions, is shaped by, and shaping, social interaction. This covers a broad variety of objects of study, spanning how code, files, copies, visualisations, functions, glitches, interfaces, bugs, and so on 'leak out of the domain of logic and into everyday life' (Fuller 2008b: 1). This chapter deals with the important, but largely invisible, role played by *algorithms* in digital society, and with concepts such as *calculated publics, the like economy*, and *big data*.

A Universal Engine on Which the World Runs

Software as an object of study is a moving target. Rapid technological development, and the acceleration of consumer capitalism has meant that, as Manovich (2013: 2) writes, 'the world is now used to running on web applications and services that have never been officially completed but remain forever in Beta stage'. A substantial part of all of the applications and services that people interact with in their everyday lives run on remote servers, meaning that they can be invisibly — or secretly — updated anytime. This is often the case, as services that aspire to become the operating system of digital society — such as Google and Facebook — update their code on a daily basis. As Manovich (2013: 2–3) puts it: 'Welcome to the world of permanent change — the world that is now defined not by heavy industrial machines that change infrequently, but by software that is always in flux.'

As cultural researcher Matthew Fuller (2008b) explains, an important task of software studies is to show that software is a vital object of study, as well as an area of practice, for researchers and thinkers in fields that one would not conventionally associate with 'software', in the narrow sense. While disciplines such as computer science, informatics, and related fields that work on the interface between computer and human have done lots of important work on the topic of software, it has long not been researched at all in cultural and social studies. Manovich (2013: 2) makes a convincing case, arguing that no matter what social and cultural things we do with digital devices — play, watch, listen, write, blog, tweet, call, talk, email, edit, take photos, film, and so on — we are all the time using software, and:

Software has become our interface to the world, to others, to our memory and our imagination — a universal language through which the world speaks, and a universal engine on which the world runs. What electricity and the combustion engine were to the early twentieth century, software is to the early twenty-first century.

Software tends to become a transparent or invisible aspect of digital society, in spite of its crucial role for its functioning. In the same way that hegemonic power and ideologies are naturalised, uncriticised, and spontaneously consented to, software also has an 'ideological layer' (Fuller 2008b: 3). Even though software is often extremely useful and even empowering, scholars in software studies remind us that much software — as a by-product — also defines social relations in certain ways that become systematic and impossible to alter once they are set. For example, consider the worries, discussed in <u>Chapter 3</u>, of Jaron Lanier that abstract automated functions will remove humanity. The 'user-friendly' software of social networking will kill off the personal, varied, often nicely strange homepages from the days when 'the web had flavor' (Lanier 2010: 15). Software, in this case, leads to a form of self-reduction:

The binary character at the core of software engineering tends to reappear at higher levels. It is far easier to tell a program to run or not to run, for instance, than it is to tell it to sort-of run. In the same way, it is easier to set up a rigid representation of human relationships on digital networks: on a typical social networking site, either you are designated to be in a couple or you are single (or you are in one of a few other predetermined states of being) — and that reduction of life is what gets broadcast

between friends all the time. What is communicated between people eventually becomes their truth. Relationships take on the troubles of software engineering. (Lanier 2010: 71)

Examples like this illustrate how software, something that is often defined as immaterial, actually has very material consequences in digital society. The design of software operates on many levels. It defines the characteristics of languages and interfaces; it enables certain kinds of use, and disables others.

Exercise

Look with this new perspective at a website or app that you regularly use in your everyday life. Try to make it the subject of a rudimentary software analysis. Distance yourself from the position you are in now where the functions and resources that make up the site or app are very familiar — maybe nearly transparent — to you. Instead, pose critical questions about it: What is it actually designed to achieve? Which functions are offered, and how? What other things *could* it have been designed to achieve? Which other functions *could* have been included? What does it seem to assume about, or expect from, its users in terms of interests, goals, skill level, gender (or any other dimension that will bring out interesting insights)? Which users are excluded? Is the site or app based on any particular values or convictions? Thinking in this way will make the software come into view so that it can be critically analysed.

From Hits to Links

Software studies are interested in natively digital things. These are things that would not exist if it was not for digital media and the internet. So, while for example a conversation between two people, or a television broadcast, can happen either through digital tools and platforms or without them, there are some phenomena that are distinctive to the digital. New media researcher Richard Rogers (2013: 25) argues for the importance of 'following the medium' — more about that in <u>Chapter 16</u> — and looking closer at what is specific to the digital. Beyond analysing online culture, or what happens to society as it becomes digital, there is also a need for research to capture and analyse natively digital things such as 'hyperlinks, tags, search engine results, archived websites, social networking sites' profiles, Wikipedia edits', and so on (2013: 19). Such an approach is about an analysis of what communications researcher Tarleton Gillespie (2010) names as 'the politics of platforms'.

New media researchers Carolin Gerlitz and Anne Helmond (2013) have explored how different types of 'web-native objects' have organised value production —economic and other — online. In the mid-1990s, in the days of web 1.0 (see <u>Chapter 2</u>), the most important objects were the hit and the hyperlink. During this period, the number of *hits* on a website became widely used as the standard metric to measure user engagement and website traffic. Many websites had 'hit counters' that displayed how many visitors a page had attracted, based on the number of computerised requests to see the page. In the late 1990s, however, this standard was replaced as Google, which was then a new type of search engine, introduced a new way of measuring impact by combining hits and *links*. This was a watershed in the history of the internet as it gave rise to a new web economy with search engine rankings at the centre.

PageRank

Famously, Google introduced the analysis algorithm of PageRank, which was developed in 1996 by founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin as part of a research project at Stanford University. PageRank — the name playing off both the name of Page and the notion of a web page calculates the relative importance of a page according to a rather intuitive logic:

a page can have a high PageRank if there are many pages that point to it, or if there are some pages that point to it and have a high PageRank. [...] PageRank handles both these cases and everything in between by recursively propagating weights through the link structure of the Web. (Brin & Page 2012: 110)

The basic idea, in other words, is that a page A can have a higher PageRank than a page B, even if B has more links pointing to it. This is because A may be linked fewer times but by more important pages. The point with this was that by using PageRank in addition to conventional text indexing, one would be able to generate much more accurate search results. Google's algorithm brought in a focus on the relational value of sites and thereby shifted the way in which the value of web resources was determined away from the hit and towards the link as the main measure of relevance. This was done according to the logic of PageRank where links have different value depending on the authority of the source.

This made links into a commodity in a new form of web economy where search engine optimisation (SEO) emerged as a key practice for actors who wanted to capture people's

attention online. SEO involves practices such as the careful choice of keywords for the site's meta description, the creation of content that includes frequently searched words, frequent updates to lure the automated crawlers of the search engines to re-index the site, and so on. Many emerging SEO practices went beyond merely helping the search engines build appropriate indexes, instead bordering on spam — so-called spamdexing. One such practice to deliberately manipulate the indexing process is carried out through so-called 'link farms' — a group of websites that all link to each other in order to boost their PageRank. Links have a direct value in digital society, and they can therefore be seen as a 'pseudomonetary unit' (Rettberg 2005: 526). And it's not only the links themselves that have value, but the knowledge about the relationships between content that became a 'prime real estate' (2005: 525). Links were increasingly exchanged in strategically reciprocal ways. Jill Walker Rettberg (2005: 526) explains how the link economy functions:

When I link to B, I give B a link. That link translates into a precise (though undisclosed) value in Google's PageRank and in other indexing systems [...]. The link has a clearer value to B than the content of B's page has to me or to my readers. I pay B for B's content with my link. This instrumental view of links does not exclude its other qualities. Many people creating or following links on the Web link generously, carefully, or haphazardly but without thinking of the economy of links and their value.

As a consequence of the link economy, link bartering, loosely organised systems of linking someone and being linked in return, was made more formal through phenomena and functions such as webrings and blogrolls. Such practices subverted Google's 'objective' measurement of links, and when they got too overtly strategic, they were sometimes labelled as 'link slutting' or 'link incest' (Rettberg 2005: 528). It was frowned upon to shamelessly or inappropriately sell your integrity for links. But gradually, there was also an increasingly open exchange of links for real-world money. A black market for links emerged, where people could pay to be linked by link farms, circles, and other technological agents designed to do nothing but link to others. Consequently, Google developed different practices to police and ban such activities. Of course, it was in Google's interest to protect the integrity of its system, since the map of the Web that they were, and are still, developing is priceless, not only for the generation of as 'good' search results as possible, but also for the ability to personalise searches and — by extension — ads (see <u>Chapter 9</u>). As more and more of our online activities are tied into our user profiles with corporations like Google, Facebook, or Apple, these actors will have more and more data about us in their rapidly-expanding databases.

The Like Economy

After the arrival of the social web and, consequently, social media, there were further changes to the attribution of value to sites and content. Initially, the participatory features of web 2.0 made it possible for users who were increasingly engaged in the creation of their own content to be more active also in the creation of connections between sites, accounts, and platforms. The early renditions of the link economy had been predominantly based on expert recommendations and aggregation engines such as Technorati and Blogpulse. However, as Richard Rogers (2005: 27) explains, 'the blogsphere became a new kind of collective, aggregated source — one freed from the "tyranny of (old media) editors"'.

The emergence of 'social buttons' that could be placed on any website were a further development towards more participatory linking practices. These buttons enabled the submission of, or voting for, posts on platforms such as Digg and Reddit, which introduced sharing buttons in 2006 (Gerlitz & Helmond 2013: 1351). Many other platforms followed suit and offered different social buttons which allowed for a variety of predefined user activities: bookmarking, voting, recommending, sharing, and tweeting, and counters which showed how many times they had been clicked.

Buttons

Digital aesthetics scholar S^oren Pold explains that buttons in web interfaces and apps have a certain social power, since buttons 'signify a potential for interaction' and because buttons feel very real and definite. Pold (2008: 32) writes:

There is an analog connection between pressing the button and, by the force of one's finger transmitted through a lever, changing the state of the apparatus — as in old tape recorders, where one actually pushed the tape head into place with the button. The computer interface does away with the analog mechanical functionality, but the function of buttons here is to signify the same stable denotation, even though its material basis is gone. That is, interface buttons disguise the symbolic arbitrariness of the digital mediation as something solid and mechanical in order to make it appear as if the functionality were hardwired.

The major transformation came with Facebook's introduction of the like button in 2009. The now classic thumbs-up button was created in order to be a shortcut for comments, and to replace short affective statements such as 'Congrats!' or 'Awesome!'. Since 2009, there has been a longstanding debate on the absence of a 'dislike' button. Critics have argued that a button for positive sentiment only, works to support commercial interests, such as building brands or promoting products and services. Mark Zuckerberg, head of Facebook, said in 2014:

Some people have asked for a dislike button because they want to say, 'That thing isn't good.' And that's not something that we think is good for the world. So we're not going to build that. $\frac{1}{2}$

However, in February of 2016, Facebook introduced a wider range of 'reaction' options: Like, Love, Haha, Wow, Sad, or Angry.

www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2014/12/facebook_dislike_button_why_mark_zuckerbei

The social act of liking — or otherwise 'reacting' — can be performed on most things on Facebook, through actions such as status updates, shared photos, shared links, or comments. As with the social buttons that preceded it, from the very beginning, the like button had a counter, and also listed the names of those who had clicked it. A year later, in 2010, Facebook launched an external like button that could be used as a plugin by any site owner, 'potentially rendering all web content likeable' (Gerlitz & Helmond 2013: 1352).

This innovation made links — the main currency of the link economy — less interesting and instead put the focus on how 'liking', or performing other preset 'reactions', transforms user interactions into comparable and actionable forms of data. The emerging like economy facilitated a more social web experience, where being liked and seeing what others like enables new forms of engagement. But, Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) argue, it also creates 'an alternative fabric of the web in the back end'. In this obscured dimension, specific relationships are created 'between the social, the traceable and the marketable'. So, while the link economy bore traces of democratisation, as it was a system where anyone could link to anyone else, the like economy means a recentralisation. Many people are involved in the 'liking' part of the like economy, but most of them lack full access to the data they are part of producing. Instead of the patterns generated through mutual linking practices, the like economy presents an alternative fabric of the web, which is organised through data flows that emanate from social media platforms such as Facebook.

The like button, embedded both inside and outside Facebook, is an example of a 'tracking device', which establishes new markers of relationships online that go beyond the conventional hyperlink between websites. So, the fabric of the like economy is not organised through relationships between websites, but instead through third-party tracking devices, linked to data mining services. Fundamentally, the digital artefact of the Facebook like, or reaction, button sets up a particular relationship between the social and the economic dimensions of society. The widespread use of Facebook, the prominence of the like button, and appearance of the embedded like button throughout the internet makes it possible to gather large amounts of valuable user data.

Exercise

Try to reflect upon what a 'like' is to you. From the perspective described above, the like button is a tracking device for generating economic value. From another perspective, it can be a shorthand for conveying a positive sentiment. One could also imagine that the meaning of a like is very contextualised. In the cases when you 'like' something, do you ever think about how that click is going to be interpreted by others? Is 'liking' just something that we do, compulsively? Is the meaning of the like taken for granted? May the like even be an empty signifier, in the sense that its meaning is not fixed?

Algorithms

Algorithms play a key role in the softwarisation of society. From a strictly computational point of view, algorithms are mathematical procedures that are performed in a controlled fashion on data in order to be able to present an output in the shape of other forms of data. Algorithms are the important procedural logics that undergird all computation. The storage and reading of data, the application of procedures to it, and the delivery of some form of output can be done by hand as well, but the way in which digital society relies on computational tools has turned automatisation and digital routines into a social key mechanism, which governs the flows of information we depend on. Media and communications scholar Taina Bucher (2012: 1), writing about 'programmed sociality', is among those who have shown that algorithms can 'establish certain forms of sociality' by way of how they 'produce the conditions for the sensible and intelligible'. We rely on search engines for the navigation of massive informational databases, or the entire web, and in this process, algorithms help us decide and select what information is important to us. For example, many online services and platforms have recommendation algorithms that suggest to us which book to buy, which Twitter users to follow, what TV series to watch next, who to 'friend', which content is 'hot' or 'trending', and so on. In doing their work, algorithms highlight some bits of the world, while hiding others. For Gillespie (2014: 168), the role of algorithms in society is important since where we may have previously relied on credentialled experts, scientists, 'common sense', or religious authority for correct knowledge about reality, we have now turned to algorithms.

Obviously, not everyone welcomes such 'behind the scenes' mechanics. Algorithms may be beneficial but they may also be exploited to manipulate users. In February 2016, Twitter announced the launch of its 'algorithmic timeline', which was followed by a storm of protests from its users. The change meant that the service would depart from the presentation of tweets in reverse chronological order, in favour of the provision of algorithmically produced tweets, based on user activities. *Wired* magazine contributor Brian Barrett presented an analysis of the changes that indicated that new and uninitiated users might be aided by the new, more accessible method of presenting tweets — 'isolating the signal from the noise'.² However, as Barrett wrote, power users who were comfortable with the platform, and had a longer history and familiarity with the original reverse chronological presentation became suspicious and launched hashtags such as #RIPTwitter. So, while some individuals, in some contexts, might be perfectly happy to have their content feeds 'refined' by algorithms, other individuals in other contexts may feel that the very same algorithms 'destroy' their feeds.

² www.wired.com/2016/02/a-twitter-algorithm-wont-ruin-anything/

As discussed previously, it is important to carry out critical social analyses of software and algorithms, because they have a certain unquestionable quality to them. Even if we know that an algorithm selectively puts our YouTube start page together, it is still somewhat natural to perceive it as being *the* YouTube start page. But, as Gillespie (2014: 169) argues, algorithms are socially constructed, rather than objective and precise:

A sociological analysis must not conceive of algorithms as abstract, technical achievements, but must unpack the warm human and institutional choices that lie behind these cold mechanisms. I suspect that a more fruitful approach will turn as much to the

sociology of knowledge as to the sociology of technology. [...] This might help reveal that the seemingly solid algorithm is in fact a fragile accomplishment.

Furthermore, Gillespie writes, the algorithms that underpin digital society, the internet, and social media platforms all contribute to the production and legitimisation of knowledge, according to a logic based on assumptions that are very specific. This is why it is important to examine algorithms as a key feature of the media ecosystem of digital society. What are these specific assumptions in relation to given algorithms and contexts, and what are their social and political ramifications?

Googlisation

Philosopher Michel Foucault wrote that knowledge is closely related to power. He said that the knowledge of the world that is established 'tends to exercise a sort of pressure, a power of constraint upon other forms of discourse' (Foucault 1972: 219). As Rettberg argues, this is also highly pertinent to the political economy of links. Links may be useful, functional, or provide us with happiness, for example, but links are also part of a power structure, which must not be ignored. Links define what can be found and so they define knowledge, knowledge, which, once again, is power. Cultural historian Siva Vaidhyanathan (2011) thinks that there has been a *googlisation* of everything, and that in hindsight it might have been a better idea not to put the entire 'human knowledge project' in the hands of a single corporation. We must not assume, he argues, that Google will deliver to us what we 'actually need'. Even though Google might have grandly promised not to 'be evil', it is still big business. Vaidhyanathan argues that:

About the same time that Google started, we could have coordinated a grand global project, funded by a group of concerned governments and facilitated by the best national libraries, to plan and execute a fifty-year project to connect everybody to everything. (2011: 203)

Activist and author Eli Pariser is also worried about the future. In *The Filter Bubble* (2011), he writes that the evolution of Google and social media, with their underlying algorithms, has ushered people into a personalised and filtered world, where all search results and other information that they are served reinforces their pre-existing values as well as their view on the world. This compartmentalisation and customisation erodes the common ground that people need to share in order to build community and to engage in democratic politics. The googlisation of social reality brings many problems; our beliefs are seldom challenged, which reduces our drive and desire to try to understand others and to incorporate alternative ways of thinking and seeing the world. An element of randomness is needed if we are to be open to discovery.

Exercise

Try to break out of the 'filter bubble' by experimenting with different search queries in different search engines with different settings. Choose a search query and enter it into the search field at google.com. Take note of the top search results. Enter the same query at — for example — google.jp, google.ru, google.tn and google.co.uk. Take note of the respective search results. Try the same query at bing.com, duckduckgo.com, yandex.ru, or others. If you like, you can play around with settings for the different engines as well. Note your top search results throughout. When you have finished, analyse the differences and overlaps in the search results. What conclusions can you draw from this?

