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Histories

Introduction

Groundhog Day

On September 9, 2020, Netflix releases *The Social Dilemma*, one of the most publicly discussed films of that year. It is a fictionalized documentary about potential risks of using social media, with testimonials from former high-ranking workers at technology companies in Silicon Valley. Most interviewees have been involved firsthand in the creation of products such as Gmail, Facebook, and Instagram. The protagonist is Tristan Harris, an expert on the prevention of the psychological, social, and political harms presumably associated with contemporary information and communication technologies. Harris's myth of origin has to do with the disenchantment he experienced as a design ethicist at Google. Such disenchantment ultimately led him to become director of the nonprofit Center for Humane Technology. Since then, the Center has been dedicated to conducting awareness campaigns to alert society about the dangers contained in the design of supposedly addictive mobile technologies and social media.

The central message of *The Social Dilemma* is that technology companies deliberately profit from the attention of their users and manipulate it, with potentially dangerous political implications. To make the case, the script of the film constructs, often implicitly, a model of the user as someone devoid of agency and self-reflexivity, and therefore amenable to having their thoughts and actions being directed by others. Social media are correspondingly imagined as the equivalent of an addictive and unhealthy drug that robs users of their autonomy, will, time, and relationships—and is ultimately able to destroy democratic regimes.

Against the backdrop of the alleged novelty of these technological innovations, it is worth recalling Ellen Wartella and Byron Reeves's (1985) indication that the moral panics associated with the use of communication and information technologies show a recurrent pattern throughout modern history. These authors quote May Seago who in 1951 argued that "Whenever there is a new social invention, there is a feeling of strangeness and a distrust of the new until it becomes familiar" (143). Amy Orben (2020) calls this "the Sisyphean cycle of technology panics." Like Sisyphus in his myth, who lifts a giant boulder every day to a peak only to have it fall again, individuals and organizations have repeatedly produced dystopic discourses about the harms that media technologies can bring to individuals and collectives—from the codex to the radio to movies to the internet. Such discourses, which are sustained by what Leo Marx and Merritt Roe Smith (1994) call "the 'hard' end of the spectrum" (xii) of technological determinism, always seek to protect those considered weaker from the dangerous seduction of new devices and their potentially deleterious effects. Along the way, these discourses encourage governments to promote applied research on media effects and scholars to propose linear models of causes and effects. The result is a state of affairs in which current models fail to build on prior scholarship and research yields inconclusive findings, which are also forgotten by the time the next major innovation

comes around. At that point, fear emerges again and the cycle starts from scratch.

There is one scene in *The Social Dilemma* that illustrates this pattern with particular resonance for those familiar with the social and historical studies of technology. Tristan Harris looks into the camera and explains that to understand the unique seriousness of social media's effects relative to those of other technologies of the past, it is enough to know that "no one got upset when bicycles showed up." That assertion conveniently ignores that one of the foundational academic works in scholarship on the social construction of technology (Pinch and Bijker 1984) recounts the various tensions across multiple social groups that arose in relation to the development of bicycles in the late nineteenth century. For a moment, it seems as if viewers are watching not Tristan Harris but Phil Connors, the character played by Bill Murray in Harold Ramis's iconic 1993 film *Groundhog Day*.

The Multiple Genealogies of Platforms

The Social Network, released a decade earlier than *The Social Dilemma*, tells a story about Facebook's origins. The film suggests that one key antecedent of Facebook was the website FaceMash. As stated in Mark Zuckerberg's deposition before the US Congress in 2018, FaceMash "was a prank website that I launched in college, in my dorm room, before I've started Facebook."¹ That website, which was kept live for a few hours, proposed a game based on the comparison of women's images taken from Harvard University's directory. *The Crimson* called it the "Harvard version of the Am I Hot or Not? website,"² referring to a site created in 2000 by two University of California at Berkeley engineering graduates that ranked people's beauty on a scale of 1 to 10. *The Social Network* suggests a genealogical line connecting FaceMash and Facebook.

Shortly after Facebook launched in the United States, Niconico (2006) was created in Japan and Sina Weibo (2009) in China. In each of these cases there appear to be genealogies that diverge from

that of Facebook. Jack McLelland, Haiqing Yu, and Gerard Goggin (2018, 53) remind us that “we are moving away from a time when discussions about the Internet and the effects of its myriad applications can be discussed or judged from an exclusively North American (or even wider Anglophone) perspective.” One potentially generative angle into this can be found in the docuseries *High Score*, also released in 2020 like *The Social Dilemma*, which narrates the historical development of video games. It shows how many of the ideas and aesthetics of the most popular games of the second half of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first century emerged in no small measure within the creative scene of Japan in the 1970s and 1980s. The docuseries begins by focusing on the figure of Tomohiro Nishikado, creator of *Space Invaders*. This game diffused from Japan to the United States. It became a commercial hit among American kids and teens, and subsequently in many other parts of the world. It was a pioneer in the “shoot ‘em up” genre and inaugurated the use of “high scores” to catch the attention of players.

