

MINNA SAARIKETO

Facebook as a space for agency: negotiations by users and non-users

Abstract

The Web's architecture sets conditions for how people communicate, interact and act online in general and on social network sites (SNSs) in particular. Users and non-users of Facebook were invited to focus groups in order to create an understanding of Facebook as a technology-afforded space for agency and to illuminate the variety of meanings given to it. The aim of this study is to identify user and non-user stances to the possibilities of action and actor roles – understood in terms of mediated agency – enabled by SNSs, particularly Facebook. The negotiation of Facebook's nature as a space is scrutinised using concepts of connectedness and connectivity as analytical lenses.

Introduction

A little personal story will describe the starting point of this article and my own ambivalent attitude towards Facebook. At the same, it encapsulates the best and the worst things about using Facebook. One morning in May when I logged into Facebook – the first thing I do before starting a workday – I noticed how my newsfeed had several postings by groups I had joined, from people I did not know on topics in which I was not at all interested. Until then, it had been possible to control the flow of messages by turning off notifications of messages sent to groups. This setting was still on, but I was receiving messages from strangers on topics with little relevance to me. I wanted to contact Facebook to get advice and give feedback on a change that did not please me. The site for problem situations created by Facebook includes a list of links to pre-selected topics, and it did not offer help to me. I was irritated: why am I using a site that refuses to be contacted or to hear feedback on changes it makes without asking its users or at least informing them? The only way to express feedback seemed to be to quit using the site altogether. I wrote a status update on the problem and within twenty minutes a friend of a friend I had met once replied with instructions on how to hide unwanted messages from the newsfeed. The way the problem was solved summarises what I find best about Facebook and it raises a new question: am I ready to quit using a site where I have created a unique network that has helped me in many ways in various situations?

These contradictory thoughts lead us to the topic of this article: the negotiation between affordances and the architectural boundaries of a social network site (SNS). The issues are addressed using José van Dijck's (2013) conceptualisations of connectedness and connectivity, which are applied in the analysis of focus group data gathered among Facebook users and non-users. The article aims to shed light on the nature of an SNS, using Facebook as an example, as a space for technology-afforded agency.

Theorising agency in a digitalised society

More and more people are using social media platforms on a daily basis. The various platforms employed influence human interactions at an individual level, as well as affecting the community and larger societal levels, as the worlds of online and offline become increasingly interwoven (Dijck, 2013: 4). Social network sites are at the core of Web 2.0,

which has been identified as marking a shift to a new era of the Internet characterised by a 'new participatory architecture' (O'Reilly, 2005). Technological innovations and developments in Internet services have often been optimistically described. It has been said that they bring people joy and pleasure, make everyday life easier, enable new ways of communication and participation and possibly offer citizens the means to challenge power structures (Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Kolbitsch and Maurer, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2006). In other words, it is thought that technological innovations and particularly social media platforms open new possibilities of agency for individuals and the entire society.

It has often been ignored, however, that the Web's architecture sets conditions for how people can communicate, interact and act online in general and on SNSs in particular. In academic writing, there has been a lot of excitement about the 'new virtual public sphere' (Papacharissi, 2002) on one hand, as well as concerns about privacy issues (e.g. boyd, 2008; Debatin et al., 2009; Robards, 2010) on the other. Anyhow, little academic attention has been paid to the technical mediation and affordances of SNSs. The presumption that new networked technologies lead to enhanced involvement of users as well as to active cultural citizenship ignores the substantial role a site's interface plays in manoeuvring individual users and communities (Dijck, 2009: 45). Studies with a political economic perspective (Fuchs, 2009; Terranova, 2004) in turn have given important input to the field of social media research from the point of view of governance and power, but they rarely relate the issues to actual users. User agency in the Web 2.0 environment encompasses a range of different uses and agents and so a more nuanced model for understanding its cultural complexity is needed. This study seeks to contribute to such research.