Calculated Publics

A consideration of exactly what algorithms might include or exclude is a vital area for research. In practice, algorithms and the databases upon which they are applied are seen as one and the same phenomenon. But, as Gillespie argues, from an analytic point of view, the two must be studied separately. Algorithms are meaningless without data, and before an algorithm can generate any type of output or result, some information must be collected as input. This process always includes a set of choices about what should be collected and how it should be ordered and 'readied for the algorithm'. The collected data must always be cleaned and ordered into some form of matrix or other readable structure. Furthermore, data — even before they are collected — can be trimmed, primed, and vetted by owners of sites and platforms. Content which is deemed to be 'problematic' can be removed altogether, but it can also be algorithmically demoted in subtler ways. YouTube, for example, withholds 'suggestive content' from lists of most watched videos, or in other recommendation systems. Generally, there is a process of tidying up data. Gillespie (2014: 172) says that:

Indexes are culled of spam and viruses, patrolled for copyright infringement and pornography, and scrubbed of the obscene, the objectionable, or the politically contentious.

Such tidying is of course necessary, and even helpful, to a certain degree. But it is still valuable to reflect upon this as a form of subtle censorship and to analyse what the choices mean — especially when algorithms have an aura of automation and objectivity. It is also important to consider the social character of algorithms – after all, someone designed and devised them. Rather than thinking only about the effects of algorithms, it might be more fruitful to scrutinise them in terms of their entanglement with the lived world of their creators and users. The entanglement of algorithms with users leads to the rise of what Gillespie (2014: 188–189) calls 'calculated publics'. He explains how algorithms create types of publics that don't really exist in the conventional sense:

When Amazon recommends a book that 'customers like you' bought, it is invoking and claiming to know a public with which we are invited to feel an affinity — though the population on which it bases these recommendations is not transparent, and is certainly not coterminous with its entire customer base. When Facebook offers a privacy setting that a user's information be seen by 'friends, and friends of friends,' it transforms a discrete set of users into an audience — it is a group that did not exist until that moment, and only Facebook knows its precise membership. These algorithmically generated groups may overlap with, be an inexact approximation of, or have nothing whatsoever to do with the publics that the user sought out.

Similarly, Twitter's algorithm which shows live 'trending' topics within a certain national or regional public also leads to the definition of a highly constructed public, shaped by criteria that are specific and unspecified at the same time. Gillespie defines the notion of *calculated publics* in relation to that of networked publics (see <u>Chapter 2</u>). His main point is that there is a friction in digital society between the — networked — publics that are forged by users

through their social interaction with each other and the calculated, somewhat artificial, publics that are generated through algorithms.

Digital sociologist Deborah Lupton (2016) writes that the move towards tracking and monitoring users' movements within and across digitally networked tools and platforms has given rise to new ways of conceptualising people and what they do. Instead of conventional socially and culturally embedded identities, we develop 'data selves' that are configured by the bits of information we generate and collect. As Lupton suggests, one might argue that rather than having a traditional sense of selfhood, people today have started to understand themselves as an assemblage of data. As we are becoming data, we must increasingly understand ourselves as such. This process is further extended with the development of our 'quantified selves' as a consequence of the increased use of techniques of 'lifelogging', personal informatics, and personal analytics, through apps, and wearable technologies such as smart watches and wristbands.

Challenging Big Data

Big data has been defined in several different ways since the term was first used in the mid-1990s to refer to the handling and analysis of massively large datasets. According to a popular definition, big data conforms with three Vs: it has volume (enormous quantities of data), velocity (is generated in real-time), and variety (can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured). To this, various writers and researchers have suggested a number of other criteria be added, such as exhaustivity, relationality, veracity, and value. During a review of a number of big data sets in order to find their common traits, geocomputational researchers Rob Kitchin and Gavin McArdle (2016) found that the two most important characteristics of big data are velocity and exhaustivity. This means that big data captures entire systems rather than samples (exhaustivity) and that it does so in real-time (velocity). Crawford and boyd (2012) think that 'big data' is in fact a poorly chosen term. This is because its alleged power is not mainly about its size, but about its capacity to compare, connect, aggregate, and crossreference many different types of datasets (that also happen to be big). They define big data as:

a cultural, technological, and scholarly phenomenon that rests on the interplay of: (1) Technology: maximizing computation power and algorithmic accuracy to gather, analyze, link, and compare large data sets. (2) Analysis: drawing on large data sets to identify patterns in order to make economic, social, technical, and legal claims. (3) Mythology: the widespread belief that large data sets offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, with the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy. (Crawford & boyd 2012: 664)

From a critically sociological perspective, Lupton (2014: 101) argues that the hype that surrounds the new technological possibilities afforded by big data analyses contribute to the belief that such data are 'raw materials' for information — that they contain the untarnished truth about society and sociality. In reality, each step of the process in the generation of big data relies on a number of human decisions relating to selection, judgement, interpretation, and action. Therefore, the data that we will have at hand are always configured via beliefs, values, and choices that "cook" the data from the very beginning so that they are never in a "raw" state'. So, there is no such thing as raw data, even though the orderliness of neatly harvested and stored big data sets can create a mirage to the contrary.

Sociologist David Beer (2016: 149) argues that we now live in 'a culture that is shaped and populated with numbers', where trust and interest in anything that cannot be quantified diminishes. As Crawford and boyd (2012: 665) argue, the mirage and mythology of big data demand that a number of critical questions are raised with regards to 'what all this data means, who gets access to what data, how data analysis is deployed, and to what ends'. There is a risk that the lure of big data will sideline other forms of analysis, and that other alternative methods with which to analyse the choices, expressions, and strategies of people are pushed aside by the sheer volume of numbers. 'Bigger data are not always better data', they write, and they use the example of Twitter analysis to demonstrate that the bigness of tweet data does not mean that an analysis of it will necessarily lead to insights about society that are more true than other data and methods:

Twitter does not represent 'all people', and it is an error to assume 'people' and 'Twitter users' are synonymous: they are a very particular sub-set. [...] For example, a researcher may seek to understand the topical frequency of tweets, yet if Twitter removes all tweets that contain problematic words or content – such as references to pornography or spam – from the stream, the topical frequency would be inaccurate. Regardless of the number of tweets, it is not a representative sample as the data is skewed from the beginning. (Crawford & boyd 2012: 669)

In sum, Crawford and boyd, who see the emergence of big data as part of a more wideranging 'computational turn' in culture and society, underline the importance of recognising the rhetoric surrounding big data. We must remember that the design and interpretation of big data is socially constructed, that there is still value to be found in 'small data', and that there are a number of unresolved and problematic ethical issues that surround the use of big data.

Further Reading

Manovich, Lev (2013). Software Takes Command. London: Bloomsbury.

Manovich presciently called for 'software studies' in his 2001 book *The Language of New Media*. In this volume from 2013, he presents a further development of that idea. Focusing especially on 'media software' (such as Photoshop, After Effects, and Google Earth), Manovich discusses where such software comes from (historically), and how it shapes how media is created, viewed, and remixed.

Fuller, Matthew (Ed.) (2008a). Software Studies: A Lexicon. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Software studies often focuses on the influence of software, but this edited volume is also interested in the very material of software. Writers from a wide variety of fields have contributed short texts about key topics such as 'algorithm', 'code', 'copy', 'glitch', and 'pixel'.

Lupton, Deborah (2016). The Quantified Self. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Lupton examines the emerging field of self-tracking through digital devices and software. She deals with a set of related issues from a social and cultural perspective. Lupton specifically pays attention to how the large amounts of data generated and collected via self-tracking tend to be collected and used for different purposes by businesses, governments, and researchers.

Part III Tools

13 Digital Social Research

Key questions

- What are the new challenges for social research in digital society?
- What new types of data are available today, that were unavailable to social researchers in predigital society?
- How can the divide between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' methods be bridged through 'methodological bricolage'?
- What ethical principles should guide digital social research?

Key concepts

Digital social research * the data environment * methodological pragmatism * methodological bricolage * research ethics

Much as the emergence and development of digitally networked tools and platforms has changed the parameters for social interaction, digital society also changes how we think about research methods. In fact, because of its relative newness, social scientific research about the internet and digital media is a key area of methodological development. Routine research labour is rapidly transformed when one tries to capture the fast-evolving patterns of sociality online and through digital tools. Because of its transformative character, research on digital media still — some years into the 'information age' — gives rise to new methods, as well as new challenges and opportunities for the analysis of society and human behaviour.

In this part of the book, consisting of this and three following chapters, I will introduce a framework for carrying out *digital social research*. Of course, as the internet is such a big and ever-present part of today's societies, there is no one way to define what 'digital social research' is. It could be any type of study using any kind of existing and established research method to say something about life in digital society.

The choice of a method for research relates to the aims of the study, the type of data to be analysed, personal preferences of the researcher, and so on. I will, however, present a suggestion as to what digital social research can be. This suggestion will be presented more in terms of a framework or toolkit than a fixed and ready-made universally applicable model. My specific version of digital social research will be, by necessity, shaped by the types of studies that I myself have been doing and engaging with, as well as by my background and position as a mixed-methods sociologist.

In <u>Chapter 15</u>, I will argue that *ethnography* – a 'qualitative' approach based largely on interpretations of rich data from interviews and observations – is a very useful method to capture the complexities of digital sociality and how digital society works. Ethnography conventionally relies on collecting research data through participant observation and interviews, aiming to generate close and detailed descriptions and interpretations of social life as it happens in context. I think that the ethnographic approach, with its interpretative stance, provides a solid foundation to undertake research, with potential to generate sociologically relevant knowledge about the complexities of digital society. As anthropologist Gabriella Coleman (2010: 488–489) states:

To grasp more fully the broader significance of digital media, its study must involve various frames of analysis, attention to history, and the local contexts and lived experiences of digital media — a task well suited to the ethnographic enterprise.

Sometimes ethnography alone can be more than enough as a research method, depending on what one wants to find out. But as I will argue in this chapter, the best strategy is often to combine ethnography with other methods. This is a consequence of the changing *data environment* and the increased social complexities which follow from the networked characteristics of digital society. Mixed-methods approaches entail, among other things,

venturing beyond the longstanding and well-established divide between so-called qualitative and so-called quantitative methods, as well as crossing boundaries between conventional academic disciplines. Doing digital social research, still a couple of decades into the 21st century, means entering new terrains and facing new challenges. I will address some of these challenges — for example those relating to *research ethics* — in this chapter.

In <u>Chapter 16</u>, I will discuss some methods for exploring, mapping, and mining digital society that can be useful to expand on the ethnographic foundation. I pay particular attention to social network analysis, but also deal with text mining – more or less automated techniques, developed in the fields of computer science and linguistics, for analysing large collections of documents. I also discuss what Richard Rogers (2013) calls 'methods of the medium'. Before these two specialised chapters, <u>Chapter 14</u> will offer some hands-on guidelines for the navigation of the research process – how to formulate a good research question, how to frame your field of study, as well as how to collect and analyse data. But first, in this present chapter, I will address a number of challenges and general strategies when undertaking digital social research.

The Data Environment

First, let's think about what types of information we may be dealing with. As you will remember from the <u>previous chapter</u>, 'big data' has become a buzzword that is repeatedly used to name and characterise some of the new types of data that have emerged in digital society. In reality, however, the emergence of big data is only one of many transformations in our data environment, which affects opportunities as well as challenges when doing digital social research. For example, Kingsley Purdam, an expert in research methods, and his data scientist colleague Mark Elliot aptly point out that what is commonly known as 'big' data is in fact data defined by several other things, rather than just its large size: it registers things as they happen in real time, it offers new possibilities to combine and compare datasets, and so on. Furthermore, Purdam and Elliot believe that even these characterisations are still not sufficient. This is because those definitions still seem to assume that data is 'something we have', when in fact 'the reality and scale of the data transformation is that data is now something we are becoming immersed and embedded in' (Purdam & Elliot 2015: 26).

The notion of a 'data environment' underlines that people today are at the same time generators of, but also generated by, this new environment. 'Instead of people being researched', Purdam and Elliot (2015: 26) say, 'they are the research'. Their point, more concretely, is that new data types have emerged — and are constantly emerging — that demand new flexible approaches. Doing digital social research, therefore, often entails discovering and experimenting with challenges and possibilities of ever-new types and combinations of information.

Different types of data

In trying to describe the ever-changing data environment, Purdam and Elliot (2015: 28–29) outline an eight-point typology of different data types based on how the data in question has been generated:

- 1. **Orthodox intentional data**: Data collected and used with the respondent's explicit agreement. All so-called orthodox social science data (e.g. survey, focus group or interview data and also data collected via observation) would come into this category. New orthodox methods continue to be developed.
- 2. **Participative intentional data**: In this category data are collected through some interactive process. This includes some new data forms such as crowdsourced data [...].
- 3. **Consequential data**: Information that is collected as a necessary transaction that is secondary to some (other) interaction (e.g. administrative records, electronic health records, commercial transaction data and data from online game playing all come into this category).
- 4. **Self-published data**: Data deliberately self-recorded and published that can potentially be used for social science research either with or without explicit permission, given the information has been made public (e.g. long-form blogs, CVs and profiles).
- 5. **Social media data**: Data generated through some public, social process that can potentially be used for social science research either with or without permission (e.g. micro-blogging platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, and, perhaps, online game data).
- 6. **Data traces**: Data that is 'left' (possibly unknowingly) through digital encounters, such as online search histories and purchasing, which can be used for social science research either by default use agreements or with explicit permission.
- 7. **Found data**: Data that is available in the public domain, such as observations of public spaces, which can include covert research methods.
- 8. **Synthetic data**: Where data has been simulated, imputed or synthesized. This can be derived from, or combined with, other data types.

The most important point here is that while social research traditionally relies on orthodox intentional data (1), such as surveys and interviews, digital society has enabled much more far-reaching registration and collection of participative intentional data (2), consequential data (3), self-published data (4), and found data (7). These are types of data that indeed existed before digitally networked tools and platforms but which have been expanded and accentuated. The remaining types — social media data (5), data traces (6), and, at least chiefly, synthetic data (8) — are specific to digital society. Therefore, researchers who analyse this society face dramatically altered conditions for the generation and gathering of data about social processes and interactions.

Revealing the Messy Details

In today's world, large amounts of social data are registered and aggregated independently of initiatives from researchers. This is illustrated by work such as that of computational sociologists Scott Golder and Michael Macy (2011). Their research mapped people's affective states throughout the day as expressed via Twitter posts, in 84 countries, generating results of high interest to its subject-area, but using a research design that was, by necessity, dictated by the availability and character of the timestamped and text-based social media data. Examples of similar studies exist in several other fields where, while the issues dealt with are of high relevance, it is nonetheless the case that the researchers have confronted data that were largely already at hand and constituted in certain ways. Researchers of digital society are often left to dealing with the data generated through the platforms to be analysed, rather than having the opportunity to elicit data in conventional ways controlled by the researcher. While choosing an approach — for instance, opting for a survey or for in-depth interviews — will have continued relevance in some contexts, scholars are now increasingly also facing the challenge of thinking up and constructing some of their 'methods' after the fact.

One of Purdam and Elliot's (2015) main points in the presentation of their typology, discussed in the <u>previous section</u>, is the argument that the complexity of today's data environment forces researchers to constantly think about the highly variable characteristics of data that they encounter or seek out. And one of the key challenges when entering this type of terrain is the need to constantly try out new methods for data gathering. In order to know that the data we elicit or download, as well as the strategies we choose to make sense of it, are appropriate, we may test our strategy to see whether it produces good research results. However, the dilemma is that in order to know that the results are good, we must already have developed the appropriate method. Because of this constant — and potentially endless — need for experimentation and discovery, investigations drawing on new tools and approaches risk becoming stuck and intellectually unproductive very quickly.

For instance, you are researching some aspect of social interaction on a platform like YouTube, and have decided that an analysis of user comments on videos seems to be the data collection method of choice. Now, if this had been survey responses, or interview transcriptions, you could rely on an entire canon of literature on methods and well-established research practices in order to understand how to work with such data. Even though you might want to undertake new approaches or challenge the conventional ways of going about the research, you would at least have a sort of baseline or common practice to relate to and argue with. But in the case of YouTube comments, you would have to do a lot more groundwork. First, for example, you would have to find a way of collecting the comments. If the number of comments was large enough for it to be inconvenient to manually copy and paste them which is often the case — you would have to find some tool or another to automatically capture and download them. This risks the use of trial and error as you work your way through a variety of browser plugins, scripts, or applications, none of which may eventually do what you want them to do. This process can be very time-consuming and it is not uncommon that the researcher becomes so engaged with this very quest for a tool that he or she — instead of doing the social research that was initially intended — starts to devote a lot of time searching for ever 'better' tools or learning how to code their own tools. And this is only the first step out of several subsequent ones, where other challenges may throw you off

track.

Once the comments are collected and ordered, there are wide ranges of issues as regards to how knowledge of the comments should be achieved as well as ethical issues to address. What are the comments actually? Are they individual comments or conversations? How should you, if at all, take the likes and dislikes of the comments into consideration? Do all of the comments relate to the YouTube video in question, or can the comment threads take on lives of their own, to become forums for the discussion of issues other than those instigated by the video? How can you, ethically, use these data for research? Do you need the informed consent of all the people who have posted in the thread? And so on, *ad infinitum*. In sum, because of the inherent multidimensional complexity and unresolved questions, research on digital society must embrace research methods as a creative act. Instead of relying on previous work, copying and pasting run-of-the-mill methods sections into our papers, researchers must 'reveal the messy details of what they are actually doing, aiming toward mutual reflection, creativity, and learning that advances the state of the art' (Sandvig & Hargittai 2015: 5).

Methodological Bricolage

Nearly twenty years ago, in the preface to a book about researching the internet, Steve Jones (1999: x) wrote that 'we are still coming to grips with the changes that we feel are brought about by networked communication of the type so prominently made visible by the Internet'. And this is still the case. Research on digital society has continued to be a trading zone between conventional academic disciplines — it is truly transdisciplinary. In their book about 'internet inquiry', Annette Markham and Nancy Baym (2009: xiv) explain that:

While most disciplines have awakened to an understanding of the importance of the internet in their fields, most do not have a richly developed core of scholars who agree on methodological approaches or standards. This absence of disciplinary boundaries keeps internet studies both desirable and frustrating.

This frustration, they argue, makes researchers of digital society push the boundaries of 'disciplinary belonging' in ways that most academic research would benefit from doing more of. Furthermore, they write that as very few internet researchers have been specifically trained in how to do it well, one is by necessity forced to actively and critically navigate a landscape of old and new methods in order to seek out ways of engaging with data that suit one's particular project. It is seldom workable to just apply previously existing theories and methods when studying digital society. Some perspectives and approaches can most likely be, and have also to some extent been, repurposed for digital media research — for example, survey methods and interviews. But one must remember that the internet, and its networked social tools and platforms, is in many ways a different research context, possessing an 'essential changeability' that demands a conscious shift of focus and method (Jones 1998b: xi).

