JOUR 285: SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIETY LECTURE NOTES

Unit 2 (week 3)

Week 3: What kinds of behaviors do platform affordances encourage?

Networked Publics:

- **Networked publics** are a multifaceted, digital version of a public sphere where our experiences + connections are fundamentally shaped by technology
    - Spaces where we can:
        - Create profiles
        - Indicate our interests via likes + shares
        - Connect with friends + other users
- Networked publics are essentially most social media we're familiar with which is also known as **Web 2.0**

What's a Platform?:

- **Platforms** are best described as sites/apps/services that:
    - Host + circulate user-generated content or interaction
    - Do ***not*** produce most of the content that exists on the site
    - Exist on a digital infrastructure with competing interests
- "...platforms don't make content; but they do make important choices about it" (Gillespie, 2018, p. 19)
- Interactive spaces characterized by **affordances**

What's an Affordance?:

- **Affordances** refer to what a particular platform, site, piece of technology, etc/ encourages a use to do
- First coined as the range of "actionable possibilities" a user can take advantage of in a given environment (Gibson, 1977)
- Originally applied to physical objects but has since been adapted for digital technologies
    - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ye5AwaCTdBc
- Especially evident in game design

Internet Affordances:

- *Persistence:* online expressions are automatically recorded and archived
- *Replicability:* content made out of bits can be duplicated
- *Scalability:* the potential visibility of content in networked publics is great
- *Searchability:* content in networked publics can be accessed through search

Affordances + Behavior:

- Some scholars + critics assert some of the unintentional affordances of social media encourage users to:
    - Be deceptive
    - Be less empathetic
        - Example: Trolling + cyberbullying
    - Blur the lines between public and private
- Different platforms offer different affordances which leads to different types of engagement

Platform Affordances:

- YouTube prioritizes content creation + confessional-style monologues
    - Example: Video essays + influencers
- Twitter incentivizes stream of consciousness + quick bursts of info
    - Journalism + lifestyle updates
- Tumblr prioritizes anonymity
    - Fan communities + marginalized groups
- On most social media sites, you own your content; ownership is an *affordance* of social media
    - Social media influencers + monetization

Subverting Affordances:

- **Networked publics** are shaped by **affordances** and instruct us how to engage content + other people online
- Intention vs. actuality
- Certain platforms have specific affordances, but users find ways around them or find new ways to engage the platforms altogether
    - Mods for video games
    - Numbered threads on twitter
    - Reposting tweets on Instagram

Moderating Content Online:

- Because billions of people can post/create/share content online, **platforms** must be **moderated**
- Primary causes of moderation include:
    - Illegal activities (discussing, acting)
    - Pronographic materials
    - Graphic violence
    - Hate speech
- Moderation aims to make the Internet a safer, healthier place, but ‘gray areas’ pose other challenges

Moderation: Example:

- Algorithms are necessary for moderating content, but artificial intelligence (AI) doesn't always work the way we want it to
- Tumblr's change in community guidelines + revised algorithm (December 2018)
    - Response to child poronography on the site
    - Algorithm targeting skin + "female presenting nipples"
    - Engineers are typically tasked with one goal

"Competing Interests"

- Many of the platforms we know rely heavily on ad revenue + collect user data which they sell back to advertisers
- Advertising is embedded in the "design + policy" of platforms (Gillespie, 2018, p. 19)
- Social media platforms often prioritize two interests:
    - Advertisers + children
- Managing community guidelines mean to protect users
    - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBZoVpmbwOk

Media vs. Tech Companies:

- The difference between media + tech companies lies in the very concept of **platforms**
    - Facilitating interaction/consumption/etc. vs. production
    - Media companies create content whereas tech companies develop and/or manage technology, flatforms, etc/
    - Example: Uber
- To what extent is Twitter, Google, or Facebook different from news media?

Unit 2 (week 3)

Week 3: How do platforms use algorithms to manage information + privacy online?

What is an Algorithm?:

- An **algorithm** is a digital tool and piece of AI technology that is trained to identify and categorize information and images
- Human bias is sometimes build into the technology itself
    - Word + image recognition
- Twitter's ranking algorithm
    - New terms + things that catch on suddenly
    - A way of reflecting + encouraging 'public discourse'

The Semantic Web:

- Also known as **Web 3.0**, the **semantic web** refers to the current iteration of the Internet that uses linked data + algorithms to create the ontologies (knowledge hierarchies) that structure the web
    - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v+58-sYT8QZ4w
    - Examples: NFTs + cryptocurrency
- Industries focus on **Web 3.0** in terms of decentralization online whereas academics often focus on how **platforms** centralize information for us (users)

Platforms + Knowledge:

- Search engines are great examples of **platforms**
- 62% of users who do a Google search stop at the knowledge panel
    - Kelley (2019) "The Google Feature Magnifying Misinformation" in *The Atlantic*
- The Google Knowledge Graph demonstrates how platforms centralize information for users to streamline searching + other online behaviors
- **Schema** is an example of a knowledge of hierarchy
    - https://schema.org/
    - https://schema.rog/docs/releases.html
    - https://schema.org/version/latest

Privacy + Internet Affordances:

- Scholars, critics + industry professionals have claimed that the Internet has eroded our sense of what's public and what's private
    - This is one **affordance** of the Internet
- Social media ***affords*** us ownership of our content, but platforms retain the right to use it which is explained in the Terms & Conditions
- Most platforms are considered "public" by virtue of the ***scalability*** Internet affordance

Social Media Privacy Policies:

- Date privacy policies are normally explained in the "Term & Conditions" agreement
    - "Opt out" policies on most platforms
    - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v+9Hn2oMlRI0I
- Ad blockers + encryption software can be used to limit how much personal data is recorded + stores across these platforms
    - Consumer reports detailed Facebook's recent changes to its privacy settings on the mobile app:
    - https://www.consumerreports.org/privacy/facebook-privacy-settings-a1775535782/

How Is Data Used?:

- Companies often store user data (text transcripts, voice recordings, etc.)

    - An example of the **persistence** Internet affordance
- Data is stored for a variety of reasons, including:
    - Building consumer profiles
    - Training AI technologies + tools
    - To predict trends (trend forecasting)
- This can raise issues of transparency in terms of what kinds of data are stored and where

Data + Privacy:

- Brands, companies, and platforms use algorithms + software to mine our data to develop more effective technologies + personalized advertisements
    - Cookies are the most common way that our information is collected
- This process is often described as a form of surveillance
- Sometimes the data is used to make our lives easier + provide us with experiences that we want
    - https://www.youtbue.com/watch?v+vku2Bw7Vkfs

Protecting Our Privacy:

- How existing regulations work + what they can do
- U.S. data protection laws are still being developed and differ significantly from Europeans data privacy laws
    - Section 230 of Communications Decency Act (1996)
- Some potential solutions:
    - "Opt in" policies on platforms + websites
    - "Allow App to track" requests + non-tracking cookies
    - Privacy settings on our devices

Unit 4 (week 5)

Week 5: How do platforms circulate information and exacerbate political polarization online?

News + (Mis)information:

- **Misinformation** refers to any information that is intentionally misleading and is not always about news or politics, specifically
- **Fake news** is a type of misinformation referring to misleadings content presented as news and became a more commonly used term around the 2016 election
- **Clickbait** (sensationalized, eye-catching, and normally misleading headlines) is one example that illustrates how these issues intersect with the **attention economy**

Circulating (Mis)information:

- Clickbait has become a popular and effective means of grabbing user attention online

- These headlines aim to spike reader interest + make the content seem more appealing but frequently "reinterprets" the research being featured and "its meaning is lost in translation" Specht & Gimenez, 2020)
    - Examples: Night vision "rat study" + wine study

Polarization + "Filter Bubbles":

- Political issues have found footing on social media through digital reporting + public discourse online
    - These issues aren't new, but social media compounds them in more visible + intense ways
    - Example: Fox vs. CNN
- **Filter bubbles** have become commonplace online where users curate/personalize their content to reflect their own beliefs + interests that they're likely to agree with, resulting in **echo chambers**
- Everyone can voice their opinion through social media which can make healthy discussion, debate, or collective action difficult

Algorithms + (Mis)information:

- Platforms algorithms often intensify these issues online
    - Interview with Dr. Jonathan Haidt, psychologist
    - https://www.youtbue.com/watch?v=G9ofYEfewNE
- Facebook has been criticized for its use of algorithms that prioritize clicks + engagement rather than accurate information
    - Example: Pizzagate
- The issues regarding clickbait, misinformation, and engagement are largely rooted in the attention economy
    - Social platforms seek engagement + aim to keep users on the site for longer periods of time

Identifying Credible Info:

- The Specht & Gimenez (2020) article provides some guidelines for vetting whether a source is accurate + how to locate reliable information
    - https://theconversation.com/how-to-spot-bogus-science-stories-and-read-the-news-like-a-scientist-133828
- **Fact-checking tools** have become more prevalent on social media platforms as a result of the issues surrounding misinformation
    - Eli Pariser on fake news
    - https://www.youtbue.com/watch?v=bJ5qUx1WOsg

Other Solutions:

- **Digital literacy programs** are often focused on responding to these issues in educating people how to tell the difference between clickbait, fake news, etc. and how to find accurate + reliable information
- Restructuring platform interfaces + designing algorithms that diversify the content we see
    - Example: getting rid of visible (dis)likes
- Reimagining what a “healthy platform” looks like
    - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjLyGk79WXk