Currently, the video game industry provides one of the great sources of content and lifestyles on social media platforms such as Twitch (Taylor 2018; Gray 2020)—where the goal is to play online and watch others play, as we noted in chapter 3 regarding the streamer-turned-political commentator Hasan Piker. Perhaps relatedly, the first algorithmic idea that gives rise to the Facebook prototype, according to *The Social Network*, has to do with playing a misogynistic game online. Could Facebook exist without a culture of gaming? Can a platform invented in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, have roots in the Tokyo creative scene of the 1970s? Do platforms have multiple genealogies? More generally, can we understand the present of social media without comprehending their past?

Why Historical Comparisons Matter

The role of history in the nascent scholarship on social media has been decidedly relegated in favor of a present-day focus. That is, the

objects of inquiry examined in the present tend to be implicitly naturalized as ahistorical phenomena and therefore their histories are left out of most scholarly analyses. However, the two vignettes presented earlier show that a historical look at platforms can shed light on their evolution over time, their modes of use, and their social and political consequences. This, in turn, can help illuminate continuities and discontinuities that are fundamental to a better understanding of what might be unique about the present. For it is precisely by observing the historical links between phenomena across different points in time that it is possible to identify areas of discontinuity. These areas are ultimately what indicate transformations and novelty. In the words of Ben Peters (2009, 15): “Alone, neither continuity nor change approaches to media history are fully satisfactory. However, viewed together, they complement one another: the historian’s eye for contingent change can lead to a fuller understanding of the contemporary relevance of media; so too can new media scholars engage the present more forcefully with historiographical cautions in mind.”

The first vignette, on the cyclical nature of technology panics about media and communication technologies, allows us to place the dominant apocalyptic tone of contemporary conversations about social media within a long tradition of similar dystopic discourses. In other words, from a historical standpoint there is little novelty in *The Social Dilemma* and the related narratives that circulate in contemporary society. The second vignette, on the multiple genealogies of platforms, provides one concrete illustration of the many influences of the past in the present and therefore opens up the possibility that platforms can have rich and complicated histories. One common account of the origins of Facebook centers in the United States during the dawn of the twenty-first century and magnifies through the connection with FaceMash the misogynistic biases of algorithmic cultures examined by Safiya Noble (2018) in the case of search engines. Another alternative yet complementary account takes us back to Japan several decades earlier and highlights the role of transatlantic flows of gaming cultures over time.

In both vignettes, the historical perspective makes it possible to identify the influence of the past in the present and therefore also what might be novel about a platform in particular and social media in general. However, the dominant approaches in social media studies have constructed—sometimes by denotation although more often by connotation—a present that lacks a past and therefore hinders the ability of the analysts to assess the meaning and implications of the phenomena under study. To counteract this tendency, in this chapter we explore historical pathways that enrich the comparative gaze in social media scholarship. For although comparing contemporary phenomena can teach us many things, adding a historical layer allows us to challenge the inevitability of conceptual assumptions and interpretations of empirical findings that have been often baked into present-day biases.

History in Cross-National and Regional Comparisons

Antecedents

A study by Marc Steinberg (2020) that examines the evolution of LINE in Japan provides a fruitful antecedent to show the importance of history in social media matters. Steinberg argues that the emergence of LINE is inextricably tied to a local culture of mobile connectivity marked by *i-mode* and dating back to the late 1990s in Japan. More precisely, LINE's historical evolution has been shaped by a visual culture represented by the large sticker collections that the platform hosts. According to the author, LINE draws “on emoji and deco-mail proto-stickers pioneered by *i-mode*, and on the wider character-centric visual culture of manga, anime, and games, including manga's complex grammar of semiotic signs used to denote emotions” (Steinberg 2020, 5). Furthermore, Steinberg argues that it is from this platform that stickers began to be imported into other platforms such as Facebook and WeChat.

These visual artifacts are sold by amateur producers who are part of a “Creator’s Market” within the LINE platform. While this “entrepreneurialization of the subject” (Steinberg 2020, 7) could be read as a descendant of the neoliberal culture of Silicon Valley, Steinberg shows the importance of historicizing the phenomenon to properly appreciate its meaning within broader patterns of Japanese labor market trends: “This is where I take issue with the platform presentist and American-centric framings of contemporary labor conditions. . . . [The entrepreneurialization of the subject] is also, and in equally large part, an extension of the progressive increase in contingent work underway, at least, since the deregulation of the labor market in Japan in the 1990s . . . , and present even during the height of Japan’s economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s in the form of automobile and electronics factories’ subcontracted, precarious labor” (Steinberg 2020, 7).