Because of this, researching digital society often demands that the person carrying out the data collection and analysis is even more critical, and more reflective, than what is already demanded by scholarship in general. The specific challenges of doing digital social research have, Markham and Baym (2009: vii–viii) argue, 'prompted its researchers to confront, head-on, numerous questions that lurk less visibly in traditional research contexts'. One such issue is the urgent need to address the longstanding dispute in social science between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' methodological approaches, which has persisted, apparently unresolvable, for more than a century. Among researchers, there are still traces of a battle between case-oriented interpretative perspectives, on the one hand, and variable-oriented approaches focused on testing hypotheses on the other. Scholars who prefer case-oriented methods will argue that in-depth understandings of a smaller set of observations are crucial for grasping the complexities of reality, and those who prefer variable-oriented approaches will argue that only the highly systematised analysis of larger numbers of cases will allow scholars to make reliable statements about the 'true' order of things.

Today, however, there is an increasingly widespread consensus that the employment of combinations of 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' methods is a valid and recommended strategy, which allows researchers to benefit from their various strengths and balance their respective weaknesses. The 'qualitative' tradition is seen as the more inductively oriented interpretative study of a small number of observations, while the 'quantitative' tradition is

characterised by the deductively oriented statistical study of large numbers of cases. This has given rise to the common notion that 'qualitative' research produces detailed accounts through close readings of social processes, while 'quantitative' research renders more limited, but controllable and generalisable, information about causal relations and regularities of the social and cultural fabric.

I think that the best strategy is *methodological pragmatism*, focusing on the problem to be researched, and on what type of knowledge is sought. Instead of methodological positioning within the existing field of methods literature, one can instead, as methodologists Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2000) have suggested, conceive one's research strategy as a form of *bricolage*. 'Bricolage' is a French term — popularised by cultural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) — which refers to the process of improvising and putting preexisting things together in new and adaptive ways. From that perspective, our research method is not fully chosen beforehand, but rather emerges as a patchwork of solutions — old or new — to problems faced while carrying out the research. As critical pedagogy researcher Joe Kincheloe (2005: 324–325) observes: 'We actively construct our research methods from the tools at hand rather than passively receiving the "correct," universally applicable methodologies', and we 'steer clear of pre-existing guidelines and checklists developed outside the specific demands of the inquiry at hand'. So, developing your method as a bricolage means placing your specific research task at the centre of your considerations, and allowing your particular combination and application of methods take shape in relation to the needs that characterise the given task.

Thinking about What We Capture

The previously discussed demand for reflexivity on behalf of the digital social researcher operates on several different levels. In a similar vein to the bricolage approach described above, Markham and Baym also argue that research design is an ongoing process, and that it is to be expected that any study will be reframed continuously throughout the process of research. They write:

Different questions occur at different stages of a research process, and the same questions reappear at different points. Second, the constitution of data is the result of a series of decisions at critical junctures in the design and conduct of a study. [...] We must constantly and thoroughly evaluate what will count as data and how we are distinguishing side issues from key sources of information. (Markham & Baym 2009: xvii)

As Jones (1999) emphasises, when researching the specificities of the internet, it is important to remember that its uses — as discussed in <u>Chapter 1</u> — are always contextualised. Research subjects, both human and non-human actors in the sense of actor-network theory, as mentioned elsewhere in this book, are part of physical space as much as they are part of 'cyberspace'. This means, Jones (1999: xii) says, that '[n]ot only is it important to be aware of and attuned to the diversity of online experience, it is important to recognize that online experience is at all times tethered in some fashion to offline experience'.

So, while it is exciting to study the internet and digital society, it is also especially challenging. New platforms, concepts, and social practices emerge fast enough for making the 'internet' in itself into a compelling area of inquiry. The field, Markham and Baym (2009: xviii–xix) write, has a 'self-replenishing novelty [that] always holds out the promise for unique intellectual spaces'. But, as discussed above, new terrains of research brings with them new challenges and difficulties. First, there is a need for constant reflection about the role of the self in research. Processes of digital social research highlight that researchers are actually co-creators of the field of study. Our choices are made in contexts where there are no standard rules for research design and practice, and this makes such choices more meaningful. Furthermore, the often-disembodied character of digital social settings makes it important to think a little deeper about the relationship between the researcher and the researched:

What decisions are we making to seek consent; what counts as an authentic self-representation? How are we conceptualizing the embodied persons we study? How are we framing our own embodied sensibilities? Do we approach what we are studying as traces left in public spaces or as embodied activities by people situated in rich offline contexts? We must consider how to interpret other people's selves and how to represent ourselves to the people we study, especially when we may not be meeting them in person. (Markham & Baym 2009: xviii–xix)

Researchers and their subjects, Purdam and Elliot (2015: 47) say, increasingly bleed into one

another. This is because 'as the proportion of our lives spent online grows, so the boundary between data and subject becomes less distinct'. In the same sense that offline identities of people are partially coming together in the minds and memories of others, our online selves are partially constructed in our intentional or unintentional data footprints.

Second, Purdam and Elliot argue, 'the activities of others also contribute to constructing these footprints, for example, a photograph of a person might be in the public domain as a result of being posted online by someone else'. Additionally, that photograph might also have been shared, tagged, liked, or remixed by somebody else, and it may contain 'meta-identity information' (2015: 47). So, if a 'researcher' analyses this photo, posted by a 'research subject', then who or what is actually being analysed? Things are further complicated in the movement from orthodox intentional datasets to various types of data streams or synthetisations, which blurs the distinction between data and analysis.

Third, and finally, it is important to think about the quality of the data used in research. Conventional social science has a set of established mechanisms for quality control, which assess things such as the reliability, validity, and generalisability of research results. The introduction of new types of data, and new modes of data gathering, demands that we ask ourselves questions about rigorous and robust methods of going about our research in order to avoid unnecessary errors or biases. When analysing different platforms, such as a discussion forum or Twitter, and making claims about society, we must remain critical to whose views — whose society — are being expressed on the platform in question, and in our particular sample. Generally, however, conventional and established ways for thinking about such things can't be easily transferred to studies based on many of the new data types. The criterion of validity, for example, is about evaluating to what degree one is actually studying what one purports to study. Giving an example based on Twitter, Purdam and Elliot (2015: 48) posit:

For example, a tweet might be generated for fun, to provide information or to persuade or mislead; the motivation obviously affects the meaning of the tweet. With survey data and even, to some extent, administrative data, the impact of respondent motivations is, at least in principle, structured by (or perhaps mediated by) the data collection instrument itself. Thus, a well-designed social science research instrument can constrain motivational impact. But this is not so with Twitter data; here people's motivations are given full rein – a tweet might be designed to manipulate or obfuscate, to attract truth or to repel it. It might be designed to fantasize or 'try out an opinion', to provoke a response or simply to create controversy.

So, here we can choose different pathways: Do we want to find verification techniques with which to check the 'quality' of these data — for example, looking at a user's tweets over time to see whether a tweet is characteristic or not — or is it more feasible to argue that we are not studying the person, but something else. Society? Culture? The medium?

Digital Research Ethics

It has been argued throughout this chapter that research about digital society demands continuous critical reflection. This is true to an even larger degree than in many other types of research, since this is a field without, as yet, an established methodological tradition. The negotiations are ongoing and, as illustrated above, it is important to maintain an ongoing discussion about methods, and for researchers to give others insight into their research processes, even though they may be messy or sometimes even may feel like one is 'cheating' or cutting corners. The subject of digital research ethics is an especially urgent strand of this discussion. Here, too, there is an ongoing discussion about best practice. How the researcher navigates issues of research ethics will differ, depending on how the data in question have been generated and collected. Looking at the typology presented by Purdam and Elliot (2015), new ethical challenges arise especially in relation to self-published data, social media data, data traces, and found as well as synthetic data. New data types, and new ways of accessing and gathering data, demand that the researcher constantly navigates the data environment and makes choices in a critically reflective way.

Principles of research ethics, and how persons that are researched should be ethically treated, are codified in a number of documents and policies throughout the academic community. Most of these codifications work best in relation to what Purdam and Elliot call 'intentional data'. And although ethical principles about maximising the benefits and minimising the harm of research are a good starting point — as is the obvious need to respect fundamental rights of human autonomy, dignity, and safety — digital research demands consistent reflection, as discussed in the previous section, about what information one is really capturing. Like the other methodological considerations discussed in this chapter, issues that relate to how one should deal with the ethical treatment of data are highly context-sensitive. Markham and Baym (2009: xviii) emphasise that context-specific uses of the internet demand that the researcher continuously and carefully reconsiders notions such as privacy, consent, trust, and authenticity.

The emergent character of the field of digital social research, a field which is in a perpetual 'beta state', makes it impossible to escape questions about ethical decisions. Such questions must be posed and responded to iteratively. Even though one might wish there were clear rules, issues like these must always be navigated inductively. In light of these concerns, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) has put together an Ethics Working Committee, composed of internet researchers from a variety of regions and countries. The committee argues that ethical issues are complex and that they can rarely be handled in any binary way. There is in fact 'much grey area' (Buchanan & Markham 2012: 5). The transdisciplinary character of digital social research means that researchers and institutions confront many contradictions and tensions that are impossible to resolve completely. Instead, 'many competing interests must be negotiated by researchers, ethics review boards, and institutions' (2012: 6). For the individual researcher it is recommended, the committee writes, that ethical decision-making is approached as a process, dealing with the issues in a contextualised fashion throughout the research process. This is because different issues will be pertinent at different stages. This approach is in line with the perspective of research method as a bricolage. It is not only the methodological choices, but also the ethical considerations that are emergent and unwinding.

Ethical principles for digital social research

The AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Buchanan & Markham 2012: 4–5) has arrived at the following key guiding principles:

The greater the vulnerability of the community/author/participant, the greater the obligation of the researcher to protect the community/author/participant.

Because 'harm' is defined contextually, ethical principles are more likely to be understood inductively rather than applied universally. That is, rather than one-size-fits-all pronouncements, ethical decision-making is best approached through the application of practical judgment attentive to the specific context [...]

Because all digital information at some point involves individual persons, consideration of principles related to research on human subjects may be necessary even if it is not immediately apparent how and where persons are involved in the research data.

When making ethical decisions, researchers must balance the rights of subjects (as authors, as research participants, as people) with the social benefits of research and researchers' rights to conduct research. In different contexts the rights of subjects may outweigh the benefits of research.

Ethical issues may arise and need to be addressed during all steps of the research process, from planning, research conduct, publication, and dissemination.

Ethical decision-making is a deliberative process, and researchers should consult as many people and resources as possible in this process, including fellow researchers, people participating in or familiar with contexts/sites being studied, research review boards, ethics guidelines, published scholarship (within one's discipline but also in other disciplines), and, where applicable, legal precedent.

While discussions about the concept of the 'human subject' in digital social research, about definitions of public versus private, about data protection and ownership, and of several other pertinent dimensions must be continuously reviewed, the AoIR committee presents the above points as general principles for researchers to turn to as a starting point. The guidelines described in the quote above state that:

- The vulnerability of research subjects should decide how careful the researcher is.
- The rights of research subjects to be protected should be balanced against the importance of conducting the research.
- Research ethics must be continuously discussed among researchers and other relevant actors.

To this list, we can add some more important things to keep in mind. Anthropologist Tom Boellstorff and colleagues (2012: 129–149) suggest the following:

- The principle of care. Taking good care of informants and making sure that they gain something from their participation.
- Informed consent. Make sure that informants know about the nature and purpose of the study.
- Mitigating legal risk. Being aware of relevant laws that govern one's research.
- Anonymity. Avoiding the inappropriate revelation of the identities of informants or

any sort of confidential details or otherwise — that might lead to their identification.

- Deception. Don't pretend to be something you are not, and don't use 'fly on the wall' practices to study sensitive topics.
- Empathy. Try to forge a 'sympathetic depiction of informants' lives, even when discussing aspects of informants' lives that some might find troubling'. This does not have to mean that the researcher 'agrees' with any actions or beliefs of the informants, but one must labour to 'grasp informants' own visions of their worlds'.

Further Reading

Brady, Henry E., & Collier, David (Eds.) (2010). *Rethinking Social Inquiry*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

With this edited volume, Brady and Collier engage in discussions about deficiencies of 'qualitative' versus 'quantitative' approaches, and direct focus towards how to navigate and combine a variety of methodological strategies. The book makes the case for multi-method research and methodological pluralism, in order to do as good social science as possible.

Hargittai, Eszter, & Sandvig, Christian (Eds.) (2015). *Digital Research Confidential*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

This collection of texts, edited by Hargittai and Sandvig, aims to reveal 'the secrets of studying behavior online'. It addresses the constantly evolving character of the digital environment, and acknowledges that researchers therefore must often improvise, revise, and adapt when it comes to their methodological strategies. The book gives an insight into behind-the-scenes accounts of challenges in areas such as data collection, analysis, and ethics.

Markham, Annette, & Baym, Nancy (Eds.) (2009). *Internet Inquiry*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

This textbook is built around a collection of dialogues between prominent internet researchers. The focus is on their experiences of working through and overcoming critical challenges. The addressed challenges are in areas such as defining the boundaries of a research project, combining online and offline data, dealing with issues of privacy and ethics, and how to assess the quality of the resulting research.

14 The Research Process
Key questions

- What are the key steps of the research process?
- How can the researcher move from a general idea about what to study towards formulating a workable question to guide the research?
- Which is the best strategy for deciding on a unit or field of study or several units and fields and how might they be effectively delimited?
- What are some of the key challenges faced by the researcher in gathering data to form the basis for empirical analysis?
- What are the key elements of data analysis?

Key concepts

Emergent research questions * multi-sited research * researching sites, topics, people * research logging * saturation * thematic analysis

With this quite hands-on methodological chapter, I present a framework for digital social research. The chapter provides a step-by-step discussion of the research process, and focuses on formulating a good research question, choosing your data, collecting it, analysing and interpreting it, as well as arriving at research results. The research process, as described here, relies on tools from digital ethnography (detailed in <u>Chapter 15</u>) and also on a set of approaches to mapping and mining digital sociality (detailed in <u>Chapter 16</u>). As I have already discussed in <u>Chapter 13</u>, and as will be further discussed in <u>Chapter 15</u>, I advocate an approach that rests on the solid foundation of ethnography. This means taking a holistic and interpretative approach to whatever aspect, dimension, or characteristic of digital society that you want to study. Drawing on different forms and levels of observing, taking part in, experimenting with, discovering, and mapping your object of analysis is a vital part of the strategy.

Depending on what you want to analyse, what questions you aim to answer, and which claims you want to be able to make, your ethnographic approach may vary in its character. This may be to the point where some researchers might claim that it is in fact no longer deserving of being called 'ethnography' in the sense that it draws on conventional field data and interpretative techniques. It may range from undertaking traditional forms of anthropological fieldwork for extended amounts of time, relying solely on ethnographic data and 'qualitative' methods, to just being ethnographically inspired by the aim to make sense of people's interaction in social contexts, but relying just as much on types of data and analysis that are not seen to be conventionally ethnographic. This is in line with marketing researcher Robert Kozinets' concept of what he calls *netnography*, which he says is something quite different from standard ethnography. However, this does not mean that any strategy whatsoever can count as research. Kozinets (2015: 101) writes:

Are you ready to begin a netnographic research project? Pull that smartphone out of your purse or pocket. Flip open your laptop or uncover your handy dandy tablet. Double tap that app. Type some keywords into that search engine, pick your site and you should be good to go. You are just a few clicks away from finding a fabulously free-flowing online conversation about just about anything. And then you are off, entering the wonderful world of netnography. Or maybe not.

Rather, before one can start researching — interacting, discovering, recording, and reflecting — it is important to decide not just what one is going to study, but also how. We must be able to respond to crucial questions about the who, what, where, and how of our empirical work. We will look closer at Kozinets' approach in the <u>next chapter</u>, but what is important for the time being is his notion that one must have a general sense of the response to such questions, rather than having things set in stone. Discussing ethnography in internet research, danah boyd argues that one's methods should be a customised, evolving set of approaches and strategies. The main goal is to get a holistic picture of the object of analysis. She writes:

While approaches vary, ethnographic fieldwork relies on participant observation, qualitative interviews, and analysis of cultural artifacts to make sense of cultural practices on their own terms. Ethnographers use different techniques to interpret, complicate, and analyze cultural practices, situate complex cultural phenomena, and map social worlds from the bottom up. As a method, ethnography does not speak to individual traits or beliefs but to the complexity and interconnectedness of culturally driven practices and norms. Ethnography produces a topological map of a particular set of cultural practices. (boyd 2008: 46–47)

So the thing that the researcher should aim for is that *topological map*. And to capture it, one must rely on a set of different techniques to analyse and situate the data. This is why the concept of 'methodological bricolage', discussed in <u>Chapter 13</u>, is so useful. So, once again, even though I believe that the ethnographic approach is very well suited to unravel how digital society — or part of it — functions, the emerging data environment (see <u>Chapter 13</u>), as well as the complexity of social life, demands that one considers multiple techniques to broaden the investigation. Such techniques, as will be further presented in <u>Chapter 16</u>, may be, but are not limited to, 'following the medium', social network analysis, and text mining.

While observation and interviews are central to ethnographic research, it is common that ethnographers augment those methods with other types of data collection. It is all about being pragmatic and adaptive. Anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2010: 129) also agrees that the research method for any project is constantly renegotiated and transformed. He writes:

Any claim that a particular method is the best (or the only valid) method [...] misses how research always involves a coming-together of research question and methodology. How one conducts research is not determined by some essential property 'out there;' it is determined by the research questions that one wants to investigate.

Formulating the Research Question

The research process, in most kinds of inquiry, tends to be iterative and reflexive, which leads to revisions of the choices that have been made, sometimes several times. But thinking about *the research question* is a good place to start. What is it that you want to study? Deciding on a research question, or a set of questions, is a fundamental and consequential part of the research process. This is because it is the decision from which most other challenges and choices throughout the research will follow. Once the research question is in place, at least an initial and preliminary one, data collection can be started, guided by that question.

In order to arrive at a research question, it is a good idea to start with some more general questions and drill down from there. Broad questions about the general area in which we take an interest will help us to explore the setting or topic we are interested in. Discussing her ethnographic work on youth and social media, boyd (2008: 44) reflects upon how her research question was repeatedly revised during the research process:

My ongoing interest in identity, privacy, impression management, and social interaction shaped where I began, but my fieldwork also led me to explore other topics. While I had grown up at a particular point in the history of the Internet, it was tremendously rewarding to be able to watch a new generation of teenagers embrace an entirely different set of circumstances and technologies. I was well positioned to watch the phenomenon of teen engagement with social network sites unfold and I used that to my advantage. MySpace became popular with teens just as I began my fieldwork. I did not initially intend to focus on social network sites, but as teens turned their attention to these sites, so did I.

