Facebook as a Tool for Producing Sociality and Connectivity

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Abstract

This article investigates whether social media in general—using Facebook as an example—warrant identification of a new public sphere, another private sphere, or a different corporate sphere, as some scholars have argued. It is argued that social media platforms neither warrant a recalibration of Habermas' public sphere, nor a conscious blending of spheres. Rather, social media platforms form a contested space where private, public and corporate interests compete to produce new norms of sociality and connectivity. In order to understand the dynamics of social media, it is not enough to revamp existing social theory of networks, to polish up legal frames, or to reintroduce political-economic schemes. We need to connect these theories and come up with an analytical model that accounts for the complexities of the various interests interpenetrating the new space of mediated communication.

Introduction

"It won't be finished. That's the point. The way fashion is never finished," replies the fictional Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) after his companion Eduard Saverin (Andrew Garfield) has asked him when The Facebook, the social media site they just launched, will be finished. David Fincher's movie *The Social Network* (2010) dramatizes Facebook's tumultuous first years after its creation in 2004. The movie's three storylines illustrate how the world's largest social media platform emerged amid a

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battle for power. First, there is the story of a genius inventor, Mark Zuckerberg, who codes students' social behavior into algorithms and interfaces—technologies that end up at the heart of people's everyday routines. Second, there is the narrative of the indignant twins Tyler and Cameron Winklevoss who take Zuckerberg to court for intellectual property theft because he allegedly stole their idea for a site called the Harvard Connection. And finally, there is the story of a misjudged entrepreneur, Eduard Saverin, whose failed attempts at finding a business model befitting his friend's digital creation are, in his view, rewarded with betrayal and dismissal. The movie tells a typical story of success, envy, and greed; depending on whose perspective they chose, viewers will regard the characters as tragic heroes, ruthless impediments, or involuntary victims of a young man on his way to success.[1]

On a more philosophical level, Facebook's fictional history relates the skirmishes and clashes inaugurating the tumultuous growth of web 2.0 media platforms in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The three storylines emblematize seminal aspects of a much larger social phenomenon: the changing social norms for communication and (public) debate, the transformation of legal norms concerning the private sphere and privacy, and the makeover of conventional business models. This article explores social, legal, and economic facets of this phenomenon, starting off with the question whether social media in general—using Facebook as an example—warrant identification of a new *public* sphere, another *private* sphere, or a different *corporate* sphere, as some scholars have argued. I will argue that social media platforms are less a recalibration of these spheres; rather, the complex interpenetration of spheres typifies our current culture where sociality and connectivity are increasingly produced through networked platforms. A continuous stream of informal communication—associative ideas, interests, tastes, hearsay, likes, dislikes, buzz, and news—is generated by digital platforms and is gradually becoming a substantial new communication space. Social network sites (SNSs) like Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Linkedin, as well as user-generated content (UGC) sites such as YouTube, Wikipedia, Blogger, and MySpace have rapidly conquered and divided this communication space into specific niches for social networking, microblogging, exchanging pictures, video sharing, and so on. Rather than being finished products, these platforms are the sociotechnical engines of trends in communication that, just like fashion, are never finished and thus constantly evolving.

To investigate the ideology underpinning this cultural change, three questions based on Jurgen Habermas's (1989 [1962]) theory of communication and the transformation of the public sphere will structure my argument in this article. First, do social media platforms warrant the emergence of a new public sphere? I will explain why I think there is no need for identifying a new public sphere, but why Habermas's concept is nonetheless significant in understanding how the convergence of spherical interests affects the nature of communicative action. Second, I will discuss whether social media transform the private sphere, challenging our norms for personal communication as well as our privacy laws. What is important to understand about social network sites is how they activate relational impulses, which are in turn input for algorithmically configured connections—relationships wrapped in code—generating a kind of engineered

sociality. Third, this article raises the question whether social media platforms should be squarely put into the corporate sphere because their operation is substantially defined by market forces and commodity exchange. Even though communicative traffic on social media platforms seems determined by social values such as popularity, attention, and connectivity, they are impalpably translated into monetary values and redressed in business models made possible by digital technology.

Using *The Social Network* as an illustration, I will explore the sociopolitical, legal, and economic dimensions of emerging social media platforms. My argument will show that there is less need for articulating a "new" sphere or spherical concept but more need for theorizing *how* this communicative space is contested by public, private, state, and corporate actors fighting to dominate the rules for social interaction.

Social Media Platforms: A New Public Sphere?

