

Social network(ing) sites...revisiting the story so far: A response to danah boyd & Nicole Ellison

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Introduction

In a recent issue of this journal danah boyd and Nicole Ellison (2007) guest edited a special section dedicated to what they refer to as 'social network sites' or SNS. As we know, these types of web applications have already moved into the cultural mainstream (see Keen, 2007a), yet so far they have received little in the way of sustained analytical attention. Although, it is worth noting that there is a burgeoning academic interest in this phenomenon, exemplified by the kinds of discussions taking place on email groups like that hosted by the Association of Internet Researchers. This special section represents the beginning of what is sure to be a lively and varied engagement with these nascent developments in online cultures. Colleagues will no doubt be aware of a flurry of academic activity that has already started in the wake of the rise of these highly popular online phenomena. It is for this reason that we are at a crucial moment in the development of this field of study, it is at this moment that the parameters and scope of the debate are set and when we begin to set agendas that may well become established and shape how we study and understand SNS. This article is intended to be provocative and, it is hoped, it will open up some of these debates and questions relating to the direction in which the study of SNS seems to be heading. In order to do this I focus this response on the specifics of boyd and Ellison's (2007) essay 'Social Network Sites: Definition, History and Scholarship'.

This is likely to become a highly referenced article that could well shape these emerging debates, for this reason their article requires some attention before the dust settles on the path forward.

It is worth noting from the outset that boyd and Ellison, who have rapidly become leading names in this area of study, deserve credit for bringing together this special issue and for laying the foundations for continued work in this area. They are in fact operating at the cutting edge of what is going on, with boyd's website www.danah.org forming an informational hub for many researchers and students. Indeed, the article that they have co-authored to open this special section, to which this article is a response, does a great deal of work to clarify the boundaries of study and to provide an overview of the story so far. In so doing it draws together a number of loose and disconnected strands of work on SNS. In addition to this, perhaps most credit should be given for their attempts to construct a history of SNS, the resulting timeline is highly usable and highlights just how quickly these things are moving into everyday life (and even falling out again in the case of Friendster). Equal acknowledgement should be given for their attempt to define some of the ways in which we might move forward with our analysis of SNS – although, as I point out later, I do not entirely agree with the directions they intimate or the premise on which these intimations are based.

So, this article then is written as a response to boyd and Ellison's *defining* essay on social network sites, and, as such, it represents an attempt to instigate further cross-pollination in the study of SNS by revisiting and engaging with the vision that boyd and Ellison construct. I do not attempt to re-write the history that they develop in the article, instead I focus here upon the definition of SNS that they advocate, upon the theory that seems to underpin the article, and, informed by these, upon reconsidering the way forward that the authors suggest we take.

Definition revisited

It is no surprise that one of the key problems facing work into what are quite rapidly shifting contemporary online cultures concerns the types of definitions we use to understand what is happening and to classify different types of web applications. The difficulty is in giving some clarity to the terminology where the things we refer to are mobile and where the terminology is used so widely to describe so many different things and to service so many different agendas. Somewhat inevitably we have seen a range of terms used to describe what is going on in online culture as journalists, bloggers, media commentators, and academics have tried to get to grips with these shifts. Boyd and Ellison's suggestion is that the term 'social network sites' is crucial in capturing these shifts. As the following passage illustrates:

'We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system,

(2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.’

(boyd & Ellison, 2007: 2)

In an attempt to further clarify this definition boyd and Ellison carefully separate ‘social networking sites’, often the preferred vernacular term, from ‘social network sites’. They offer the following explanation for this distinction:

‘While we use the term “social network site” to describe this phenomenon, the term “social networking site” also appears in public discourse, and the two terms are often used interchangeably. We chose not to employ the term “networking” for two reasons: emphasis and scope. “Networking” emphasizes relationship initiation, often between strangers. While networking is possible on these sites, it is not the primary practice on many of them, nor is it what differentiates them from other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC).’