So, research questions are emergent. It is common that one starts off a project with a set of questions that are subsequently revised so that one comes out the other side with a quite different set of questions from the ones that were there at the beginning. While part of this process is about going along with the field, as boyd did, another part is about looking carefully at any previous research that has been done in this or related areas. Doing a literature review allows you to get a good picture about the domain to which you want to make a contribution, and mapping the state of the field will help sharpen your research interests. Boellstorff and colleagues (2012: 55) encourage researchers to 'just plunge in and start reading'. Remember to think historically too about studies in related — even pre-digital — fields that may be relevant to frame your own work, and to think widely and to explore studies from less obvious parts of the research landscape. When it comes to the need to narrow down your research question, Kozinets (2015: 122) has a set of practical suggestions (drawing on Creswell 2009: 129–131):

- 1. Formulate a single large, broad, guiding question (you can always narrow it down later).
- 2. Ensure that your question is amenable to netnographic inquiry. That is, does your question relate to the online social interaction and experience of particular sites, topics or people? If not, go back to the drawing board to reformulate.
- 3. Building on that large question, formulate no more than five related sub-questions that elaborate parts of your major question.
- 4. Try to focus on the question word you are using. If you are interested in people and

topics or their locations in online sites, then 'where' may be important. If you are interested in processes, then 'how' and 'when' may be important. If you are interested in people who inhabit sites or discuss topics, then 'who' may be important. Your most useful questions often will begin with 'what', as they relate to descriptions of things such as types of online narrative, story, topic, meanings, or associations. 'Why' tends to be a very difficult question for netnographic evidence to conclusively answer.

5. Try experimenting in your question with exploratory verbs such as 'discover', 'understand', 'explore', 'describe', or 'report'.

The general idea is to arrive at the research question through *exploration*. Look around, test ideas, discard some, and hold on to others. However, this openness should not be mistaken for 'wandering around aimlessly', as having an adaptive approach still means that your work must be purposive. Many of the phenomena that we study in digital society are relatively novel, emergent, and shift in their character, which demands that the researcher is prepared to modify questions based on what is encountered throughout the study. Back in the 1920s, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1922: 9) argued that the work of the ethnographer (just like that of any researcher) is 'worthless' unless he or she is prepared to be ungrudgingly casting any determination to prove certain hypotheses aside 'under the pressure of evidence'. So, the research question if often formulated *iteratively* throughout 'an emergent process of discovery' (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 54).

Research questions can be formulated on different levels of abstraction, and they can be more or less specific. Drawing on the previous chapters in this book, one can imagine a wide range of questions that would be interesting, relevant, and important to study, as parts of the wider inquiry into digital society. One such question could be: In what different ways are emotions and social support expressed in open and anonymous forums as compared to in closed and non-anonymous ones? Another one could be: What parts of their everyday lives are people most likely to share with others in the form of photos posted on social media? Yet another could ask: To what extent and how is hate speech countered when it occurs online? Or: How do 'amateur' creators of online content feel about posting their creations on privately owned profitable platforms? No matter what our question happens to be, and what specificities about digital sociality, culture, and interaction it is interested in, the mark of a really good research question is that it centres on issues that are important in relation to wider research communities (Boellstorff et al. 2012). In general, it is a very good idea to make your research narrow while keeping your thoughts broad, which means formulating the question in a way so that it has the potential to produce results and generate knowledge that is relevant to larger debates in society. For example, we might study some aspects of online gaming and — nearly as a bonus — be able to say something more generally about, for example, intimacy and friendship in the 21st century. We may analyse social network patterns in a feminist discussion forum online, and also get to know new and important things about social movements and gender in today's world. A really good question will, if the research is successful, generate knowledge that is useful in more than one way. Boellstorff and colleagues (2012: 56) make a very important point when they say that it can't be overemphasised that, aside from its relevance, a research question is only as good as the researcher is passionate about it:

All good science flows from a scientist's passion to learn something he or she is deeply curious about. Thus [...], although it is important for the work to be broadly relevant, the question should be personally interesting and exciting to us. It is vital to underscore this point because we are best served by honoring our own passions and intellectual journey

when deciding on a research question.

Framing the Field

Once the initial research question is set, the next step is to decide what constitutes the core unit of study. Which setting, which group, or individuals will you study, and what are your delimitations in space and time. Basically: How should you frame your 'fieldsite'? The concept of fieldsite will be discussed closer in <u>Chapter 15</u>, but for now it suffices to say that it is a name for the context you want to study. Boellstorff (2010) has been working with ethnography in the specific settings of virtual worlds — such as online multiplayer games and other online social realms that aim to render some sort of 'world' for users to be embedded in — but has developed thoughts and guidelines that are just as relevant for any form of ethnography in digital society. Part of Boellstorff's thinking is a three-part typology of what he calls ethnographic scale:

- First, he writes, we might be interested in focusing on one specific and clearly delimited online setting as a fieldsite in its own right.
- Second, we might want our study to explore and maybe compare more than one such relatively distinct setting.
- Third, we may want to move in the direction proposed by Daniel Miller and others (see <u>Chapter 15</u>) and analyse not only online settings but focus maybe even wholly on the role of one or several online settings in the 'actual' lives of people. This means starting the study offline.

Kozinets (2015) makes a similar distinction between frames for studies. He writes of a scenario synonymous to Boellstorff's first one:

We might be interested in examining a particular online community, for example, Wikipedia, [the newsgroup] alt.coffee, the Winter is Coming Game of Thrones news blog, the use of #addiction hashtags, or the Church of Satan's official Facebook group. (Kozinets 2015: 118)

He then goes on to write about the second, and *multi-sited*, and also the third 'offline' scenario:

Alternatively, a research topic can be considered to be manifesting in a widely dispersed manner among a wide number of online and offline social experiences. A site such as a Star Trek or Samsung Galaxy wiki can seem at first glance to be a straightforward single location. [...] However, [...] my interest in a particular topic, such as Star Trek fandom, drew me to a variety of sites or groups. Sometimes, certainly, my entire study stayed on one site such as alt.coffee, but this was as much topical as it was a response to the relative concentration of the early Internet prior to the explosion of blogs and other social media forms. (2015: 118)

Similarly, boyd (2008: 54) writes that her research on teens and social network sites also saw her develop a 'multi-sited project' where her fieldsite, in practice, was a network of several different sites. In her case, these sites were both online and offline, which is quite often the

case. It is common that the analysis of social things on the internet will urge the researcher to look for information in non-internet places as well in order to get a more complete picture. Furthermore, while Boellstorff's three-tiered terminology can indeed be helpful to think about how we delimit and define our fieldsite, the boundaries between sites both online and offline, and between online and offline as such, are perpetually unstable. Because of this, many studies end up encompassing both of these dimensions. As in boyd's case, the researcher may move between the online and the offline simply by following the field where it leads. At other times, researchers may design their studies from the outset to pay explicit attention to offline events and concerns.

It may also be possible to frame the context to be studied, but on the basis of investigating an *activity*, rather than in terms of milieu and setting, or a particular group and the way it functions. It may be helpful to think in terms of the idea, presented by Kozinets (2015), that ethnographic research is based on studies of *sites*, *topics*, and *people*:

- Sites, then, are locations any kind of social site, geographically, culturally, or notionally. These are the places where people's social worlds take root and it is the job of the ethnographer to map them out. Research into such sites respond to questions of *where*.
- Topics are conceptual, rather than spatial, and are related to language, knowledge, information, and meaning. Topics are sites of attention and researching them helps the researcher respond to questions of *what*.
- People are what we analyse when we want answers to questions about *whom*.

It can be useful to think of one's research in relation to concepts and divisions such as these. Not only is it necessary to be able to break down and describe the research process to others afterwards in a comprehensible way, but it is also good to gain perspective on one's own relationship to the object of study, because in practice the levels and dimensions float into one another. Reflecting on this, boyd (2008: 55) describes her process:

Instead of starting with one bounded site, I decided to approach my field site as a network. I focused my study on the intersection of American teenagers, their relationship to networked publics, and, in particular, the sociotechnicalphenomenon marked by the rise of social network sites. I began my fieldwork from different angles and traversed the phenomenon using different approaches. My fieldwork includes mediated and unmediated environments and I moved across different social contexts and engaged with different relevant social groups to gain an understanding of what was taking place. Approaching this puzzle, I began broadly and narrowed my focus as I achieved clarity. As appropriate, I expanded my scope when following specific people or trying to make sense of specific spaces. This created many layers of awareness that allowed me to locate people, spaces, and practices in a broader context.

Collecting Data

After thinking about the field of the study, the next step is to collect the data to be analysed. As outlined in Chapter 13, these data can be of varying character. We are working on an ethnographic foundation here, so therefore 'qualitative' data (observation notes, interview transcripts, and the like) will play an important role. As I have argued earlier, such data is enough in some cases. Sometimes (see <u>Chapter 16</u>), it will be useful to complement them with data which emanates from natively digital strategies for collection and analysis, what Rogers (2013) calls 'methods of the medium' such as search engine results, likes, links, tags, and so on. We may also be interested in 'quantitative' data to use in social network analysis, or large sets of downloaded text data to analyse with the help of 'quantitative' text mining techniques (more about this in Chapter 16, as well). So, as discussed in Chapter 13, the emerging and increasingly complex data environment means that any researcher approaching digital society — or slices or bits of it — will want to access different data types that demand different techniques to capture them. Observational data can be registered through note taking, interviews may be recorded and transcribed, or done through email or text messaging, and will be automatically captured as text in that way. Digitally native data, social network data, and big text datasets will have to be captured through any means available — copying and pasting when possible, downloading when possible, and by scraping (using tools to automatically download it) or acquiring data from a variety of online services, databases, websites, and resources according to different schemes from case to case. Part of becoming an empirical researcher of digital society is to embark on the learning journey of discovering tools, strategies, and resources — mastering them, and constantly adapting to their variable and changing functionality, availability, and terms of use.

Similarly to the steps involved in the formulation of the research question, and framing the field, the step of data collection also lends itself to an open and explorative starting phase. Kozinets (2015: 167–168) describes this process in an engaging way:

I am often asked which special software tool to use. Try everything out there, online and offline. [...] For the sake of illustration, you can simply use Google — and this includes additional Google features such as Google's Analytics, Trends, and NGram reader features. [...] Use several engines from Google, including the web, groups, blog and image search function. Then search YouTube videos. Search on Twitter, and on a forum search engine like omgili.com ('OMG I love it!'). Take a look at Facebook Groups, Wikis and LinkedIn groups. [...] Keep your search terms as simple and consistent as possible across sites and engines to start. Grab as many major overviews of data as vou can, but always also stay as close to the interactions and direct experiences as possible. [...] Your main task at this stage is to first attune your perception to the various social media and other channels that might inform your research question. [...] For example, if you are studying the contemporary whale and seal hunts worldwide, then consider entering variations on 'whaling', 'whale hunt', 'whale activism', 'whale management', 'conservation', 'hunting endangered species', 'animal rights', 'Native rights', 'Aboriginal rights', 'international markets for whale meat and blubber' and 'international hunting accords dating back over 1000 years'. Investigate everything. Look at every website that seems even remotely relevant. Read them, and follow all the trails and hints they bring to you. Take your time. [...] In the long run, you must choose particular routes and pursue those, seeing where they take you. [...] How and why you

direct your research will be driven both by your research questions as well as by serendipitous discoveries that you make along the way.

After the exploratory phase, which may or may not be as wide-reaching and ambitious as that which Kozinets describes, a focused and structured phase of data collection — guided by the research question, and targeted towards the chosen object of study (sites/topics/people) – must commence. As mentioned above, the actual process of doing this will probably include several different strategies, depending on the type of data. One important thing is to document your research thoroughly: 'If we fail to write it down, it might as well not have happened!' (Boellstorff et al. 2012: 82). So, it is important to take notes throughout the process, as well as keeping data organised. Make it a habit to keep a *research log*, where you note things such as the search queries you have made, what settings you manipulated and how, what day you made a research interview, which filter and layout settings you used in your social network analysis software — all of these things are useful to note. You will thank yourself for having kept that log when the time comes to write about your method when you are about to publish the results of your research. From the very start of the data collection process, observational data, interview data, and/or data gathered through any other methods must be neatly logged. Some researchers do this in notebooks, others in word processing software, and others use databases. You need to take this type of note taking and documentation seriously. Boellstorff and colleagues (2012: 113) write that the handy possibilities for copying, pasting, and downloading data in online contexts creates a risk that other, researcher-centred, forms of documentation are forgotten:

This ease of data capture can sometimes create the false impression that the methods enumerated earlier, such as taking fieldnotes based on participant observation, are unnecessary. Why go to all that trouble when we can just capture the data digitally? This temptation is false: we cannot stress enough that as useful as digital records are, they cannot stand alone without the rigor of a detailed accounting of interactions in the field.

Further Reading about capturing and collecting data

Emerson, Robert M., Fretz, Rachel I., & Shaw, Linda L. (2011). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

James, Nalita, & Busher, Hugh (2009). Online Interviewing. London: Sage.

Russell, Matthew A. (2014). Mining the Social Web. Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media.

Salmons, Janet (2016). Doing Qualitative Research Online. London: Sage.

Data collection in digital social research can and should be open, exploratory, and aim to get as complete an image as possible. It is useful to think about the concept of *saturation* when it comes to the issue of when one should stop data collection and move on with analysis. This concept, originally formulated by the originators of the so-called Grounded Theory method, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), postulates that once the research process has been going on for a while, the researcher will gradually develop a sense of whether a newly added piece of data points to any new insights. If the answer is yes, then the data collection continues. If the answer is no, the data is disregarded, since it only adds bulk to the dataset and nothing to the theoretical insights (Glaser 1965: 441–442). So, as Boellstorff and

colleagues (2012: 59) write:

When we start hearing the same reflections repeated in interviews, when we are no longer seeing new things or getting new insight while undertaking participant observation, when we have reached a point where we can anticipate answers, practices, and the general everyday unfolding of the field, we have likely reached the point of diminishing returns in our data collection and can consider that phase complete.

Basically, when we feel that we have enough data to be able to say something that is meaningful and interesting, and when our sample is sizeable enough to provide a solid foundation for the arguments that we want to make, then it is time to turn to the analysis phase.

Analysing and Interpreting Data

In the next step, the data that we have collected is used as the raw material for analysis and interpretation. Analysis is what we do when we break the studied phenomenon down into its component parts. Boellstorff and colleagues (2012: 166) explain that 'the key to data analysis is to interact with the dataset: read it, study it, immerse oneself within it, and let the data paint a portrait of the culture we are studying'.

As you will be able to tell from the approaches to be presented in <u>Chapters 15</u> and <u>16</u>, the methods for analysing data can indeed differ. On the one hand, they can be resting on a statistical foundation, as is the case in, for example, social network analysis and text mining. On the other hand, they can be interpretative, as in the cases when it draws on 'qualitative' observational or interview data. In line with this, Kozinets (2015: 198) argues that we should be open to using both hermeneutic interpretation, and all sorts of computational elements. While it will be further detailed in <u>Chapter 16</u> what social network analysis and text mining can entail, there is reason here to think more about what hermeneutic interpretation is. Kozinets (2015: 205) gives an example:

Consider a collection of 3 YouTube videos, 4 pages of blogger text, 6 pages of newsgroup materials and 17 Instagram posts. Finding their common elements, the key and core of their meaning structure, requires us to find the common elements between them. Locating these shared themes is the challenge of hermeneutic interpretation.

Hermeneutics is an interpretative strategy where parts and instances of the data are iteratively reassessed and interpreted in relation to a developing sense of what the data say as a whole. So, one starts to look at some of the data to arrive at some initial understandings. Those understandings inform subsequent readings of other parts of the data, and this process carries on in interpretative loops, while the researcher's understanding of the meaning of the entire context that is represented by the dataset takes shape. But, while that rather abstract and philosophical notion of how knowledge is formed through empirical experience is a useful and inspirational image, we also need actual hands-on strategies to move the analysis forward to broader insights.

First, the data that has been collected must be systematised through some form of *thematic analysis* (see for example, Braun & Clarke 2006). The practice of annotating data, assigning tags or keywords to important passages and insights, is called *coding* and it is something that is done early on in the research process to map prominent themes in the empirical material. Moving on from reading the data, annotating it, promoting some annotations into codes, one is looking to develop more abstracted themes. In sum, the analysis should move from unstructured data, to annotated and coded data, to themes.

Further Reading about coding and thematic analysis

Guest, Greg, MacQueen, Kathleen M., & Namey, Emily E. (2012). *Applied Thematic Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Saldaña, Johnny (2015). The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers. Thousand Oaks, CA:

Sage.

Once one has arrived at the core themes of the context under analysis, the next and final step of the study is to develop arguments and conclusions that point to larger theoretical and conceptual insights. By necessity, the scope and type of the results that will emerge from your research will range from the narrow to the overarching, from the abstract to the concrete, from descriptions to applicable insights, all depending on what the study is about, and on the methodological choices made along the way. 'Ethno-graphy' means culture writing, and the primary output of such research is the documentation and hermeneutic interpretation of the social setting that has been analysed. So, at the end of the research process, when insights have been channelled through codes and themes into broader insights that can be developed, discussed, and positioned in relation to previous research and to theoretical concepts and debates, it is time to start crafting your text. In fact, the writing process is also part of the inquiry as one often arrives at important analytical insights through the process of writing in itself.