An early scene in *The Social Network* relates how Zuckerberg, one night in 2003, downloads pictures and names of all female students living at his Harvard dorm, to create a website called "FaceMash." The site prompts male students to iteratively choose which of two girls presented on the screen is more attractive, using an algorithm based on the principle "who-is-hot-and-who-is-not." When the site becomes an instant hit in all of the dorms, the imploding Harvard computer network alarms the university administration. Zuckerberg becomes the designated villain of the female half of the college community and gets punished by six months of academic probation, not for violating the social mores of interaction between the sexes but for bringing down parts of Harvard's computer network. The scene epitomizes a transforming social realm, a realm that thrives on the exchange of tastes, feelings, and preferences. In fact, FaceMash literally translated a social code into a technical one: intuitive judgments prompted by engineered popularity rankings and processed by algorithms relating individual evaluations to those of others, resulting in a "collective opinion." These principles underpinning FaceMash later became the rationale for Facebook, which initially, like its predecessor, served as a social network for students.

Not long after Facebook's debut, in the early stages of social media platforms, the question arose whether this new kind of mediated sociality presented a new type of public sphere. Terms such as *democracy*, *collectivity*, and *participation* implicitly borrowed Habermas's model of political communication to argue the value of these platforms as new carriers of the public sphere. Habermas (1989) described the transformation of the public sphere between the eighteenth and the twentieth century as a structural conversion of institutionalized social life. In doing so, he positioned the public sphere between the private sphere, or the realm where people work, exchange goods, and maintain their families, and the "sphere of Public Authority," or the realm of the state, the law, and the ruling class (Habermas 1989, 30). The bourgeois public sphere was a sphere where private people came together for discussion and to exchange opinion—an arena for debate rather than for commercial transactions. During the short historical flourishing of the public sphere in the eighteenth century, the social

structures for exchange were coffee houses and salons—meeting places separated from those of the established powers of state and church and unfiltered by market forces. However, the rise of the public sphere was short-lived; its demise, starting at the end of the eighteenth century, was driven by specific social circumstances, such as the emergence of a commercial press, growing literacy rates, and more access to printed literature. The sphere of rational arguments, independent from both market and state, was destroyed by the same forces that initially established it. Printed mass media became a tool for political manipulation as well as a medium for advertisements and as a result, the public sphere transformed into a discourse in which "state authority was publicly monitored through informed and critical discourse by the people" (Habermas 1989, xi). The principle of publicity activated by the people was taken over by state powers and commercial forces, which took control over communication flows, thus influencing people's social behavior and political preference through rhetorical and publishing strategies.

When the internet first evolved, some scholars thought its technological potential would significantly alter the public sphere back to its original or pure state; they welcomed the internet's endless opportunities for interactive exchange as a new technological structure allowing a plurality of unfiltered voices (Bohrman and Roberts 2004; Slevin 2000). Others asserted that "electronic coffee houses" or "digital salons" signaled a desirable return to the unregulated exchange of public opinion in an eighteenth-century setting—a setting in which salons were supposedly independent of central authority and of market forces (Rheingold 2000). Yet other academics asserted that SNSs and UGC sites, being freed of institutional confines, provided semi-public ways to enact relationships and express opinions (Barlow 2007, 2008). Benkler (2006) launched the term "networked public sphere" to proclaim the new *nonstate, nonmarket* sector of information and emphasizes the internet as a technological infrastructure that facilitates the unfettered exchange of voices and opinions. The presumption that social media platforms are untainted by state forces at the level of political communication and untouched by market forces at the level of political economy has prevailed for quite some time, despite ardent criticism.

At the level of political communication, the concept of the public sphere has often been misinterpreted when transferred to the contemporary digital domain. Ideally, according to Habermas, the public sphere brings together isolated opinions in order for the public's collective opinions to result in informed decision. Habermas himself, in a 2006 speech, seriously questioned the internet as a viable new public sphere arguing that "the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world instead lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated public issues" (Habermas 2006, 423). Social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Blogger, etc.) are anything but "free spaces" where opinions are negotiated so that collective opinions can be formed. Notions of internet platforms as spaces for deliberative democracy informed the assumption that they constitute a specific (civic) sphere, contradicting Habermas's critical assessment (Dahlgren 2009; Dahlgren and Olsson 2007). For one thing, as Dean (2010) has pointed out in her

criticism of the alleged democratic potential of social media, they capture their users in intensive networks of enjoyment, production, and surveillance. Ironically, they may prohibit individuals from engaging in real collective political organizing but transform engagement into a "point-and-click" politics that is ineffective as a social tool. Second, although the internet is often celebrated as a new space for democratic freedom, it is open to the influence of government censorship, for instance, in China, Russia, and Iran. As Morozov (2011) has made abundantly clear in his work on the use of social media platforms in Eastern European and Middle Eastern states, exchanges via these platforms are vulnerable to repressive monitoring and state censorship. Morozov convincingly argues how Twitter, for instance, was never the alleged "liberating" platform in the 2009 Iranian uprising; instead, its log files were used to monitor active members of the Iranian resistance and to communicate the news outside Iran.

