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SOCIAL NETWORKING AND CLOUD COMPUTING: PRECARIOUS AFFORDANCES FOR THE “PROSUMER”

JAMIE SKYE BIANCO

Web 2.0 technology offers users easy-to-use interfaces to contribute and generate content through interactive applications that operate on networks or the Web versus software that users install and use on an individual hard drive. Arguably, the World Wide Web has always functioned in this manner, though the “easy-to-use” qualifier might not apply. In the early days of the Web, a producer needed basic coding or mark-up literacies, such as knowledge of HTML, to build a website. While some websites offered minimal engagement to the user, for the most part, they were static, read-only, and unidirectional nodes of information.¹ In recent years, use of web-based platforms that engage fuller participation, that rely on “scaling” a large user-base of “prosumers” (producer/consumers), and that solicit user-generated content has proliferated, ushering in social networking and “cloud computing” as a part of everyday digital life.²

“Social networking” as a descriptor marks a huge range of personalized cloud computing platforms and functions of interaction on the web. “Cloud computing” refers to the use of a network-based application that also handles user data storage. In other words, both the program and any documents, files, or data generated through this program all reside on the host’s remote networked server and not on a user’s own hard drive. Hugely popular instances of this sort of social networking and cloud computing are carried out on such sites as MySpace, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, Twitter, and Delicious.³ All of these platforms offer a variety of user controls that allow for the creation of personal networks, such as “adding a friend,” “subscribing” to a channel or feed, and “following” other users as well as options to subscribe to an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) “feed” directed at a “reader.”⁴ They also offer subplatforms, for activities such as blogging on a MySpace page, messaging users directly through the web interface or via cell phone-enabled SMS (Simple Message System) text messages, and incorporating various digital objects such as digital video and photos into a Tweet

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(an individual Twitter message) or “posting” an outside URL on the “wall” of a Facebook user. The platforms and communicative capacities mentioned here just scratch the surface of the complexities of self-production and distribution, sharing, networking, and community organizing that social networking makes available.

Social networking is often criticized as providing a “space” for unfettered narcissism—a criticism that misses the powerful “networked” aspect of this sort of self-making and self-articulation in the world and its “ground-up” capacities for social action, productivity, collaboration, and interaction. In the cases to follow, social networking and cloud computing raise provocative issues for knowledge production, public discourse, politics, journalism, and activism.

CASE #1: BREASTFEEDING ON FACEBOOK

A quick search of the term “breastfeeding” on Facebook (FB) will lead users to a global group named Hey, Facebook, Breastfeeding Is Not Obscene!: Official Petition to Facebook, boasting 206,671 members.⁵ The group organized itself in the fall of 2007 when FB “started ‘pulling a MySpace’ by not allowing people to post profile pictures of babies nursing.” (Facebook 2007) The practice of remote hosts deleting content deemed “obscene” bears a complicated history and no small sense of irony. Concerns with “obscenity” online tracks directly back to “concerned” parents of children who engaged with online content. The group organized FB protest events under “Mothers International Lactation Campaign M.I.L.C.: Because Breastfeeding Is NOT Obscene.” The first event, a letter-writing campaign addressed directly to FB’s CEO, Sheryl Sandberg, culminated on December 27, 2008, and in the next event, a “virtual ‘nurse-in’ and letter writing campaign was Saturday February 21, 2009” (Mothers International Lactation Campaign M.I.L.C. [M.I.L.C.] 2009). The first event garnered much mainstream media attention at the end of 2008 and into early 2009 from the *New York Times* (Wortham 2009), the *Guardian* (Sweney 2008), *United Press International* (2008) the *Chicago Tribune* (Tsouderos 2008), and *Asia One* (2008). *Asia One* is the only press outlet listed that included an image of a breast-feeding baby in its coverage. M.I.L.C. produced a video, originally uploaded onto YouTube on February 4, 2009. Members have created crossover content on MySpace, under the tag “Facebook’s War on Nipples,” and a global feminist consciousness-raising campaign through a viral social networking community.

CASE #2: CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND TWITTER: THE CRASH ON THE HUDSON AND THE ATTACK ON MUMBAI

On January 15, 2009, at 3:23 p.m., Janis Krums of Sarasota, Florida, posted the following “tweet,” or microblogged message post, on Twitter:

“Leaving the city [New York], had a great day. Trying to beat the traffic. Wish me luck!” In trying to “beat the traffic,” Krums boarded a ferry. At 3:36 p.m. he posted his next tweet: “There’s a plane in the Hudson. I’m on the ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy” accompanied by a digital picture of US Airways Flight #1549 now floating in the Hudson River, taken and uploaded to Twitpic by Krums. Less than a half hour later, Krums was interviewed live on MSNBC, and within a day, he had made the media rounds. Krums broke the story globally using Twitter (Krums 2009a, 2009b).