Further Reading about research writing

Sword, Helen (2012). Stylish Academic Writing. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wolcott, Harry F. (2009). Writing up Qualitative Research. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Digital Social Research — some pointers

- 1. During any social research, especially that which explores 'new' or uncharted phenomena, always strive to capture as much complexity as possible. Ethnography striving for 'thick description' (see <u>Chapter 15</u>) is a good basic philosophy, even though it can be scaled and adapted largely depending on the character of your study.
- 2. Drawing on the ethnographical basis, bring in other sources and techniques for getting a topological map of the analysed phenomenon that is as rich as possible. In studying the internet and social media, you can consider methods like social network analysis and text mining (see <u>Chapter 16</u>).
- 3. After initial exploration, formulate a research question that is as concrete and sharp as possible. Don't worry if you have to revise it continuously throughout doing the research. Aim to formulate the question in such a way that the results of your study will potentially be useful beyond your specific empirical case.
- 4. Decide what you are going to study. Is it sites, topics, or people, or more than one of these? Will your study be focusing on one delimited setting, or will it be multi-sited? What role will the 'offline' play in your study?
- 5. Collect your data with the appropriate methods. Make sure you keep a research log of all the choices big or small that you make and which affect the composition of your dataset in the end. Gather data while being open to following the research question and the field where it leads you. Combine several different strategies if needed. Stop collecting when you have enough.
- 6. Analyse your data in ways that follow from your research question and the type of data that you have. Systematise, code, mine, and crunch the data with the help of your toolkit. Use techniques such as text mining and social network analysis when suitable, and hermeneutic approaches when suitable. Be open to the use of computational approaches when you don't necessarily think it is suitable, and try to challenge 'quantitative' results with hermeneutic interpretation.
- 7. Draw on the ethnographic idea that *writing up* the research is also a key part of the analysis and interpretation itself. Write not only to publish, but also write as a research method.

15 Digital Ethnography

Key questions

- What is ethnography and why is it useful for studying digital society?
- What new opportunities and challenges for ethnography arise with the arrival of the internet and social media?
- How must the notion of an ethnographic 'fieldsite' be renegotiated when research is done in 'virtual' settings?

Key concepts

Ethnography * fieldwork * thick description * embedded internet * digital anthropology

In this chapter, I will provide an introduction to the methodological strategy of digital ethnography. As discussed in the two previous chapters, I see ethnography as an important tool for studying digital society. In discussing ethnography, I will also argue that it is often not enough to study the online internet alone. In order to fully respond to most research questions relating to digital sociality, the offline contexts where the internet is embedded and comes to play a part in people's lives must also be taken into account. Depending on the type of study, its aims, data, and design, the balance between online and offline aspects can vary widely. To complicate things further, I will address the problems inherent in making a distinction between online and offline altogether.

Ethnography is a pre-digital research strategy which is about creating detailed and in-depth descriptions and interpretations of people's everyday lives and social and cultural practices. This is most often done with the help of contextualised research data that has been collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews. Those data are then closely described, read, and interpreted to carefully map out patterns of thinking and acting. What one might call *digital ethnography*, then, is an approach aiming to generate such knowledge about lives and practices in digital society — both online and in settings where digital media intersect and entangle with our offline lives. The key authors in this area are sociologist Christine Hine, who authored the influential book *Virtual Ethnography* (2000) and several follow-ups, and anthropologist Daniel Miller, who has played a very important role in developing a framework for what he has labelled *digital anthropology* (Miller & Slater 2000; Miller & Horst 2012).

Analysing digital society and sociality from an ethnographic point of view is about reading it as if it were a text, and trying to grasp the ways in which participants make meaning. An ethnographer must not simply report observed events and details, but must also render and explain those observations in ways that help decode the webs of meaning from an insider perspective. While each digital social researcher will, as was argued in <u>Chapter 13</u>, develop her or his own 'methodological bricolage' in different ways in relation to the different tasks that might be at hand, ethnographic exploration of some sort is often a very useful component.

Out in the Fields

Classic anthropology and ethnography had emerged from the academic discipline of natural history, and, typically, the early ethnographic studies were about apparently 'primitive' cultures and people living in European colonies. Since then, however, an increasing number of studies have been made by researchers in the communities where they live and work themselves. What has remained, however, is the aim to identify and interpret underlying meanings and principles of the social setting that one is analysing, as well as the idea of relatively long-term engagement in a fieldsite. This means that ethnography poses a double demand on the researcher. It is assumed that in order to develop an adequate understanding of what it is like to live in a setting, one must become immersed in it and take part in it. But at the same time one must maintain the role of being a relatively detached observer.

In terms of data collection, ethnography does not rely on any single approach. Instead, ethnographic understanding is developed by exploring several different sources of data in close detail. The most common methods for collecting ethnographic data are observation studies — where the researcher may or may not be a participant in the analysed context of interaction — and interviews. Ethnographic researchers may also collect other sources of data, the character of which may differ depending on the specific nature of the research setting. The notion of ethnographic *fieldwork* is often used as an umbrella term for all of the different strategies that a researcher employs to gain an insight, as rich and detailed as possible, of the milieu under analysis. The primary source, however, tends to be observation studies, often in the form of so-called participant observation, where the researcher assumes a dual role of both taking part in and observing the setting. As linguistic anthropologists, Jan Blommaert and Dong Jie (2010: 7) note: 'Fieldwork is the moment when the researcher climbs down to everyday reality.'

The underlying assumption of ethnography is that in order to develop an adequate understanding of what it is like to live in, or be part of, a setting, a balanced mix of immersion and detachment is needed on behalf of the ethnographer. The most classic ethnographies, predominantly carried out by anthropologists, have tended to involve the researcher spending many months, even years, in the 'strange' or 'foreign' contexts that they wanted to try to understand. The key was long-term engagement, and the forging of quite deep and lasting bonds with people. For example, iconic anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski wrote several books about his 32 months of fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands off the coast of New Guinea, and another very important anthropologist — Clifford Geertz (1973) — wrote his most famous study about Balinese cockfighting. It was, in fact, Malinowski's work that pioneered the key ethnographic idea that the researcher should use participant observation to get 'the native's point of view'. In classic ethnography, the 'field' is understood as clearly delineated, and as an actual 'recognizable place to go to that contains the people we are interested in' (Hine 2012: 24).

But, even without taking the internet into account, ethnographers have had to deal with the fact that people of today very rarely locate their existence to predefined and fixed places. A history of increasing mobility, migration, tourism, and commuting, as well as mediated communication, has relativised the ethnographic notion of the field. In digital society, an ethnographer can be 'in the field' whenever and wherever they wish. But, Hine explains, the notion of a bounded fieldsite was always flawed. As new media researcher and anthropologist Andreas Wittel (2000: 1) writes:

The idea of 'a culture out there', with the implication of being, firstly, a coherent entity and secondly, unique and different from other cultures becomes increasingly difficult to sustain given the developments and transformations we've been witnessing the last few decades.

The pluralisation of cultures in general makes the notion of 'the field', as a geospatially defined area of research, problematic. This is further accentuated when one uses the internet, or parts of it, as one's ethnographic fieldsite. Instead of seeing the field in terms of spatially defined localities, the focus then shifts towards 'socio-political locations, networks, and multi-sited approaches' (Wittel 2000: 8).

Thick Descriptions

Drawing on seminal work by Geertz (1973), the ultimate goal of ethnography is to provide a *thick description* of the patterns, modes, and functions of social life. The basic assumption on which this approach rests is that culture is 'semiotic' –it is made out of a complex set of symbols in the form of language, traits, customs, gestures, attitudes, actions, and so on, which are webbed together in systems 'within which they can be intelligibly — that is, thickly — described' (1973: 14). He wrote further:

Ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is in fact faced with — except when (as, of course, he must do) he is pursuing the more automatized routines of data collection — is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render. [...] Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript — foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour. (1973: 9–10)

Suspended in webs of significance

One of Geertz's key influences was the sociology of Max Weber (1922/1978: 4), which was focused on 'the interpretive understanding of social action' — on the subjective meanings that people attach to their social actions. Drawing on Weber's idea of '*Verstehen*' (understanding), according to which society should be analysed from a participatory and interpretive point of view, Geertz (1973: 5) famously stated:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical.

So, Geertz argues that ethnography is about analysing the meaning that people ascribe to their self-created 'webs of significance'.

Similarly, Malinowski (1922: 9) said that ethnography should lay bare unknown social and cultural principles that govern what previously seemed 'chaotic and freakish', 'sensational, wild and unaccountable'. As opposed to thin description, which just provides an account of facts, without interpreting them, thick description is characterised by specifying many details, the laying bare of conceptual structures, and the revelation of meanings. According to Geertz, it is the task of the ethnographer to not only present facts, but to comment on and interpret them. The researcher must try to trace the ways in which meaning is ascribed. Against this background, it should be easy to see that ethnography is highly relevant in digital society, not least because now 'The Internet is the fabric of our lives' (Castells 2002: 1).

Ethnography and the Internet

In her book *Virtual Ethnography*, Hine (2000) argued that internet contexts deserve to be taken seriously as places in which to undertake ethnographic studies. At the time she wrote this book, it was important to make the argument that things of a broader social significance were indeed taking place online, and that ethnographers could do fieldwork on the internet as well. Work such as that of Hine played an important part in the development of the internet as a serious setting for the social research of things other than cybercultural peculiarities. Her main idea is that as the internet has become a mainstream phenomenon, rather than a subcultural one, it offers a significant and innovative resource for social science. As discussed previously, the emerging and transforming data environment leaves a wide range of persistent traces of people's everyday interactions, which are accessible for scrutiny by researchers. And while a lot of discussion in this area has focused on the possibilities for research using big data (see <u>Chapter 12</u>), Hine's focus is on the significant new opportunities for ethnographic and interpretative research.

No matter what social or cultural issues we research, it is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid dealing with online aspects of communication and interaction at some point. It is important to note Hine's argument that the internet and social media do not just provide researchers with an additional arena where social things occur. Rather, she writes, the analysis of online settings is helpful to research social issues that extend beyond the internet itself. This is because the internet can be understood not only as a cultural artefact — a thing in the world — but also as a culture — an important aspect of the world itself. As people are simply going about their everyday lives in their use of the internet, by necessity in the process they leave traces that researchers will be able to draw on. Hine summarises her point:

The Internet is, to summarize, increasingly reflective of broad swathes of the population and of diverse activities: it is readily accessible, it allows for imaginative new research questions to be explored and for previously hard-to-reach populations to be accessed. It offers rich data on almost every imaginable aspect of existence. Internet research has developed from being a somewhat esoteric and unworldly frivolity to serving as a route to explore significant and weighty social issues. (Hine 2012: 11)

The internet makes it possible for researchers that use ethnography to observe a wide variety of social behaviours, patterns, and phenomena, which were not nearly as readily available to see before. In digital society, otherwise 'private' discussions take place in online public spaces, and many of the interactions persist, as archived and searchable digital material. This makes it possible to carry out research that otherwise would be impractical, due to the demanding, daunting work needed to negotiate access and traverse social barriers. Furthermore, Hine argues, because of the disinhibition caused by online anonymity, and the development of trust through mutual disclosure over time (cf. <u>Chapter 4</u>), people will discuss things on the internet that they might not talk about comfortably, or in the same way, in face-to-face interactions. This exposes aspects of social life to the researcher that may otherwise be very difficult to access. However, this does not mean that everything documented on the internet is automatically available for social research. Hine (2012: 14) writes that 'the ethical question persists throughout: simply because something happens online does not make it socially trivial or openly available as research data'.

There is also the issue of how much data, and contextual information, is enough. Interpretative research strategies, such as ethnography, are more generally about the distillation of multifaceted, complex, and rich social data into something that is more straightforward and easy to grasp. Even with thick descriptions, the aim of the description is still to render complex matters more comprehensible. While in any type of research it may feel problematic and unsatisfying to be aware of the extent to which one has to simplify and leave out complexity, the internet — with its gargantuan amounts of potential research data — accentuates this difficulty. Furthermore, while research of any type, in any context, can be overwhelming, the possibilities presented by the opportunities to search and get such huge amounts of data online will emphasise the feeling that one lacks the capacity as a researcher to account for the full complexity. Both the issues of ethics and issues such as the one about reducing complexity in data are best dealt with through constant critical reflection, and through being open about the 'messy details' of our research process, as discussed previously in <u>Chapter 13</u>.

In sum, Hine's argument is, first, that the internet is an important venue for ethnographic research. It offers a mirror of people's everyday existence, and people often talk on the internet with a candour and frankness which is very rare in many other research settings, such as in interviews or surveys. Internet ethnography makes it possible to look at sociality and social interactions in their 'natural environment'. We can study discussions that arise for their own sake and which are not artificially topicalised by researchers' design. The internet also affords the possibility to search for social data in ways that were not at all possible before digital society. Second, Hine argues that ethnography is a distinctive and useful way to research social uses of the internet. The ethnographic method allows for in-depth understandings of how people engage with each other, and with, and through, technology.

Ethnography on the Internet

In the years since writing *Virtual Ethnography*, Hine has increasingly questioned whether online settings should be used as ethnographic fieldsites in themselves. Is it enough to simply analyse online interactions in order to draw meaningful conclusions about social reality? Is it useful at all to adhere to the online–offline boundary when designing ethnographic studies? Hine (2012: 14) asks:

Can the study actually be reliable if it is not rounded out by pursuing its concerns more deeply into the lives of participants? Would we be able to trust what participants said about themselves? Put bluntly, can a study that only looks at online phenomena be more than mere voyeurism?

And Hine does indeed think that 'online-only' studies can be justified. Many significant social things do happen in settings that are online-only, and as long as one is clear about which conclusions can be drawn with a given research design and object, without becoming speculation, all is fine. As Hine points out, one of the pioneering studies of this kind was Nancy Baym's 1993 ethnography of a Usenet newsgroup where a community of soap opera fans was emerging (Baym 1994, 2000). An even earlier example was Elizabeth Reid's (1991) thesis on internet relay chat (IRC).

Translating ethnographic principles to the online setting

In her study of an online forum for soap opera fans (the discussion group rec.arts.tv.soaps, abbreviated r.a.t.s.), Nancy Baym did participant observations, carried out online interviews and questionnaires, and conducted detailed analysis of the roles, hierarchies, shared values, and evolving practices of the group. In the extract below, Baym (2000: 24–25) describes her methodological strategy in a way that illustrates the translation of ethnographic principles to an online setting.

This study, like most ethnographic work, has evolved as it has developed, and I have maintained *a dialectical relationship with the data*. I began with a set of research questions knowing that as I moved among observation, data analysis, and theory, I would end up taking paths I had not foreseen. One of my primary methods was *participant observation*. I began participating in r.a.t.s. in 1990, a year before I began to study it, and continued to participate actively through 1993 (at which time I began writing about it so much that I no longer had time to read it). My experience as what one r.a.t.s. participant called 'a member in good standing' (at least at the time this research was conducted) lent me a certain degree of legitimacy in speaking for r.a.t.s., and my intuitions and understandings as a member guided this project at many stages. The r.a.t.s. newsgroup is written in English but has its own style and referents, and my participant status gave me the background and experience to interpret these social meanings. The group's trust in me also resulted in support for, and willingness to help with, this project; indeed, the group's enthusiasm when I announced and followed through on my research intentions was one of the main reasons I have continued with this work. As a participant, I sought to *remain sensitive* to how my status as a researcher could, at least hypothetically, have influenced patterns of interaction on r.a.t.s.

After this description of her method of data collection, Baym goes on to describe the specific strategies she used to analyse the collected data, and the related challenges. I have added italics in

the extract above to emphasise the key points that demonstrate Baym's translation of ethnography to the online world. She writes that ethnography is evolving (dialectically) as the researcher interacts with the data, and must remain sensitive to the process; that participant observation is the key strategy; and that building trust or even becoming a member of the studied group or setting may be important to gain a rich understanding and to be able to produce thick descriptions. These are broadly the same principles as those of Geertz or Malinowski, and Baym treats r.a.t.s. in a way similar to the approach of classic anthropologists to the social settings that they analysed. Baym's study has definitely led the way both methodologically, by establishing that the internet could be an ethnographic fieldsite in its own right, and empirically, by showing that online interactions could be enough for the development of social formations that are rich and complex.

Not everyone was equally impressed by such studies, however. Instead, some scholars were quite sceptical about the possibilities of doing anything worthy of being labelled ethnography through online-only analyses. For example, Wittel (2000: 6) argues that such studies stretch ethnographic practice so far 'beyond tradition' that it must deal with a number of serious difficulties. He identifies four problems:

- First, that the accuracy of information can hardly be validated.
- Second, that the key strategy of participant observation is about observing 'real people', and that this is not possible online.
- Third that the shift towards an ethnography of networks makes it hard to do thick descriptions, as online links are an impoverished way of representing sociality.
- And, finally, that the lack of a physical fieldsite means that there is very little contextual data available, which can help to fully understand the things that one is studying.

Because of such shortcomings, Wittel calls for 'a modernised version of fieldwork'. He says that all of the problems are related to the fact that online-only ethnography seems to assume that there is a clear boundary between online and offline. Rather than emphasising the differences between material and digital spaces, we should introduce a more relational perspective and concentrate on the similarities, connections and overlaps. Hine, as I mentioned earlier, still thinks that online-only ethnographies may be useful and that the scope of the fieldwork — for example, whether it should include only online or offline settings or both — depends on what the researcher wants to find out. The scope of the study will in turn lead to the researcher knowing different things about the people and settings that are analysed. Furthermore, Hine (2012: 32) writes, it might not even be possible to decide about any exact limits of the fieldsite beforehand:

As the research goes along, a deeper understanding of what the fieldsite should be, in terms of the contexts that the people involved use to make sense of what they do, is in itself one of the products of the research.

Ultimately, sometimes a focus on online interactions alone may be enough, and sometimes such a focus will not be an appropriate choice. Obviously, however, no sociality between people can happen in total disconnection from any material reality, so it is to be expected that ethnographic projects in digital society will force the researcher to look for evidence in various places. Some of these places may be located online and others offline.

Ethnography With the Internet

It seems, then, that it is useful to think about the internet in society by moving beyond the idea that there is any clear distinction between what happens in and through digital mediation and what happens in other ways and places. Instead of the 'virtual ethnography' that may have been appropriate a few decades ago, Hine has suggested in more recent writings that researchers take a multimodal approach to doing ethnography in digital society. In this case, multimodality means that one should not see an online–offline boundary as important for delimiting ethnographic fieldsites. Instead, we must accept that the things — the topics and issues — we study will often cross that very boundary, or even be agnostic to its existence. These revisions, then, are in line with Wittel's call for a modernised form of fieldwork, as previously discussed, which is not fixated on the separation of online from offline.

They way in which people today experience the internet is characterised, Hine (2015) argues, by three Es, which refer to the internet being embedded, embodied, and everyday. I will especially focus here on the *embeddedness of the internet*, as it largely also encompasses the other two Es. The internet is embedded, in the sense that it is generally becoming more and more entwined in how it is used, with a large number of other settings, tools, and forms for meaning-making. So, because the internet is 'embedded' in our 'everyday' lives, ethnography may have much to gain by taking materiality and 'embodiment' into account. This is what Hine calls 'the E³ internet'.

The embedded view challenges the idea, prominent in the early days of the mainstream internet, that it offered a new type of (cyber)space. So, even if this was not always the case, it seems obvious now that, rather than being a new frontier set apart from everyday life, the internet is indeed best understood when it is contextualised and approached from an understanding of how it is embedded into people's realities. Fundamentally, this means that the internet can mean different things to different groups of people in different places.

