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The city without gates: Facebook and the social surface

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unsatisfying answer – as we shall see, much of the discursive construction of place and location has informed the language of digital experience.

In this paper I will argue, through an analysis of the social networking service Facebook, that new, social Web platforms constitute a new form of social space – something I have termed a ‘social surface’, which coats and permeates almost every

LITERATURE REVIEW

It will be useful at this point to establish a genealogy of conceptualisations of the sites of social interaction through the last century or so of social theory. By discussing already-existing notions of space –

parts do not necessarily need to be physical – rather, any 'unit of domination' (Foucault, 1991: 145), whether literal or conceptual, can serve to 'organize ... an analytical space' (Foucault, 1991: 143).

When conceptualising the functioning of power, later writers influenced by Foucault tended to focus on his concept of security, which refers to 'the problem of circulation' (Foucault, 2009: 21), that is: 'the temporal and the uncertain, which have to be inserted within a given space' (Foucault, 2009: 20). This notion highlights the difficulty of strictly regulating physical space in a swiftly modernising world, given

urban space in ways which do not always lend themselves to narrative or

according to its physical boundaries – indeed, Simmel refers to 'social thresholds' as joining and separating discrete social spaces (I koric, Ki"juhas and ! koric, 2013: 592) – its sense is constructed according to the social interactions that occur within it, and the distances that dictate the nature and form of those interactions. Space has little conceptual importance in the absence of the social practices through which it is constituted and the distances that define them.

Given the increasingly global nature of cities, understanding their function as frontier spaces is increasingly important. Saskia Sassen states that the global city – that is, one with significant transport and trade links to foreign cities – constitute a 'new frontier zone' through which capital, people and goods must travel in order to traverse national borders (Sassen, 2012: 67). Sassen argues that rather than globalisation bringing

Here it is useful to start with a somewhat more philosophical approach, through which we can develop an understanding of the virtual as constituting the digital equivalent of space and distance. Roberto Diodato argues that 'the virtual has the peculiarity of being an intermediate entity between object and event, thing and image' (Diodato, 2012: 101)

simultaneously occupy the same place, then one object cannot occupy multiple places, Meyrowitz posits that electronic media facilitate a 'doubling of place' – a 'simultaneous "occupation" of two different yet continuous social spaces' (Moore, 2012: 28). This, in itself, is somewhat incongruous to Meyrowitz's model for analysing social interactions – this doubling-up necessarily changes the nature of mediated communications. Whereas physical interactions can only take place in one setting, mediated interactions can operate in parallel to them, thus adding a layer of complexity to any analysis of the latter and effectively altering the prism through which we can view them. Andreas Wittel's work on network sociality also contradicts Meyrowitz's theoretical framework, arguing that social behaviour is seeing a 'change from pre-given relationships to choice' – a shift from the relatively static social relationships and structures of the pre-network age to a more mobile, 'translocal' and subject-

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METHODOLOGY

The research method selected for this dissertation was a combination of mapping exercises and semi-formal interviews conducted one-to-one, in private settings, the data from which was coded and analysed according to principles of thematic analysis.

age, no personal data from any of the respondents was used, and pseudonyms have been provided for each. All respondents read and signed a form detailing the processes and requirements of the research project.

RESULTS

This chapter will comprise both examples of, and some analysis of, the ways the interview candidates interacted with the themes established in the previous chapter. While this is necessarily not exhaustive – any attempt to include and analyse every example present in the data would be impractical and rife with redundancies –

indicates the difficulty in articulating the workings of the platform, and how it impacts upon the respondents' lives.

There is some important information like articles from newspapers abroad, that maybe you wouldn't have any access to if your friends don't post it. I'll give you an example - my friends in Peru, where I was living for a few years, I have a couple of friends. They normally post articles from the local newspapers, and I'm really happy to read them every time, because they keep me updated about what's going on.

Candidate 6

Many will argue that it'll make you much more alienated, isolated from the real world, but I feel like, if anything, it connects me more.

Candidate 3

Here we see the site not only as a system of internal connections, but also as a means by which its users can maintain their own links to the social world or worlds that they inhabit, independent of physical location. This virtualisation of social relationships and connections is a consistent theme throughout most of the interviews. The use of the site to 'stay in touch' or 'keep in touch' with friends, news and other content is of significant interest here, particularly given that these phrases, or variations upon them, were used by all but two of the interviewees: Candidates 6 and 7. The phrases convey a sense of virtual tactility and closeness, in spite of the physical absence implicit in Facebook interactions. This sense of abstraction will be explored further in the following sections.