(boyd & Ellison, 2007: 2)

We begin to see here the authors developing a vision of these sites not as spaces where users are solely preoccupied with forming networks around themselves but where they involve themselves primarily in other activities, thus, for boyd and Ellison, the term networking is misleading in this regard. For them, ‘networking’ can only refer to particular set of these sites and not to the range of site to which the authors would like it to refer, so by using ‘network’ in its place the authors feel they can open up the scope of the discussion and the type of sites to which this discussion might refer.

My argument here would be that given these rapid cultural shifts and the dynamic and disjointed nature of much contemporary online culture there is a pressing *need to classify* in order to work toward a more descriptive analysis. As we can see in the above definition, ‘social network sites’ as used by boyd and Ellison, stands for something quite broad. Whereas the term ‘social networking sites’ describes something particular, a set of applications where, to a certain extent, networking *is* the main preoccupation. In short, the motivation to form expanding networks, the practice of ‘networking’ as described by boyd and Ellison, that defines social networking sites should be the grounds for separating out different types of site (along with other established differences). It seems a shame to adjust our classifications so that they no longer account for this nuance.

Social networking sites, in the narrower sense, can then be differentiated from other related but different web applications like Youtube, where, picking up on boyd and Ellison’s own argument, making and accumulating friendship connections is not the sole focus of activity. Youtube could be categorised as a folksonomy

for instance. The difficulty that boyd and Ellison's use of the term social network sites creates is that it becomes too broad, it stands in for too many things, it is intended to do too much of the analytical work, and therefore makes a differentiated typology of these various user-generated web applications more problematic. So where we might group a series of different applications such as wikis, folksonomies, mashups and social networking sites – maybe under a broader umbrella term like Web 2.0 (see Beer & Burrows, 2007; O'Reilly, 2005) – we are instead faced with thinking of a vast range of often quite different applications simply as social network sites. Although, it is clear that there is a great deal of overlap between categories relating to how these various types of site are organised and the information they contain – common aspects like tagging, profiles, and friending illustrate the complexity of the similarities and differences between these types of site. My argument here is simply that we should be moving toward *more* differentiated classifications of the new online cultures not away from them. boyd and Ellison themselves point out that these emerging user-generated led sites have a number of shared features and some important differences. I agree that a number of these sites aren't about networking but are networks, but this should be grounds for distinction not for opening up a relatively stable term to include these differences. Having said this, it is possible that social network sites might become the new umbrella term, in place of user-generated content or Web 2.0 or me media or the like, and that we may be able to find a new typology to sit within it. My problem with leaving things as they stand in boyd and Ellison's article is that I am not sure what a shift to their definition of social network sites actually achieves in terms of analytical value. As I read it, it could actually make the terrain more difficult to deal with as the number of sites that fit this broadly defined category continues to grow – as we open-up the parameters of its definition and as the range of sites on the market continues to expand¹.

It makes sense to try to come up with a term that captures a broad sense of what is happening in online cultures, this is much needed, but it seems to me that mutating social network sites to do this job may actually create problems. My question here then is why not stick with the vernacular terminology, social networking site, which is more differentiated and descriptive of the processes, rather than moving toward this re-definition forwarded in boyd and Ellison's article? And, crucially, in addition to this, why not place SNS (whether network or networking) into a broader more nuanced typology of contemporary online cultures or web applications? This has been done elsewhere using the admittedly problematic and dubious Web 2.0 as an umbrella term or sensitising concept used to describe some general shifts toward user-generated content and toward the webtop in place of the single device (Beer & Burrows, 2007). Using an umbrella term like Web 2.0 allows for a series of categories to be fitted within it. In short, my suggestion is that in place of a very general vision of these sites as social network sites, why not use a term like Web 2.0 to describe the general shift and then fit categories, such as wiki's, folksonomies, mashups and social networking sites within it.