The view of the internet as embedded was also advocated by anthropologist Daniel Miller and sociologist Don Slater (2000: 1) in their ground-breaking study of 'the internet in Trinidad, and Trinidad on the internet'. They argued that, in spite of the views expressed in the first generation of scholarly literature about the internet, 'the Internet is not a monolithic or placeless "cyberspace"; rather, it is numerous new technologies, used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations'. Their central idea is that ethnographies relating to the internet should investigate not 'the internet' in general, but 'how Internet technologies are being understood and assimilated somewhere in particular (though a very complex "somewhere")'. They write further that:

Social thought has gained little by attempting to generalize about 'cyberspace', 'the Internet', 'virtuality'. It can gain hugely by producing material that will allow us to understand the very different universes of social and technical possibility that have developed around the Internet in, say, Trinidad versus Indonesia, or Britain versus India. (Miller & Slater 2000: 1)

They make the point that ethnography should focus not on 'the internet' as some sort of metaentity, but on undertaking detailed studies of what people make of the internet, as such studies will tell us a great deal about both people and the internet. But the argument can be turned around once more, as it may not always be the case that checking what people do offline will reveal 'the truth' about what their specifically online existence means to them. Hine (2012: 27–28) writes:

[T]he ethnographer needs to take the time to understand and reflect upon what that virtual-only knowledge of one another means for those concerned, rather than rushing off straight away to triangulate what they say online about their offline lives with face-to-face observation. We may, therefore, have to accept that not knowing all of the demographic details of informants, or not being able to pursue them into other aspects of their lives, is a part of the experience in which we are immersing ourselves rather than simply a lack for which the ethnographer has to apologize. [...] Face-to-face interactions, therefore, need not always be taken as the grounding context within which online interactions are framed.

However, that point is only valid if one agrees that a social sphere with its own distinctive characteristics actually exists online. Let's just say: it's complicated!

Ethnography Beyond the Internet

In a 2016 blog post, Miller argued, rather refreshingly, that he has 'never, ever actually believed in "The Internet".¹ He writes that ethnographic studies of online activity should focus on contextualising these activities from a holistic perspective: 'I study populations whose online activities are a growing element of who they are and what they do. Yet no one lives just online.' So instead of 'fetishising' the internet, there is a point in the examination of the online setting as just one out of many places where people now live and interact. He makes the point convincingly:

After overhearing a two-hour telephone conversation between your husband and his mother, for example, you would not remark, 'Oh, that sounded bad, but what is your relationship like in the real world?' Nor does online represent a consistent trajectory. What people call the Internet has already meant entirely opposite things. The early debates — no one knows you're a dog on The Internet — were all about anonymity and creating specialist interest groups. By contrast, current debates about Facebook are all about a lack of privacy and how it muddles work, kin, and friendship. Middle-aged people used email to demolish the boundary between work and leisure; now young people use email to create a boundary between work and leisure. [...] Because we know that there is no Internet, we are open to finding that people online do entirely unexpected and contradictory things and that the same platform can do opposite things at different stages in its development.

¹ www.culanth.org/fieldsights/847-the-internet-provocation.

In an impressive series of books, Miller and a number of his colleagues are in the process of presenting the results of fieldwork undertaken by nine anthropologists, who have spent fifteen months in nine communities around the world researching the role of social media in people's everyday lives. The project is called *Why We Post* and aimed, among other things, to show how problematic it is to assume that the internet and social media are the same everywhere:

When we tell people that we have written nine monographs about social media around the world, all using the same chapter headings (apart from <u>Chapter 5</u>), they are concerned about potential repetition. However, if you decide to read several of these books (and we very much hope you do), you will see that this device has been helpful in showing the precise opposite. Each book is as individual and distinct as if it were on an entirely different topic. This is perhaps our single most important finding. Most studies of the internet and social media are based on research methods that assume we can generalise across different groups. We look at tweets in one place and write about 'Twitter'. We conduct tests about social media and friendship in one population, and then write on this topic as if friendship means the same thing for all populations. By presenting nine books with the same chapter headings, you can judge for yourselves what kinds of generalisations are, or are not, possible. (Miller et al. 2016: v) The key point here is that, from an ethnographic point of view, it is the content rather than the platform that is of interest. For Miller and Slater (2000) there is, for example, nothing inherently 'virtual' about the internet. Rather, the internet is only virtual in those cases when it is used or perceived as a virtual space. 'Cyberspace' is not always present as soon as the internet is around. So, from the perspective of *digital anthropology*, it is more useful to study a platform such as Facebook by exploring it as being contextually embedded from the eyes of its users than to study what is posted online. An embedded approach to ethnography of the internet will lead the researcher to ask other questions beyond a cyberspatial approach. The aim is to embrace the multiplicity of the internet, and to pose questions about how it comes to mean different things in different settings among different people. Once again, this is because technology in itself does not have any pre-defined or given settings of use. Rather, different practices will generate different and divergent enactments of technology.

Remember, however, that while some ethnographers may be interested mainly in the study of how the internet is embedded in people's everyday lives, this does not mean that online-only ethnography is irrelevant or wrong. As Hine (2015: 38) puts it:

There are still online spaces which develop distinctive and well-ordered cultures. It is still relevant and interesting to find out what people do when they are online, and what forms of identity, structure, and inequality emerge when people come together in online space. However, there are now also many ethnographers who want to study the embedding of the Internet in various dimensions of everyday life.

So, on the one hand, there are online-only studies that use milieus and platforms on the internet as fieldsites for ethnographic analysis, without going beyond what happens in those places. On the other hand, there are studies that focus on how the internet becomes meaningful, through an analysis of how the internet is embedded in material and physical settings. Still, it is often a good idea for the researcher to move 'between mediated and unmediated spaces', since this often contributes to the contextualisation of the online interactions (boyd 2008: 45). After all, 'people do not live in online communities, or not exclusively at least' (Hine 2012: 27).

Further Reading

Hine, Christine (2015). *Ethnography for the Internet*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

In this, one of her more recent books, Hine specifically explores how one can adapt the complex process of doing ethnography, striving for thick descriptions, to the changing and challenging conditions of digital society. The internet becomes more and more embedded into our everyday lives, to the extent that it even becomes a rather unremarkable way of carrying out our interactions. This poses methodological dilemmas for the ethnographer as regards whether one should look online, offline, or actually somehow in between.

Miller, Daniel, & Slater, Don (2000). *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.

This is Miller and Slater's seminal ethnography of 'the internet in Trinidad, and Trinidad on the internet', as introduced earlier in this chapter. The key contribution here is the notion that the internet, rather than being placeless, should be seen in terms of the variety of new technologies that it encompasses, and more specifically of how such technologies are put to use and become socio-culturally decoded and translated in a variety of different offline settings.

Geertz, Clifford (1973). The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books.

Geertz's writing has been crucial in defining anthropology, and ethnography, as it stands today. The most important concept, as also discussed in this chapter, is that of thick description. The goal is to extract the structures of meaning that make up a culture, and this is done through presenting a combination of facts, commentary, interpretations, and interpretations of those interpretations.

16 Mapping and Mining Digital Society

Key questions

- How can the internet's functions in apps, algorithms, and software for collecting, sorting, and visualising data be harnessed as a new form of research instruments?
- What types of research questions can be answered through social network analysis, and how can this method be used in digital social research?
- What is text mining, and how can it be a useful method to analyse social interaction on the internet and in social media?

Key concepts

Methods of the medium * instruments of revelation * social network analysis * weak ties * small-world networks * text mining * distant reading

The ethnographic approach, as introduced in the previous chapter, offers a solid framework with which to embark on studies within the field of digital social research. As I said in <u>Chapter 13</u>, sometimes ethnography alone can be a sufficient research method, depending on what you want to find out. However, the changing data environment — also discussed in <u>Chapter 13</u> — means that it is often a good idea to bring in other sources that are not conventionally associated with the ethnographic method. This is because, as described in <u>Chapter 15</u>, the notions of what actually constitutes the 'field' or 'the data' of ethnographic analysis are altered in digital society. As discussed in previous chapters, Kozinets (2015: 3), wrote about an approach that he calls 'netnography', and thinks that devising research methods for studying sociality online is about 'intelligent adaptation' and 'considering all options'. The root, he says, should be in the core principles of conventional ethnography, but digital social researchers must also seek to selectively and systematically seize 'the possibilities of incorporating and blending computational methods of data collection, analysis, word recognition, coding and visualization' (2015: 79). Digital social research, as I argued in <u>Chapter 13</u>, relies on methodological bricolage, and must move beyond any divisions between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative'. Kozinets would agree, and he writes (2015: 53-54):

Consider that the images, words, Facebook profiles, Twitter hashtags, sounds and video files flowing through the Internet are composed of binary signals and various electromagnetically charged and uncharged blips of electrons and photons riding wires between various distant servers. Ultimately, they are zeroes and ones, already numerical and, in their own way, quantitative. We thus see fluidity and transferability, as analogue human experiences such as sitting and talking to a camera are transferred into digitally coded signals shared through a platform like Vine or YouTube, then decoded into densely pixelled moving images on screens and sounds emanating from speakers and headphones. This experience of audiencing can be captured as qualitative words and images experienced by a human listener and watcher, coded into fieldnotes or captured as a text file or visual screenshot, and immediately or subsequently optionally coded and transferred into a quantitative reading. Quant becomes qual becomes quant in this slippery shifting example.

In this chapter, I discuss three approaches to exploring, mapping, and mining data that can extend our ethnographic understanding: first, the idea of 'following the medium', and using digital media tools and platforms themselves as 'instruments of revelation'; second, *social network analysis*; and third, *text mining*. Depending on perspective, these approaches can either be seen as 'other' methods with which digital ethnography is combined, or — as in Kozinets' netnography — even as new forms of 'ethnographic' methods needed by the researcher in order to become fully immersed in that which is digitally social. It is important that the methodological bricolage is customised according to what is needed by the research task at hand.

Following the Medium

There are two general ways in which research methods relate to digital society. First, there is the innovation of new, and the repurposing of old, research methods for mapping, analysing, and understanding digital society as an *object of study*. This is the perspective used throughout <u>Chapters 13–16</u> of this book, where research methods are introduced for the study of the social transformations that are the topic of this book: interaction and identity (<u>Chapter 4</u>), communities and networks (<u>Chapter 5</u>), new modes of visuality and visibility (<u>Chapter 6</u>), new expressions of affect and emotions (<u>Chapter 7</u>), changes in the public sphere and in power structures (<u>Chapters 8–10</u>), new forms of mobile interaction and coordination (<u>Chapter 11</u>), and the underlying scripts of digital society (<u>Chapter 12</u>).

Second — and this is the topic of this part of this chapter — there is the possibility of harnessing the technologies and artefacts of digital society as *research methods in themselves*. Richard Rogers (2013: 1) suggests that what he calls 'digital methods' are about identifying and following '*the methods of the medium*' (in a wider sense) that are already embedded in digital society. Rogers' argument is that the internet is already doing research-esque things by itself, such as collecting, computing, sorting, ranking, and visualising data. This is just how it functions, and it is not related to anyone developing it this way to be useful specifically for research. The central idea of Rogers' approach to the study of the digital is to not intervene or interfere very much with these existing 'methods'. Our analyses may in fact be more accurate if we respect the integrity of them, follow them with curiosity, and learn from them. Rogers (2013: 1) writes:

For example, crawling, scraping, crowd sourcing, and folksonomy, while of different genus and species, are all web techniques for data collection and sorting. PageRank and similar algorithms are means to order and rank. Tag clouds and other common visualizations display relevance and resonance. How may we learn from and reapply these and other online methods? The purpose is not so much to contribute to their fine-tuning and build the better search engine, for that task is best left to computer science and allied fields. Rather, the purpose is to think along with them.

The role of the researcher, then, becomes to attempt to 'follow the medium' and its methods as they evolve, and to find ways of exploiting and recombining them in useful and fruitful ways. So, we could, for example, ask ourselves: How can a hashtag be used for social analysis? How can Twitter's search function be used, not just to instrumentally find tweets, but to respond to questions about social dynamics or cultural mores? How can we as researchers 'read' a Facebook feed in ways other than those intended by the creators of the service? The aim of thinking and working in this manner is, Rogers (2013: 3) writes, 'to build upon the existing, dominant devices themselves, and with them perform a cultural and societal diagnostics'. This means that the 'initial outputs' of the research — a search result, a set of Tweets, a set of Instagram accounts, algorithmic book recommendations, etc. — can very well be the same as, or at least very similar to, the things that digital devices output to their users. But with a 'digital methods' approach, Rogers (2013: 3) explains:

they are seen or rendered in new light, turning what was once familiar — a page of
engine results, a list of tweets in reverse chronological order, a collection of comments, or a set of interests from a social networking profile — into indicators and findings.

This shift of focus is Rogers' key point. For example, instead of reading Google results in conventional ways — as some sort of pure computed information that has been optimised by underlying algorithms — we might read them in other ways, in order to be able to see societal conditions. The main challenge for digital research, in that case, is to develop a mindset as well as a methodological outlook for doing social and cultural research *with*, rather than about, digital society.

Instruments of Revelation

Internet researchers Christian Sandvig and Eszter Hargittai (2015) discuss how digital media and the internet can be seen to offer new tools for answering new, or old, questions in new ways. They give an example of how things that were not conceived as research instruments can still become used as such:

In this view, online games like World of Warcraft were created by private companies to allow people to pretend to be night elves (or more accurately, for the company to make money from what people spend on subscriptions allowing them to pretend to be night elves). Yet these games might hold the potential to answer basic questions about the networked structure of human interaction. (Sandvig & Hargittai 2015: 8)

Employing digital media as a research instrument offers 'a new kind of microscope', which we can use to shed light on both new issues that are specific to digital society, and on basic and longstanding questions about human social life (2015: 6). Naturally, because of the multifaceted character of digitally networked tools and platforms, there are a wide variety of such uses. They can draw on new tools for data collection via web scrapers, APIs, or online repositories. And they can also include new devices and ways of analysing data, in the form of computerised language processing, the harnessing of geolocative hardware, new visualisation techniques, and so on. The case of big data is just one example of the metamorphosis of digital society into research method, as discussed in <u>Chapter 12</u>. But, Sandvig and Hargittai (2015: 11) argue, the examples of big data are not the most fascinating ones.

We instead see that the actual revolution in digital research instrumentation is going on now, all around us, in smaller, 'ordinary' research projects. We see it in the use of crowdsourcing to replace traditional pools of research participants; the use of hyperlink networks as a new source of data to study the relationships between organizations; or in the idea that writing your own Web-based application is now a viable data collection strategy.

As Sandvig and Hargittai point out, the totality of all such innovations, experimentations, and renegotiations are today's examples of what historian of science Derek J. de Solla Price (1986: 246) called *instruments of revelation*. When discussing the Scientific Revolution historically, he argued that its dominant driving force had been 'the use of a series of instruments of revelation that expanded the explicandum of science in many and almost fortuitous directions'. He also wrote of the importance of 'the social forces binding the amateurs together'. So, in the case of digital social research, we are now at that stage: a point where researchers often act like curiously experimenting enthusiasts — 'amateurs' — in testing and devising new 'instruments of revelation'.

Analysing Social Networks

Another approach that can complement the ethnographic analyses is social network analysis (SNA). As discussed when we explored networks and communities back in <u>Chapter 5</u>, SNA is a method for looking at the structure of relations in social systems, and at the patterns of connections between and among those who take part in those systems. Even though SNA is a pre-digital method that can be used on datasets of any size, it is a method which is increasingly developed for, and used in, studies of 'big data' or other 'social data'. SNA is a set of theoretical perspectives and methodological tools, which aim to give a better understanding of individuals and groups in the relational social systems of which they are part.

Many people associate the concept of a social network to specific digital social network services such as Facebook and LinkedIn, and their predecessors, such as MySpace. However, the notion of 'social network' in SNA has to do with such networks and relations at the most basic level where we, as individuals and groups, are part of a number of different social networks, in the form of families, groups of friends, school classes, organisations, clubs, professional networks, and so on. In the context of this book, SNA is described as a method with which to obtain a better understanding of the social networks with which people engage online and offline in digital society. This often means that data on network relationships are collected through the internet, but that our analyses in many cases assume that the social patterns we identify stretch beyond what people do online. Some networks may take shape online only, others offline only, but, naturally, it is most often a bit of both.

SNA sees people as social beings, and assumes that our interaction patterns affect what we believe, say, and do. It is also based on the idea that our positions in networks decide which other people we can influence, and how much. So SNA argues that the behaviour of individuals and groups is, if not totally governed, at least deeply affected by the social networks — the sets of socially networked relationships — in which they are embedded. People will think and do the things they do largely as a consequence of their ties to others. As SNA can help to demonstrate, the interaction patterns among individuals and groups in society is far from random. For example, people have a tendency to interact with others who are similar to themselves, and repeated interaction can lead to the emergence of (among other things) norms of behaviour, symbols of group belonging, group solidarity, as well as a sense of identity. So, social networks enable and constrain what people do, they also help us make sense of the world around us, and they influence the choices that we make.

With SNA, researchers can use different metrics and visualisation techniques to gain an understanding of how a certain network functions. When analysing digital society, one can think of any number of things and settings that we might want to analyse in terms of it being a social network, and it is also possible to do so on a number of analytical levels ranging from the whole of the internet, to text message exchanges among a small group of friends. Let's think of two concrete examples, just in order to have something to draw upon in the following description of SNA. First, we envision that we have a very large dataset consisting of several millions of tweets, all of which have used the same hashtag while posting about a major global political event. Second, let's imagine that we have copied and pasted around fifty posts to a thread in a discussion forum that deals with a topic relevant to our research. I will call these 'the Twitter example' and 'the forum example'.

Dyads — Networks of Two

The basis for being able to do SNA is what Simmel called the *dyad* — as discussed in <u>Chapter 5</u>. A dyad can be defined as a pair of social actors along with the status of the network tie connecting them. In other words, it is a connection between two people or groups, together with the information about how they are connected. A dyad is a group consisting of two people — a pair — and in order to be able to carry out SNA we need information about all such pairs that constitute the building blocks of the network that we want to analyse. As a result, it becomes crucial to decide what is seen, in the context at hand, to constitute a connection between two actors. Is it the fact that they exchange text messages, the fact that they are 'Friends' on Facebook, that they subscribe to each other's YouTube channels, that they have liked the same video, or that they have both commented on the same blog post? In our Twitter example, with a dataset that consists of a large number of users who employ the same hashtag, one could decide, for example, that any one user directing a tweet to a specific user is also then part of a dyad with that user. We may also decide that the addressed user should also respond back to the first one in order to constitute a dyad.