Another study that demonstrates the power of historical analysis is the account by Luolin Zhao and Nicholas John (2020) of “sharing” in Chinese social media. The notion of sharing has become a central element of platform use. According to Nicholas John’s (2013, 2017) previous work, in the West it has been tied to three semantic fields: therapy, computing, and economics. In China, however, the same concept has been linked to a double translation: *fenxiang*, which has to do with dividing and distributing, and *gongxiang*, which implies the action of enjoying together. Zhao and John (2020) contend that a historical sensibility is essential to understanding the culturally situated enactment of both terms. Thus, they focus on their long evolution: from the Qing Dynasty (1636), in the case of *fenxiang*, and from the Han Dynasty (206 BC), in that of *gongxiang*. They explain that “while *fenxiang* has gradually transformed from dividing and distributing into an act of communication with interpersonal connotations, *gongxiang*’s newer meanings lie in the technical realm, while conveying and promoting the value of sharing and harmony in a higher societal sense” (Zhao and John 2020, 7).

Zhao and John complement this focus on the *long durée* of linguistic evolution with another one about transformations in the recent history of individuality in China. They argue that what they call a “divided self” is currently taking shape, where notions of appreciation of individualism coexist with a high respect for state authority. Therefore, “In the context of Western social media, ‘sharing’ (or at least an ideal type of ‘sharing’) appeals to people who authentically communicate their true core selves, and, according to SNSs [social networking sites], is a practice that will bring about better interpersonal understanding. In the context of Chinese social media, *fenxiang* appeals to people who wish to communicate within a reciprocal relationship while expressing themselves in a risk-free, altruistic manner while for the SNSs, *gongxiang*, the state attained by *fenxiang*, will bring about societal harmony, in keeping with the state’s objectives” (Zhao and John 2020, 14).

These two studies illustrate how a historical view helps illuminate both shared and unique patterns in the appropriation of platforms around the world. Despite the contributions enabled by the historical work, both studies seem to engage in cross-national and/or regional comparisons in an ad hoc fashion. In the next section we chart some possible future directions of research that compare the temporal evolution of social media practices in two or more national or regional contexts in a programmatic fashion.

Future Developments

We outline two possible lines of future work. The first one has an institutional sensibility and centers on examining how different national contexts shape divergent trajectories of the same platform. The recent history of the incorporation of payment functionalities to WhatsApp provides an interesting example for this approach. WhatsApp Pay debuted in Brazil on June 15, 2020, but eight days later it was blocked due to antitrust concerns. This triggered a nine-month-long dispute between the Brazilian Central Bank and WhatsApp about the

potentially negative impact of the app on the country's local banks and financial technology companies. The government requested the company to adapt WhatsApp Pay to PIX, the Central Bank's own instant digital payment system. During the press conference in which PIX was originally launched, Roberto Campos Neto, then President of the Central Bank of Brazil, claimed: "WhatsApp will start doing P2P soon. I have talked a lot with their CEO, we are making good progress. He has told me that the process (with us) was *faster than in other countries*"³ (emphasis is ours). The pay functionality finally was approved on March 30, 2021.

Why was this process "faster than in other countries"? To answer this question, it helps to examine what happened with the implementation of WhatsApp Pay in India. In this country the incorporation of this functionality took place in 2020, following a protracted four-year negotiation process that presumably started after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2016 attempt to demonetize the Indian economy. This measure, which consisted in severely restricting the circulation of cash in a largely informal economy, was part of Modi's larger "Digital India" plan launched in 2015 and publicly backed by Mark Zuckerberg.⁴ Despite the alignment between the company and the government, a series of regulatory disputes and technical adjustments greatly slowed down the incorporation of the pay functionality into the app. The Indian government approved the use of WhatsApp Pay in November 2020, when it conformed to India's Unified Payments Interface.⁵ In the words of Ravi Shankar Prasad, then minister of Information Technology, Law, and Justice, "India is the world's largest open Internet society and the Government welcomes social media companies to operate in India, do business and also earn profits. However, they will have to be accountable to the Constitution and laws of India" (Singh 2021).⁶

The contrast in the implementation of WhatsApp Pay between Brazil and India raises a key question at the intersection of comparative historical work: Was the process faster in Brazil than in India

because of (a) a learning effect within the company, (b) a difference between the political, regulatory, and/or technological systems in the two countries, (c) a combination of both, or (d) none of the above? Answering this question necessitates a cross-national comparative historical perspective, one that is attentive to the consequences of both the passage of time and the differences across countries. Furthermore, this perspective could help illuminate the dynamics of expansion of platforms from one country to another in the context of a market that is highly concentrated in the hands of a few players and where demands for national and international regulation seem to be increasing—consider, for instance, the vignette presented in chapter 4 concerning New Zealand and the Christchurch attack.