Theory revisited

As a second issue I think it is also worth giving some consideration to the way that boyd and Ellison separate online and offline living – an organisational premise that appears to underpin the way they approach SNS, how they have organised their piece, and where they say we might move in future research. Here everyday life is defined and organised by a mixture of these two things, with users having ‘friends’ offline and ‘Friends’ online (boyd & Ellison, 2007: 14, note 1) for instance. The contention here being that ‘“Friends” on SNSs are not the same as “friends” in the everyday sense’ (boyd cited in boyd & Ellison, 2007: 10). The problem is that increasingly, in the context of SNS moving into the cultural mainstream, the ‘everyday sense’ of friend can often be the SNS Friend. So what we are missing here is a sense of the recursive nature of these processes as SNS become mundane and as the version of friendship they offer begins to remediate and shape understandings of friendship more generally². So we cannot think of friendship on SNS as entirely different and disconnected from our actual friends and notions of friendship, particularly as young people grow up and are informed by the connections they make on SNS. Where, as Lash puts it, ‘forms of life become technological’, as we see illustrated quite clearly by SNS, ‘we make sense of the world through technological systems.’ (Lash, 2002: 15). We can imagine this as a recursive process where SNS come to challenge and possibly even mutate understandings of friendship. It is conceivable then that understandings and values of friendship may be altered by engagements with SNS. As time goes by and as young people spend longer with such technologies in their lives, so these types of recursive questions will need to find a place on the research agenda – to make it clear I am not suggesting that this heralds the death of friendship or any such view, rather that we might need to engage with sociological studies of friendship (Pahl, 2000) to understand how friendship changes as it interfaces with such technologies.

In addition to this, as the authors claim elsewhere in the article in reference to another separate article by boyd, friends use SNS when they are unable to meet in ‘unmediated situations’ (boyd cited in boyd & Ellison, 2007: 11). One of the growing problems here is that we often find that friends and Friends, as the authors inadvertently point out, can often be the same people. If this is the case, then how can it be profitable to separate out offline and online relations and spaces or online and offline forms of living in trying to understand SNS?

As Pahl has pointed out, and this remains unchanged, the ‘challenge for sociologists is to be more specific about what they mean when they refer to ‘friends’, friend-like relations and friendship’ (Pahl, 2002: 421). The point is that if ‘friendship must be seen in context’ (Pahl, 2002: 422) then it is essential that we begin to understand the role of friendship in forging the connections of SNS and, allied with this, begin to appraise the implications for friendship thrown up by the friendships of SNS. One option here would be to reassess or re-contextualise the typology of personal communities offered by Pahl and Spencer (2004: 210) in light of SNS.

This would enable us to further develop understandings of how ‘friendship changes in its meaning and function through the life-course’ (Pahl, 2000: 97) and how we ‘are socially and culturally determined by our friends’ (Pahl, 2000: 172). Pahl has concluded that friendship is particularly important in the early stages of life, we need to consider this as a part of a shaping of notions of friendship, not think of understandings of friendship as being historically fixed or stable. In short, it is possible that SNS, as they become mainstream, might well have an influence on what friendship means, how it is understood, and, ultimately, how it is played out.

The way the authors deal with friendship fits with the more general approach taken in their article. They refer, for instance, to SNS as reflecting ‘unmediated social structures’ (boyd & Ellison, 2007: 9). The question here would be whether we can actually imagine a ‘social structure’ or a ‘situation’ that goes unmediated. Indeed, we find that boyd and Ellison’s article and its conclusions are defined by a determination to think of online and offline social relations as interwoven yet separate, a process that requires us to imagine that there are aspects of life that go unmediated. This, I would suggest, directs this and the future work they point toward in a particular direction. It represents a particular set of conceptual assumptions that may need to be questioned, particularly in light of how SNS operate in the everyday.

Separating out online from offline, even if we think of them as ‘entwined’ (boyd & Ellison, 2007: 13), seems to take us away from understanding these technologies as mundane and as a defining and integral part of how people live, especially as we open up this context to include not just user-generated content based web applications but mobile phones, PDA’s, iPods, iPhones, laptops, RFID, MSN, digital cameras, wi-fi, smart dust, amongst a range of others (Hayles, 2006; Beer, 2007; Crang & Graham, 2007). These mobile, locative and integrated technologies lead to an increasingly mediated way of life with little if any unmediated room outside. Lash’s now widely cited claim is that the ‘information order is inescapable’ and as such it ‘gives us no longer an outside place to stand’ (Lash, 2002: xii). At issue here is the ‘remediation’ (Graham, 2004a) or ‘meditization’ (Lash, 2007a) of everyday life. As Nigel Thrift has put it, ‘software has come to intervene in nearly all aspects of everyday life and has begun to sink into its taken-for-granted background.’ (Thrift, 2005: 153). This then is an alternative vision in which virtually all, if not all, aspects of our lives are mediated by software, often when and where we are not aware of it.