In the forum example, we could decide that all participants who have posted in the thread should be seen as being, theoretically, part of dyads with all others, as they have all somehow related to each other by being part of the forum thread. Another strategy could be to decide that any participant should be seen as having a dyadic relationship with just the participant who started the thread. Yet another strategy would be to say that all participants have entered into dyadic relationship with the participants who had posted the entry upon which their own entry followed in the thread. Or, one might decide that it is only in those cases when a participant explicitly mentions another participant in their post that they become related.

So, as you can see, this construction of pairs is driven by theoretical assumptions, and the choices we make will shape the patterns that we map out in the end. For example, in predigital versions of SNA, pairs could be identified by asking people in a workplace to suggest which of their colleagues they would be more likely to socialise with, then using the responses to analyse who was connected to whom. Another way would be to do an observation study of which persons were actually spending coffee breaks together. Fundamentally, in order to do SNA, we must have information on pairs of actors. This does not mean that we assume that people understand their world on the basis of all of the different pair-wise connections they have with people, but for the sake of analysis, we must break it down to these paired connections, because dyads are the fundamental unit of networks. If we take the Twitter example, we can draw on our dataset to create what is called an 'edge' list, like this:

User A mentions User B

User A mentions User C

User B mentions User C

User B mentions User C (again)

User D mentions User N

In most real-life analyses of social networks in digital society, the list would of course be much longer, and the graph much more complex. But we operate here with a small network for the sake of illustration. The most powerful analyses take place when we analyse networks that are complex enough for it to be hard to grasp how they function by just reading the edge list.

Graphs and Maps

The list above gives us the information we need as a starting point for SNA. In reality, we can also register other data about both the users and their connections. For example, we may know that Users A and C are politicians, and that Users B, D, and N are journalists. And we may also want to add other types of relationships apart from mentions to the list, including, for example, follows and retweets. In some network analyses, attention is paid to the direction of connections (*directed networks*), and in others, not (*undirected networks*). Our mentions are directed because users are actively mentioning other users. The social act of mentioning is directed from the mentioner to the mentionee. As we imagined our example tweet dataset to consist of millions of tweets, the list would likely be very much longer as well. But let's keep it simple for now.

In SNA, networks are represented as mathematical objects called *graphs*. Graphs hold information about *nodes* (the Users in our example) and *edges* (the connections between them — the mentions in our example). So, if we were to input our edge list above into SNA software, it would know to create a graph which included the nodes A, B, C, D, and N. It would also know to create edges between A and B, A and C, B and C, and D and N. I would also assign the edge between B and C a value of 2, because B mentions C twice. All other edges would have a value of 1. The next step that many researchers take is to create a visualisation of (commonly) circular objects connected by lines or arrows (called 'arcs'). Such network maps are what SNA is famous for, and they are what most people who have heard of SNA imagine when they think of the method. Rainie and Wellman (2012: 50) describe these as 'a bunch of network members connected by a bunch of lines'. The visualisations help explore the network data and assist in the interpretation of it. It is important to remember, however, that these network maps are not the same thing as the actual social networks that we analyse. The real-life network is not the same thing as the graph, as the graph is a simplification, which says nothing about many of the things that ethnography captures —such as people's thoughts, their driving forces, struggles, ambiguities, and so on.

Furthermore, the graph is not the same thing as the visualisation, because the visualisation is never automatic or 'standard'. Rather, it is the result of a process where the researcher thinks, from case to case, about the best way to abstract the observed social system as a network. The different available SNA softwares use similar algorithms to visualise graphs. In general, the visualisations place the nodes on the screen, more or less randomly, and lines are drawn between them to represent the edges. Then, nodes are automatically rearranged to optimise the readability of the network visualisation, to make sure that nodes are not obscuring one another, that nodes are positioned close to the other nodes with which they are connected, and to try to avoid unnecessary crossing of lines. It is common practice for the researcher to experiment with different layout algorithms, and to make manual adjustments to the visualisation in terms of node sizes and colours, edge widths, filters for nodes with certain attributes, and the adjustment of placement.

Clusters and Power Laws

So, a graph must be analysed before it can be presented as a research result, and thinking about how to best visualise it as an image of the network is indeed part of the analytical process. Generally, SNA rests on the idea that social networks are not random jumbles of nodes and edges, ties, and connections. Instead, as discussed earlier, they are sets of relationships that have a profound effect on people and their actions. So, what types of patterns can be found through SNA?

First, it is possible to identify clusters. As Rainie and Wellman (2012) explain, people in digital society (they call them 'networked individuals', as discussed in <u>Chapter 5</u>) have a tendency to have many of their connections in densely knit groups where several people all have close and frequent connections with one another. Clusters, in other words, are parts of networks that are heavily interconnected internally. So in our examples of the Twitter dataset and the forum posts, we may be interested to see whether some of the included actors form strong sub-networks that affect and are affected by the network as a whole.

Networks can also be analysed in terms of centrality. One way of doing this is to calculate the 'degree' of nodes. This is a measure of how much of the activity in the network emanates from any particular node. The more connected lines a node has the higher its degree. In our Twitter example, a user being mentioned 20 times and mentioning others 15 times has a degree of 35. And, as the graph is directed, this can be divided into an 'out-degree' (activity) of 15 and an 'in-degree' (popularity) of 20. The degree centrality of a node is a measure of how prominent and important it is to the network structure as a whole. If all activity in a network stems from one participant being connected to everyone else, the network would be completely disconnected if that one person were removed. If many participants were connected to many others, the network would live on, despite the disappearance of an individual participant. The degree distribution of social networks, often shown in the form of a histogram displaying the number of nodes with each given degree, very often imitates a 'long tail' distribution (as was discussed in <u>Chapter 1</u>), according to which a minority of nodes stand for a majority of the activity. As you will remember from the discussion about 'preferential attachment' in Chapter 9, mathematicians call such distributions a power law. As I explained then, this pattern differs from a 'normal distribution' — the so-called bell curve — according to which most nodes would have about the same number of links. A power law, by contrast, describes a situation where a small number of nodes are very well connected, while the rest are not.

The rich get richer

Referring to sociologist Robert Merton (1968: 62), and his discussion of science communication, one could conceive power law distributions in terms of what he called the Matthew Effect. He defined this effect as 'the principle of cumulative advantage that operates in many systems of social stratification to produce the same result: the rich get richer at a rate that makes the poor become relatively poorer'. As I discussed in <u>Chapter 9</u>, power laws are very common in social interaction on the internet and in social media. Howard Rheingold (2012: 195) explains:

A few blogs get a jillion inbound links and hits, and a jillion blogs get a few inbound links and hits. Put this together with the small-world network structure of the Web, and you can see how videos and other Internet memes go viral. The viral logic would be something like: an obscure blogger breaks a story; others link to it; then suddenly a 'supernode' with lots of connections links to it; attention becomes diffused to the long tail. It doesn't really matter that only a few people have a large audience, because when the conditions are right, that large audience is quickly accessible to others. In a many-to-many network such as the internet, the value of a node is not only based on the number of other nodes to which it is connected, but also on the potential number of groups it is connected to.

Betweenness, Weak Ties and Small Worlds

Path length is another thing to consider when analysing social networks. Paths are the network roads along which information can travel from one node to another, even though the nodes in question are not directly connected. So, paths are a connected sequence of edges. If User A is connected by an edge to User B, and User B is connected by an edge to User C, there is a path (with the length of 2) between User A and C. In a complex network, there can be more than one path between nodes. But the shortest path between any two nodes is called a 'geodesic' in SNA. While the above-mentioned centrality measure of degree gives information about which nodes are the most active, another centrality measure — that of betweenness — measures how many of these shortest paths (geodesics) the node is on. So, the more geodesics between any two other nodes that a node is on the higher its betweenness. So, in other words, betweenness is a measure of how important a node is for the connection of other nodes with each other. Nodes with high betweenness are those that bridge social networks that are otherwise separated. Sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973) formulated a theory about the strength of such *weak ties*. The idea is that while the highly embedded 'strong ties' between close connections such as family and friends provide 'network closure' and align with the inclination of humans to operate in small groups, the 'weak ties' provide connectivity across a network. The weak ties function as bridges over 'structural holes' in the network. So, in spite of their name, weak ties can be very powerful and are more likely than strong ties to provide access to different social circles and to connect to more diverse networks.

In the passage that was cited in the box about how 'the rich get richer', Rheingold mentioned that *small-world* network structures are common online. The theory of such patterns of connection is also related to path length. You may have heard of the concept of 'six degrees of separation', which suggests that everyone in the world is connected to everyone else by roughly six steps in a chain of 'friend-of-a-friend' statements. According to the logic of 'it's a small world after all', social psychologist Stanley Milgram (1967: 67) wrote that 'we are all bound together in a tightly knit social fabric'. Having conducted experiments that involved mailing paper letters between acquaintances across the United States, he found that the average path length fell around five and a half or six. The experiment was repeated in the early 2000s, using email, by sociologist Duncan Watts and colleagues (2003). They gave more than 60,000 people from 166 different countries the task of reaching one out of 18 target persons by passing the message on to somebody they knew, and whom they thought was closer than themselves to the target person. The study showed that the typical chain length was five to seven steps, depending on the geographical distance between the source and the target. When it comes to social media, Rainie and Wellman (2012: 55) report that:

The many bridges between Twitter clusters means that chains of information from one Twitter follower to a follower of that follower, and so on, encompass about 83 percent of all Twitter users within five steps of interconnection.

So, in sum, one can look at a number of different structural properties of the networks that are analysed through SNA. The method rests on the idea that social networks are not random. Rather, they are structures that affect and are affected by people. So SNA as a method can help tease out the prominent patterns from networks by tracing the flow of different resources

(such as information, ideas, money, social support, power, love, etc.). Through such analyses, one can start to explore and discover how flows in networks have effects on people and the other way around. In doing so, one can be interested both in individual persons or groups, within the wider network, and in the network as a whole.

We may want to know more about a certain Twitter user in the Twitter example, or a specific forum participant in the forum example. What position does the actor have? What role does it play, and what are its resources? Which connections does it have, and what structural opportunities does it have to influence those it is connected to? We can also be interested in the entire Twitter dataset or the entire forum thread. What character does this social setting have as a whole? Is it tightly knit, with many actors being very active and connected to many others? Or is it sparsely knit, with just a small number of connections between a few key participants? Is it a centralised network, with most activity revolving around a key actor, or is it decentralised with some such key actors sharing the role of holding the network together? Is it a distributed network instead, where everyone is connected to everyone else? Having the answers to such questions about the particular setting in digital society that we want to study can be very helpful, both as research results themselves but, even more powerfully, as a complement to the thick descriptions which are generated through ethnography.

A Pact With the Devil

Yet more digital methods can be brought in from the field of *text mining* to complement ethnographic analyses. As digital society has expanded, and as the internet continues to make available vast sources of textual data, largely in the shape of user-created content (see <u>Chapter 2</u>), there have been rapid developments in computerised methods for text analysis. This is not in the least because new groups other than computational linguists and computer scientists — for example, social scientists — are now taking an increased interest in such methods. The massive amounts of text content that are generated on social media and through other forms of computer-mediated communication have prompted social scientists to think more and more about how such data can be best used, and how the many technologies available to analyse it can be best harnessed.

The techniques that are called text mining were developed by computer scientists and linguists who wanted to use computers to identify and extract useful information from large numbers of documents — generally, a number large enough for it to be hard to read and make sense of for any reasonable-sized group of human researchers. The large set of documents analysed in text mining is called a *corpus*. When researching digital society, we may want to make sense of a corpus of blog posts, forum comments, YouTube video descriptions, Facebook postings, tweets, and so on. Text mining is useful when we want to be able to see patterns in the corpus, which we would be unlikely to find by manually interacting with the documents one at a time. Text mining, therefore, as opposed to close reading of the text, can be seen as a *distant reading*. Literary scholar Franco Moretti (2013: 48–49) coined this idea, arguing that there is an analytical point to not close-reading texts, since this removes focus from the more general patterns that he thinks research should be focused on:

The trouble with close reading [...] is that it necessarily depends on an extremely small canon [...] You invest so much in individual texts only if you think that very few of them really matter. Otherwise, it doesn't make sense [...] What we really need is a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let's learn how not to read them. Distant reading: where distance [...] is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, less is more. If we want to understand the system in its entirety, we must accept losing something. We always pay a price for theoretical knowledge: reality is infinitely rich; concepts are abstract, are poor. But it's precisely this 'poverty' that makes it possible to handle them, and therefore to know.

In relation to more interpretative — 'qualitative' — approaches, then, distant reading demands that the researcher is prepared to move away from conventional close reading in order to be able to grasp larger sets of data, and also to lose some degree of qualitative detail because of this. At its core, text mining is about making a text into numbers to be able to calculate things about the text. It is based on registering, ordering, or counting words or phrases in documents — for example, social media postings. Once the documents have been numericised, statistical or predictive modelling methods can be applied in order to gain information about patterns in them (Miner et al. 2012: 71). Typical applications of text

mining include analysing and structuring a text through strategies such as:

- 'Parsing' it to make it easier in later steps to extract information about specific parts of it.
- Finding the most relevant themes or *topics* (clusters of words and terms) that organise the analysed corpus.
- Automatically dividing documents into categories, which are defined beforehand or even computationally 'discovered'.
- Using dictionaries of positive and negative words to map *sentiments* in the text (for example, if things are mentioned in positive or negative ways).

These applications are important to build things such as search engines, spam filters, and online recommendation systems. But of course, the same methods can also be useful in digital social research. Miner and colleagues explain the important role of *tagging*, or annotation, with the help of the following example of an algorithm for extracting entities in a text (2012: 70–71, original tags have been simplified for clarity):

For example, suppose a document contains the following sentence:

Jim bought 300 shares of IBM in 2006.

After processing this sentence through an entity extraction and tagging algorithm, the sentence might be 'annotated' as follows:

<PERSON>Jim</PERSON> bought <QUANTITY>300</QUANTITY> shares of <ORGANIZATION>IBM</ORGANIZATION> in <DATE>2006</DATE>.

So the words or terms in the sentence are now preceded with tags that identify the type of entity that it describes; for example, IBM describes an organization, 2006 describes a date, and so on. If all of the sentences in the entire corpus of text are tagged in this manner, it becomes much easier to perform efficient searches (or queries) of the corpus of text to extract, for example, all of the documents that mention the organization by the name of IBM and the person by the name of Jim, and so on. Thus, the corpus of text has been turned into a structured database that can be queried using the values for the entities, making it much easier to identify relevant documents, compute indices of relevance, and display (to the user) the specific places in the document where the entities of interest are found.

In a book entitled *Text Mining: A Guidebook for the Social Sciences* (2016), sociologist Gabe Ignatow and computer scientist Rada Mihalcea aim to make text mining accessible to a wider group of researchers than before, particularly in the humanities and the social sciences. As Ignatow and Mihalcea explain, text analysis has existed in various forms since the 1200s, but text mining is a fairly new set of methods, which is interdisciplinary but has its basis in computer science. Today, text mining draws on approaches such as data mining, information retrieval, computational linguistics, machine learning, and statistics. When researching digital society, one has access to very large amounts of text-based data as well as to advanced software and inexpensive but powerful programming languages such as Python and R. Taken together, these things hold the potential, Ignatow and Mihalcea argue, to completely revolutionise text analysis in the social sciences. However, we must be aware that, even

though we have a lot of text and good tools for mining it, we also have to actually interpret the patterns we can map. This is why SNA and text mining work best for social research when they are incorporated into a broader interpretative, ethnographic framework.

Some text analysis methods to start with

Corpus analysis is useful for 'distant reading' — seeing patterns in text from a holistic or largescale perspective, which would be hard or impossible to see through close reading. Corpus analysis makes it possible to see how language is used more generally across a large number of documents (blog posts, tweets, comments, and the like). The method can respond to questions about which phrases are frequently occurring, about what types of expression would be more or less likely for a particular kind of document or author, and so on. You can start testing the method by playing around with voyant-tools.org, and dig in further by learning about the Antconc software,¹ for example, using the tutorial at The Programming Historian website,²

¹ <u>www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc</u>.

² <u>http://programminghistorian.org/lessons/corpus-analysis-with-antconc.</u>

Sentiment analysis — sometimes called 'opinion mining' — is a method for determining the attitude of a speaker or writer. This can be with respect to a particular topic or with the aim of assessing the overall tone of a larger or smaller chunk of text. The method can be applied using a variety of different tools, but you can try out 30db.com or streamcrab.com to get an initial feel for the method.

Topic modelling is a form of text mining that aims to identify 'topics' in a corpus. The method processes large bodies of text to find recurring patterns of co-occurring words (topics). An open source tool for doing topic modelling is MALLET,³ for which an accessible tutorial is also available at The Programming Historian.⁴

³ <u>http://mallet.cs.umass.edu</u>.

⁴ http://programminghistorian.org/lessons/topic-modeling-and-mallet.

Further Reading

Rogers, Richard (2013). *Digital Methods*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

In this relatively new but already influential book, Rogers – as discussed in this chapter – argues for a repurposing of digitally native tools and techniques for researching society and culture. This is about reapplying things such as search engines, crowdsourcing, tags, and likes, for use in research.

Robins, Gerry (2015). Doing Social Network Research. London: Sage.

This book offers hands-on guidance in how to design and carry out social network analysis research. Robins discusses topics ranging from data structures, data collection methods, and ethical issues, to techniques for analysis, visualisation, and interpretation.

Ignatow, Gabe, & Mihalcea, Rada (2016). *Text Mining: A Guidebook for the Social Sciences*. London: Sage.

Ignatow and Mihalcea's book aims to make text mining accessible to a wider group of researchers than before, particularly in the humanities and the social sciences. It addresses issues of how to deal with natural language data from the perspective of both sociology and computer science. The book covers areas such as web crawling and scraping, lexical resources, text processing, and text

mining techniques from a variety of areas.

Part IV Conclusion

17 A Theory of Digital Media and Social Change

In this concluding chapter, I pull together some of the insights made throughout this book in an attempt to formulate a conceptual framework for how to think about digital media and social change. Recalling Kranzberg's first law, from <u>Chapter 1</u>, that 'technology is neither good nor bad' but 'nor is it neutral', we must be aware that technology interacts continuously with the social ecology in ways where one and the same technology can have widely different effects on society, depending on the context and on the circumstances. This means that a mobile phone, a tweet, a YouTube video, a link, or a like mean different things in different settings.

