

Digitally Mediated Social Networking Practices: A Focus on Connectedness and Disconnectedness

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Abstract

Research into digitally mediated networks is important as these are becoming increasingly intertwined with other aspects of our everyday lives as we invest as much effort in the relationships developed there as elsewhere. Over the past few years we have witnessed the rise of digital media usage (at least in the developed world) as exemplified by such Web 2.0 enabled networks as Facebook, YouTube and the like. It appears that Wittel's (2001) hypothesis that 'network sociality' will become ever more important has come to fruition. Socialization for many has become deeply embedded in technology and is characterised by an assimilation of work and play (Wittel 2001). As Judith Donath states: "information that was once local is becoming global. The dramas of high school friends, blind date traumas, and mundane job irritations, once hot gossip only to be the immediate circle of the people involved, are now published for worldwide consumption on blogs and network sites." (Donath 2007).

Social networks comprise relations amongst those who deem each other to be important or relevant to them in some way (Wellman 1996). Thus, social networking sites aim to lubricate such relations. Social networking sites are often discussed in terms of features which allow users to create profiles, which in addition to images, text, and video created by the member, may also contain comments from other members, and a public list of the people that one identifies as being friends with within the network. Such sites are usually presented as friendship oriented sites (albeit they have been commercialised and appropriated for professional networking of late). However, if we return to Wellman's notion of social networks, it is not much of a leap to state that digitally mediated social networks can take many forms. I am aware of debates surrounding what constitutes a social networking

site, and indeed whether it is appropriate to use this term or 'social network site' (Beer and Burrows 2007; boyd and Ellison 2007). However, I am purposefully using the term social networking as, in my experience of researching this area I have found that digitally mediated networking activity involves the formation of new relationships as well as the activities associated with maintaining those started in other ways. Social networking sites, as far as I am concerned, are not just about maintaining existing networks via a digitally mediated environment. Moreover, we have to be aware of the continuous shaping of technologies to incorporate new features. Social networking sites are flexibly interpreted; they can, and do, have other functions ranging from offering a platform for organising political action to arranging meetings for casual sex. Friendster, for example, originally began life as an Internet dating site and Facebook was, originally only accessible to Harvard College students.

However, with a few exceptions my reading of the situation is that much of this work focuses upon fairly mainstream networking sites, emphasising egocentricity over other network mechanisms. Indeed, Nancy Baym (2007) emphasises other forms of online networks to critique danah boyd's (2006) pronouncement that egocentric networks – as exemplified by social network sites – are replacing online groups. That said, I do not dismiss this line of inquiry, but as with any field of study, there is always more to be done.

Since 1999 I have been studying a site, arguably one of the forerunners of social networking and Internet dating, as we know it today – Gaydar.co.uk (Fletcher and Light 2007; Light 2007; Light et al. 2008). Gaydar.co.uk is essentially a dating/networking service marketed towards men who have sex with men. Through this work I have surfaced, amongst other things,

issues associated with process of marginalisation within socially excluded groups, the commercial interests in socially excluded groups, the role of the Internet in identity work and the issues associated with linkages between predominantly heteronormative online communities and the those which might be seen as Queer in the theoretical sense of the word. Alongside this, I have undertaken work regarding the Internet and Digital Gaming which has focussed upon sites (and I don't just mean Internet sites) that are often presented/lived out in a heteronormative fashion. For example, I have undertaken work that considers ethics and Facebook (Light and McGrath 2010), scamming in Habbo Hotel (Griffiths and Light 2008) and creativing on YouTube (Light et al. 2012). Because my original work regarding the Internet attended to Queer issues, I have found it interesting, in surveying the literatures for this second strand of work, that there seems to be a schism between the two areas.

Such a demarcation is problematic for a number of reasons – we know that individuals and groups inhabit a variety of spaces as part of their daily lives – whether physical or otherwise. However, many studies focus upon a single site. Such issues need further interrogation as convergence becomes easier to achieve as social networking sites, infrastructures and human agency evolve. Indeed we have strong indicators that such issues will present themselves from certain extant studies: as Kendall concludes from her study of Live Journal, there can be tensions between the necessary blending of social contacts in social sites on the internet and the desire to create diverse presentations of self to those contacts (Kendall, 2007). Di Micco and Millen (2007) also point to the issues users can face when using Facebook, personally and professionally. Indeed, this is something raised by other sites. As boyd (2006) states of Friendster: “It did not take long before the early adopters came face to face with their bosses and high school classmates”. In order to add theoretical richness to this approach I argue that we need to consider the intersection of mainstream and niche sites of socialisation. Having studied various sites over the past 11 years, I am acutely aware that that such sociotechnical arrangements generate a variety of cultures and structures. For example, Gaydar readily allows for creation of polyamorous connections, Facebook does not. Thus, there is

the potential for theories and definitions of socialisation generated from single site studies, to be somewhat lacking.

I believe that the rise in digitally mediated connectivity across social networks is an important phenomenon that is understudied. Therefore, this talk will shed light on the increasing possibility for different aspects of our lives to be revealed to different individuals and groups, intentionally and unintentionally, as a result of engaging with digitally mediated social networking. I argue that there are benefits and problems associated with such increased connectedness and underlying my aim will be an analysis of the mechanisms and/or motivations of such convergences.

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