THE ONTOLOGY OF FACEBOOK: POPULAR CULTURE AND CANADIAN IDENTITY

ABSTRACT

Popular culture now offers the opportunity to Canadians to communicate online in large, loosely coupled social groups. Through social-software technologies such as Facebook, some aspects of individual identity are exchanged for the "total involvement" in an environment that allows for high-speed sequences of episodic service encounters. In both synchronous and asynchronous time and with potentially great frequency, participants post and respond to notices and exchange photos. In this article, the work of George Grant, Marshall McLuhan, and Jacques Ellul, is used as a lens on the philosophy of being constituted by the use of social software. In particular, social software is examined in relation to an ontology characterized by speed, universality, and instrumentality. Some implications for the potency of propaganda are considered.

Large, virtual gatherings of loosely coupled individuals are now commonplace methods for beginning and maintaining social relationships. Social software and other new communications technologies are changing the proportion and quality of what we perceive in our social environment. This article considers the underlying communication of social software in order to provide a basis for a better understanding of the meaning of new social practices in the context of technological change.

First, what is social software? In keeping with a social constructivist view of technology, an approach in which we can observe historical moments in which technology is shaped by users, a useful definition of social software would refer to how individuals and group create, use, and popularize a new technology. Social software refers to web-enabled products that support the formation of a community and feature design principles emphasizing two or more modes of communication, that is, one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many. A prominent example of social software is Facebook, in which participants post and respond to notices, engage in discussion in dyads or small and large groups, and "poke" others (virtually hug, pinch, or bite them, for example). If you want to imagine the activities in Facebook, it is similar to having a personal bulletin board on which may be posted photos, videos, notes, and conversations. Facebook then allows this bulletin board to be linked to any of the millions of other bulletin boards that already exist. There are as of this date some 48 million users of Facebook, and it is reputed to be the site with the most photos in the U.S. (Facebook expands 2007).

Previous technologies have been establishing the social "ground" for Facebook over the last couple of centuries. Print allowed individuals to read discrete pieces of information without committing to a long apprenticeship in a monastic order (Innis 1951). In our era, social software as a set of design principles has its roots in the work of scholars of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). In the 1980s, organizations began to use online and database technologies to support the work of groups within the organization. The task was especially important for large organizations, which were looking for ways to reduce the number of people working on a long-term basis in the organization, without losing the large body of strategic knowledge held by individuals. At the same time, Wenger and others studied organizational and other kinds of learning that could take place within a social context. Rather than learning in classrooms, Wenger wanted to encourage learning

MARCO ADRIA is an Associate Professor in the Graduate Program in Communications and Technology at the University of Alberta.

that was engaged in applied social contexts and whose subjects were the messy situations and relationships in the same places and times in which people experienced them. This has been called situated learning.

The service environment of social software

Social software in its early stages, before Facebook, was therefore created for the purpose of increasing organizational effectiveness. Online tools were intended to provide opportunities for gathering information, engaging in conversations, and expressing acquired knowledge at the time and place that these opportunities would best support learning, with learning devoted to articulating and expressing knowledge that otherwise might remain tacit. Because these times and places were not likely to coincide with the schedules and locations of formal classrooms in schools and universities, social software (or *groupware*, as it was called in business) would be used on a continuous basis for supporting learning whenever and wherever individuals and groups would choose. Learning was viewed as occurring episodically, and the normative principle was developed that it should be made available – as a service – on an as-needed, when-needed basis (Brown and Duguid 1991). For some time, then, communications technologies have been increasing the extent to which *episodic service encounters* can be arranged.

If you want to imagine the activities in Facebook, it is similar to having a personal bulletin board on which may be posted photos, videos, notes, and conversations. Facebook then allows this bulletin board to be linked to any of the millions of other bulletin boards that already exist. There are as of this date some 48 million users of Facebook, and it is reputed to be the site with the most photos in the U.S.

Facebook and other social software are new only to the extent that it represents an intensification of this type of encounter, and on an unprecedented scale. Social software in this sense provides what McLuhan called, in a speech to University of Florida students in 1970, a service environment. Following this insight, medium theorists have argued that media create social and psychological environments, in which large-scale changes in patterns of behaviour may be discerned. These changes are not directly caused by technology but are more likely to become potent in the new environment than they were before the introduction of the new technology. A new medium favours some changes and discourages others. For example, the almost universal use of television has served to increase the permeability of divisions in the stages of child development. Through television, children now witness (previously private) adult conversations (Meyrowitz 1985). The institution of a primetime viewing period in the evening has served to reduce, albeit not to eliminate, differences in what is viewed as properly belonging to childhood and what is considered to be associated with adulthood.

Ronald Deibert of the University of Toronto points out that the bias or favouring aspects of a technology do not appear spontaneously as individuals and groups abruptly drop certain social preferences and adopt others. Instead, the "web of social preferences" changes over time (Deibert 1997). The changes in question are therefore intergenerational changes, not intrapsychic, because social preferences are relatively intractable in the short term. Furthermore, over longer periods of time technologies that are used intensively may reverse their effects, helping to create a shared sense of identity and a shared purpose in one historical era, but encouraging atomism and anomie in another (McLuhan & McLuhan 1988).