Agency is chosen as the central concept of this study because it enables an analysis of the conditions for individuals' actions. In general, by agency I refer to the capacity of individuals for independent and free choice (Carpentier, 2012: 6). The concept of agency also seems to capture the most essential elements of the hopes and fears about technological developments of SNSs. By looking at agency, it is also possible to discuss alternative forms of agency to the ones offered by the SNSs.

Data and methodology

From the various social network sites, Facebook was chosen as the platform for this study because it is currently the most popular SNS, reporting 728 million daily active users (Rushe, 2013). Its dominance as a site is indisputable and its influence in everyday life spreads to touch even those who are not registered as users. Facebook's operational logic is a powerful force in the ecosystem of social media as it has affected many other platforms, spread its 'Like' button to various websites and established itself as a login mode for a number of platforms (Dijck, 2013: 67). Facebook's leading status among SNSs makes it relevant as the target of a case study for the chosen research questions.

Data for the research was gathered in four focus groups in which users and non-users of Facebook discussed Facebook's role in everyday life, Facebook as a (public) space and the material conditions of Facebook agency. Participants were, for example, invited to find metaphors to describe Facebook as a place, to design an SNS of their dreams and to share their views on different forms of surveillance. The semi-structured frame used was based on the one designed in the research project 'Public agency in spaces of Web 2.0' in 2010 (Ridell, 2011), for which I worked as a research assistant. The results of the online

survey conducted as part of the project, with almost 2200 participants, are used as contextualising data to discuss the different actor roles of Facebook users in the focus groups.

Focus groups were organised in the sixth biggest city of Finland, Turku, in March-April 2013. The four focus groups, two for Facebook users and two for Facebook non-users, included five female and three male users (aged 23-45) and two female and seven male non-users (aged 23-57) respectively. In terms of educational background of the Facebook users, four had studied at university, three had graduated from vocational school and one had a background in a combination of high school and vocational school. In the group of Facebook non-users, there were six high school graduates, one vocational school graduate and two university students. At the time the focus groups were held, four of the Facebook users were studying, two were working and two were on a leave from work, whereas in the group of Facebook non-users, six were working, two were studying and one was on a leave from work. There are differences in the educational background and working status of the participants, but these differences might be due to a random selection of a small group of people. Further, studies with more data can show whether background impacts the decision to join SNSs or attitudes towards technologically mediated agency.

The focus groups generated almost six hours of taped discussions and 137 sheets of transcribed material. Participants were found by using several channels: a press release on the website of the local newspaper, an email advertisement sent to local colleges, posters placed on library and supermarket notice boards, a Facebook event and personal networks. Participants were self-selecting in that they identified themselves as appropriate candidates for the study.

Focus groups were chosen as a method for data collection to concentrate on collective ideas and shared views rather than individual opinions. The latter have been well documented in previous research on social network sites using personal interviewing as a method (Davis, 2012; Livingstone, 2008; Portwood-Stacer, 2012; Robards, 2010). There are few studies that have used focus groups in data collection for studying SNSs. This is surprising, considering that the social meaning-making practices of focus groups provide extremely interesting ways to discover ideas linked to a platform that is so intertwined in the social lives of people today.

Interviews have been described by Gubrium and Holstein (2002) as interactive co-operative projects. This description likewise fits focus groups. Stories told by individuals in the focus groups were short and lacked deeper analytical reflection on personal experiences. However, participants continued and supplemented each other jointly, creating meaningful stories in dialogue with each other. This suggests narrative analysis as a prominent methodology for deeper analysis. Narrative as a linguistic form is uniquely suited for displaying human existence as situated action, and narrative descriptions exhibit human activity as purposeful engagement in the world (Polkinghorne, 1995: 5).

Users and non-users in their multiple actor roles

To begin with, when discussing use and non-use of social media, it is important to notice that both of them comprise different levels of agency. A general rule of thumb often cited in

Internet studies suggests that among 100 Internet users, one will create content, ten will interact with it and the other 89 just view it.