The practice of Web 2.0 citizen journalism is not a new phenomenon. It most recently garnered much mass attention and corporate media spotlighting in the United States through political blogging and independent online media reporting of the election cycles of 2004–8. Blogging, however, tends to cover political issues and campaigns across a protracted period of time. Web 2.0 citizen journalism tends more toward the “breaking news” variety. It notably proved to the world its capacity to transmit real-time information during late November’s attacks in Mumbai. Bloggers and corporate media reporting drew on aggregated cloud feeds consisting of Web 2.0 citizen journalist Skype phone calls and live video, Flickr uploads, and Twitter posts. As Guarav Mishra (2009) commented in his blog, “So far, microblogging service Twitter seems to be the best source for real time citizen news on the Mumbai terrorist attacks, and ‘Mumbai’ & ‘#Mumbai’ are both on Twitter trending topics now.”⁶ Likewise on Flickr, locally shot digital photos were uploaded as the violence unfolded.⁷ As major news outlets found their journalists locked down in a single location, usually a targeted hotel, a mass of social networking users and Mumbai residents poured feeds onto the web, creating the journalistic base of reporting on the crisis.⁸

So, given these surges of ground-up activism and the knowledge production made possible through these instances of social networking and cloud computing, what are the problems? The following three cases reveal precarious aspects of social networking in terms of privacy, monetization, proprietary issues with user-generated content, and network failures.

CASE #3: PRIVACY ON FACEBOOK: "BECAUSE YOU MAY NOT WANT EVERYONE IN THE WORLD TO HAVE THE INFORMATION YOU SHARE"

This nod towards privacy may be found on FB's online "Policies" page, one of the terms of service (Twitter 2009). Privacy on FB came up on a podcast addressing the financial state of FB more than a year ago: "At some point, [Facebook is] going to have to figure out some way of making money, and a lot of money. And so I assume that invading privacy is a good way to do this [ironic laughter]" (Cohen et al. 2008). This ironic comment pointedly notes Facebook's difficulty in justifying its market value: "They have to figure out, as Rupert Murdoch put it when he bought MySpace, they're going to have to figure out a way to monetize their traffic" (ibid.). FB's success heralds its maturity beyond the venture capital "growth" phase, synonymous with generating a "scaled" user base that generates the networked content without pay. Now the investment must pay out—to investors. On February 2, 2009, the U.K. newspaper *Telegraph* reported, "Networking site cashes in on friends" (Neate and Mason 2009). From the World Economic Summit in Davos, Switzerland, FB founder, twenty-four-year-old Mark Zuckerberg, announced the company's intention to capitalize on the "private" user data of its 150 million member database. Specifically, *Telegraph* adds, "companies will be able to pose questions to specially selected members based on such intimate details as whether they are single or married and even whether they are gay or straight" (ibid.). Demographic data mining and targeted advertising practices are not new.⁹ The new project positions itself as a new applet, such as "lil green patch" or the meme "25 random facts about me" that engage users and are presumed to come from other friends. FB's popularity grew out of the well-nourished perception that FB's privacy and closed networking countered MySpace's exposures. Terms of service (TOS) in the end user license agreement (EULA) are in fact rather ambiguous: "Profile information is used by Facebook *primarily* to be presented back to and edited by you when you access the service and to be presented to others permitted to view that information by your privacy settings. . . . Facebook may use information in your profile without identifying you as an individual to third parties. . . . *We believe this benefits you* (Facebook 2009; my emphasis).

The conditional terminology, as in "primarily," regarding the use of profile data suggests that a rather open-door policy governs user privacy, tempered by whatever FB "believe[s] benefits" its users. The content and membership of users generate the value of the company in exchange for the social affect of networking, and the effects shall be guided by the company's

“belie[fs]” regarding user well-being. Do users read the EULA? Will users be able to distinguish between targeted marketing and the latest “share with your friends” meme circulating the FB network? How will self-identified women be targeted? And few understand that third-party applications fully access user data and do not carry the same EULA as FB. FB’s TOS is clear: “*You should have control over your personal information. . . . You choose what information you put in your profile, including contact and personal information, pictures, interests and groups you join*” (ibid.; my emphasis), ergo *you opt out of privacy* with FB use regardless of the rhetoric of security.¹⁰

CASE #4: WHO “OWNS” THE CONTENT OF FLICKR AND YOUTUBE?