It is hard to think then of unmediated social structures or spaces for the very reason that applications like SNS are becoming so popular – both becoming parts of the mundane and reporting on it for other users to consume. It is hard to think of a life offline, particularly for what appear to be the engaged and switched on youth (I acknowledge here that not everyone lives in this way and there are of course retro cultures and resistances). The point is that where these technologies are so mundane and integrated in how we live, why try to understand them by separating them out of our routines, how we live, how we connect with people and form relationships and so on. I’m sure that this is not boyd and Ellison’s goal, but the general concern with online and offline living pushes the analysis, and most importantly shapes the

development of the nascent stages of study of SNS, in this direction. There is a chance that might come to overlook some of the crucial aspects of SNS concerning its already established and realised potential to be a mundane part of our lives and our everyday communication. Imagining aspects of SNS user's lives outside of SNS, to give a comparative angle on things, is not the *only* way forward. Without wanting to sound Baudrillardian, we might even want to think if there is such a thing as an online and an offline in the context of SNS. Perhaps one of the things that SNS reveal, in the way that they are integrated into the mundane ways people live and as they communicate mundane aspects of their lives to other users (in photos, status, views, activities, favourites, and so on), is that we need to consider other types of theoretical frameworks and the grounding premises that underpin them.

The future revisited

Finally, this leads us to the important question of what is missing and where we might go to next. The authors provide a useful and revealing insight into the work that has been published so far or that will be published over the coming months. To conclude I'd like to take this, alongside boyd and Ellison's brief intimations toward future research, as a point of departure for doing two things, the first is to suggest what might be missing from this existing body of work³, the second is to use this to suggest some alternative ways forward to that imagined by boyd and Ellison.

boyd and Ellison suggest that so far we have 'a limited understanding of who is and who is not using these sites, why and for what purposes' (boyd & Ellison, 2007: 14). Of course, this is true, we have little understanding of these things. This lack of knowledge is interesting given that SNS can be understood as vast *archives* of information about their users, accumulated as they create content, that answer exactly these questions (Gane & Beer, 2008). If we so wish, and given sufficient time, we can dip into these archives at will in order to answer these questions⁴. Indeed, we often see revealed in the activities of users of SNS a kind of 'sociological tendency' (Beer & Burrows, 2007) or a 'new culture of public research' (Hardey & Burrows, 2008) as they routinely engage in a kind of 'vernacular sociology' (Beer & Burrows, 2007) as they research, classify and find about one another (and their cultural artefacts). As well as the everyday acts of finding out about other SNSers, ordinary users are also researching one another using the technologies themselves – and even in some cases researching the particular details of each others SNS use. To illustrate this we can visit user generated software mashups that visualise the geography of user generated content such as posts on Twitter at <http://www.twittervision.com/> or the edits and additions made to Wikipedia <http://www.lkozma.net/wpv/index.html>. In this regard, as Hardey & Burrows (2008) have pointed out, we already have ordinary users of SNS engaging in answering the questions that boyd and Ellison highlight⁵ (see also Beer & Burrows, 2007). We merely need to join in. We might then continue to find answers to these questions by learning not only about SNS users, but also by learning about their practices and incorporating them into our own. It is likely

that some researchers, those that are SNS savvy, might already be doing this. For these people SNS are already a part of how they live and a part of how they research.