The second avenue for future work that we propose, from a cultural and political economy perspective, would center on de-westernizing social media genealogies (Curran and Park 2000). One illustrative example could be that of deconstructing the constitutive ties between social media based in the United States and the libertarian value system, entrepreneurship ethos, and close connection to elite university research of Silicon Valley (Lécuyer 2006; Turner 2006; Streeter 2011; Marwick 2018; Meehan and Turner 2021). This would imply revisiting two separate yet interrelated issues: the history of Silicon Valley and its relationships to social media companies, and its global status as both role model and default imaginary for other locations of social media production in the world. The former topic would entail shedding light on the contingent economic and social decisions that over time turned what was essentially a farmland into “a regional network-based industrial system that promotes collective learning and flexible adjustment among specialist producers of a complex of related technologies” (Saxenian 1996, 2). In other words, Silicon Valley as we know it today is a recent historical achievement. Uncovering that history and unpacking the processes that guided it would allow scholarship on social media to challenge assumptions about how and why platforms have been designed, built, marketed, and distributed in certain ways and not others.

Restoring the historical contingencies that led Silicon Valley to acquire its contemporary status and interrogating the connections of this history to social media would be tied to interrogating its global implications. According to Marwick (2018): “[D]espite its excesses, Silicon Valley functions as a global imaginary: it models what is considered a superior type of wealth-generating innovation for other places eager to replicate its success. Thus, we must take it seriously as attempts are made world-wide to replicate its practices” (314).

A cross-national historical comparative perspective would problematize attempts to conceive of Silicon Valley as a benchmark for other regions in the contemporary sociotechnical imaginary (Jasanoff and Kim 2015). This tendency is reflected, for instance, in the ways in which the anglophone news media often characterize Zhongguancun as the “the Silicon Valley of China,” or Bangalore as “the Silicon Valley of India.” This tendency not only unreflexively exports American models into other parts of the world but also obscures what might be unique about what goes on in different locales. Thus, attending to the development of alternative platforms such as WeChat in China—created with the strong presence of a large bureaucracy like Tencent and within the environment of a state-controlled economy—could help denaturalize the dominant Silicon Valley global narrative. Historical cross-national research could contribute to show both the limits of this narrative and its associated sociotechnical imaginary, as well as illuminate how the specific histories of different locations around the world contribute to divergent trajectories of social media production and use.

Historical Cross-Media Comparisons

Antecedents

How are we to think about the relationships between traditional and social media in historical ways? One powerful illustration can be found in the work of Lee Humphreys, who in her book *The Qualified*

Self: Social Media and the Accounting of Everyday Life (2018) and in papers with colleagues, has sought to establish the historical roots of contemporary social media practices in much older ones, such as personal diaries. For instance, Humphreys et al. (2013) explain that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the personal diary genre had a semipublic trait characterized by the reflection of daily life in a brief format and, in general, was devoid of depictions of emotional states. Contrary to what is usually imagined about personal diaries as necessarily private, the authors show how they in many cases traveled from one place to another and were shared with loved ones and nearby communities to give an account of the events of one's own life. Comparing the content of personal diaries with a sample of tweets from the year 2008, Humphreys et al. (2013) find that the actors mentioned in most cases are the authors of the tweet and, to a lesser extent, other person(s), thus resulting in a mix quite like that of social diaries centuries ago. So "rather than condemn the accounting and reflecting practices on Twitter as narcissistic (Sarnow 2009), by placing them into a longer discussion of media and communication we can begin to understand Twitter's popularity. While there are important differences . . . the similarities to historical diaries suggest long-standing social needs to account, reflect, communicate, and share with others" (Humphreys et al. 2013, 428).

Another fruitful antecedent of historical accounts of cross-media comparisons is provided by Bridget Kies (2021), who analyzes the case of the *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* television show. She focuses on its segment "Celebrities Read Mean Tweets," presented by Kimmel as an instance of "encounter" between celebrities and social media audiences, in which "a celebrity reads the tweet from a phone while the tweet and Twitter user's handle is displayed on screen" (Kies 2021, 517). The author's goal is to ultimately understand the changing interactive dynamics between television and social media. She thus traces the historical evolution of "celebrity roasts" as a form of media event. This format emerged from the New York's Friars Club

back in the early twentieth century and was then televised in 1968 with NBC's *Kraft Music Hall*. Subsequently it started to be produced as a stand-alone format on Comedy Central in the early twenty-first century. Kies (2021) finds that "As televised roasts move further from their origins to more closely resemble the bullying and trolling found on social media, the use of mean tweets on late-night television segments like 'Celebrities Read Mean Tweets' becomes a contemporary remediation of the celebrity roast. 'Celebrities Read Mean Tweets' not only finds its source material on Twitter but remediates it as television" (524).

The research by Humphreys et al. (2013) and Kies (2021) illustrates the power of historicizing the ties between traditional and social media. In the next subsection we build on their contributions to continue developing building blocks of a comparative cross-media agenda that is attentive to historical dynamics.

Future Developments

We propose two potential areas of work to further the historical dimension of cross-media dynamics. The first focuses on the influence of traditional media in the emergence and unfolding of different social media platforms. The second centers on the coevolution of traditional and social media.