Flickr, owned by Yahoo! and YouTube, owned by Google, are the world’s largest repositories for digital photographs and videos, respectively. Proprietary rights over this material have been challenged primarily in terms of user breach of copyright. But what are the intellectual property rights of the user? The YouTube TOS offers a complicated contract:

The content on the YouTube Website, except all User Submissions (as defined below) . . . are owned by or licensed to YouTube, subject to copyright and other intellectual property rights under the law . . . You retain all of your ownership rights in your User Submissions. *However*, by submitting User Submissions to YouTube, you hereby grant YouTube a worldwide, non-exclusive, royalty-free, sublicenseable and transferable license to use, reproduce, distribute, prepare derivative works of, display, and perform the User Submissions. The above licenses granted by you in User Comments are perpetual and irrevocable. (YouTube 2009).¹¹

So while users may own videos, an interminable set of licensing agreements allow YouTube to continue to retain the content as it sees fit. Furthermore, these licenses persist beyond the choice of a user to delete a video or an account: “The above licenses granted by you in User Videos terminate within *a commercially reasonable time* after you remove or delete your User Videos from the YouTube Website” (ibid., my emphasis). What is a “commercially reasonable time”? This is not defined, and once these licenses for display and distribution end, YouTube banks user material in perpetuity: “You understand and agree, however, that YouTube may retain, but not ‘display, distribute, or perform,’ server copies of User Submissions that have been removed

or deleted” (ibid.). Server copies live with other cloud data retained indefinitely by corporations.

Flickr offers a similar proprietary and licensing agreement to YouTube’s, with two differences. The most notable difference in the Flickr TOS might be paraphrased, “Delete before you die.” As Yahoo! puts it, under the rubric “No Right of Survivorship and Non-transferability,” “You agree that your Yahoo! account is non-transferable and any rights to your Yahoo! ID or contents within your account terminate upon your death” (Yahoo! 2009). In other words, should a Flickr account bearer die leaving content in the account, ownership of his or her digital photographs are bequeathed to Flickr. However, unlike YouTube, Flickr offers a pre-death termination of licenses and makes no claim to retention of content upon termination of the account: “This license exists only for as long as you elect to continue to include such Content on the Yahoo! Services and will terminate at the time you remove or Yahoo! removes such Content from the Yahoo! Services” (ibid.).

It is worth noting the corporate ethos at work in both of these instances, which are by no means unusual in terms of proprietary rights and licensing agreements to which users must agree and comply in order to engage in social networking and cloud computing. Upon the termination of an account, Yahoo! allows for a severance of content retention and Google does not. Both make full, unfettered, and uncompensated licensing claims to user material. Compare this to the TOS of the microblogging network Twitter: “Copyright (What’s Yours is Yours) We claim no intellectual property rights over the material you provide to the Twitter service. Your profile and materials uploaded remain yours. You can remove your profile at any time by deleting your account. This will also remove any text and images you have stored in the system.” A very different TOS and a very different ethos. That said, Twitter is considered to be in its “scaling-up” period, and with the enormous recent buzz about the site, the famous question asked of all social networking platforms that are commercial, not licensed by Creative Commons, will soon be asked of Twitter, “How will it monetize its traffic?” Will Twitter “pull a Facebook” in 2009?

CASE #5: STORMS IN THE CLOUD: DATA RETENTION AND SYSTEM FAILURES

Cloud computing not only looms on the digital horizon but also approaches with a free and viable offset to high technology costs in the midst of a global recession. Google Docs is a powerful, free application that in conjunction with the entire Google suite of cloud officeware could replace the expen-

sive Microsoft Office suite. Unlike Word, Docs is a cloud application that is accessed on the Web, offers sharing and collaboration options, takes up no space on a local hard drive, and costs nothing. One can imagine the cost savings to government, education, nonprofit, and corporate entities alike were they to stop paying for Microsoft Office and move their data processing and documents to the Google cloud. After all, Microsoft isn't exactly a corporate saint.

But Google's push for cloud computing and offers of free applications and data storage might be considered in terms of the case of YouTube and in the context of Google's efforts to digitize all printed books, newspaper archives, and other media. In recent years, libraries have been approached with offers of *free* digitization by both Google and Microsoft, but recently Microsoft dropped out of this domain, leaving the Google Library and Google Books projects to stand alone in digitizing the world's print archives. There is a serious problem with one company, albeit one whose motto is "Don't do evil," digitally housing and controlling access to the majority of human knowledge production, yet this push toward massive accumulation receives little notice.

