Facebook & Users: Who is Using Who?
A material semiotic approach to the irreversibilisation of Facebook as a case of lifeworld colonisation by social media.

By Rob Heyman

Promoter: prof. Jo Pierson, PhD

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Abstract
The subject of this dissertation is Facebook as an exemplary case of social media. Facebook once started as a dorm room project, free of advertisements and devoid of a business model in 2004. But now Facebook Inc. is a ubiquitous social media platform visited daily by more than 1 billion users (Zuckerberg, 2015), which generated global advertising revenue of 3,827 million dollar for the second quarter of 2015 (Facebook, 2015). Research on social media has focused on the means of production and the subsequent exploitation of users. Or the redefinition of privacy that coincided with the advent of social media. In this case social media are a mere change of scenery to research already existing issues; Profiling and surveillance discriminated before, other media have already caused the mixture of audiences (Meyrowitz, 1986) and the audience-commodity is not a recent expansion of capitalism (Livant, 1979). In these studies, social media are framed as the background and cause to changes, but their materiality, the real causes of these changes are not researched, only the texts that are produced. As such, “the materiality of these devices and networks has been consistently overlooked.” (Tarleton, Boczkowski, & Foot, 2014, p. 3)

This research starts with the observation that social media business models rely on the free model; advertisers pay for user access to the service. And the service consists of UGC, which attracts other users. As such, the business models of any social media company always rely on an activity that remains outside capitalist control: the creation of UGC. The aim of this study is to research Facebook in a critical material semiotic way to analyse the evolution and the innovations Facebook deployed to create and control the relation between advertisers and users between 2004 and 2015. It is our assumption that social media have rendered the social controllable and this can be framed as Habermas’ colonisation. Because this control exists in the relation between user and technology we require an STS approach and more in particular actor-network theory to describe the power that works at this level.

Our theoretical framework consists of CPE, which is coupled to autonomist Marxism and critical theory of technology in order to investigate how social media steer prosumption. Since social media are technologies, we develop a material semiotic approach, which relies on ANT and affordances. This enabled us to identify the colonisation of lifeworld as capability deprivation and causes a reversed communication privacy management model, where technology manages personal data flows instead of humans.
We research the evolution of Facebook by studying its affordances through time. Next we used desk research and expert interviews to analyse how advertisers use social media and lastly, we researched how users use social media and negotiate its behaviour through interviews and observations.

We found that social media always evolve through two distinct phases. The first phase consists of adding features and users in order to become indispensable for social activities. This usually coincides with an intensification and automation of production and distribution of UGC. If this point is reached, the second phase starts. Social indispensability, which we will call irreversibilisation, is leveraged to introduce new features such as increased advertising, targeting and tracking. These are accepted because the only alternative is to use a less ‘social’ medium, which is not a real alternative according to Facebook users.

We found that our material semiotic method is able to describe the coercion on the means of prosumption found in social media. Facebook steers user behaviour via technology and other actors connected through this technology. Here privacy invasions and exploitation are not the main issues to be worried about. It is the colonisation of lifeworld itself; social media such as Facebook have reduced users’ behaviour so that it increases efficiency and profitability. Here the quantity, the number of posts, the exposure to ads and the time spend are more important than the quality. Users are deprived of their capability to freely communicate or mass self-communicate. This dissertation points to relevant methods to research this process and criticise this evolution. Ultimately, users have the power to resist, but since this is social media, any form of resistance has to take this social factor into account.