Essay 2
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Does Social Media mirror our own expectations or is it a preexisting set of technologies that we simply follow and adapt to?

In her talk at the 2012 Unlike Us Conference which took place at Trouw in Amsterdam, Jodi Dean remarked that the Social Media we have now looks like the Social Media we would expect.
She then introduced three different understandings of the concept of the „social" and subsequently outlined three according Social Media concepts. All three understandings, Dean pointed out, are based in the idea of neoliberalism. At the end of her talk she summarized that the Social Media we know correlates exactly the following three understandings:

1 Neoliberal stance on society

According to Dean, the idea of the society as a collective does not exist in a neoliberal worldview: While men and women exist as individuals, there is no community. Everybody is responsible for themselves and everybody is pitched against one another. National armies are a prime example to illustrate such a non-social institution: the individual has the authority to determine if he wants to be part of this construct (in this case the army) or not.
Dean summarizes the according Social Media with three words: competition, alliance, procreation. It is a model that is characterized by a high level of individualism and comparability. In this model of Social Media, people will closely monitor each other: Everybody is responsible for him- and herself only and acts accordingly: People will try to find out who is the best match in personal life and in career.

2 Actor-network-Social Media

This Social Media Model is based on Bruno Latour`s Actor-Network theory. The Actor-Network theory is a socio-scientific theory which focuses on the effects of science and technology on human society. Latour`s theory not only considers — as do most of the social theories — what occurs between human beings. It also describes the relationship between humans and technology and the actor-networks that they form. These actor-networks are cooperations of humans, technology, organizations, rules and infrastructures. The networks have the aim to build stable structures of knowledge, communication and action. All actors — humans, machines, media and artifacts — are all and equally able to influence the relationships and the conduct of all actors within the network. The Wikipedia page of the Social Media Model explains Latour's theory with the example of a university: The interaction of a university includes students and teachers but likewise their ideas and thoughts as well as black boards, pens and computer. Together, all these things — whether material or immaterial — form a network that we call university.

This model of Social Media would promote the fun factor. A central goal is to find new ways of interaction. It would be about developing new software to keep the Social Media playful. This Social Media wouldn't be, in contrast to the neoliberal-social media, that profit orientated.

3 Radical Democracy Model

The third model that is presented by Jodi Dean was developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Muffe in their book „Hegemony and Socialist Strategy". The book consists of two theory parts: one on hegemony and one on democracy. In the first part the authors develop the hegemony theory of Antonio Gramscis and in the second part they draft the project of a radical and plural democracy. The key element here is the democratization of all social relations: The radical democracy wants to overwhelm all authoritarian and hierarchical structures in order to create the conditions for a self-determined life. Radical democrats complain about the non-democratic structure of some parts of our society like our economy and our education system.

The radical democratic social media would be a place where you will be in trouble constantly. This place would change continuously and reconstruct again and again. The members of the radical social media would be in a constant riot and it would result in coalitions and alliances.

In his book »Web Aesthetics« Vito Campanelli describes the web as a space of »monolithic blocks of beliefs and desires« (Campanelli Web Aesthetics, 2006 p. 96). He ascribes this to the user themselves but, unlike Jodi Dean, Campanelli sees the cause of the behavior of the user as a result of technology. Dean however describes the technology as a result of the realization of the three different understandings of Social Media.

Vito Campanelli describes the user of Social Networking Sites as self-referential and monolingual. They speak one single language and therefore they support the web in its form as „monolithic blocks of beliefs and desires“. If everything develops within the context of a group (and that is what Social Media is about), it becomes very difficult to develop ideas that are outside the group. To allow different views, the group has to open up which is unlikely to happen. It is actually quite contradictory that the technology that should convey a feeling of participation and freedom causes the exact opposite: The technology promotes the emergence of monolingual blocks; the technology that should actually mobilize the user puts them into predetermined flows. Instead of communicating via technological outlets, you are constantly busy to subscribe to ideas and images by means of a software that makes this process very easy: We add people to our blog, reply ‚attending‘ to an event invitation or follow someone on Twitter. Because of the easiness of theses processes, any critique falls silent. Every critique that is directed at this simplicity or that process requires the analysis of technology. Actually, everybody is in state to use the technical tools to contradict but these two actions are totally out of any proportion: On the one hand you have an immensely complex technology and on the other hand you have just one ‚click‘ to agree. So the right question, Campanelli remarks, is why should you do that, „if it is much easier to stay on an oases of happiness together with your ‚friends‘“ (Campanelli Web Aesthetics, 2006 p. 96)

