

Facebook as a third author—(Semi-)automated participation framework in Social Network Sites



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Abstract

Questioning the transparent construction of emerging Web 2.0 discourse communities, this article asks in what ways structural options and restrictions of the *software service* 'Facebook' offer new semiotic resources and set up (novel) conditions for participation. More specifically, it holds that the medium in use and the particular software service acts as a *kind of third author*. The electronic environment and its functional properties facilitate and delimit a variety of discourse patterns and thus intervene in the communication between profile owner and profile recipients.

To assess the impact of the electronic environment on user participation within Facebook, the present article will first introduce the notion of (technological) affordances and discuss characteristic 'action possibilities' that are typically offered by Social Network Sites. It will then give background information on general features of participation in online environments and identify key functions of the Facebook environment. On the basis of these findings, the article will discuss how Facebook's communicative properties enable and constrain textual practices and social interaction (functional affordances). Data from actual Facebook members give weight to how individuals adapt in different ways to software-biased action possibilities (relational affordances).

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1. The 'affordances' of Social Network Sites

Innovations in technology have always intermingled in various ways with the communicative practices and wider social customs of a society. Murray (2000) points to a correlation between the invention of the printing press and the promotion of individualism, nationalism, and secularism in society, while Ebersbach et al. (2008) have shown that early programmers in the 1960s working on the same 'dumb terminal'¹ started to exchange electronic messages and developed a collective team spirit. In this sense, current Social Network Sites (SNS) are the latest link in a chain of technologies that have not only facilitated certain tasks, but have brought forward new social spaces where people construct and perform all kinds of interactional practices (Eisenlauer, 2011).

Such an intertwining of new communication technologies with innovations in peoples' communicative and social actions is reflected in the notion of 'affordances'. Coined by Gibson in 1977, the term refers, in the broadest sense, to 'action possibilities' afforded by an object or an environment in relation to social actors and their individual capabilities. In this sense, a newspaper is not likely to afford the act of reading to a toddler, but would be a suitable object for crumpling up or ripping apart. In a similar way, the affordances of information technologies interrelate with distinct practices of mediated discourse

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¹ An early computer terminal with no processing capabilities.

and patterns of actions. As Hutchby (2006) shows for radio and television talk, “different genres of media talk have their own frameworks of participation and dynamics of address that operate within, and necessarily shape, the ‘message’ that reaches the audience at home” (Hutchby, 2006: 21). Drawing on the notion of ‘affordances’ as developed by Gibson (1977) and modified by Hutchby (2001, 2006), this study is concerned with the medial framing of human agency and participation in current SNS. In line with Hutchby’s (2001) distinction between functional and relational affordances, it is dedicated to two questions in particular: In relation to the functional affordances, it reflects on the ways the ‘material substratum’, here Facebook’s communicative properties, enable and constrain textual practices and social interaction (see Sections 4 and 5). In terms of relational affordances, it asks how individual users adapt in different ways to Facebook-biased action possibilities (Section 6).

There is considerable research on SNS and common objects of investigation concern the key features of SNS (boyd and Ellison, 2007²; Richter and Koch, 2007), identity creation (Livingstone, 2008; Bolander and Locher, 2010) and friendship performance (boyd, 2006). Livingstone (2008) investigates teenagers’ practices of social networking and identifies opportunities and risks that interrelate with affordances of different SNS³. As the author shows, teenagers are well aware of the multiple options different SNS offer for presenting oneself. Accordingly, they make use of different SNS services at different stages of their lives. According to the author, the software and its standardized templates have only a minor impact on self-presentation:

In terms of affordances, then, social networking sites frame, but do not determine. It remains open to young people to select a more or less complex representation of themselves linked to a more or less wide network of others. (Livingstone, 2008: 402)

boyd and Ellison (2007) devote considerable attention to the question of what constitutes a SNS and describe the construction of a personal profile and the articulation of a list of network friends as the most central features. In line with the relational aspect of technological affordances, the authors also point out that the dominant community of a specific SNS does not necessarily coincide with the user group the software developers originally targeted. O’Riordan et al. (2011) reflect on the functional affordances of SNS in order to learn about the impact of the software service on discovering and consuming music. In relation to functional affordances, the authors distinguish between ‘Social Functional Affordances’ and ‘Content Functional Affordances’. Social Functional Affordances concern SNS properties that affect interpersonal relations, i.e. functionalities supporting the creation and maintenance of a personal profile as well as services for connecting and interacting with other users. Content Functional Affordances cover those SNS tools that enable the generation, distribution, and retrieval of content. Though the authors acknowledge that contents in the form of “cultural goods [. . .] are used in SNS as a means of acquiring and maintaining friendship networks” (O’Riordan et al., 2011: online), they give no information on how this connects to their division into Social and Content Functional Affordances. boyd (2010) lists four key characteristics of SNS which impact the ways members present and share information and how they interact with each other: *Profiles* provide spaces where members may present themselves and where they may gather and interact with other members. In addition, profiles also let members control their individual (privacy) settings and are thus influential in the creation and/or limitation of potential audience(s). *Friends lists* provide records of who members are connected with. Such public articulations of network connections provide information on the intended audience and its individual (sociolinguistic) rules to which the members’ behavior is adjusted. *Public commenting tools* allow members to generate texts and comments on their own and/or befriended members’ profiles. As such, public commenting tools result in conversations among two or more members, who simultaneously perform acts of social connections in front of broader audiences. *Stream-based updates* disperse and re-display user-generated texts and comments on the profiles of a particular member’s network contacts. In doing so, “the running stream gives participants a general sense of those around them” (boyd, 2010: 6). In her discussion boyd (2010) relates these SNS key characteristics to the more general architecture of network publics and contrasts bits with atoms as architectural building blocks. In her view

the affordances of networked publics are fundamentally shaped by the properties of bits, the connections between bits, and the way that bits and networks link people in new ways. (boyd, 2010: 4)

When people connect within and with the help of software services such as Facebook, the ‘properties of bits’ surface in innovative ways to amplify, record and distribute information. More specifically, these transformations concern, according to boyd (2008), the automatic recording and archiving of online texts (*persistence*), the easy duplication of text data (*replicability*), the effortless distribution of content (*scalability*) and the access to content via search engines (*searchability*).

² Note that danah m. boyd spells her name using lowercase letters.

³ i.e. MySpace, Bebo and Facebook.

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