It seems to me that the more difficult and overlooked questions about SNS and other related Web 2.0 phenomena concern the ‘cultural circuit of capitalism’ (Thrift, 2005) that underpins them in an age of what Thrift (2005) has called ‘knowing capitalism’ (see also Beer, 2006; Beer & Burrows, 2007). This is where ‘feedback loops’ establish that inform capitalism by drawing upon forms of knowledge that have largely evaded the business sector. As *one* example of capitalism’s use of new forms of knowledge, Thrift suggests that ‘knowledges which are transmitted through gossip and small talk which often prove surprisingly important are able to be captured and made into opportunities for profit’ (Thrift, 2005: 6). If we take just this one example then we could imagine how valuable the content of SNS might be in a context of knowing capitalism, particularly as they are undoubtedly the site of wholesale engagement with gossip and small talk. And this is by no means the end of the list when it comes to valuable information sources that are readily accessible through SNS and the back-end SNS databases. We can see here how the information on free to access SNS can be of value in itself, or as Bruce Sterling has put it, ‘my consumption patterns are worth so much that they underwrite my acts of consumption.’ (Sterling, 2005: 79). The information that the SNS holds is of immense value in the context of a knowing capitalism, we need look no further than the valuation of these sites to see that.

We can, and probably should, think of SNS in this context. SNS are commercial spaces, even those that are free to access – indeed, it is where they are free to access that we need to remind ourselves of this most frequently⁶. This is illustrated by the recent developments at Facebook, valued at \$15bn, where the business model is being reconfigured to capture further profits from its established social networks with the development of ‘social ads’ (van Duyn, 2007; Keen, 2007b). These social ads will be guided and targeted by information held about people and connections they make with brands and products – creating an automated advocacy through news feeds. By focusing solely upon the user, which is what boyd and Ellison’s closing section on ‘future research’ suggests, we are overlooking the software and concrete infrastructures, the capitalist organisations, the marketing and advertising rhetoric, the construction of these phenomena in various rhetorical agendas, the role of designers, metadata and algorithms, the role, access and conduct of third parties using SNS, amongst many other things. Scott Lash (2006 & 2007a; Lash & Lury, 2007) for example has called for us to address these gaps in knowledge through an engagement with software designers and those constructing brands and working-up algorithms. Or as Katherine Hayles has put it, ‘information derives its efficacy from the material infrastructures it appears to obscure’, understanding this ‘should be the *subject* of inquiry, not a presupposition that inquiry takes for granted’ (Hayles, 1999: 28).

So these questions about users and what they are doing are, of course, of real significance, but we should not ignore that there are other things going on inside and around SNS – or even in the access and delivery of SNS as we see the launch of

technologies like the iPod Touch and iPhone and as we start to think of SNS as geographically located in the context of ‘splintering urbanism’, ‘the capitalist urban infrastructure’ and the ‘space-time mobilities of capitalism’ (Graham & Marvin, 2001: 190-191)⁷. It is important then that we do not perpetuate any ‘amnesia about the functioning of capitalism’ (Burrows, 2005: 464) in our analysis of SNS – fuelled by the free to access and user generated nature of such sites. It seems to me, reflecting on the story so far presented by boyd and Ellison that this is a real danger. Capitalism is there, present, particularly in the history, but it is at risk of looming as a black box in understandings of SNS. It is necessary then that even where we are tempted by the way that social network(ing) sites are organised that we do not cultivate a ‘context in which the functioning of capitalism has sunk into the background as a sort of *analytic given* with no or little explanatory sociological purchase.’ (Burrows, 2005: 466). At the moment we can see a direction emerging for the study of SNS in which capitalism becomes this *analytic given*, present in part in the descriptions, but remaining for the large part absent, especially in the analysis.

We can see, for instance, from the type of user focused research questions boyd and Ellison suggest that we could easily fall into this trap of sociological amnesia if we do not consider some of these other structural and pressing questions about SNS and the *cultural circuits of capitalism*. It seems that it is the underlying functioning of capitalism on SNS, particularly in the context of ‘knowing capitalism’ (Thrift, 2005) where information about us is routinely harvested and used to inform, that is one of the key unanswered questions. George Ritzer’s (2007) work on the ‘prosumer’ could be one example of work that attempts to bring capitalism to the surface in relation to SNS, particularly with regard to the changing nature of the relations between consumption and production that SNS afford. Indeed, within these questions of capitalism it will be necessary to think through a conceptualisation of consumption where we are faced with users taking an active and immanent part in creating or producing the content that they and others users are consuming.

