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Robert W. Gehl

Julie Synder-Yuly

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The Need for Social Media Alternatives

Robert W. Gehl & Julie Synder-Yuly

This short essay describes the Social Media Alternatives Project (S-MAP), an online archive of materials associated with non-corporate social media sites. The essay contrasts alternative social media with corporate social media such as Facebook and Twitter. It calls for media justice organizations, including the Union for Democratic Communications, to shift some of their communication practices away from Facebook to systems such as Twister or Diaspora.

Keywords: alternative social media, corporate social media, media justice, social media alternatives project, surveillance

Late in *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, Bernard Stiegler takes aim at Margaret Thatcher's famous, truculent claim: "there is no alternative." In response, Stiegler writes, "To the TINA ideology, 'there is no alternative,' one must oppose the TALOA argument, 'there are lots of alternatives.'"¹ Stiegler's book, written in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 financial recession, is in part a theorization of alternatives to speculative capitalism. Specifically, Stiegler calls for long circuits of care, durable institutions that would allow human creativity to flourish and conquer the short-

1. Bernard Stiegler, *For a new critique of political economy* (Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity, 2010), 123.

circuiting and rapacious economic destruction that seems to be accelerating around the world.

Some of these long circuits of care, Stiegler hints, may lie in online social media, which could bring about “a new regime of psychic and collective individuation and, with it, the possibility of a new process of transindividuation opening onto an unprecedented politico-economic perspective.”² In other words, social media may represent an “economy of contribution, *contra* the economy of carelessness.”³

Although Stiegler does not specify which online social media he is referring to, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Google (specifically, the social network Google+ and the video-sharing site YouTube) leap to mind. These sites famously allow nearly anyone connected to them to contribute ideas, media, and emotional connection. For the past decade, popular coverage of these sites has lauded them for their role in support of activism. Recall that some journalists branded the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street as “Twitter Revolutions.”

However, social media systems such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Google have been criticized by critical academics for a wide range of reasons: privacy concerns, the algorithmic shaping of sociality, their emphasis on moneyed speech (in the form of advertisements) over “ordinary speech,” constant interface changes that seem to be more about monetization than increasing communication, their centralization and the subsequent concentration of media power in a small number of corporate hands, and their willingness to supply states with user information.⁴ From Twitter Revolutions we move to ubiquitous surveillance and the proletarianization of desire. “Like” it or not, corporate social media can hardly be said to fulfill Stiegler’s lofty goals.

Despite these criticisms, when it comes to social media, we seem to be facing Thatcher’s slogan: there are no alternatives to these corporate social media sites. Young people seeking work are told to build their LinkedIn profiles or else miss out on employment networks. Activists build Twitter followings to coordinate protests. Even academics are increasingly pressured to submit to corporate social media; the site for them is the paper-sharing, analytics-heavy Academia.edu. In sum, if you’re an activist, looking for work, a media maker, or if you simply want to connect with others, corporate social media seem to be your only choice. For example, Democracy Now!, Economic Update, and the media justice advocacy organization Free Press all offer ways to Tweet, Like, or +1 their stories, even if Amy Goodman, Richard Wolff, and Bob McChesney would be the first to

2. Ibid., 48.

3. Ibid., 129.

4. Robert W. Gehl, “The Case for Alternative Social Media,” *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (July 1, 2015): 2056305115604338, doi:10.1177/2056305115604338.

point to the dangers of relying on for-profit corporations to get their media messages out. Even the Union for Democratic Communications's site offers visitors a chance to network via Facebook or Twitter. It seems that media justice organizations see no other choice but to spread the word via corporate social media. TINA, indeed.

But Stiegler was right: TALOA, there are lots of alternatives.

In response to the critiques leveled at corporate social media, activists and technologists have built a wide range of sites and software packages that, in one way or another, seek to ameliorate the problems posed by Facebook et al. Some sites and systems, such as Twister, Soup, or Helloworld, have emphasized radical decentralization in the form of peer-to-peer architectures to provide social media functions (friending, sharing, liking, and so on) without relying on any central authority. Others, such as Gnu social, rstat.us, Lorea, or Diaspora, use a federated structure: they allow people to join social networks on a federation of servers located anywhere there's a willing administrator. Still other sites such as Galaxy2 and Visibility retain the centralized structure of Facebook and Twitter, but they do so with a privacy-enhancing twist: they exist on the dark web, on Tor-based hidden services or on the Invisible Internet Project's network. Regardless of their architectural differences, these alternatives are built as critical responses to the problems of corporate social media.

In doing so, these sites build on the long tradition of alternative media, free software, open source, and the Creative Commons. Rather than closed-source software running on distant server farms, alternative social media are open to modification and study. Of course, auditing code is a technical practice, one that excludes a great many people. Recognizing this, the founders and volunteers of Lorea, rstat.us, and Gnu social seek to teach users how to install, run, and alter the software underlying their systems. Theirs is not a techno-elitist philosophy of RTFM ("Read the Fucking Manual"); it is more a pedagogy of the interface, meant to guide new users through the layers of abstraction that comprise social media not only so that users can successfully use the sites, but also so that users can become administrators and coders themselves and have far more control over these systems.

These alternatives also seek to avoid the dominant political economy of the Internet: they do not accept ads. Consequently, they do not accept the entire infrastructure that supports advertising, including cross-site tracking, behavioral profiling, and nano-second auctions of our attention as we browse the Internet. In other words, they deny the logic of marketing surveillance, a logic that was fundamental to the very rise of corporate social media in the first place.⁵ Moreover,

5. Robert W. Gehl, *Reverse Engineering Social Media: Software, Culture, and Political Economy in New Media Capitalism* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2014).

because these sites are invested in user privacy, they seek to avoid the other great form of ubiquitous surveillance, state surveillance, by emphasizing encryption and decentralization.

Despite all these innovations, these sites tend to have far fewer users than corporate social media. However, the importance of these sites cannot be measured in terms of Monthly Active Users or daily logins, and certainly not by speculation on their stock prices. These sites are important because they crystallize new ways to “do” online social networking, and thus they represent new economies of contribution, new ways to organize, support one another, and learn about the media infrastructures that shape our lives. By exploring alternative network infrastructures and political economies and by offering technical pedagogies, we believe these sites contribute to the challenge to media power called for by scholars such as Clemencia Rodriguez, Nick Couldry, Megan Boler, Geert Lovink, and Chris Atton.

Recognizing the importance of alternative social media to activists, technologists, and everyday social media users, we are building the Social Media Alternatives Project (S-MAP, hosted at www.socialmediaalternatives.org), a collection of screenshots, interviews, and artifacts drawn from a wide range of alternative social media sites. Currently, there is no centralized resource dedicated to the preservation of alternative social media. The S-MAP is thus a contribution, a labor of love, to catalog and document this new form of alternative media for academics, journalists, and activists. We have been steadily adding material to the S-MAP, documenting the dynamic world of alternative social media. We welcome the feedback of the Union for Democratic Communications. And we hope the site is useful to the activist-scholars who look for alternative ways to network as they struggle for media justice.

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Robert W. Gehl is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah. His book, *Reverse Engineering Social Media* (2014 Temple UP), explores the architecture and political economy of social media and is the winner of the Association of Internet Researchers Nancy Baym Book award. At Utah, he teaches courses in communication technology, software studies, new media theory, and political economy of communication.

Email: robert@robertwgehl.org

Julie Snyder-Yuly is currently a doctoral candidate in communication at the University of Utah. Her academic work engages qualitative and rhetorical methods to examine textual and visual microaggressions associated with the intersection of race and class in online environments.

Email: julie.snyder-yuly@eccles.utah.edu