At the level of political economy, it is impossible to disregard the influence of the market in defining the meaning of this new realm of communication. The internet in general—and social media platforms in particular—is not just a vehicle for *facilitating* connections but also manifests itself as a medium for *forging* connections between people, ideas, and things. The "millions of fragmented chat rooms" that Habermas identified are increasingly steered by techno-commercial structures that are even more inscrutable and hierarchically structured than the old media apparatuses (Gerhards and Schafer 2010; Dahlberg 2007; Hindman, 2010). For Habermas, the public sphere is only possible in a noncorporate, collectivist (communist) culture. Despite the abundant rhetoric of "sharing" and "produsing" used in corporate manifestoes, common ownership is hard to find in web 2.0 (van Dijck and Nieborg 2009). In the Western world, corporate platforms make up the bulk of social media, leaving only a small percentage of noncommercial platforms, notably Wikipedia and several file-sharing sites.[2] Unless alternative ownership models are developed, digital platforms would never meet Habermas's criteria for the public sphere. I will return to the issues of "incorporation" in the last section of this article.

So did the emergence of many new social media platforms fail to bring the rehabilitation of Habermas's ideal public sphere? And if so, is Habermas's theory still pertinent to the digital age? While the first question must be answered in the affirmative, I still dare argue that Habermas's original model of thinking, if interpreted properly, bears relevance to understanding the function of social media platforms. One of the problems with labeling the internet or web 2.0 as a "new" public sphere is its erroneous classification as an *enabling* instrument for social interaction. Habermas, however, does not see the public sphere as a communicative domain that facilitates the free exchange of ideas, but defines it as a social space through which norms for communication and interaction are *produced*. In other words, Habermas believes media channels to be a formative part in the creation of collective public knowledge and opinion and concludes that most web-based media platforms fall short in fulfilling this function.

Another problem with the uncritical adaptation of the notion of public sphere by internet enthusiasts is its imprecision; Habermas's model, in fact, separates the various spheres (public, state, private, and corporate) from the mechanisms that *link* them. In

his analysis of the rise and fall of the public sphere, Habermas distinguishes two politically relevant areas of communication: "the system of informal, personal, nonpublic opinions on the one hand, and on the other hand that of formal, institutionally authorized opinions" (Habermas 1989, 245). The first area consists basically of verbalized attitudes, feelings, tastes—primordial opinions or small talk—which are typically exchanged within the family, peer groups, or among acquaintances at work. Public opinions are "systems of norms demanding adaptation" and they circulate inconsequentially, through "'fashions' whose shifting rules require only temporary loyalty" (Habermas 1989, 246). These quasi-official, informal opinions do not fulfill the requirements of rational-critical debate required in the formal mode of public opinion exchange, but both areas are intimately linked through specific channels of publicity. Opinion polls, according to Habermas, are the apex of such publicity channels. Mass media massage individual opinions into group views, after which they are distributed as "collective opinion" (240). By using such publicity strategies, mass media gradually infiltrated the formal public sphere, where they "corrupted" collective opinion making by introducing mechanisms beneficial to corporate and government interests.

In the internet age, social network sites capitalizing on "primordial opinions and small talk" form the linking mechanism to the formal public sphere. Informal discourse, previously expressed verbally and ephemerally, is now generated, registered, and manipulated via publicly available channels. Platforms like Facebook support (informal) sociality—chat, talk, verbal exchange of taste, gossip, reflections—deploying sophisticated technological mechanisms that both inscribe preexisting norms for behavior and interaction and at the same time challenge these norms. Zuckerberg's creation of "FaceMash" illustrates how a formalized mechanism mediates an informal discursive process grounded in a mode of behavior. Harvard's female students were outraged not by the existence of informal social behavior—after all, male students had always ranked their attractiveness and popularity—but by the *publication* and *manipulation* of heretofore informal conduct. The informal discourse is generated and ousted by a new channel of publicity that enables all peers to participate in the process of ranking. As becomes evident in the remainder of the movie *The Social Network*, this form of mediated sociality quickly gains terrain because students massively adapt to new norms of sociality, such as the ranking of popularity, allowing Facebook to begin its march up the rank(ing)s of social media platforms. Like its successor, FaceMash *brokered* sociality, rather than simply mediating it. It channeled informal behavior via algorithms engineered to produce connections between people on the basis of their articulated opinions.

