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Social Media and Distribution Studies

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Abstract

Social media increasingly trouble our traditional distinctions between distribution concerns on the one hand and editorial concerns on the other. Sites like Facebook and reddit simultaneously serve as distribution platforms, circulating messages addressed to individuals and publics, and as mechanical editors, deciding algorithmically which posts and topics warrant inclusion in the continuous and often overwhelming feed of information delivered to each of our screens. Recent controversies surrounding the manner in which social media companies develop and test software and editorial strategies for curating content may have brought this editor–distributor duality into sharp relief in ways that feel new and at times uncomfortable. But as a number of critical scholars—most notably Michael Warner—have illustrated, the boundary between editorial and distribution concerns has always been highly porous. Framing social media as centers of reflexive distribution not only opens up sociologically interesting questions about how such distribution infrastructures are forged but also about how they affect the "concatenation of texts through time" and the sense of shared attention and imagined community that enable public discourse. This essay argues that the emerging field of "distribution studies" is a compelling lens for the considering social media and their place in society and public life.

Keywords

media distribution, social media, public discourse, reflexive distribution

Tarleton Gillespie (2014) recently noted the ways in which social media increasingly trouble our traditional distinctions between distribution concerns on the one hand and editorial concerns on the other. Sites like Facebook and reddit simultaneously serve as distribution platforms, circulating messages addressed to individuals and publics, and as mechanical editors, deciding algorithmically which posts and topics warrant inclusion in the continuous and often overwhelming feed of information delivered to each of our screens.

Recent controversies surrounding the manner in which social media companies develop and test software and editorial strategies for curating content may have brought this editor–distributor duality into sharp relief in ways that feel new and at times uncomfortable (Gillespie, 2012, 2014). But as a number of critical scholars—most notably Michael Warner (2002)—have illustrated, the boundary between editorial and distribution concerns has always been highly porous.

Warner, in arguing for his concept of *reflexive distribution*, suggests that in considering the public sphere(s), we've tended to think primarily about editorial issues, and to conceptualize them in terms—like "conversation" and "argument"—that evoke small interpersonal discussions. Such metaphors, he says, elide the one-to-many and many-to-many nature of public communication, wherein messages and pronouncements are made in a performative space filled not just with passive recipients, or even individual interlocutors, participating in a neatly bounded dialogue, but with active audiences, discussants, and onlookers whose attention and identity as a group outlast any single exchange.

This, argues Warner (2002), is where the crucial (and often underappreciated) elements of circulation and distribution come in: "Not texts themselves create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and when a responding discourse can be postulated, can a text address a public" (p. 90).

In other words, public discourse is predicated on regular and reliable media distribution, which allows participants and audiences (who may, in principle, become participants at any time themselves) to imagine themselves as part of an assembled group and to assume an ongoing shared context for their exchanges.

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Warner suggests that a lack of scholarly attention to the specifics of media distribution has ultimately proven detrimental to our understanding of how publics operate. And he is not alone. As Alisa Perren (2013) puts it,

> there are two points about which those writing on distribution seem to agree: first, scholars have examined distribution far less frequently than either production or consumption; and second, the digital age has fueled dramatic changes in distribution processes and practices that necessitate greater interrogation. (p. 165)

Perren goes on to highlight that more attention has been paid to this area than is usually appreciated. Indeed, scholars ranging from Louis Althusser (2011) to contemporary researchers like Yong-Chan Kim and Sandra Ball-Rokeach (2006) have asserted that distribution infrastructures, like a TV station's broadcast radius or a newspaper's circulation footprint, likely play a major role in defining our sense of which communities we belong to and to whom we have civic responsibilities.

But, as Perren (2013) also indicates, much of the existing work on media distribution has taken place under a variety of often unconnected scholarly rubrics and research agendas, which she argues could be productively synthesized under the "broader heading" of distribution research (p. 169). And she is just one of a growing number of scholars, myself included (Braun, in press), clamoring for a now-emerging field of "distribution studies."

While such a field will inevitably encompass more than just social media, that is also what makes it an especially valuable lens *on* social media. As the adoption of digital tools generally, and social media in particular, has helped to upend many traditional media systems and practices, scholars have been continually challenged as to how to productively address these shifts while maintaining an appropriate critical distance and sense of history that industry-promulgated buzzwords like "disruption" and "Web 2.0" typically fail to provide.

Framing social media as centers of reflexive distribution, meanwhile, opens up sociologically interesting questions not only about how such distribution infrastructures are forged but also about how they affect the "concatenation of texts through time" and the sense of shared attention and imagined community (Anderson, 1991) on which public discourse is predicated. As Charles Acland (2003) notes, "the organization of how, when, and under what conditions people congregate is a fundamental dimension of social life" (p. 20)—one that is, today, thoroughly tied up with social media, but at the same time long predates it.

In writing about the reflexivity and sense of shared attention facilitated by media distribution infrastructures, Warner (2002) says that "I don't just speak to you; I speak to the public in a way that enters a cross-citational field of many other people speaking to the public" (p. 95). This sounds a lot like Twitter, perhaps, but many of the cases in his work come from the 17th Century. Similarly, John McMillian (2011), in writing about the manner in which distribution infrastructures that give new exposure to underrepresented voices help to create "a visible manifestation of an alternative culture" (p. 189), is speaking not about protest movements on Facebook, but is rather quoting Abbey Hoffman on the 1960s underground press.

Gillespie (2014) suggests social media provide us with a renewed invitation to consider the intersection of what is (inter)personal and what is public—an invitation also inscribed in the title of this journal, *Social Media + Society*. Distribution studies provide one excellent framework for taking on this charge.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Joshua Braun (PhD, Cornell University) is an Assistant Professor of Journalism Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a visiting fellow at the Yale Information Society Project. His research interests include media distribution, digital media infrastructures, and the evolution of social media as sociotechnical systems.