A scale used by Ridell (2011: 41), in an empirical study of Finnish Facebook users, demonstrates conspicuously how users' participatory intensity can be described in relation to the dimensions of use offered by SNSs. At the bottom, there is an audience who follows and downloads material. In the next two levels are users utilising services and applications, followed by users interacting with the network (communicating, commenting and discussing). The top two levels include actions of recycling (sharing and reposting) as well as producing and publishing new content (Figure 1).

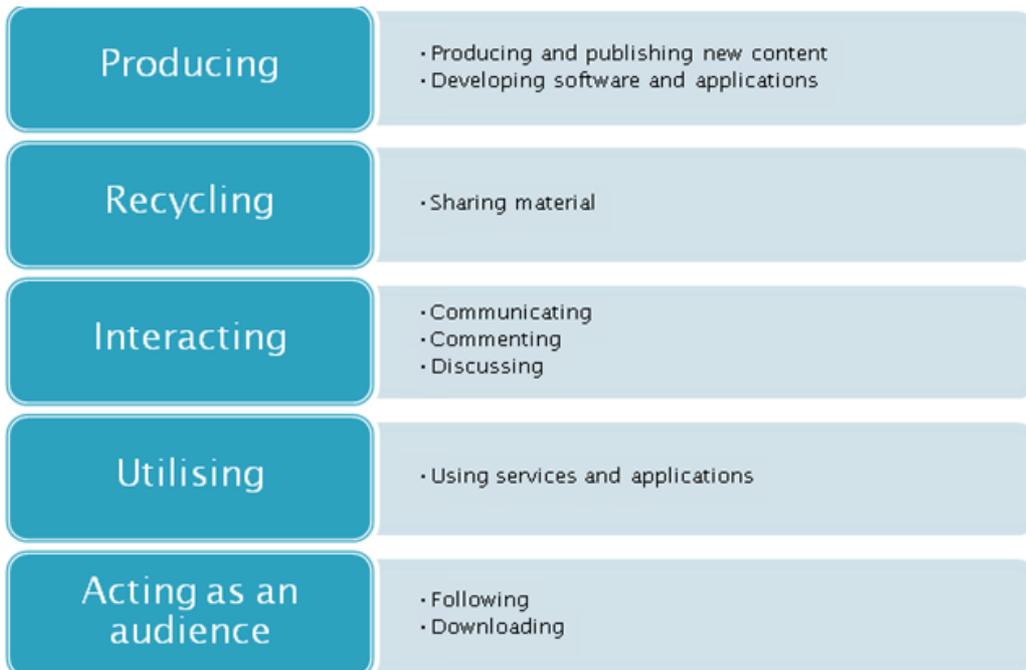


Figure 1. Participatory intensity of social media users. Image created by Minna Saariketo based on Seija Ridell's *Life in the Wonderland of Facebook* (2011).

Previous studies (Li et al., 2007; Ridell, 2011: 41, 49-50) have noted that the ways of using social media are concentrated in the three lowest levels: namely, acting as an audience, utilising services and interacting. When moving up on the scale towards being a creator, the number of users decreases. For example, in Ridell's online survey, the five most common uses of the site were reading newsfeed, watching friends' photos, following friends' profiles and liking and commenting on status updates (Ridell, 2011: 48-52).

In the small group of Facebook users participating in the focus group for this study, interacting (being in contact with close and far away friends, relatives and work contacts) was clearly mentioned most often as the main use of and motivation to use the site. What seems to differentiate users in this sample is the level of privacy they wish to have. At one end, there are users who do not know their Facebook contacts personally and who post funny, entertaining and general material, as well as users who have accepted all friend requests to ensure a collection of people for future needs. At the other end of the scale, there are users who actively and regularly unfriend contacts with an aim to create an intimate space where they know everyone and can share information considered personal (e.g. updates about family members). This observation suggests a need to complement

the scale by describing SNS users in terms of attitudes towards sites as public/private spaces, since these attitudes seem to influence use in a crucial way.