Social media platforms are thus not inaugurating a new public sphere, but they are communicative instruments that formalize and inscribe a heretofore informal discourse that was always already part of the public sphere, hence reconfiguring our norms for sociality and social conduct. Digital hardware, like servers and platforms, are not simply preexisting infrastructures facilitating communication, but their development and deployment is part of a power struggle to recalibrate communicative norms in the public sphere. New strategies of publication are to collect informal opinions through algorithmically engineered digital methods, and next oust this information into the formal

public sphere of mass media—newspapers, radio, television. For instance, news organizations may report that "40% of all Twitter messages this morning are about the disqualification of the national team," or a television announcer promotes a band saying "they have already built quite a following on MySpace and Twitter." Informal communication is no longer informal nor ephemeral, but every message is eternalized in digital space: you may (verbally) express a personal judgment, but publishing it on the web is a different strategy altogether. Or, as Zuckerberg's fictional ex-girlfriend Erica in *The Social Network* angrily remarks when they unexpectedly meet again: "The Internet is not written in pencil, Mark, it's written in ink and you published that Erica Albright is a bitch."

Social Media Platforms: A New Private Sphere?

Social media platforms produce forms of sociality that not only transform the public sphere but also change the rules governing the (protection of the) private sphere. One of the most painful moments for Facebook's creator in *The Social Network* is when litigators preparing for the lawsuit filed by the Winklevoss twins—who accuse Zuckerberg of intellectual property theft—dig up Instant Messages sent by Zuckerberg while at Harvard. These messages portray Facebook's founder as being rude, insensitive, and arrogant toward his peers. The movie script emphasizes the ultimate irony when the champion of openness is publicly adjudicated on the basis of intimate, private information that was involuntarily ousted into the legal domain when he himself has been engaged in ongoing social and legal battles with its users for resetting the norms of privacy since 2004. In defense of the many criticisms launched at Facebook for breaking privacy rules and diminishing one's control over private information entrusted to the site, Zuckerberg responded in public by saying that his main goal was to make the world a "more open place" and that privacy was "an evolving social norm" (Zuckerberg quoted in Vargas 2010). And this is exactly what Facebook has done to the private sphere: it opened up information meant to be read by selected individuals to the public eye, thus pushing the social norms and legal boundaries of privacy. Private behavior, as one of the movie's characters clarifies, is "a relic of a time gone by."

A relevant concern in relation to privacy is, Do social media platforms represent a new private sphere? In order to answer this question, it is worthwhile to recall the interpenetration of several spheres in Habermas's original model. In his view, the public sphere mediates between the private sphere and the sphere of public authority; the private and public sphere are part of the "institutional orders" of the life world. The private sphere refers both to the "intimate private sphere" and to the market, or the domain where people work, exchange goods, and maintain their families. In the eighteenth century, the intimate private sphere was reflected in the new architecture of family homes, containing living rooms and bedrooms, in addition to salons or large dining rooms. Found under one and the same roof, living room and salon served as extensions of each other: the "privacy of the one was oriented toward the public nature

of the other" (Habermas 1989, 50). Disclosure of private information was always already oriented toward an audience, as evidenced by two popular eighteenth-century genres: diaries, considered an imprint of the soul, and letters, regarded as a conversation with one's self addressed to another person. Strategic styling of a private self into a public persona, then, is hardly a new phenomenon (McNeill 2009; Arosio 2010). Just like Habermas's eighteenth-century example, disclosure of private information via blogs or platforms is often a publicity strategy. Blogs may well be seen as twenty-first-century diaries and Facebook as a new type of "published conversation." By tactically handling control buttons, users decide whether they want to share their information with friends, a larger circle of friends of friends, or with the public at large. The disclosure of private information is inevitably coupled to a desire to increase one's visibility: the most popular people on Facebook are those whose identity construction is most actively participated in by others (Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais 2009).

