



# Governance within social media websites: Ruling new frontiers

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## ABSTRACT

Governance within social media websites can be evaluated in terms of conformity to or transgression of external legal requirements, social mores, and economic incentives. By examining social media websites as frontiers and heterotopias in which rule is indeterminate, this paper explores the way rule is established and changed. The authors illustrate this approach using the case of changing governance within Formspring.

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## 1. Introduction

By February 2011, Facebook had over 250 million users in the US (Nielsen Company, 2011), and the number of Facebook users in the Arab world almost doubled between 2009 and 2010 (Dubai School of Government, 2011). Twitter, YouTube, Foursquare, Yelp, Google+, Formspring, and innumerable other sites capture attention and are places to visit in cyberspace. In short, social media and Web 2.0 have changed the way people interact. This article's purpose is to look more closely at political processes within social media websites. Social media websites are not simply ways to communicate – the digital equivalent of Christmas letters or conference calls. Instead, websites are *sites* on which interaction happens. Consequently, there is a politics within the sites. Social media websites are governed, and the way in which they come to be governed is a political process. Examining the rules that arise within the political spaces created by new media has been the subject of research from a variety of fields, including business (McGhee, Bayzick, Kontostathis, Edwards, McBride, & Jakubowski, 2011), human factors (Ballam & Fullwood, 2010), sociology (Konieczny, 2009), computer science (Rojanakul & Liang, 2009), communication (Falvey, 2011; Humphreys, 2005), and political science (Dorbeck-Jung, Vrielink, Gosselt, van Hoof, & de Jong, 2010; Wong & Welch, 2004). This article extends this research to examine social media websites as spaces of evolving governance in which operative rules may transgress or conform to external social norms.

A focused case study, Formspring, provides an example of a social media website that can be understood as a heterotopic cyberfrontier. A heterotopia, to borrow the term used by Michel Foucault, is an *other space*. The neologism describes “counter-sites ... in which the real sites ... are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). The term heterotopia captures the ambiguous duality of websites: they are both real and virtual. Websites exist on computers that are located in the physical world and that require real world things like software, electricity, and people to operate. Yet these social media websites simultaneously create a virtual space, a space apart in which people can interact without being together in the real world. Furthermore, the nomenclature itself – that these are websites – emphasizes that these are imagined places. They are frontiers in cyberspace because the creation of such a website carves out a new place of interaction in which the rules for participation are skeletal and open to interpretation and revision. These are frontier-like places in that the ruling order is unsettled, and governance is contested and evolving.

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Despite the sense within some social media websites that the rules are up for grabs, governance within the site is always situated in the context of and subject to multiple external (Kobrin, 1998) and internal powers. By examining the tension between the extant rules outside the site and the frontier-like and heterotopic qualities of the site, this paper looks at how governance emerges within the site. Specifically, the paper examines rules that conform to or transgress generally accepted external rules.<sup>1</sup> Does transgressive behavior become the rule for the site (the site itself becomes transgressive), or does someone (the site owners, some site participants) force a halt to transgressive behavior (site governance changes to conform to external rules)? The extent to which a website conforms to or transgresses external legal requirements, social mores, and economic incentives will depend on the balance of powers and coincidence of interests among the various agents involved: governments, society (more diffusely), advertisers and investors, site owners, site users, and others.

This paper proceeds in section two with an introduction to the methodology: an abductive and analyticist approach to generating a model and an interpretivist method of evaluating the empirical evidence. The two following sections provide the theoretical discussion. Section three develops a model of governance within websites in terms of the external rules and the rules emerging from within the site. Section 4 introduces the heterotopic cyberfrontier as a way of understanding the contestation of governance on some social media websites. In Section 5, the focused case study of Formspring.me shows how the site exhibited characteristics of a heterotopic cyberfrontier and how governance on the site evolved through iterative changes to rules implemented by the site. Section 6 offers concluding comments.

## 2. Methodology: Analyticist model building, abduction, and interpretivist methods

The methodology draws upon insights from analyticist model building, abduction, and interpretivist methods to provide a compelling (but intentionally *not* uncontested<sup>2</sup>) way of thinking about the evolution of governance within social media websites. The ontological position of this paper is analyticist. In analyticist model-building, “what researchers do is to order analytically the empirical data in accord with a model the worth of which lies *not* in its correspondence to the world, but in its pragmatic consequences for ordering the facts of the world” (Jackson, 2010, p. 115, *stress in the original*).

The model is developed through abduction, a form of logical inference that draws upon practical reasoning (Peirce, 1994) and that is often referred to as inference to the best explanation (Douven, 2011). A better rendering is inference to an explanation that allows the observer to make sense of the situation and to act in the world. Abduction is increasingly recognized as an appropriate approach to research (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Smorti, 2008; Walters & Vayda, 2009).

Using abduction as the logical foundation of the inquiry grounds the study in a pragmatist approach to research (Hellman, Rytovuori-Apunen, Friedrichs, Sil, Kornprobst, & Jackson, 2009). The value of the conclusions that are drawn comes in their usefulness for making sense of the politics within social media websites and the way in which the perhaps surprising or thought-provoking results open up opportunities for public responses and policies that had not been evident previously. Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009) suggest that case selection for abduction should be based on important or typical cases, but selection may be serendipitous, as indeed this was, because it is the puzzling instance that sparks the abductive theorizing. Formspring was chosen because the authors became aware of the site and harassing posts on it by happenstance. The case selection can also be considered a convenience sample (Johnson & Joslyn, 1995).

The case is analyzed using an interpretivist method, for which the goal is to uncover a deeper understanding of phenomena, rather than to accept or reject a specific hypothesis (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). Interpretivist methods do not allow for strong claims of generalizability, nor do they present a final answer to the research question. Instead, the research endeavor is one of making sense of the case in a way that may, but will not necessarily, be generalizable.

The data comes in the form of words: the content of documents for the site, including using archived copies of early pages accessed through the Internet Archive Wayback Machine (Internet Archive, n.d.), and observation of posts made by users.<sup>3</sup> The site documents include the homepage of the site itself, the terms of service, the privacy policy, and other rules that were accessible from links on the website. Each version of the site documents available in the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, as well as the documents available online at the time the research was being conducted, were evaluated. Changes to the content of these documents over time was noted. The authors identified publicly available users' pages by searching for common names and using those pages that were openly accessible. In some cases, finding one openly accessible page led to the discovery of others. No users were contacted since the purpose was observation of interactions among users and interpretation of the discourse, rather than interviews.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Transgression,” as discussed in the next section and in the conclusion, need not be morally bad.

<sup>2</sup> “An abductive suggestion ... is something whose truth can be questioned or even denied” (Peirce, 1994, para. 186).

<sup>3</sup> The request for an interview was made through the link for media inquiries on the Formspring site. The request was declined by Sarajane Sacchetti, then head of Marketing and Communications for Formspring, due to other pressing demands on the staff's time (S. Sacchetti, personal communication, June 28, 2011). Consequently, the research was conducted using publicly available texts. Though the Johns Hopkins University Homewood Institutional Review Board determined that this study was exempt, many Formspring users are children and many of the posts are embarrassing or ill-advised. While anonymity cannot be provided to the users since they have made their posts public, identifying information in this article has been limited.

<sup>4</sup> All site documents and screenshots of user pages used in the study have been downloaded and are on file with the author.

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