Abstraction

Most of the respondents referred to somewhat abstract relationships between their 'real' self, and their online self, and the worlds those respective selves inhabit. This served to create a

interacting – a sense that offline interactions are somehow more ‘real’, or better, than those that take place online. This view was articulated in similar terms by Candidates 1, 6, 7 and 8, each of whom expressed some misgivings about the quality of social interaction available through Facebook.

Similarly, a consistent theme among most of the respondents was an apparent disjuncture between Facebook users’ offline and online personalities. Candidate 4 expressed it thus:

There’s a me, yeah, on the screen. ... Well, there’s the me that goes around, walking around, walking to school, buying sandwiches from real people. And then there’s the me in front of the screen, that is producing something for Facebook. So I’m sitting there at a keyboard and

Yeah, I'm more likely to just flick through (mimes scrolling on a smartphone), and not really look unless something interests me. And then I'm like, 'Oh they've put up photos from half

are Facebook proficient, this big blue blob is just surrounding everything. Everything gets sucked into it, like blubber or something like that. Kind of like lava or something...

Candidate 7

My friends are here. They're an audience only in the sense that they're grouped together and I am sort of the centre of that stage. But they're also all doing their own things. Like, they're all on stages and I get to wander around and see what everyone's doing simultaneously, which is a different relationship, I think. So the metaphor of being on a stage and sort of shouting is there, but it's more I'm getting on stage and saying 'ask me questions', or asking people to come up on stage, in a sense. Though of course I'm not asking anyone to do anything - they're all volunteering to do it. ... [They're like] a sort of satellite system feeding into my Wall.

Candidate 4

These descriptions share several common factors. First, they all portray the site in physical language – there is a unifying theme of size, form and movement. Second, they convey a sense of users occupying positions relative to one another, and relative to that of the information held within the site. Third, each description conveys the idea of a system in flux, constantly shifting and evolving as time goes on and the elements within it move one way or another.

The differences lie in how each interviewee saw the user's position and agency, relative to Facebook. For Candidate 6, who elsewhere in his interview spoke of his limited use of the service, it is a place where he can go, which stores photos and other information for him to share or return to later. Candidate 7, who was engaged with but wary of the site, instead pointed to its all-consuming nature, which to him manifests in it absorbing every aspect of its users' lives, thus reducing its users' capacity for agency. Candidate 4, who was the most immersed Facebook user of this group, described it instead almost as a system of essentially

8tracks to listen to music, I can click the 'log in with Facebook', and it's interesting, because I don't think anybody would do that unless it was a one-click login.

Candidate 2

Among the myriad services available online, Facebook constitutes a common thread. Here

dense net of interconnections. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it is a continuous presence in the lives of its inhabitants.

Flatness

Facebook constitutes a flattening of social interaction in both a literal and an abstract sense. The former occurs in users' interactions with the interface itself – as articulated by Candidate 4; the service is interacted with through a screen. This, allied to Candidate 7's reference to the text- and image-based nature of the site, particularly as it is illustrated by Candidate 8's habit of 'flick[ing] through'

Interconnection

The second key thread of this discussion lies in the dense web of connections that make up Facebook. The interviewees described three ways that this is constituted. Candidates 1 and 2 discussed the interlinked nature of the site itself, in its structure and use; Candidates 2, 4, 6 and 8 spoke of how it connects them to media content and other information; and each of the respondents except Candidates 6 and 7 made some reference to the social or interpersonal

base of more wide-ranging research. Indeed, competing models should be developed and compared to this and others. Secondly, similar creative research methods could be adopted, not only in the study of social spaces, but in a wide variety of other areas of sociological research. While more traditional types of research retain their utility, researchers should continue to experiment and think laterally in approaching their work, so that the social sciences may continue to evolve and remain relevant. Technological development and redundancy dictates that researchers' work must forever be increasing in efficiency, particularly as it loses grip on old certainties.

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APPENDIX – INTERVIEW GUIDE

Part 1: Mind-mapping – 10 minutes

Mind-map exercise instructions:

- In the next 10 minutes, using the provided materials, draw a map of Facebook. You can use as much or as little of the page, and as many or few of the pens, as you like. There are no other rules here – you are free to draw your map however, and from whatever angle, you want.
- Materials: 1 piece of A3 paper, coloured felt-tip pens

Part 2: Reflection – 30-60 minutes

Question guide (General – can be departed from):

- **FIRST QUESTION:** In your own words, explain what you've drawn.
- Types of question to ask:
 - Why this shape/colour/space?
 - Why this size? (How is the page used?)
 - Why here?
 - Why is X included?

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