In consciously deploying the tactic of disclosing private information to boost one's public persona and to build relationships, Facebook users do not fundamentally change the relation between the private and the public sphere in setting the norms for sociality. What does challenge these norms, though, is the fact that Facebook triggers the disclosure of personal information in exchange for participation. For instance, users are prompted to disclose their relationship status or sexual preference in their profile (while leaving a blank in this instance is bound to raise even more questions). Facebook, perhaps more than any other social network site, has stretched the boundaries of the private sphere by pressing its users to divulge intimate details to a general audience (Youngs 2009; Grimmelmann 2009). Legal scholars in particular have argued that social media are "polluters" or "diffusers" of the private sphere. As Grimmelmann shows in his lucid analysis of Facebook's privacy policy, its bottom line is that "*any* personal information users upload may become publicly available" (Grimmelmann 2009, 1183). Social media's trade-off between disclosure and making connections is a grey area where laws scarcely apply. Legal information specialists have addressed the applicability of key legal concepts to web 2.0 platforms, including disclosure, exposure, dispossession, breach of confidentiality, defamation, and trust (Solove 2008; Nissenbaum 2010; Raynes-Goldie 2010). Courts often wield a sharp dichotomy between private (secret) and public information, but in the context of social media, the private–public dichotomy is fuzzy and therefore a poor basis for the right to privacy (Nissenbaum 2010, 120). In response, legal scholars have called for a recalibration of traditional legal concepts to tackle the social norms that are quickly transforming as a result of web 2.0 practices.

In contrast to this call for sharper boundaries between private and public in the context of social media, communication scholar Papacharissi (2010) hails the private sphere as the new nexus of sociality and public engagement. The "new" private sphere on the internet is a peculiar mixture of private and public, which she considers to be overlapping spheres. The networked individual, according to Papacharissi, can easily manifest herself in public spaces while at the same time "sustaining the control, autonomy and self expression capabilities of the private sphere" (2010, 139). Social

network sites, such as Facebook, have gradually affected prevailing norms as to what counts as private and what as public, and Papacharissi (2010, 164) emphasizes not struggle but connection, empowerment rather than privacy concerns.

As a counterweight to both a protective legalist and a neoliberalist stance, I want to stress that these changing definitions of privacy are part of an ongoing battle over information control in a culture where sociality and connectivity are increasingly defined through online platforms. In line with what I argued in the previous section, the novelty of social media platforms is not that they allow for *making connections* but lead to *engineering connections*. By virtue of their technological capabilities, social media sites connect data that users consciously or unconsciously provide, be it profiling data or metadata on search behavior. Every single user's decision to share something online is monitored, according to Facebook's privacy policy:

> We keep track of some of the actions you take on Facebook, such as adding connections (including joining a group or adding a friend), creating a photo album, sending a gift, poking another user, indicating you "like" a post, attending an event, or connection with an application. In some cases you are also taking an action when you provide information or content to us. For example, if you share a video, in addition to storing the actual content you uploaded, we might log the fact that you shared it.[3]

"Keeping track" is a euphemism for data mining. In fact, the site heavily invests in tracking, interpreting, repurposing, and selling information generated by its users. What are patterns of likeability? Which people who like X also like Y? Which circles of friends are sensitive to which preferences or joint tastes? Whereas "making connections" may be the main goal for users to share information, for platform owners the main goal is to extract valuable collective and personalized information out of a data flow of extracted "likes," "pokes," "dislikes" and so on. Users often leave behind a trail of inconspicuous information that becomes a prime asset for application programmers. While many people consider social media to be technical translations of human sociality, sociality is rather an engineered construct than a result of human social interaction.

Relevant legal questions arising in this context are, Do users know how their data and metadata are being mined and used? Who has access to the exploitation of users' metadata? Access and exploitation of these data are mostly unregulated territory. Companies or governments can gather a large volume of personal information about communicative habits and social behavior (who contacts whom?) and even about users' movements in space, by means of the geodata distributed automatically by mobile devices. Facebook Connect, for instance, is a feature that enables members to log on to third-party websites, applications, mobile devices, and gaming systems with their Facebook identity. What most users do not know is that their online behavior automatically yields information on what they like, what their "friends" like, and what actions and preferences connect them. Social behavior of many individuals together informs pattern analysis, which in turn feeds algorithms that direct users' behavior.