There are at least two ways in which we can ascertain how traditional media formations have shaped platforms: genre conventions and defining features. Regarding genre conventions, for instance, research discussed in chapter 3 has highlighted the role of reality television in preparing the ground for the confessional style that has marked the presentation of the self on Facebook. That is, many of the discursive resources that have been common for information presentation and commentary on that platform have a strong connection with similar resources that were first popularized in reality television and the social uses of webcams in the 1990s and in blogs in the 2000s (Holmes and Jermyn 2004; Koskela 2004; Kraidy 2009;

Siles 2017; Psarras 2020). Furthermore, the centrality of immediacy, the prevalence of sound bites, and the role of strong opinions that have been the hallmark of Twitter have a direct antecedent in the contemporary evolution of journalistic conventions, in both print and broadcast media. Thus, it is unsurprising that journalists themselves have gravitated to Twitter as their platform of choice both for gathering and disseminating information (Hermida 2010; Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012; Paulussen and Harder 2014).

Moreover, the aestheticized presentation of the self that characterizes Instagram has strong ties to the celebrity system that has been part and parcel of mediatized entertainment since the dawn of mass media and that has intensified in recent decades with dedicated programming in cable television and the tabloidization of print, broadcast, and digital journalism (Douglas and McDonnell 2019). The very notion of influencer, one of the supposedly novel aspects of social media, cannot be fully understood in its continuities and discontinuities without placing it in a long lineage of practices of mediatized parasocial interactions with celebrities and the system that manufactures and sustains them (Marwick 2013; Duffy 2017; Christin and Lewis 2021; Craig, Lin, and Cunningham 2021). Finally, the carnivalesque genre that permeates some of the most recent platforms such as Snapchat and TikTok has important antecedents in the carnivals, fairs, and magic shows from the nineteenth and twentieth century (Hill 2011; Jones 2017)—which also continue to this date, with varying degrees of popularity. The prevalence of visual tricks, costumes, and masks, and seemingly more spontaneous and less inhibited behavior that is expected in the use of these platforms, has an uncanny yet seldom explored resemblance to those prior mediated ways of staging experiences of enjoyment and awe.

Cutting across these different ties between traditional and social media is how much the genre conventions of the latter have been shaped by those of the former media. Also at play are specific areas of discontinuity in which the present differs from the past. In both

cases, a historical gaze is key to expanding and enriching our knowledge of what is and is not new about social media platforms in comparison to traditional media counterparts.

Concerning defining features, and going back to the topic of one of the studies discussed earlier, one of the most central elements of social media has been the act of sharing, which has critical historical antecedents in traditional media. First, several scholars have pointed out the extent to which sharing has been central to the emergence and development of earlier media and communication technologies (John 2013, 2017; Hermida 2014; Hartley 2018). For instance, the first newspaper published in what would eventually become the United States, *Publick Occurrences, Both Forreign and Domestick*, printed its first and only issue in Boston on September 25, 1690. It had four pages and the publisher, Benjamin Harris, only printed news in the first three, leaving the fourth page blank so that readers could annotate their news before passing along the issue to other members in their community (Emery and Emery 1978). Furthermore, as noted in chapter 1, the research by Douglas (1989) has shown that amateurs played a decisive role in the transition of the radio from a point-to-point technology to a mass medium. Their desire to share their favorite aural content and communicate with fellow amateurs was a critical aspect in the historical development of radio as we have come to know.

Moreover, Fischer (1992) has demonstrated that the telephone, originally designed and marketed as a technology to support business communication, became a central element in the communication infrastructure of everyday life of the twentieth century due to the unforeseen development of regular users taking up the artifact during nonwork hours for noncommercial purposes. A common denominator across these histories of newspapers, radio, and landline telephony is the agency of users appropriating new technologies to share what is important to them. Understanding the role of sharing on social media is therefore enriched by establishing the connections

with sharing in earlier technologies and also the potential areas of novelty in the case of one or more platforms.

Concerning the coevolution of traditional and social media, for instance, over the past decade news organizations have regularly added social media posts to their repertoire of sourced content (Paulussen and Harder 2014; von Nordheim et al. 2018; Bouvier 2019). It is common to read, for example, articles that curate series of tweets, Instagram posts, or viral TikTok dances to convey a news story. In turn, sources seem to have adapted their social media practices over time to maximize the likelihood of their posts being picked up by journalists. The Kardashian-Jenner vignette presented in chapter 3 illustrates this state of cross-media awareness: televised scenes showcased on platforms and social media posts being subsequently featured on tabloid covers.

One news genre in which this coevolution of traditional and social media has become particularly salient is that of stories concerned with the passing of a public figure. According to Moran Avital (2021, 1,742), “the media have become the main social platform in which public grief is constructed and delivered. By telling stories of death, the media provide the means and opportunity to discuss shared values and moral lessons.” Reporters have recently resorted to farewell social media posts as source materials for their stories. This, in turn, seems to have increased the level of self-consciousness of social media users regarding their posts. In the words of Davide Sisto (2020, 181), “every time a famous musician, actor, writer, or sports figure dies, social media users compete to see who can write the most poignant message, or share the most iconic images, video clips, and quotes from that celebrity’s career.”