One final issue: assuming that cloud computing does become an established mode of production, is cloud computing a safe refuge for all this centralized data? Two recent incidents cast long shadows upon what many consider to be the inevitability of a digital future that relies heavily upon cloud computing. On the morning of Saturday, January 31, 2009, Twitter was abuzz with complaints about Google flagging websites as harmful—in fact, www.google.com was flagged as well. This "harmful" flag functions in the Google security apparatus to signal users of probable "malware" in websites and applications. One recent Saturday morning, Google flagged *the entire Internet* as malware (Wauters 2009). This incident lasted less than one hour and was the result of a single erroneous keystroke entered by a Google employee. Were it not true, it would sound like a thin plot device in a big Hollywood action film.

While Google will certainly take steps to prevent any repetition of this bad backlash error, it serves as a warning. And it was not the only shot across the bow of cloud computing. Just one day earlier, Magnolia, a social bookmarking service and major competitor to Delicious, suffered a catastrophic system failure in its both primary and backup servers, effectively losing all user data (Calore 2009). Twitter, again, was the channel for news in this meltdown. Subsequently, data was only recovered in instances in which users had

interfaced their bookmarking account with another networked platform (which makes clear that data is housed in places you don't expect). This shot followed by the Google hiccup led to enormous debate over the power and frailties of contemporary reliance on and practices of cloud computing and social networking as the now next framework for human knowledge.

Condemning technology cannot address these concerns or engage in the affordances; active and informed engagement can. Log in and participate!

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NOTES

1. Chatrooms, MUDs, MOOs, and usenet groups were early exceptions, operating in text-only and DOS-based formats that required intermediate to advanced user skills to navigate.

2. "Scaling" refers to the developmental period wherein social media ramp up their memberships and user-created infrastructures of content.

3. MySpace and Facebook host users through an identity database model wherein users create their own "page" based on self-articulation; in other words, the user's "life" is the content. Flickr and YouTube host users through a genre database model wherein users upload digital photographs and videos, respectively. The image-based media constitutes the content and the uploading or creating user functions as a distributive channel. Twitter hosts users through a hybrid of an identity database and Internet relay chat (IRC) model, commonly articulated as "microblogging," wherein users engage in real-time self-articulation or dialogic exchange by uploading status updates of 140 keystroke characters or less. Finally, Delicious hosts users through a database model wherein users upload preferred website addresses (URLs) creating a list of shared Internet locations or "social bookmarking."

4. "Readers" aggregate "feeds" from a user's subscription base, allowing all to go to one web location, the URL for the reader, in order to read feeds from many different sources. Readers also operate on a cloud-computing model.

5. This was the figure as of February 5, 2009. Much gratitude to Matthew K. Gold for bringing this socially networked activism to my attention.

6. The "#" symbol is a hash tag, indicating the subject matter in a Twitter post, or "tweet."

7. Earliest collections include Soumik Kar's collection (<http://flickr.com/photos/soumik/>).

sets/72157610380275624/) and Vinukumar Ranganathan's (Vinu's) collection (<http://flickr.com/photos/vinu/sets/72157610144709049/>).

8. In the wake of both of these events and the teetering financial state of newspa-

pers in the United States, the move to citizen journalism through social networking has exploded. New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen is an excellent source on the topic (@jay_rosen on Twitter).

9. Nor is it new within FB's history, as in a rather famously failed attempt to use Beacon, which notified a FB user's friends of movie ticket purchases through the online vendor Fandango then framed it as a friend's endorsement, resulting in an uproar by FB users. Beacon was extinguished.

10. On February 15, 2009, six days after submitting this article to press, the online blog "The Consumerist" broke the story that FB had severely altered its TOS in the post, "Facebook's New Terms of Service: 'We Can Do Anything We Want with Your Content. Forever.'" FB had in fact asserted total propriety rights over posted user content, in perpetuity and beyond any user account deletion. FB members revolted, which resulted in a storm of media coverage, and four days later, on February 19, 2009, FB reverted to the previous TOS. Subsequently, FB has attempted to solicit user contribution to a new TOS, suggestive of democratic engagement with the company and yet without clear indication as to the manner in which user contribution will have actual effect on the new TOS.

11. "In connection with the YouTube Website and YouTube's (and its successors' and affiliates') business, including without limitation for promoting and redistributing part or all of the YouTube Website (and derivative works thereof) in any media formats and through any media channels. You also hereby grant each user of the YouTube Website a non-exclusive license to access your User Submissions through the Website, and to use, reproduce, distribute, display and perform such User Submissions as permitted through the functionality of the Website and under these Terms of Service." (Facebook 2009)

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