



“Seek the meek, seek the just”: Social media and social justice ☆, ☆ ☆



Amit M. Schejter^{a,b,*}, Noam Tirosh^a

^a Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, POB 653, Beer Sheva 84105, Israel

^b Penn State University, PA, United States

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ABSTRACT

The latest development of media technology brought about the proliferation of a new media form more often than not dubbed as “social media,” however the catchy “social media” descriptor has not been helpful in surfacing the challenges this new media form raises for governance. In this study we try to tackle that difficulty by addressing the impact on policy of both the four characteristics that we have previously established as making contemporary media stand out from the mass media that preceded them – abundance (of content), mobility, interactivity, and multi-mediality – and their capability to enrich information and make its transference more effective. To do so, we propose to adopt the framework of “social justice” to their governance by describing the philosophy of utilitarianism and its effect on media policy in the twentieth century and preferring the competing twentieth century philosophies of John Rawls and Amartya Sen as the theoretical bases for a new governance framework of social media.

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1. Introduction

The latest developments in media technology brought about the proliferation of a new media form often described as “social media.” However, this catchy descriptor has not been helpful to generate a conversation on whether this technology serves the public’s interest and how, even though social media have raised a variety of concerns ranging from their impacts on the lives of young people and families (O’Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011) to their roles in social and democratic life (i.e. Loader & Mercea, 2011). In order to contribute to a more informed debate about the policies that should address such concerns, we offer in this study an approach based on a comprehensive definition of contemporary social media that emanates from their unique characteristics and their social and democratic potential. We suggest that the unique characteristics of contemporary media call for the adoption of a regulatory framework based on redistributive justice concerns that will contribute to the unleashing of their potential to contribute to the public good.

☆ Zephaniah 2:3 (Douay-Rheims Bible).

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: schejter@gmail.com (A.M. Schejter).

We start by stating that contemporary social media, the “communication technologies that enable the maintenance of the links between individuals and the personal and cultural networks to which they wish to belong” (Schejter & Tirosh, 2012) are undergoing a technological transition, which makes them stand out from the mass media that preceded them. The characteristics – interactivity, mobility, abundance and multi-mediality (Schejter & Tirosh, 2014) – allow information communicated by individuals to be rich (Daft & Lengel, 1984), and its transfer intimate and immediate (Biocca & Harms, 2002), and as a result contribute to a new form of mediated sociability.

We propose that through understanding social media’s unique characteristics, one can better evaluate the implications of these media’s potential to contribute to the public good, based on their enhanced capabilities to offer users interaction at any time from any place, while accessing large quantities of information, which can be transferred in a variety of forms. We argue, however, that materializing the opportunities to contribute to the greater good presented by social media requires the introduction of a new framework to media policy debates: a framework focused on the fair distribution of access to these media’s characteristics and on the ability to use them.

To reach this goal, we claim that the utilitarian philosophy of justice governing media policy in recent decades will have to be replaced by a redistributive philosophy of justice developed in the latter part of the twentieth century by John Rawls and by Amartya Sen, who while lauding Rawls’ approach, proposed additional measures required to reach just policies, measures we find to be in line with the new capabilities social media offer. Rawls’s and Sen’s theoretical approaches to distributional justice are pertinent not only because of their prominence in, and influence on, Western thought, but also because of the fact that they challenge utilitarianism effectively and propose viable intellectual alternatives. While Rawls’s work was mostly theoretical, Sen’s contribution and development of theory has been influential in changing welfare economics in the developing and developed world.

We suggest that translating Rawlsian and Senian philosophies into the realm of media policy debates, would require a focus on distribution of the means to communicate; to provide those who do not have access to social media with such access; and to ensure those least advantaged in the contemporary media ecosystem can communicate and express themselves while keeping their social presence high within the enriched media environment.

2. The social significance of social media

Scholarly uses, as well as everyday practice, have labeled the media of the second decade of the twenty-first century “social media” as if it is their “sociality” that differentiates them from the generations of media that preceded them. However, the term “social media” is an elusive term, which is used to describe different things by different authors (Schejter & Tirosh, 2012). In particular, “social media” has been equated with “user-generated content” (e.g., Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis, & Mishne, 2008) or with “Web 2.0” (e.g., Kaplan & Haenlin, 2010). Others have gone as far as stating that “[social media] has little to do with traditional information media use” (Correa, 2010, p. 247). This is a limiting understanding of media as it overlooks the social commonalities between communication technologies both new and old.

Social media are “communication technologies that enable the maintenance of the links between individuals and the personal and cultural networks to which they wish to belong” (Schejter & Tirosh, 2012). This definition encompasses “old” mass media such as radio and television, “old” interpersonal media such as the telephone, and contemporary “new” media, such as the mobile Internet. When using this definition one can include social networking applications (such as: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and the like) in a richer and broader social media environment instead of highlighting them as the exemplars of social media.

Yet, contemporary social media are “social” in a different way than the social media that preceded them. To understand why, one needs to identify the differences in the social experience each medium affords its users. While the traditional electronic media environment has always been a social environment, its sociability was limited. Its leading technologies were the telephone, radio and television. The first is an interpersonal medium in which two individuals at a time could converse using only voice. The other two enabled large corporations or governments (depending on which country you lived in) to disseminate sounds, images and moving images to mass audiences, although unidirectionally. Indeed, both interpersonal and mass electronic media were stationary and the amount of information they could carry was limited. The distinction between personal and mass media was straightforward.

The situation is different in contemporary media that enable “mass-self communication” (Castells, 2007, p. 248). These new media can be described simultaneously as “mass communication,” “multimodal,” and “self generated in content, self directed in emission and self selected in reception” (Castells, 2007). Yet, what differentiates them from their predecessors is not that they are social, or that they are new, but that they create an opportunity for a new type of mediated sociability. This opportunity is created because contemporary media are unlike their predecessors in that for their users they are at the same time (a) interactive; (b) have the potential to be mobile; (c) have the potential to access, deliver and store infinite amounts of data; and (d) create the potential for users to express themselves in a variety of ways utilizing written words, sounds, images and moving images, all or any at any given time. These four characteristics: interactivity, mobility, abundance, and multi-mediality (Schejter & Tirosh, 2014) have a crucial influence on the social communication process and on its implications.

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