Social change

Social change refers to transformations of social relations, symbolic meanings, value structures, and other things that make up the social fabric. Such changes can of course come from a number of sources — political, economic, demographic, technological, and so on. Some patterns of change may be cyclic, while others can be more or less one-directional. We are interested here in the type of social change that happens because people use digital technology.

While social change was always multidimensional, we are faced today with ever increasing complexities, irregularities, and unpredictable flows. This means that when we try to understand social change we can never explain it in general and all-encompassing ways. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996: 33) has argued that there are five disjunctive cultural flows that must be taken into account:

- *Ethnoscapes*: flows of people.
- *Mediascapes*: flows of media.
- *Technoscapes*: flows of technology.
- *Financescapes*: flows of capital.
- *Ideoscapes*: flows of ideologies.

When we discuss social change and digital media, we deal with transformations that spring, on the whole, from flows of technology and media — from social actions and practices in the technoscapes and mediascapes.

Contextualised Outcomes

Because different forms of mediated communication and interaction are so central to social life, it follows that different media throughout history have affected both how people relate to the world and the ways in which we have understood social transformations. Different media make it possible to carry out certain social actions, while disabling others. The media that we use will affect what we see, how we speak, and what we do. Therefore, it is impossible to talk about social and cultural change without taking into account the role of the ecologies (see <u>Chapter 1</u>) in which people and media are embedded.

There is no doubt that digital media have transformed society in several important ways but, as I have argued throughout this book, the actual outcomes in terms of social change are always contextualised. This means that the type and degree of social change differs depending on the specific situation. In the words of McLuhan (1964: 20) — as cited in Chapter 1 — 'the "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs'. So, 'the change of scale or pace or pattern' will differ from context to context. The transformational power that an act of digital media use exercises upon the social fabric is dependent upon situational factors.

Generally speaking, digital media can transform social behaviours and relationships completely, but they may also change them just a bit, and sometimes nearly not at all. Contextual factors are what decide which one of these scenarios — or what combinations of them — end up becoming realised. Throughout digital society, all of these three types of outcomes happen all of the time, everywhere, both at micro and macro levels, and anywhere in between. So, the effects of digital media on social change are ambiguous and complex. From an empirical and analytical perspective, however, we always have the possibility to look closer at some settings or contexts to assess what types of social change — or what potential for social change — people's uses of digital media might contribute to in that specific case.

Now let's have a look at the different potential outcomes of social uses of digital media. The figure below gives an overview of this.

CONVENTIONAL	NOVEL	UNEXPECTED
DIGITALLY ANALOGUE	DIGITALLY ENHANCED	DIGITALLY TRANSFORMATIVE
DIGITAL	DIGITAL	DIGITAL
Email as mail	Digital activism	Momes
YouTube as television	Online dating	Selfies
Mobile phone camera as camera	e-government	Trolling
		Peer-production

Digitally Analogue

The left-hand box in the figure illustrates the scenario where digital media are used in ways that get what could be called 'conventional' outcomes. By this I mean situations when the digital media use in question imitates pre-digital media practices. It is analogous to the analogue. In some respects and under some conditions, email, for example, is just mail. If we write a message in the style of an old-school letter to someone, who happens to deal with it a couple of days after we have sent it by returning a message in the same genre, then the socially transformative power of that digital message exchange is rather small. The digital tool of email in this case just emulates the writing of regular letters of the pre-digital type that are stamped and dropped into an actual mailbox. Likewise, if a conventional media corporation makes content available on YouTube, and someone watches it via a streaming device on a TV in their living room, sitting on their sofa, it is very much like an imitation of television. Similarly, if the user of a mobile phone camera snaps pictures of birthdays, holidays, and Christmases, and uses an online service to have paper copies of the photos printed to show to friends and family, it is also pre-digital business as usual.

In all of these three cases, there are a number of differences in the digital versus the predigital scenario. The email does not have to be stamped, the YouTube programme can be paused by the viewer, and the mobile phone camera allows for the photographer to view the snapped photo immediately, without having to have film developed in a darkroom, and so on. But generally, these three scenarios are about sending letters, watching TV, and taking photos — things that people did in quite similar ways before the advent of digital media. In these cases we are dealing with digitally analogue outcomes, because the digital tools and platforms are largely used in ways that emulate pre-digital social practices. If the uses are of the kind described in the examples above, the transformational effect upon social patterns and interaction is small. That is not to say people are doing things wrong, or that technology has failed. It is just that, from the sociological perspective, where we are interested in whether the technology has contributed to any change in social practices, there is really not much to be excited about in these scenarios.

At the level of hardware one could argue, for example, that it is indeed very new and transformational that the letter-writing, the TV-watching, and the photography can now all be done with the help of one and the same handheld device. But at the level of social practice, however, the examples above describe situations where the potential of this is far from fully harnessed.

It is important to emphasise that no one person will engage in only one way with digital media. In practice, people will use YouTube, for example, in a number of different ways, sometimes harnessing its socially transformative potential, and sometimes just using it in old media ways. The point is that sometimes, some parts of the social practices of some users align with the notion of the digitally analogue. Just because a tool or platform has transformative potential, it does not mean that all users always leverage that potential in all of their uses.

Drawing a parallel to the case of political activists who use digital media, Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 752) write that it is 'clear that the logic of the organization-centered brick and mortar world is often reproduced online, with little change in organizational logic'. They mean that just because the internet and social media make it possible to deploy new forms of 'connective' activism, this does not change the fact that many campaigns and initiatives still only use digital tools and platforms in ways that reproduce how things have worked in predigital settings. They make the point that social movement mobilisation does not automatically change at its core just because it goes digital, and this point can be transposed to account for the relationship between digital media and social change more generally. Just because society goes digital, it does not change at its core until people start using digital media in ways that produce transformative outcomes.

Digitally Enhanced

The middle box in the figure above represents the cases where digital media are employed in social practices that lead to novel outcomes. This refers to situations where somehow the new and alternative logics of how the internet and social media work are harnessed in ways that change social patterns and relations in significant, but not totally revolutionary, ways. Returning to my previous examples, email stops being just mail if an email exchange happens at a rapid pace or, for example, if an email list is used to reach a large number of people at the exact same point in time, also with the possibility of anyone responding back to the entire list. It also stops being just mail if a user blocks another user, if someone sets an auto-reply message, and so on. In such cases the digital tool of email does not simply imitate the exchange of regular letters, because it is then used in ways that harness its digital affordances to a higher degree, thereby rendering the uses more socially transformative.

Turning to the YouTube example, its uses cease to be just like watching TV the moment that someone posts a comment, registers a like or a dislike, links or embeds the video on the web, makes a playlist, and so on. Furthermore, if a conventionally organised media corporation does not produce the content — as it was in the previous example — the mere emulation of television has also been transcended.

The same goes if the mobile phone camera is used to take photos in unconventional situations, and for sharing photos through social media. In such cases, it is a question of digitally enhanced uses and outcomes. This is what happens when well-established social practices — such as sending each other messages, engaging with audio-visual material, or photographically documenting one's life and reality — persist, but do so in ways that are augmented or enhanced through the use of digital media.

The degree to which such digitally enhanced outcomes are realised is related to how well the users — intentionally or unintentionally — leverage the affordances of the digital tools and platforms. As you will remember from <u>Chapter 2</u>, the concept of affordances refers to the action possibilities of technologies. Such action possibilities are realised — once again — depending on context, and on the aims and competencies of the user. As we have learnt throughout this book, digital media have the potential to enable a range of different social practices. To name a few key examples:

- Digital media have the potential to transform relationships between the production and consumption of content. Such potentials may be harnessed in democratising, just as well as in centralising, ways.
- Digital media provide infrastructures with features for creating communities and networks that enable users to communicate, collaborate, and connect rapidly in large networks and/or intimate groups over long distances.
- Digital media have a software dimension through which algorithms and monitoring can potentially be used for efficient forms of surveillance or consumer mapping.
- Digital media offer tools for self-presentation and the possibility to actively share creations, ideas, thoughts, and expressions within networked publics. This entails both opportunities and risks.
- Digital media potentially enable disembodied, invisible, and anonymous interaction between people. These features can lead to disinhibition, which may in turn have both positive and negative consequences.

- Digital media position the individual at the centre of her or his own unique social network, which overlaps with the social networks of others, potentially enabling fast coordination of behaviours and fast diffusion of information and ideas.
- Digital media are ubiquitous, and wirelessly connected in ways that can potentially alter the 'situational geography' of society by allowing for new types of coordination.

In those cases, when users — individuals or groups, those already empowered or those who lack access to conventional power — make use of and leverage such socially transformative potentials of digital media, they are able to enhance and augment social action and practices though the affordances of digital media. This changes the scale of the social action or practice as tapping into the technological capacities and networked structures of digital society enhances its impact.

What we see happening are what Earl and Kimport (2011) call 'scale changes', in the sense that things move faster, reach further, and grow larger. The augmentation of the social fabric achieved by the affordances of digitally networked media could mean, for example, that political mobilisation is scaled up as a message reaches larger, more globally interconnected publics in a shorter timeframe; that people looking for a partner may be able to find someone who matches their interests more effectively; that the process of peer-editing or consulting an encyclopaedia is enabled; that officials can crowdsource political decisions among citizens more efficiently; that aspiring writers or musicians can reach out with their creations to an audience in faster and more autonomous ways; that like-minded people with niche interests can find each other and connect in greater numbers; and so on.

These are examples of how the addition of 'digital', 'online', or 'e-' enhances previously existing social actions and practices. In the cases listed above, we are dealing with enhancements in the form of things like 'digital activism', 'online dating', 'online encyclopaedias', 'e-government', 'e-books', 'digital music distribution', 'online social support', 'online community', and so on. If one were to remove the prefixes from all such concepts, we would still end up with social actions and practices that have a pre-digital existence: activism, dating, encyclopaedias, government, books, music distribution, social support, community, and so on. This does not in any sense mean that the digital, the online, and the e- is a minor attribute. But it is an augmentation — a scale shift, in terms of increased speed, impact, reach, and efficiency. The actions and practices, at their core, are not new and many of their key characteristics remain the same.

Digitally Transformative

There is a sliding scale, however, between scale changes and more substantial transformations. Consider, to take but one example, how online dating has changed beyond being a scale-shifted version of the older system with print personal ads. Today, some dating apps, such as Tinder, have GPS functionality, increasingly refined algorithms, and game-inspired interfaces for swiping potential partners in different directions on a touchscreen, depending on whether we prefer them or not. In this case, one could argue, we have moved beyond the level of digital augmentation and into the right-hand box in the figure above, to the digitally transformative. This is an example, then, not of scale change, but of model change, where not only the extent or degree of the practice is altered but where the very practice itself comes to function in alternate ways, with other consequences, and new meanings (Earl & Kimport 2011: 27–29). And this is just an example from online dating, but we can also look for similar developments in any number of areas of society and culture.

Digitally transformative outcomes — in the sense that digital media have changed the fabric of society — happen when social actions and practices that are carried out rely so much on digitally specific affordances that they would not be possible without them. So when we look for traces of digital transformation, we must ask whether the social action or practice in question is uniquely digital. Consider memes as an example (see <u>Chapter 2</u>). They are images and text, so there is nothing new there. But the entire social practice around them — the handy image editing, the 'internet'-humour, and their sometimes-viral spread — could not have happened in, say, 1989. They are a product of digital society, and one — however small — piece of the puzzle we must consider when exploring how digital media transforms sociality. We could ask the same of hashtags, likes, blogging, vlogging, fanfiction, hacktivism, and so on. You will realise that all these phenomena have elements of the digitally analogue, enhanced, and transformative, all at the same time.

It is important to underline that the above figure illustrates a theory — a set of abstract concepts — rather than an idea about a chronological historical development from left to right. The digital media use of any society, group, or individual will simultaneously have elements of digitally analogue, digitally enhanced, as well as digitally transformative outcomes. This is not to say that transformation replaces enhancement replaces emulation. A person engaging in transformative practices — posting selfies, trolling, or using Tinder — will still sometimes use YouTube as television, and so on. Remember that people still rely on both the wheel and on pen and paper for some social actions and practices. As art and technology scholars Robert Pepperell and Michael Punt (2000: 19) write: 'in the postdigital age we will still wear trousers, live in brick houses and eat from wooden tables as there is no compelling reason why these accessories to existence should change'. We simply keep much of the old, while bringing in new things alongside it. New and old technologies are layered on top of one another, and so are the different uses of digital media.

The figure in this chapter should therefore be read as an analytical instrument that can be used to help make an assessment of the level of 'real' digitally-driven social change which is at work in relation to a given social action or practice. Selfies, for example, become distinctive not because they are photographic self-portraits, but in terms of how they are snapped in certain ways with mobile phone cameras, and how they are tagged and shared in digital social networks (see <u>Chapter 6</u>). Selfies could not have happened in '1989' either, even though self-portraits could. They are another small piece of the puzzle needed to

understand how digital media contribute to the transformation of the fabric of society. Another example is trolling: satire, pranks, sarcasm, and irony are not new. But the social practice of trolling is born digital, and without the relative anonymity and invisibility of computer-mediated communication (see <u>Chapter 7</u>), and the development of a certain breed of 'internet humour', it would not be what it is.

It must also be emphasised that the figure is not normative in the sense that the further to the right side a digital social action or practice can be positioned, the more valuable it is to society. Indeed, there is nothing wrong with uses that are mostly digitally analogue. Nor is it to be seen as a partial failure that one is 'just' doing, for example, digital activism of the digitally enhanced, scale-change type. But if we are to focus on the question of digital media and social change from the overarching societal perspective, it is the social phenomena in the right-hand box that are the most uniquely digital, and that therefore are the most likely to hold clues as to what the future of society and sociality holds.

The Power of the Non-Political

It may appear odd that the most prominent examples of the digitally transformative are largely to be found among the cool, quirky, 'extreme', and seemingly random parts of digital society — such as memes, selfies, trolling, cute cats, and so on. It is not only about such things, however. There are also examples of digitally transformative types of social organisation and modes of operation such as, for example, peer-production (see <u>Chapter 3</u>), cybersalons (see <u>Chapter 8</u>), and the most decentralised and crowdsourced forms of citizen journalism.

But it is nonetheless also important to take the apparently random internet phenomena seriously, as pieces of the puzzle. Perhaps, in fact, such phenomena seem insignificant and random for the very reason that they are the most transformational. We simply don't have concepts yet that allow us to see them as anything else than oddities. This is in line with Earl and Kimport's view that model changes, as opposed to scale changes are disruptions and alterations of which there is not yet a developed understanding. Writing about social change, sociologists Gene Shackman, Ya-Lin Liu, and George Wang (2002: n.p.) argue that 'many coincidental, unique or random factors influence the change process'. In a similar vein, as social movement researchers Douglas McAdam and William Sewell (2001: 102) have written about social change, that 'very brief, spatially concentrated, and relatively chaotic sequences can have durable, spatially extended, and profoundly structural effects'.

One might argue, then, that there can exist a politics of the seemingly non-political. Political scientist Jessica Beyer (2014) has conducted a series of case studies of online groups and spaces — Anonymous, The Pirate Bay, World of Warcraft, and the IGN.com forum — from a mobilisation perspective. In these studies, she found that digital tools, platforms, and spaces that appear to be non-political are in fact crucial for gaining an understanding of civic engagement. Digital society has a certain nature, which tends to foster certain types of interaction. Beyer argues that environments where no individual owns the content, where there is high anonymity, and low levels of formal regulation, give rise to creativity. Therefore, social interaction in online spaces that are 'non-political' is important for an understanding of how people conceive of themselves in relation to political processes. This is because, no matter the aim or intended function of the tools and platforms in question, political conversations and negotiations over norms happen in unlikely places. In the online role-playing game World of Warcraft, for example, Beyer (2014: 128) found that:

politically significant interactions permeated micro-interactions, such as the informal regulations players laid out for each other in one-on-one conversations in terms of acceptable speech, and macro-structures, such as the realm that has become a widely known as a 'safe haven' for GLBTQ players and women because of the presence of large and powerful GLBTQ-focused guilds on the realm that discourage hateful speech and encourage inclusion.

Because of this, Beyer argues, movements and organisations have quite a lot to learn from spaces like these. There is a common normative assumption that for society to be healthy it should be characterised by 'high discourse', where highly educated people who appear with their real names interact with each other in a polite manner. Beyer argues, however, that in

places such as 4chan or Reddit, the wide range of content — some of which can be deeply disturbing — and the wider range of conversation may create better possibilities and more opportunities for political action as well. For example, she describes how Christopher Poole, the creator of the 4chan board where Anonymous was born, said in a talk that he believed in 'content over creator'. Rather than having people 'bandwagon around certain individuals', the idea was that people should all be judged the same way, namely by their contribution.

Beyer (2014: 132) concludes that 'there is value not only in the places online that fit our expectations of civil society but also in the places online that make us cringe'. In such spaces, Beyer says, there are much better opportunities to foster activism than on privately-owned sites. And looking beyond the narrow scope of Beyer's empirical case of activism, unexpected and seemingly random spaces are also the ones likely to be disruptive (see <u>Chapter 10</u>) in a broader sense, and to contribute more generally to digital social transformation.

Towards Postdigital Society

While the digitally analogue outcomes of digital media use point back to the pre-digital, the digitally transformative outcomes point forward towards the postdigital —an era where the digital is no longer new and exciting but something that is commonplace and assumed. You may remember Shirky's statement from <u>Chapter 3</u> that digital media become socially interesting at the point when they have become technologically boring. Similarly, the concept of the postdigital 'looks forward not to its end but to its ubiquity — to when it ceases to be interesting' (Tinworth 2012: n.p.). But we are not there yet. Rather, at the moment, we are in the midst of an era when digitally transformative actions and practices throughout society give us more and more indications as to what we, in hindsight, will see as the defining social characteristics of postdigital society. We are in a phase which, digital journalist Adam Tinworth (2012: n.p.) says,

marks the transition from the era where we're excited by the shiny new digital toys that we have, and start to become excited by the changes that these shiny not-so-new toys are making in the way we live.

From the perspective of social change, the strongest impact of digital media might in fact come from its more surprising and seemingly odd uses, and from those things that we have yet to develop concepts for. These are ambiguous activities; the vlogs, hashtags, texts, snaps, selfies, posts, and pins, which would seem to be apolitical, ridiculous, nihilistic, or pointless in our old vocabularies. In fact, the social and cultural challenges and provocations of memes, subversive selfies, cute cats, trolling, and other digitally native and emergent social phenomena may prove in the future to be the most revolutionary contributions of digital media to a transformation of the social.

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