Many platforms sell data-derived knowledge to advertisers and third-party developers (Cohen 2008; Batelle 2005). Most proprietary platforms, notably Google and Facebook, hold all user data inside its utility, allowing them to achieve what they call "transparent personalization" and to optimize the quality of their engines. However, the same rule for transparency does not apply to both companies who prohibit access to information about how their engines function and how they are tweaked on the basis of interpretations of collective user data (Carr 2008).[4]

Importantly, as Poritz (2007) argued, the law recognizes and protects individual privacy but no such thing as collective privacy. The word *collective* implies a kind of group sociality, but the extraction of information patterns out of people's individual digital behavior has nothing to do with communal activities. Information derived from data extracted by profiling and ranking algorithms may be subsequently connected to other, perhaps completely different, sets of data. Like Poritz, media scholars Jakobsson and Stiernstedt (2010) are concerned about the dispossession "not only of personal information and intellectual property rights but also of sociability as such," as they argue for the establishment of a "juridico-political framework under which this appropriation is taking place." Evidently, the battle for a new juridicopolitical framework is ongoing; companies like Facebook and Google are engaged in permanent discussions with users, user groups, and their lawyers about information control. Frequent introduction of new features on the site, such as Connect, Beacon, and Newsfeed, have triggered heated debates about the control of generated data and profiles.[5] Users have forced the company to withdraw undesirable features from the site several times. While Facebook's Zuckerberg has called privacy an "evolving norm," consumer rights activists and user groups are taking the new conglomerates to court to settle what is meant by privacy in the site's deployment of automatically derived data.[6]

Emerging rules and regulations are the very stakes in a battle to shape new channels for communication. These stakes, of course, are not just sociopolitical or legal but also profoundly economical, which brings me to the second meaning of Habermas's notion of the private sphere: the sphere of the market—the domain where people work, exchange goods, and maintain their families. Is the connective sphere a recalibration of the existing corporate private sphere, or do Facebook and its competitors bring along a new business dynamics?

A New Corporate Sphere?

At one point in *The Social Network*, business partner Eduardo Saverin suggests to Zuckerberg that it is time to monetize The Facebook now that the site, in the spring of 2004, has attracted four thousand members on the Harvard campus. By monetizing, he means to sell advertising on the site. Zuckerberg's response sends a strong signal of disapproval to his companion: "No, The Facebook is cool and if we start selling pop-ups of Mountain Dew it's no longer gonna be cool. We don't know what it is yet, we don't know what it can be, what it will be; we just know it's cool." This cool thing is ephemeral and difficult to exploit, but one thing Zuckerberg knows for sure is that

conventional business models do not apply to his invention. Zuckerberg's right proves to be Saverin's wrong: the latter's failed attempts to sell pop-ups and banner ads on Facebook to Madison Avenue's executives are painful evidence of a profound mismatch between old economic strategies and the new social media business. In a world where social structure is everything, connections become the prime economic value. But what defines commercial value in a network milieu that capitalizes on social connections and cultural content?

In the wake of emerging web 2.0 activities, we can distinguish several approaches to social media situating these platforms squarely in the corporate private sphere yet importing values from the public sphere. Some economists claim that the added values of social media brought in by active online communities, such as peer production and cooperation, are a great asset for corporations; they are eager to turn these communities into loyal customer bases following a logic called "wikinomics" (Tapscott and Williams 2006). Along similar lines, some argue that users bringing community values to the corporate sphere revamp the very relationships between consumers and producers, turning users into "produsers" (Bruns 2008). Yet another way of understanding the monetary values generated by social media platforms is called "social economics." Social economics recognizes a wide range of value sources involved in these platforms, such as making contacts and sharing creative expression, and considers their impact to be part of their monetizing capacity (Bates 2008).

To better understand this monetizing capacity, I want to return to the double logic of making connections and engineering connections. The "cool thing" the fictional Zuckerberg refers to in the movie bears three potential economic values: *attention*, *popularity*, and *connectivity*. In the "attention economy," attention means eyeballs and (unconscious) exposure, and this value is still an important part of internet advertising in the form of banners, pop-ups, and paid ad space on websites. Gaining popularity is important to people who want to boost their public reputation. Popularity is not simply "there" to be measured: it is created through engineered algorithms that prompt users to rank things, ideas, or people in relation to other things, ideas, or people. Although popularity has no relation to values like truth, trust, objectivity, or quality, it is often equated to these values. For instance, users trust their private profiles data to Facebook because they are invited to join the network by a "friend," often as part of a preexisting offline network community, and join other networks while online. Users gain popularity as they get involved in more groups and make more contacts. Popularity is rooted in relative connections between people; in the context of social media platforms, connectivity built on the basis of trust thus becomes a quantifiable commodity. When communities of users continuously push "like" and "poke" buttons, issue recommendations, forward favorite items, or state preferences on what's hot and what's not, information generated in the informal connective sphere has "real" value on the commodity exchange floor—the markets where people meet, work, and exchange goods, all at the same time.