Footballer Diego Armando Maradona passed away on November 25, 2020. Within minutes the home pages of news sites around the globe were filled with articles about it, some of which were devoted to the repercussions of the story on social media. The Italian *La Repubblica* published a story titled “Farewell to Diego Maradona,

from Pelé to Messi: The messages of condolences on social media,”⁷ ESPN’s English-language website wrote “Diego Maradona dies at the age of 60: How social media reacted,”⁸ and *India Today* reported that “many TV celebs like Sidharth Shukla, Karanvir Bohra and Arjun Bijlani took to social media to pay last respects to football legend Diego Maradona.”⁹ Did the public figures who posted on social media do so partly with the awareness that news organizations might pick up the content in their stories? If so, did they approach their posts to maximize the likelihood of traditional media exposure, either by themselves or with the help of public relations professionals? Conversely, did reporters strategically canvas platforms in search for quotable posts? Did they even contact potential sources inquiring about their relevant social media activity? Have the editorial practices and genre conventions associated with writing obituaries changed over time in relation to this coevolution? A combination of comparative cross-media and historical sensibilities is helpful to answer these and related questions about the coevolution of traditional and social media. Focusing on only one medium as it evolves or multiple media at one point in time would miss the historical dynamics of mutual shaping (Bijker 1995) that are the heart of the ongoing changes in editorial work and social media practices.

History in Cross-Platform Comparisons

Antecedents

A rich antecedent showing an (albeit implicit) historical perspective on a cross-platform work is D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, Xu Chen, and Jing Zeng’s study (2021) about what they call the “parallel platformization” of Douyin and TikTok. The authors deem TikTok the international version of Douyin, its Chinese counterpart. Both platforms focus on short videos, a genre with origins in China and with a subsequent successful adoption in the West. According to the authors,

Douyin and TikTok were “developed by the same tech company but deployed in vastly different contexts and have thus far managed to survive as emerging platforms in two opposing but comparable oligopolistic platform ecosystems” (Kaye, Chen, and Zeng 2021, 3). Even though the authors undertake a cross sectional analysis through the app walkthrough method, they make sense of why “the waters of TikTok and Douyin flow from the same source into two highly distinct pools” (Kaye, Chen, and Zeng 2021, 17) since they are guided by a historical sensibility. Thus, they find a key reason why Douyin has developed highly appealing business models for its content producers: “The short video market has had a longer gestation period in China (Su 2019), which is reflected in Douyin’s wider variety of options for direct monetization. In addition to virtual gifting, Douyin also includes a “merchandising on behalf” (*daihuo*) feature that embeds icons in live streams that link to products. . . . Merchandising on behalf was pioneered by Chinese online shopping platforms such as Taobao and Mogu” (Kaye, Chen, and Zeng 2021, 14).

Another fruitful antecedent of historical cross-platform work is that of Jessica H. Lu and Catherine Knight Steele’s (2019) examination of joy as a resistance strategy by Black users in interactions linking Twitter and Vine. In tracing the long history of Black oral culture as a form of resistance to slavery dating back to eighteenth-century United States, the authors note that “Black rhetorical strategies were rarely employed in isolation from one another. Storytellers used song interwoven with their narratives, and dozens of players alluded to folklore in their verbal play. Likewise, Black users on Twitter are not isolated or limited by singular platform use” (Lu and Steele 2019, 826).

Applying Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis, Lu and Steele analyze a sample of tweets and vines created around three hashtags aimed at resisting mainstream news portraying negative images of Black children and a proliferation of images of Black death: #carefree-blackkids, #CareFreeBlackKids2k16, and #freeblackchild. They find

a cross-platform dynamic that is key to the resistance joy strategy deployed by users in digital spaces: “crossing over and seizing both platforms, brief moments recorded ‘live’ assert—in multi-sensory fashion—that Black people are fully alive” (2019, 832). Furthermore, Lu and Steele locate the affordances of the platforms as part of a broader, historical repertoire of joy resistance strategies within Black culture: “Because so many of these joyful [Vine] posts incorporate music and dance, they further demonstrate how the affordances of a platform can be made poignant by Black users, in particular. Black users extend traditions of using song as a resilient resistance strategy, especially since Black lyricism and music continue to escape the full understanding of dominant groups” (2019, 832).

The works of Kaye and colleagues (2021) and Lu and Steele (2019) highlight the interpretive gains of a historical gaze in cross-platform accounts. However, this gaze appears to be implemented in an ad hoc fashion rather than in a programmatic one, thus limiting its full potential. Next, we begin developing such a programmatic approach.

Future Developments

We propose two potentially fruitful areas to advance an agenda of comparative historical cross-platform scholarship. The first focuses on recovering the history of abandoned, unsuccessful, or at least marginal platforms, and the second on the coevolution of platforms currently in use by a significant portion of the population. Because social media platforms are relatively recent technological innovations, this agenda is limited to what could be considered recent history. However, even with this limitation we believe a historical sensibility could greatly contribute to more robust cross-platform accounts.