With this issue in mind, and to return again to Thrift, SNS can be seen to capture the ‘everydayness’ of the ‘knowledge economy’ (Thrift, 2005: 3) as people exchange information, cultural artefacts, personal details, links to products and commodities, contacts, friends, and details about events and meetings. Indeed, the activities and interactions of MySpace and other SNS resonate with Thrift’s observation that:

‘through the auspices of Internet and wireless technologies, consumers and producers now increasingly interact jointly to produce commodities, and, increasingly, commodities become objects that are being continuously developed (as is the case of, for example, various forms of software)...more and more consumer objects are becoming part of an animate surface that is capable of conducting ‘thought’; thought is increasingly packaged in things.’

(Thrift, 2005: 7)

The information produced through routine engagements with SNS is just as likely to inform business as our purchasing at a supermarket or our purchasing of an online book – with the information being used to predict things about us, to find us out with recommendations, or even to discriminate between us as customers (see Turow, 2006). It is in this context of *knowing capitalism* that we should now be imagining SNS. SNS, in line with ‘new forms of commodity and commodity relation’ described by Thrift, illustrate ‘changes in the form of the commodity [that] point to the increasingly active role that the consumer is often expected to take.’ (Thrift, 2005: 7). Resonating with Thrift’s vision of active consumers, informing capitalism and in turn being informed by the predictive powers that this informed capitalism develops, we can see in SNS consumers producing the commodities that draw people in – frequently taking the form of the profile⁸. We can think then of profiles as commodities both produced and consumed by those engaged with SNS – on other sites like Youtube it might be the video clip that is the draw with the profile operating behind it. We can see here, if we imagine SNS in this context, the active role of the consumer generating information and offering up information about themselves and their lives that feeds into this ‘more knowledgeable capitalism’ (Thrift, 2005: 21).

SNS then are a kind of transactional data set enriched by the types of previously hard to access, private and mundane aspects of everyday life that they communicate. Working through an understanding of SNS in the context of knowing capitalism might be one way of developing an agenda for studying SNS that provides insights that may complement and guide the empirical agenda. But we will not get a complete enough picture if we do not pay some attention to the details of the infrastructures, codes and organisations that are operating here or that feed off of SNS (as well as other consumer generated transactional data sources). I’m being speculative here, but it does not take too great a stretch of the imagination to anticipate that SNS as commodities or collections of commodities are being used as data sources to inform organisations about their populations (Savage & Burrows, 2007). The richness and scope of information on SNS is likely to enable even more sophisticated acts of ‘marketing discrimination’ (Turow, 2006) and differentiation between customers, and, as Joseph Turow (2006: 187) has suggested, it might even be that people using SNS and related profile based sites could well adapt to this and design their sites so that they are treated favourably in knowing capitalism’s attempts to attract, favour and supplement particular types of people. We see here again, if we were still in any doubt, that the forms of classifications and ‘sorting out’ made possible by information systems has and will continue to have profound consequences (Bowker & Star, 1999; Graham, 2004b; Burrows & Ellison, 2005).

As a parting thought, my feeling is that what is most urgent is a robust and sustained critique that challenges a number of the established and dominant visions that surround and facilitate the movement into the mainstream of SNS (and Web 2.0 if you like). This is what is missing, a more political agenda that is more open to the

