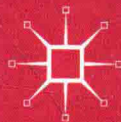


Disconnecting with Social Networking Sites

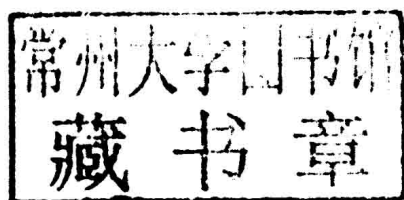
Ben Light



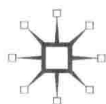
Disconnecting with Social Networking Sites

Ben Light

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Summary: "Ben Light puts forward an alternative way of thinking about how we engage with social networking sites, going beyond the emphasis upon connectivity that has been associated with research in the area to date. Analysing our engagements and disengagements with social networking sites in public (in cafes and at bus stops), at work (at desks, photocopiers and whilst cleaning), in our personal lives (where we cull friends and gossip on backchannels) and as related to our health and wellbeing (where we restrict our updates), he emphasizes the importance of disconnection instead of connection. The book, therefore, produces a theory of disconnection practice. This theory requires our attention to geographies of disconnection that include relations with a site, within a site, between sites and between sites and a physical world. Light argues that diversity in the exercise of power is crucial to understanding disconnection practice where social networking sites are concerned, and he suggests that the ethics of disconnection may also require interrogation" — Provided by publisher.

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Part I

Appropriating Social Networking Sites

1

The Connectivity Conundrum

Introduction

Facebook was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission – to make the world more open and connected.

Mark Zuckerberg, Founder Facebook

The quote above is the opening line of Mark Zuckerberg's letter to potential investors prior to Facebook's flotation on the US stock market in 2012 (see Zuckerberg 2012). In the letter Zuckerberg makes an impassioned plea for the creation of infrastructure [read Facebook] that can facilitate the maximisation of social exchange. The maximisation of the infrastructure he argues is necessary because there is a "huge need and huge opportunity to get everyone in the world connected". Connection above anything else is what should be valued according to Zuckerberg, and he is not alone in this view. But is there such a need? Is there a need for everyone to be connected 24/7? Do we all need a voice on all matters? Do we have to have opinions on everything? Of course we do not and, in practice, connection does not always play out.

This book is about how we disconnect with social networking sites (SNSs). However, I am not simply referring to issues of non-use in relation to those of use. This book is concerned with disconnection as something that we do in conjunction with connection. For example, we might engage in the deletion of relationships in a given SNS but keep others intact or we might use backchannels to create spaces within which we can interact with selected individuals or groups within our broader connected networks. Disconnection is pervasive in our use of SNSs and I argue here for the need to have a nuanced understanding

of this. Analyses of disconnection need to go beyond discussions of use and non-use and to encompass understandings of how we make SNSs work for us, or not, on a daily basis in terms of their diversity and mutability. In this opening chapter, I will introduce a way of thinking that seeks to add to our everyday experiences of and with SNSs – a theory of disconnective practice. In short, disconnective practice refers to the potential modes of human and non-human disengagement with the connective attempts made possible with SNSs. These modes of disengagement sit in relationship to our experiences, or not, of a particular site, between and amongst different sites and with regard to these sites and our physical worlds. Such an approach highlights SNSs as operationally contradictory, whereby connection and disconnection are seen to be in play together. In particular, disconnective practice, arguably, acts as a device that allows forms of connection to exist both within and beyond any given SNS.