Ideally, Social Media would be a space for different opinions and discourses that allow for disagreement and differences. To preserve this space there should be a technology that allows different opinions. But critical thoughts are only integrated to the technology if they are somehow rooted in the mainstream of ideas. Campanelli writes that critical thought must be trendy. On Facebook, it is widely regarded as cool to create a group that is against whaling, it is much easier to be be against former US President Bush than to support him. Campanelli rightly asks if we can see that as contradiction. Or isn‘t it the case that we could see it as an earmarking of different users, who are thinking the same?

We can imagine the web as a country consisting of different islands. As an inhabitant of this country, you would look for the islands where you feel good and meet people with the same taste and views. The question would be if the alliance of same-thinking-people is rooted in the desire to be part of something bigger than oneself. The fact that people tend to flock together in Social Media, Dean sees as the desire of everyone to become a part of the whole. She argues that this connection is a direct reaction to the unsteady labour market. In Social Media, people produce for others all the time, their products being emotions or all kinds of content. They are produced by a productive force which is rooted in our common effort — provided that Social Media is the result of joint efforts. Or if technology itself creates those islands and is responsible that no critique occurs within Social Media.

Is the web designed in a way that it determines the path we take?

If we see a picture in analogue life, we start thinking about what we are seeing. We start associating. Our associations are structured along the lines of personal memories, consisting of images that are ‚saved‘ in our personal storage. A chain of associations will arise. In interactive media, the media asks us to ‚click‘ on a picture to see another one. We can not follow our own chain of associations but are depending on a predetermined trajectory. The path we are following is always already mapped out. On the internet, we read more broadly, clicking from one highlighted link to another, without following the actual story. We are asked to follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations. We „follow the trajectories of the New Media Designer“ (Campanelli Web Aesthetics, 2006 p. 92)

One could regard our movement within Social Media as a path void of freedoms. Although we have a set of possibilities, they only exist within the structure that is designed for us. In Social Media we have the same problem: Social Media exists so that we may express ourselves, yet we can only ever express ourselves within the frame that is given by the particular Social Media. On Facebook we have the possibility to express our taste by showing our favorite movies and bands. But for example it is not possible to show your favorite radio show, because there is just no category for radio shows. It is likely that the template for radio shows is not missed because we don't miss what is not shown. We just follow the mainstream. Campanelli explains this phenomenon by pointing to the bird in a flock. It is always that flock that is choosing which way to go. In Social Network Media, our friends would be the flock. We will be determined by them because we are determined by the related content. We click the videos our friends are posting, visit the blogs with the most followers and just have a look at the first search results of a search engine. »The contents are perceived solely at a formal level and any semantic interpretations are simply excluded: this is the final victory of the signifier of the signified.« (Campanelli Web Aesthetics, 2006 p. 93)

And again, the decisions we make in Social Media is depending on the mainstream opinion within a certain group. But what is mainstream is defined by technology which is in turn defined by companies like Facebook and Google. I could argue that Google — with its new privacy policies and the centralization of data — strives for a commercial success. Needless to say that this is the reason why google combined over seventy different protection provisions into one privacy policy. From the viewpoint of the users it wasn't disadvantageous because Google couldn't assemble user information for example combining selected youtube movies or search engine entries to interest based advertisements. With the new privacy policies it is possible to summarize all information of one user of different Google services.

At the same time the new privacy policy only is possible because user see the advantage of combining all google services.

With the upcoming brands of Social Media, it became quite popular to use different nicknames and therefore to assume different identities. To be one person in analogue life and to have different avatars in digital life. But the urge to disguise keeps within limits now a days. Through the connecting of different cyber identities, all part identities become a complete identity again. This is what Google and Facebook are trying by connecting all their services. Before for every need we had a different Social Media. Now, everything is joined together and there is no need for a separation between your private and your professional life anymore, everything will be merged together in Facebook or the Google search. That Social Network Media user don't make use of seven different avatars anymore is not because we are longing for more authenticity, but because the network enters our lives to such an extent that we don't distinguish between on- and offline and because of that we are longing for our „old" person within the network.

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