Although abstaining from Facebook defines the group of non-users, it is possible to find outstanding differences among them as well. First, non-users' interest in joining Facebook varies from having absolutely no interest in using the site, to joining when there is a good reason (e.g. studies, work, one's children joining Facebook) and finally having already decided to join the site. Second, although non-use was defined as not having an account on Facebook, it did not mean that the site was not used. The participants who identified themselves as non-users shared stories of, for example, retrieving information on companies and non-governmental organisations, finding background information on possible tenants and looking for photos of blind date partners. Curiously, Facebook is a source of entertainment for non-users as well: the Finnish site feissarimokat.com (similar to Failbook, a section of the 'failblog' domain on the humour site cheezburger.com) gathers, 'the funniest and most embarrassing status updates, photos and comments in Facebook'. Feissarimokat was mentioned by non-users as a site guaranteeing good laughs and it was likewise used to create an idea about what Facebook is like (e.g. in Facebook, couples have their arguments in public and companies receive negative feedback on their products).

Negotiating Facebook as a space

From the various co-produced stories and counter-stories in the focus group data, two stand out and were chosen for closer analysis to create an understanding of how Facebook is perceived as a space for agency. The first of these stories, a story on connectedness, refers to users being in contact with each other. The second, a story on connectivity, describes attitudes to the site as an automated (commercial) system. Titles for the stories were adopted from an analytical model developed by José van Dijck, whose model aims to elucidate how platforms have become the central force in the construction of sociality and how owners and users have helped to shape and are shaped by this construction (Dijck, 2013: 23).

The need to be connected

The basic idea is excellent. Human beings are social animals and Facebook makes interaction easier (Male non-user, 27).

The story on connectedness brings together ideas that users and non-users share on Facebook as a platform that provides chances to be connected. The need for connectedness is what drives many users to the site initially, what gets people to come back after deactivating their account and what is mentioned most often by non-users as the probable reason for future joining. Connectedness is emphasised when users explain Facebook's value in their lives and has been noted in previous studies as the aspect of the site users consider most important (Ridell, 2011: 67). This is well illustrated in this study in the stories on what it would be like to live without Facebook: if the site ceased to exist, life would be empty and lonely and contact with certain people would be lost. For non-users, the most negative experience of not being registered with Facebook is the feeling of exclusion from social life and information they consider important. This exclusion includes not being invited to parties and other events, not getting updates on important events and not being updated on news from friends.

Interestingly, in the focus groups, the nature of Facebook communication is described as 'connectionless contact': it means hearing, or rather seeing, how, for example, cousins, other relatives and old friends are doing. It does not require interaction or exchange of messages, but the need for being in contact is satisfied by reading status updates in the newsfeed (Ridell, 2011: 75, 89). Connections thus take different forms and mean various things: they are described as finding ways to be in contact as well as making, taking and maintaining contact. At the same time, it is felt that being in contact has become easier, faster and more efficient, especially creating an effortless way to stay in touch with faraway contacts (Ridell, 2011: 69). Even though van Dijck (2013: 12) included an element of community building as a part of connectedness, I consider it qualitatively as a different type of use vis-à-vis the level of intimacy and purpose of being in contact – the reason why I exclude it from the story on connectedness. Communities on social media platforms have been theorised and empirically studied in previous research (Hjorth, 2009; Kimito and Bates, 2009).

Messages sent on Facebook have created a new level of communication that is used when sending e-mail or texting is considered too personal. Nevertheless, Facebook has replaced other media as a means to stay in touch as well: Facebook is used for communicating with close friends and family to the extent that it has become a replacement for calling and texting, and has reduced phone bills remarkably. Contrary to a general belief that mobile devices and applications of social media used on them are adding to the hectic nature of society and the need to be reachable 24/7, communication mediated by Facebook is described as liberating:

What I like about Facebook is that I can answer a message from a friend whenever I want. If my old school mate rings and I do not have at that exact moment a feeling that I want to talk with the person, it creates an uncomfortable situation. With Facebook, I can choose when to answer (Female user, 27).