The combined values of attention, popularity, and connectivity gradually and carefully have been mixed to constitute the basis of Facebook's business model. Between

2005 and 2010, Facebook has increasingly opened up the private data of its users to extract more value out of the site, risking a serious loss of users because of a steady erosion of privacy and trust (Nussbaum 2010). Economic success is highly dependent on a delicate balance and deliberate mixture between social media as meeting places (places to make contacts and socialize), working places (places to create content and increase public visibility), and market places (places to exchange, trade, or sell goods). Coolness is a reputation carefully nourished by platform owners: a site needs many visitors, attractive content, and a high level of connective activity before it can monetize either one of these values. SNSs are built on the premise of connective popularity: the more people tap into the resource, the more clicks it generates and the higher its measured value. And yet, because SNSs are meeting places and not just market places, they are different from conventional media. Network communities that collectively define popularity may be exploited for their evaluative labor or exploited as deliverers of metadata, but they cannot be held captive to the attention industry. When users are not interested or not entertained, or when they feel manipulated, they may simply leave (Clemons 2009). The long-term viability of web 2.0 platforms depends on a pristine equilibrium between attracting and exploiting communities, between entertaining users, and making them participate (van Dijck 2009). The power of users rises above the normal capability of consumers to abstain from consumption because they are also value creators.

Although Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have each managed to claim a specific niche of communicative action, not all social media platforms have developed the same business strategies (Turow 2006). All three platforms have waited several years to build their "cool" and to secure a large and loyal member base, before deciding which monetizing strategies' values render the site profitable without turning off users. Facebook chose a mixture of strategies like targeted advertising and selling customized metadata; in the past year, it has added integrating pay services for online games and selling exclusive access to games or apps to members of the site. Membership of a particular social network site is increasingly monetized as a direct marketing tool; for instance, Facebook gives user communities privileged access to certain selected services and goods via their features Facebook Connect and Open Graph.[7] Platforms thus become closed membership alliances whose data represent specific marketing and advertising niches. Corporations define their customer segments through a refined system of algorithmic connections. Despite the early euphoria over the web 2.0 belonging to "crowds" or "communities," platforms are rapidly turning the internet into a proprietary space where control over tools and services is firmly held by a small number of media corporations who are "pushing for control and exclusion as a means to exploit and reorient online users as consumers" (Milberry and Anderson 2009, 409). Some academics claim that the gap between corporate power and user control is widening at a rapid pace, leaving little hope for a level playing field (Terranova 2004; Lash 2007; Fuchs 2009).

The political economy of social media is an urgent issue at a moment when technology is still in flux and chances for intervention in its technological design still persist. I agree with Cowhey and Aranson (2009, 266) that the main regulatory question is not

whether networks or platforms are open-source or propriety. Indeed, the modularity of the internet and the global market of users demand a new set of rules governing the neutrality of the net while still encouraging trade competition, as well as a new set of rules that safeguard privacy while still fostering the ability to form shared user networks. Political-economic debates concerning the regulations of internet markets should garner intense public scrutiny because their outcomes determine what the future of our communication channels look like. However, issues like network neutrality, collective privacy, and the protection of user's rights are progressively hard to assess because the increased technological complexity of platforms quickly widens the gap between platform owners and users. Whereas most users before could still engage with technologies they understood, the technicity of platforms, their business models and regulatory schemes have become so complicated and invisible that their consequences may be beyond the comprehension even of well-educated, technically oriented minds. And yet, a persistent interest in and substantial understanding of platforms is crucial to a critical engagement with one of the most significant transformations of this century. Technological engagement is a politico-economic project that potentially challenges the industrial model of cultural production (Roberts 2009).

