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SOCIAL MEDIA

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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

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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 Chapter 5): 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 previous chapter, 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

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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.

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 Chapter 16), 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,

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[1] An example of a summary of the history of social media can be found at http://historycoop erative.org/the-history-of-social-media/. Another one is available at www.digitaltrends.com/features/the-history-of-social-networking/.

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 Chapter 5.

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 previous chapter, 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 Chapter 4.

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 Chapter 5.

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 bottom-up, 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 Chapter 1, 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 Chapter 8. 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 Chapter 9.

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 Part II 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 Chapter 1, Rainie and Wellman (2012) have described a triple revolution towards what they call networked individualism (see Chapter 5), 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 Chapter 5. 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.

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

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

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.