Over the past ten years, several disciplines have engaged with research regarding SNSs. Particularly within the arts, humanities and social sciences, scholars of communication studies, cultural studies, media and sociology have arguably been at the forefront of such work, alongside others working in business and management studies, information systems, and law. As a result a variety of philosophies, theories and methodologies have been engaged and a diverse range of foci have emerged. Exemplar themes of research include: identity work (boyd 2006, Kendall 2007, Liu 2007b, Livingstone 2008, boyd 2012); friending (boyd 2004, boyd 2006, Donath 2007b, Lampe et al. 2007, Joinson 2008); potential for social capital and relational development (Ellison et al. 2006, Donath 2007b, Ellison et al. 2011); privacy and surveillance (Gross and Acquisti 2005, Ahern et al. 2007b, Donath 2007b, Lampe et al. 2007, Lange 2007, boyd 2008d, Livingstone 2008, Tufekcki 2008, Debatin et al. 2009, Lee 2013); work (DiMicco and David 2007, Clark and Roberts 2010, Smith and Kidder 2010, Brown and Vaughn 2011, Kaupins and Park 2011); celebrity and fandom (Baym 2007, Hutchins and Mikosza 2010, Marwick and boyd 2011b); race (Hargittai 2007b, Barker and Ota 2011, boyd 2012, Hargittai 2012); class (boyd 2012); gender and sexuality (Hargittai 2007b, Light 2007, Light et al. 2008, Jernigan and Mistree 2009, Mowlabocus 2010, Cassidy 2013, Light 2013); and non-users (Hargittai 2007b, Tufekcki 2008). This list is by no means exhaustive, but merely signals the wide-ranging nature of the area. However, it is notable how little research has been undertaken with a nuancing beyond a binary of

use/non-use, and particularly whereby notions of disconnection are enrolled.

In the remainder of this chapter, I elaborate on my argument as to the need for a focus on disconnection. To begin I make a brief point regarding how we might historically contextualise SNSs and why it is important to do this beyond the dotcom boom and crash of the early 2000s. I then go on to consider in more detail the extent to which connectivity has been emphasised in SNS research to date, and how we define SNSs. Following this I expand upon how I see disconnective practice and close the chapter by outlining the text overall and how it came into being.

Web 2.0 and the origins of SNSs

It would be very easy for me to recite the usual narrative regarding the emergence of Web 2.0, the participatory turn, social media and SNSs out of the midst of the dot com boom and crash of the early 2000s. This narrative, of course, involves arguments regarding the rationales for the introduction of Web 2.0, Web 2.0's technical and social properties, differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 and stories of the coming into being of various SNS services for instance. Whilst they are interesting, they are not directly relevant to the thesis I want to put forward in this text. I therefore point the reader in the direction of these sources if they wish to follow such matters in detail (O'Reilly 2005, Beer and Burrows 2007, boyd and Ellison 2007, Beer 2009, Burgess and Green 2009, Everitt and Mills 2009, Song 2010, Lovnik 2011, Lievrouw 2012, Lee 2013, Murthy 2013). Instead, what I want to briefly emphasise is the existence of thought around some of the issues that have been brought to the fore since the emergence of SNSs and how these have been presented by some as discontinuities. The discontinuities presented in relation to SNSs are theoretical and empirical in nature and it is important to acknowledge them. I fear pronouncements about the newness of SNSs and their life changing affects sometimes do not account for an appropriate history of technological development in favour of a good dollop of technological determinism.

Let us take YouTube as an example to begin with. It has been argued that YouTube is not like watching television (Tolson 2010). Of course in some ways, YouTube is not like watching television – whatever your conception of television is, be it historical or contemporary. However, YouTube also *is* like watching television – one only has to think of

public access programming developed in the late 1960s in America and indeed the contemporary potentials for narrow casting and on-demand services common in much of the developed world. People even use YouTube to watch television programmes in the same way as they would watch television. Apps within smart TVs and games consoles even allow easy access to watch YouTube “television style”, on a television. YouTube’s original “broadcast yourself” philosophy also tapped into narratives of reality television and minor celebrity, and indeed the practice of Webcamming, whose aesthetics have of course been informed and formed by pornography. YouTube’s roots are intimately and irrevocably connected with prior and extant media.

Twitter is similarly situated in relation to an extended web of developments. For example, as has been articulated elsewhere, Twitter is part of a history of public short messaging services (Murphy 2013). It shares similarities with short messaging services regarding the need to express a message in a finite number of characters. Short messaging services for instance were developed via a process involving the analysis of postcards and experimentation with typing sentences and questions. Following this process the inventor of short messaging services Friedhelm Hillebrand determined that 160 characters were sufficient to communicate (Milian 2009). Murphy also argues that Twitter developed from earlier media such as text-based gaming in multi-user dungeons (MUDs), instant message services and internet relay chat (IRC). Moreover, Murphy likens Twitter to the telegraph, which was also used to send short messages quickly. Indeed, an article published a few years ago in the UK press highlights the similarities between Twitter and the Notificator, a robot messenger whereby the public could leave a note, for two hours, on a scrolling message board (Benedictus 2010). Murphy also refers to this technology showing its parallels with Twitter, that the messages posted on the Notificator were readily accessed and shared with others, that it incorporated a timeline and that whether the message was read or not was not guaranteed.