Although connections with one's close network are at the centre of connectedness, Facebook communication is not only limited to being in contact with one's Facebook friends. It also means getting to know new people (including using Facebook as a channel for dating), receiving and sharing information on events (art exhibitions, concerts, parties), following news coverage by reading news shared by friends, exchanging goods (e.g. furniture), organising things related to hobbies, studies and NGOs, as well as looking for jobs and promoting oneself in the job market.

The metaphors of users and non-users in describing Facebook as a social space illustrate the platform's many different affordances. These metaphors range from one's own room (chatting one to one, using Facebook as a diary or a notebook, posting photos that are visible only to the user) to a stage (showing off the best sides of one's life) or gallery (exhibiting photos). In between these extremes are semi-public metaphors such as a member's club and a school corridor. Member's club is used to describe the many overlapping circles of one's network. School corridor in turn characterises Facebook as a place with many people shouting around you, and while having a private conversations, there is the fear that someone is listening behind your back. One user vividly described Facebook as a café:

There are different tables and different groups of people and you do not necessarily hear or see what is happening at the table in the furthest corner. You are sitting in the middle of a big table with your closest friends, hearing what they have to say and commenting back (Male user, 45).

Market place is used as metaphor to show the commercial aspect of the site. This remark about the commercial uses of Facebook captures a more general observation that the users made: even though contacts are at the centre of use, they experience the site as now being more about companies and products than intimate communication. This leads us to the story on connectivity.

Commoditising connectedness

If I was Mark Zuckerberg and had the data Facebook has, I would have sold it and my soul. I just can't figure out another way to make money from it (Male non-user, 27).

The story on connectivity gathers ideas on how users and non-users understand the site as an automated system and how they link it with the political economic interests of the site. The story on connectivity brings together voices, articulating ideas about the ways Facebook operates as a technical system and as a company. Commoditising relationships – turning connectedness into connectivity by means of coding technologies – is how Facebook has managed to monetise the data and connections (Dijck, 2013: 16). The same algorithms that aim to offer a 'frictionless online experience' also make the same experience manipulable and salable (Dijck, 2013: 157). Connectedness is the user-centred sharing of information with one's network, whereas connectivity is the commercially-oriented sharing of information with third parties (Dijck, 2013: 12). Even if only a small percentage of users create content, everyone qualifies as consumers (Dijck, 2009: 46). Coded mechanisms steer Facebook users towards particular companies and products and suggest sponsored items their friends have liked in the newsfeed. At the time of this study, roughly counting, every tenth posting in the newsfeed is sponsored.

Facebook is actively promoting connectedness and diverting attention from connectivity, because the more users know about what happens to their personal data, the more likely it becomes that they raise objections (Dijck, 2013: 47). José van Dijck (2013: 12) problematised the nature of social media platforms and suggested the term *connective media* to replace the term *social media*. This way, the anything-but-neutral infrastructure of connective media is exposed and attention diverted from the human connections to the profit-driven automated logic of the site.

For most of the users in the focus groups, it is difficult to recognise how Facebook actively steers and curates connections. Even if users are aware of the fact that Facebook converts their social capital into economic capital and they share an image of it as an unreliable company, they still enjoy the capacity for connectedness it affords. Not realising the extent of connectedness-turned-connectivity is understandable, because it is far from transparent how Facebook and other platforms utilise user data to influence traffic and monetise engineered streams of information (Dijck, 2013: 12).

The extreme complexity of power in contemporary, increasingly technology-mediated society is well illustrated in the negotiation of Facebook as a space. Both users and non-

users considered data mining and data selling as a norm in society. Facebook's data mining activities are compared with supermarket customer cards and loyalty programmes. As a non-user put it:

It is a bad thing as such, but everybody does it. If you go to Prisma [MS: One of the leading supermarket chains in Finland] and use the green regular customer card, your information stays there, and they start to optimise your profile and you will receive differently chosen ads (Male non-user, 23).