There are at least three reasons that justify a focus on what could be called “dead/dying” platforms (Kluitenberg 2011; Parikka 2012). The first one has to do with accomplishing one of the foundational goals of historical scholarship: presenting a comprehensive account of the past. Complementary to the present-day bias of most research

on social media there is a certain sense of historical erasure of platforms that are no longer in existence—or at least in use by sizable portions of the public. That is, in addition to the fact that most of the studies on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter focus on contemporary matters, there is exceedingly limited scholarship on platforms that are not in use today. It is as if this was a domain of inquiry without a past or as if the past did not matter. Recovering the history of dead or dying platforms is critical to understanding in general terms the different ways in which the past might be shaping the present.

The second reason goes into something more specific. The present-day preference entails by implication the possibility of a success bias built into research designs. In other words, the practices associated with the platforms that have concentrated most of the scholarly attention are in a very basic sense successful because they have managed to persist. However, there are a host of potential alternative practices in relation to platforms that are either dead or dying that are not captured by this focus on current practices associated with platforms in existence. Moreover, it is possible that by not taking into consideration either these neglected practices or their associated platforms, the explanations provided in relation to the practices studied regarding platforms in existence might be limited by a sampling on the dependent variable. In other words, not inquiring into failed practices and platforms might limit what we are able to know about successful ones.

The third reason supporting the study of dead or dying platforms centers on its role in redressing inequalities in social media scholarship at large. This is because even when there is work on these platforms, it tends to favor some at the expense of others. MySpace is often cited as one of the greatest commercial ascent-and-descent cases in the early history of social media. Created in 2003, its period of splendor in terms of number of users and level of engagement was between 2005 and 2008, especially in the United States. Several academic studies were devoted to this platform during these years and

in the period immediately afterward, when the ascent of Facebook eclipsed MySpace (Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini 2007). Although it is still active and available in up to fourteen languages, its membership has decreased significantly over time. With this decline came a parallel lack of interest among scholars, and there has been very limited work on it since its decline began (Torkjazi, Rejaie, and Willinger 2009). However, despite this neglect there is a bounty of studies on MySpace in comparison to those available about other platforms that had their heyday at one point but are dead or dying nowadays.

For instance, Fotolog is another now-obsolete platform that has received exceedingly limited attention among scholars. Launched a year before MySpace, in 2002, in 2007 it had one of its peaks of success, being listed as one of the twenty most-visited websites in South America. In countries like Argentina and Uruguay, Fotolog was strongly associated with the emergence of an urban tribe—the “floggers.”¹⁰ After almost a decade of commercial decline, the platform closed in 2016, only to be resurrected in 2018, but almost anecdotally and from a place of nostalgia (Marcin 2020). Why is the story of MySpace told more often than that of Fotolog? Were their trajectories of rise and fall similar or dissimilar? What makes one remain almost dormant while the other has returned in a nostalgic key but not used massively? Answering these and related questions might provide important insights about patterns of inequality in scholarly attention. This, in turn, should strengthen the historical gaze by broadening the scope of suitable objects of inquiry.

To complement the historical focus on dead or dying platforms, we propose a second pathway centered on the coevolution of the platforms currently in extensive use. This line of work builds on the ideas that were already presented with regards to cross-national and regional, and cross-media scholarship. The vignette we included in the opening of chapter 4, on the emergence of Twitter Fleets and the reaction of the user community, shows the value of a historical gaze about the development of different platforms. In that brief history

what emerged from the observation of design innovations in Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat over time was a phenomenon of coevolution: The functionality of stories had emerged first in one platform to then be taken up in others in a process of mutual adaptation and ultimately convergence. To understand, for example, the ways in which Twitter users produced ironic memes about the functionality of Fleets, it was helpful to know that Snapchat had inaugurated the Snaps functionality years earlier and that in the meantime Facebook had added the stories functionality to its ecosystem of platforms. The historical perspective thus allowed us to make sense of cross-platform dynamics.

Another case that illuminates coevolutionary patterns is that of YouTube and Twitch. As we argued in the introduction to this chapter, playing online video games constitutes one of the most prevalent categories of practices on social media. Since its emergence in 2005, YouTube has been consolidating itself as one of the main platforms for observing gamers playing online. In its origins, the platform offered the possibility of sharing only recorded videos. Twitch was launched six years later, conceived as a livestreaming space associated with the media characteristics of television. In a short time, the video game genre became widely popular, and the platform began to attract millions of followers. In that same year, YouTube decided to launch its livestreaming functionality. For a long time, speculation swirled about YouTube's possible purchase of Twitch. Finally, the latter platform was acquired by Amazon in 2014.