As a final example, we can also contextualise Facebook historically. Despite coming into being in 2004, it has been linked with historical practices of enacting a self through writing. As Sauter (2013) argues, people have historically written about themselves and to others to shape their ethics, values, beliefs and understandings. She suggests that Facebook is a tool through which we do this work today, and that whilst we should not overstate the translatability of these older writing practices we should also not underestimate their contemporary influence. Like Twitter, Facebook also references prior technologies. Here one

might for instance think of diaries which capture information about birthdays and facilitate the arrangement of events, photo albums and of course online forums which predate SNSs.

Through these three brief examples of YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, it is possible to see the continuities between these, prior and existing arrangements. Indeed others have also made direct links between SNSs and prior arrangements. For example it has been argued that electronic bulletin boards, such as WELL in the San Francisco area, form part of the history of social media (Tierney 2013). These are arbitrary examples, and of course there are other potential links to be made. In the late 1970s, for instance, it was argued that services such as Ceefax and Oracle (UK), the Captains System (Japan), Datavision (Sweden), Telset (Finland) and Vista (Canada) would pave the way for the “wired household”. Along with other technologies such as satellite, disks, data and power cabling, televisions would become programmable information and entertainment centres (Carne 1979). Indeed, Carne states that “In principle, a single wideband connection like an optical fibre could link the system with the world” (Carne 1979: 65). There are also older examples, where one might consider the phonograph – like YouTube, users preferred to listen to recordings rather than make their own (Edison 1878) and the telephone – which according to the *New York Times* in 1877 threatened to expose sewing circle gossip, secret society affairs and the sweet cooings of private courtships (Lauer 2012). Doesn’t this all resonate with elements of SNSs as we know them today?

In short, the point I am trying to make is that it has long been argued that technology could become integral to our lives and if we look around we can see that SNSs have roots that extend way beyond the dotcom boom and bust of the early 2000s. This is one of my reasons for framing my work against a backdrop of the social shaping of technology (discussed in the next chapter). I agree with Boczkowski and Lievrouw (2008) that the social shaping of technology offers the ability to make crucial connections between particular technological arrangements over time, and the broader world of artefacts and culture. In doing this, it also pushes us towards conceptions of knowledge construction in the feminist tradition which rebuffs individualistic eureka moments over a perspective which recognises and celebrates group effort and the always incompleteness of what we know. In the next few sections of this chapter, I will go on to focus further upon the short history of research we have that is more directly concerned with SNSs, the Internet and its associations with connectivity more generally.

SNs and connectivity

Since debates about the implications of the Internet for the creation and maintenance of community began to dominate new media studies in the mid-1990s – see (Rheingold 1994, Jones 1995, Ludlow 1996, Wellman and Gulia 1999), much research into digitally mediated networks and communities has emphasised connectivity. In particular one might consider early work which focused on the “micro level” of social networks and the role of the Internet. This work, for instance, examined the nature of social ties, social capital development, relationship maintenance, frequency of contact, intimacy of contact, network size and network span (Wasserman and Faust 1994, Haythornthwaite and Wellman 1998, Haythornthwaite 2000, Hampton and Wellman 2001, Wellman et al. 2001, Haythornthwaite 2002, 2005, Gennaro and Dutton 2007). There are also larger scale theories which focus on connection as related to networks at the societal level. Castells’ (1996) network society thesis, for example, focuses on the capacity of information and communications technology (ICT) based connections as key organising structures of our societies – what he describes as the new social morphology. Here the dominant functions of society, its economic, cultural and media processes, are increasingly organised around networks and connectivity (Hassan 2008). Wittel (2001) also illuminates the connective effects of networked sociality, arguing that it is characterised by a combination, rather than a separation of, work and play. In addition, explaining how people and technology are increasingly coming together with online networks has been the idea of convergence – which according to Poole, is one of the most central themes of research around ICTs for the past 20 years (Poole 2009). It has been further argued that the idea of convergence is particularly powerful because it explains how technology, participatory culture and people are coming together with the potential to surmount rigid boundaries amongst producers from consumers (Postigo 2008). Here, the mapping of how the connection and participation implicitly embedded in “convergence culture” (Jenkins 2008), impacts upon various aspects of western societies, and the industries and individuals within them, for example, has been at the crux of such works as Benkler’s (2006) *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, and the work of Bruns (2008) on the nature of transitions from production to “produsage”. It has even been argued that any challenges to networks need to happen through networks. As Castells (2004) argues, it is characteristic of the network society that the dynamics of domination and resistance rely on network formation.