workings of capitalism. At the moment we are informed largely by accounts of these as spaces where we can connect, spaces that are host to new or remediating social connections, spaces that are democratic and mutually owned – the direction boyd and Ellison intimate and their focus solely upon the user looks to perpetuate this agenda even if unintentionally, at least, in my reading, that is the risk. My feeling is that the dominant visions of the democratisation of the web toward a model of ‘collaborative’ or ‘collective intelligence’ (O’Reilly, 2005; Bryant, 2007) and ‘participatory cultures’ (Jenkins, 2006; Unicom, 2007) needs to be questioned with some rigour. To be clear though, I am not suggesting we resort to the kind of cultural pessimism found in Andrew Keen’s (2007a) now famous polemic on the ‘cult of the amateur’, which tends toward the extreme. I am not saying that boyd and Ellison follow the *marketing line* but that the direction they point toward leaves us open for missing out on some key opportunities for a critical engagement with it. It is not that there is a particular problem with the direction they suggest, it is of course highly important to understand the questions they highlight, but what it is to say is that there are other questions, particularly about the workings of capitalism, that it is important that we do not overlook. Alongside this there is a pressing need to provide a strong and insightful challenge to the growing ‘rhetoric of democratisation’ that has emerged and ushered in Web 2.0 (Beer & Burrows, 2007). It is to this challenge that I think we should direct our attention, and, hopefully, it is this challenge that might well come to inform the type of empirical agendas with which we will inevitably need to be engaged. So, when we ask about who are using SNS and for what purpose, we should not just think about those with profiles, we should also be thinking about capitalist interests, of third parties using the data, of the organising power of algorithms (Lash, 2007a), of the welfare issues of privacy made public, of the motives and agendas of those that construct these technologies in the common rhetoric of the day, and, finally, of the way that information is taken out of the system to inform about the users, or, in short, how SNS can be understood as archives of the everyday that represent vast and rich source of transactional data about a vast population of users.

In short then, when it comes to understanding SNS, its connections, its populations, its integration in how people live, what it tells us about people, how they are used, its patterns of consumption, its significance for cultural preferences, and so on, then the ordinary SNSer and the knowing capitalist are more than likely already well ahead of us. To guide our research we might take inspiration from their approaches – with the SNSer living out their lives amongst the information flows on one hand and business informing itself through the routine mining, harvesting and analysis of the data on the other – but we might also aim to supplement these suggestive methodologies by thinking through ways of formulating some particular, distinctive and maybe even radical dimensions to our approach. We have the opportunity at this early stage in the development of SNS and of research into SNS to revisit our story so far and to imagine just such an agenda.

Notes

- 1 We might also find that we need to engage in greater detail with the history of network approaches. As Knox et al. have noted, and this is not a direct criticism of boyd and Ellison rather a point for consideration, there is ‘very little awareness of the long history of network approaches and little sense of learning lessons about the difficulties of thinking about networks that have been raised in these older debates.’ (Knox, et al., 2006: 114). These may well be worth examining if we wish to make the network the focus of the work in this area.
- 2 For more on recursive information processes see Parker, Uprichard & Burrows (2007).
- 3 I’m sure people will disagree with me about what is missing, I’m sure I will have overlooked some important work. I apologise if this is the case, I am hoping to be provocative here, I hope the reader who is frustrated will look to continue the debate and set the record straight. It is also worth noting that because this is a field of research in its early stages of development that there is a lot missing, I don’t point out all of these absences. Instead I focus upon the absence that I think is most urgent.
- 4 We can always complement such research with additional interviews, ethnographies and the like to try to fill in some of the gaps in the information.
- 5 In fact this vernacular sociology is part of the answer to what people are doing on SNS as it is one way of understanding what people use SNS for.
- 6 In relation to open source, one of the precursors and drivers of Web 2.0, Hayles points toward the nature of the relations between capitalism and user participation: ‘The open source movement testifies eloquently to the centrality of capitalist dynamics in the marketplace of code, even as it works to create an intellectual commons that operates according to the very different dynamics of a gift economy.’ (Hayles, 2005: 51).
- 7 It could well be that we will need to interface here with literature from urban studies to understand the geographies of access of SNS as mobile technologies continue to implicate the use of such sites.
- 8 Making a similar point about the nature of contemporary commodities Scott Lash has claimed that ‘What was a medium – and this is also true of the media sector – has become a thing, a product’ (Lash, 2007b: 18) and that the ‘new capitalism is based in sectors not of goods or even services but of media’ (Lash, 2007b: 19).

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