It is common to find videos of YouTubers and streamers arguing why they decided to transfer from one platform to the other; in general, motivations have to do with the business model that each one offers to content producers. How do these digital diasporas shape the design and business strategies of YouTube and Twitch? To what extent has their relationship as competitors generated convergences and divergences in the technical possibilities they provide to users? These are questions that arise from comparison and that can be

answered by taking a historical look at their development. The work we presented earlier by Kaye and colleagues (2021) proposed a view of Douyin and TikTok that arose from comparing business models of each platform in historical and geographical ways. Comparative work on platform coevolution aims to continue along this line on inquiry programmatically.

Conclusion

The scholarship on social media has tended to exhibit a strong present-day bias whereby research questions and objects of inquiry are situated within an “endless present tense” (Hartley 2018, 13). The examination of platforms that are widely used in current times is not inherently problematic; after all, understanding the social world includes making sense of contemporary phenomena. Furthermore, some of the most studied platforms have a tremendous reach nowadays; for instance, at the time of this writing, Facebook has 2.8 billion active users, or 37 percent of the world’s population, which explains in part the contemporary focus. But focusing on the present without consideration of how we got to this stage has at least three limitations.

First, at the most basic level it makes it invisible how the past has shaped the present by both eliding the process of evolution of the platforms currently in use and neglecting the histories of platforms that were in use at some point and are no longer in existence. Second, the present-day bias entails artificially removing the current configurations and modes of use of platforms from broader cultural patterns that become easier to identify through historical accounts. Third, because both the platforms that are widely used today and the dominant ways in which they are used are those that have survived from a wide array of additional technical and practical options, overlooking the role of history implicitly moves success

to the foreground and lack of success to the background. This, in turn, limits the analytical gaze to a relatively narrow set of objects of inquiry and runs the risk of misattributing the causes of their success; in other words, if we want to understand what makes a case successful, we also need to look at comparable cases that are not.

In this chapter we outlined a series of historical pathways to help overcome these limitations in cross-national and regional, cross-media, and cross-platform social media comparative scholarship. In the cross-national and regional dimension, we proposed the examination of how different national contexts shape divergent trajectories of the same platform over time, and the importance of de-westernizing social media genealogies. Furthermore, in the cross-media dimension, we suggested accounting for the influence of specific traditional media technologies and practices in the unfolding of different platforms and for the coevolution of traditional and social media over the past decade. Finally, in the cross-platform dimension, we highlighted the value of recovering the histories of dead or dying platforms and of continuing to explore coevolutionary dynamics—in this latter case, regarding how the main platforms currently in existence have mutually shaped each other.

Adding a historical sensibility to comparative work in social media scholarship helps to provide a more comprehensive account of how we got to where we are today. This entails shedding light on technologies, practices, and voices that have not made it to the mainstream, and unearthing forgotten—but not unimportant—milestones in the evolution of platforms today in the mainstream. As we suggested at the beginning of this chapter, platforms have multiple—and many times not self-evident—histories. Bringing them to the forefront of scholarly consciousness and integrating them into work that is contemporary focused contributes to making visible how the past might have shaped the present. This, in turn, enables the analyst to figure out areas of both continuity and discontinuity, thus showing what

might be novel about platform dynamics—and what might be old wine in new bottles.

Undertaking comparative work with a historical mindset also brings to light the many ways in which contextual circumstances shape the trajectory and current state of platforms. Thus, the brief history of WhatsApp Pay's incorporation in Brazil acquires a potentially different meaning when learning about the history of the same platform functionality in India. Furthermore, recovering the contingencies behind the ascent of Silicon Valley in the world of digital technology contributes to both not taking its current configuration for granted and de-westernizing its role in global and local sociotechnical imaginaries. Moreover, contrasting the genre conventions and defining features of the dominant platforms with relevant conventions and features that were borne in the history of traditional media helps to contextualize the present.

Pursuing scholarship that incorporates a historical gaze within a comparative agenda also counters the limitations associated with the imbalance between platforms that are currently in use by hundreds of millions of people and those that either are no longer in existence or are used by much smaller portions of the population. Uncovering the many histories of dead or dying platforms not only enables the analyst to tell more comprehensive accounts of the past that are invisible through a present-day lens. It also provides important insights about the dynamics of lack of success in past times and, by implication, what might be the factors accounting for the success of the dominant platforms in the present. This, in turn, helps bring tension to the notion of novelty, particularly recurrent in discourses around social media technologies, and to embrace “the bleeding edge of obsolescence” (Chun 2011, 184) of all media and communication technologies. The novelty of media, as Ben Peters (2009) explains, implies a constant tension with the past; what is new is always transitional, so that their aspiration to newness is in

a certain sense an impossible project. Incorporating a historical lens can operate as an antidote to the trap of obsolescence, thus avoiding a return to Groundhog Day in social media studies.

Finally, another implication from the project of de-westernizing the histories of social media ties to issues of language. Silicon Valley is not only a particular locale with a singular set of histories, but it is also a place where one language—English—dominates while others are relegated to the margins. To the same extent that Silicon Valley does not stand for all locations, English does not stand for all languages in which users engage with social media. It is to the pathway of language that we turn next.

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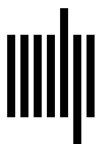
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