From within and amongst these discussions, through research focusing on the multitude of ways that we organise ourselves with online networks, various conceptions of networked sociality, including networked individualism (Wellman 2001), networked collectivism (Baym 2007), the networked household (Kennedy and Wellman 2007), networked publics (Ito 2007, boyd 2008c) and networked masculinities (Light 2013) have come into being. While this work may attend to nuanced understandings of digitally mediated sociality, it is important not to underestimate how connection and connectivity have become significant areas of emphasis in our definitions of SNSs and in our understandings of how these technologies are used. I believe that our research is focused heavily on the nature, and possible implications of, the connections established with SNSs, over other possible outcomes, as we engage with them. I am in agreement with Meijas (2010) that we may have become nodocentric in our thinking. In taking this view, it is argued that there is a tendency to construct a reality whereby only nodes can see other nodes; it privileges this and in doing so discriminates against the invisible and other – that we might not see because we are looking for nodes – for elements of connectivity. To be clear, I do not think this research is bad or wrong, such research is wholly necessary – connection matters. I also do not think that others ignore that disconnection exists with digital media. What I am arguing for is an additional lens on SNSs which adds to our understandings of such phenomena. Attempting to create some semblance of symmetry requires us to consider the role of disconnection as an active part of our engagements with SNSs. However, to date, and while many acknowledge the futility of technological determinism and the unexpected appropriation of SNSs, I am not convinced we have made disconnection a substantial focus of investigation.

There is a huge amount of research on SNSs available to us now, but if one considers how we define SNSs, the questions often asked, and findings obtained, these generally enrol notions of use and more specifically use as related to an implicit assumption of connection. If we consider how SNSs are defined, connection is integral to this. For example, SNSs have been said to incorporate and articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, allowing users to view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the space (boyd and Ellison 2007) and that the public display of connections is a crucial component of SNSs (boyd 2006, boyd and Ellison 2007, Ellison and boyd 2013). It has been further suggested that the point of the SNS profile is to establish (and demonstrate) linkages and connections (Miller 2008)

and that they are websites explicitly aimed at creating and/or maintaining social relations (Schwarz 2010). Moreover, these connections have the capacity to reach out “beyond” the boundaries of any given space and they are characterised as not being disconnected from other social venues (boyd 2006). To be clear, I agree with the general point boyd is making here: that we have to recognise SNSs as another space we interact with and one which can be intimately interwoven with other parts of our lives. boyd is talking in particular about young people here, but I believe the argument holds for other age groups too. However, we have to be careful not to overstate the lack of disconnection that comes with engaging with SNSs. SNSs may well connect us beyond the Internet and with other social venues. That said, SNSs are engaged as a space in their own right and some people may never connect the relationships they develop in these spaces with those in the physical world. These users may be in the minority, but they do exist.

Connection is also evident in the way that particular SNSs are described and defined in academic study. For example, the point of Twitter has been described as the maintenance of connected presence (Miller 2008) and YouTube as a space where many different cultural flows intersect and “diversely motivated” media producers brush against each other (Jenkins 2009). Connectivity is also emphasised in how those owning or providing SNSs describe them, as shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 SNS descriptions by SNS providers – February 2014

Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life. The ultimate gay social network. Are you looking to meet new friends, find a partner, or just hook-up? Fittlads is the place!
Capture and Share the World's Moments Instagram is a fast, beautiful and fun way to share your life with friends and family.
Welcome to LinkedIn , the world's largest professional network with 250 million members in over 200 countries and territories around the globe. Our mission is simple: connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful.
Twitter helps you create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers. Twitter is the best way to connect with people, express yourself and discover what's happening.
YouTube allows billions of people to discover, watch and share originally created videos. YouTube provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small.