Non-users argued that abstaining from Facebook is a tactic to try to protect one's privacy in a society with an increasing level of commercial and state surveillance. A non-user summarised that attitude by stating:

I do not accept it [the commercial use of data and data surveillance], so I do not want to go there [to Facebook]. In a way, if you go there, you have to accept it [Facebook sharing data with third parties] (Female non-user, 40).

Non-users shared an insight that joining Facebook would mean having to accept unclear and changing rules and having to get involved with things they could not anticipate.

For their part, users apply various tactics to negotiate around the double bind of connectedness and connectivity – the affordances and the structural conditions of the site. First, users argued for the existence of a data collection norm in society. What Facebook does is no different from standard (non-online) ways, which serves as an excuse to ignore the topic. Second, Facebook's commercial logic is located in advertisements and a routine of actively ignoring ads has developed. It is interesting to notice that, possibly as a response to users ignoring ads, Facebook placed a new advertisement slot in the newsfeed, making it virtually impossible to pass them anymore. Some of the users expressed irritation with the ads, but they are nonetheless accepted:

I get irritated by the ads, but then I think that of course the advertisers are there because it is at the moment the best market niche in the universe (Female user, 23).

Third, data mining is considered a service provided by Facebook. A few of the users took it positively that Facebook shares data with third parties, because that way they are offered interesting and better-targeted ads. Fourth, when the issue of data gathering is recognised, users downplay the importance of the data they share. They described their conscious way of sharing information, localising possible problems to situations where the site is not used in a 'right and conscious way'. This attitude is illustrated by a quote from an active Facebook user:

They didn't start it to be my friend and to offer me a nice utility. What they can sell is my data, but I don't care because they don't know everything (Male user, 30).

Conclusion

The findings in the study suggest that social media has an impact on the everyday lives of both Facebook users and non-users. Facebook as a social network site is taken for

granted as an infrastructure, creating a normalised status and establishing it as an indispensable space for interaction. The normalisation of SNSs is illustrated in descriptions of Facebook as a necessary part of everyday life, in the difficulty of imagining life without it and in practices of non-users who have made it a part of their everyday lives as well. Not being on Facebook, in the stories of both users and non-users, means being disconnected from social life.

The narrative analysis of the stories on connectedness and connectivity illuminates how both users and non-users perceive Facebook as a space for agency. The need for connectedness is what drives many users to the site initially, what has integrated the site into people's daily routines and what is mentioned most often by non-users as the probable reason for future joining. Even though the participants were aware of Facebook sharing data with third parties, it was difficult for many users to recognise how Facebook actively steers and curates connections. Automated data gathering and its monetised use did not stop users from enjoying the capacity for connectedness the site affords. The process of normalisation of SNSs and the various tactics of negotiation have made it possible for the built-in tension in the dual logic of user-centred connectedness and commercialised automated connectivity to cease to appear to be a tension at all.

The naturalised presence of Facebook in everyday life seems to make it hard to identify the underlying principles or consider the software-sustained architectural conditions for the possibilities of agency on the site. Difficulties in fully understanding SNSs as profit-driven automated systems stress the need to use the term *connective media* instead of *social media*, as proposed by José van Dijck. To further develop skills for considering technology-afforded spaces for agency, the need for critical media education with a specific focus on technology is acute.

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Biography

Minna Saariketo is a Ph.D. student at the University of Tampere, Finland. Her research concerns agency in technologically mediated society, the discursive production of agency in different spheres and ways of learning agency in a digital society. The aim of her research is to develop critical technology education, which she considers a crucial expansion and challenge to current understandings of media education. She has previously worked as a media educator in a local newspaper and as research assistant in a project focused on spaces of Web 2.0 as a public sphere.