Rather than siding with political economists to reaffirm that social media are antithetical to public discourse, I want to understand *how* platforms function as battlefields of contesting public, private, corporate (and state) interests. Studying these platforms' business models along with their technosocial and legal schemes provides insight into the complex dynamics of an emerging communicative space. My main goal is to develop a critical understanding of how sociality and connectivity are shaped, by what forces and through what mechanisms, and how these notions are redefined under the aegis of technological, economic, and legal forces.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Habermas's public sphere can still be a useful concept but it does not make much sense to hail social media platforms like Facebook as a "new" public sphere or as an expansion of the private sphere. Internet platforms neither warrant a recalibration of an ideal public sphere, nor a dismissal of a "polluted" corporate sphere. The affordances of the internet are so complex that the observation of social media being the mere result of blurring spheres, too, is insufficient. Instead, I argue that social media platforms are manifestations of a culture wherein networked publicity strategies mediate the norms for sociality and connectivity. My analytical prism intends to highlight *how* communicative practices are mediated and *how* social media platforms foster connections between people, things, and ideas. Therefore, I think it is useful to distinguish the spheres identified by Habermas (public, private, state, corporate) and to scrutinize their intertwining in the manifestation of platforms.

The movie *The Social Network* aptly illustrates the battle to establish a new space for public communication as well as the contest to control information flows and to

own the profits yielded by this dynamic interaction. The early stages of this struggle are articulated in the way Facebook shapes sociality at the same time and by the same means as it is shaped by sociopolitical factors, legal codes, and market forces. This battle for dominance is nowhere near finished and will likely not end for a long time. Facebook's market value—estimated at fifty billion dollars in January 2011—is a precarious balance between social, political, and economic values: if the world's users decide Facebook has lost its coolness, has sold out your private data, or has yielded to censoring governments, its value may decrease or even completely vanish. An analytical prism should yield important insights in how these processes work: what are the technological, economic, and legal processes or instruments at work in this domain? How are public values (participation, community, democracy, popularity), legal concepts (privacy, intellectual property, trust), and economic instruments (business models, value creation) intertwined in the construction of social media platforms? What connects issues of ownership to the technological interlocking of platforms? And how do business models restructure vital legal notions of collective privacy in the light of exploiting user-generated (meta-)data?

The relevance of such an analytical prism is to raise a critical awareness of the politics of connectivity. So far, web 2.0 culture has been overwhelmingly hailed as a culture that celebrates the idea of sharing, participation, and community bonding. My problem with this liberalist notion is that it does not reveal the way in which connections are engineered and exploited and how it profoundly transforms social norms for (political) communication. To understand the dynamics of social media, it is not enough to revamp existing social theory of networks, to polish up legal frames, or to reintroduce political-economic schemes. We rather need to connect these theories and come up with an analytical model that accounts for the complexities of the contradicting interests interpenetrating this new space of mediated communication. Much like Facebook itself, this model will never be finished, as long as its analytical objects keep evolving.

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Notes

1. I am not using the movie *The Social Network* as "evidence" for Facebook's development in its early years, but I use the various storylines to illustrate three emblematic aspects of evolving social media platforms. Of course there are a number of other interesting ways of viewing the movie's narrative structure and interpreting its storylines.

2. The Top 100 of web 2.0 platforms ranked on the basis of number of average page views over the past three months and the number of average visitors shows only two sites that are nonprofit: Wikipedia (no. 7) and Pirate Bay (no. 86). (Source www.Alexa.com, accessed July 2, 2011). For an analysis of profit vs. nonprofit web 2.0 platforms, see Fuchs (2009).

3. See Facebook Privacy Policy, under "Site activity information": http://www.facebook. com/policy.php.

4. Some proprietary platforms, like Twitter, give away access to their user meta-data in order for other (private) parties to develop application program interfaces (APIs); however, platform owners have full power to decide on who gets access to these collected data and who is denied access.

5. Besides Facebook Connect, users have reacted fiercely to features such as Open Graph, instant personalization, and Beacon. For a comprehensive overview of Facebook's ongoing struggle with user groups over privacy, see Dan Fletcher, "How Facebook is redefining privacy" in *Time Magazine*, 20 May 2010, available at http://www.time.com/time/business/ article/0,8599,1990582,00.html. (accessed July 2, 2011).

6. For instance, Google was forced to apologize to German legislators when they acknowledged they had inadvertently collected 600 gigabytes of data from unsecured wi-fi networks around the globe to benefit its Street View archive—a glitch in the system they called a "programming error." See http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/18/technology/18google. html?hpw (accessed August 22, 2010).

7. Open Graph is a Facebook feature that lets users weigh in on what they like on the web, from a fountain pen to a DVD, as long as it is displayed on a site. Users reading articles in *The New Yorker*, for instance, can see which articles their "friends" have read, shared, and liked. The logic behind this feature is that if "friends" recommend something, Facebook members will be more inclined to like it too. Less than a month after Open Graph's roll out in April 2010, more than hundred thousand sites had integrated the technology.

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Bio

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