So what sort of community develops in Facebook? Scholars examining the use of the Internet in daily life have something to say about this. The use of the Internet for mediating a community's activities corresponds to either of two basic models described by Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004). These are the "consumption" and "community" models. The consumption model involves searching for and retrieving information, which is made available for a market price. In the consumption model, users rarely talk to one another, because price is the medium of communication:

> Privacy, anonymity, reliability, speed, and visual appeal are desired properties of

> this virtual space, mobilizing armies of designers in search of competitive technical solutions (1).

By contrast, the community model represents "relatively stable, long-term online group associations mediated by the Internet"(2). These associations are largely uneconomic, providing returns that are connected to the community's values, norms, and meanings (Etzioni & Etzioni 1999). The community informatics ideal is based on the community model of Internet use (Schuler & Day 2004). It seeks what Kellner calls more *ludic* uses of technology, that is, the more playful kinds of uses representing a "more ecological mode of social organization" (Kellner 1998, 14). Such an ecology is decentralized, immersed in humanistic concerns, and responsive to direct human observation and concrete social action.

It is this tension between consumption and community that makes social software interesting in relation to Canadian identity because interactions are carried out at great speed and through a series of interactive episodes rather than through organic development. Social software is used to establish and build communities, but it is also used for consumption. In fact, the most recent innovations in Facebook involves the production, sale, and consumption of virtual gifts.

The speed, universality, and instrumentality of social software

I would argue that the ontology, or philosophy of being, of social software may be understood by considering the dimensions of speed, universality, and instrumentality. These dimensions of the experience of using social software have been extended from previous media innovations but find their most intense expression in the episodic service encounter of social software.

The French medium theorist Paul Virilio (2006) sees technology as the most profound of influences on human perception and speed as the organizing principle for technological development. He regards media innovation as invoking the same effects on perception as that of the larger category of technology. As with other media, speed is the means by which space is reduced or eliminated in the use of social software. Users of social software have access to an unprecedented level of speed in completing one transaction and beginning another.

Speed in media technologies is accomplished through two mechanisms: switches and directories, neither of which is new. They were first used in connection to the invention of the telephone. The first telephone switchboard began operating in the 19th century in New Haven, Connecticut, a couple of years after Bell's invention. About a month later, the first telephone directory was published, also in Connecticut. It had only fifty names. But these two add-ons to the basic hardware of the telephone set, the switchboard and the directory, are innovations that became part of each communication system developed since then. The Internet, for example, relies on what is called packet switching, which allows for shorter delays in connecting users than the telephone switchboard did. We can see the power of directories in the rise of Google. Google provides a kind of directory on demand to information that can be found on the Internet. The unprecedented speed with which users can gain access to the services they require and request is what sets social software apart from previous technological innovations. Many of these interactions can take place simultaneously, because users are linked within networks and across networks.

Social software provides the fastest switching and directory capabilities we have ever seen. It also provides a universality of experience that is unprecedented. Universality is achieved through the myth of the elimination of time and space. Episodic service encounters are provided for any and all individuals and groups. The universality of the social-software experience is created by reference to myth and attention should therefore be given to the universality of experience as the second primary dimension of social software, after speed.

Lévi-Strauss refers to music and myth as "machines for the suppression of time" (Leach 1989). Social software allows people to carry out many social transactions without the time required to develop a relationship with someone else. The suppression of time is based in the attempt to achieve a universality of experience in time and space. The speed of social software allows and the consequent negation of geographical space suggests a transcendence of the limits of time in the sense that Lévi-Strauss discusses in relation to music and myth. The myth of transcending time and space allows for a universality of experience that art has always provided and which the

Internet now claims. The universal experience of religion, art, and then technology are the successive stages of social paradigm described by Grant (1969). In the universal experience offered by social software, the opportunity is also created for flexible symbolic accumulation. This means that if a poke is only available at a particular time from a participant in whom one is only marginally interested, the poke may be valued nonetheless.

If the ontology of social software is based on speed and universality, the implications for those seeking to disseminate propaganda are significant, because the instrumentality with which propaganda is concerned, but which may not be approached directly and explicitly, is revealed in the meeting of production and consumption. The instrumentality of social-software practices is reflected in the continuous meeting of the acts of production and consumption in the virtual world. The instrumentality of social software is therefore directed towards solving the problems of advertising and propaganda.

Propaganda is not necessarily false information, but information provided for questions that have not been posed by recipients. Jacques Ellul (1973) describes propaganda a particular effect, not a cause, of technological society. Ellul argues that in the twentieth century, the relationship between ideology and propaganda changed irreversibly. Previously, ideology gave rise to propaganda. Afterwards, propaganda became a relatively autonomous system, by which ideology could be revised to serve the needs of the propaganda system: "Propaganda's task is less and less to propagate ideologies; it now obeys its own laws and becomes autonomous" (Ellul 1973, 196). Ellul sees propaganda as necessary to the functioning of the state even in democratic countries. Integration propaganda seeks to create unity of sentiment, thought, and action. At all times, individuals and groups are encouraged to think and act together, because propaganda "is called upon to solve problems created by technology, to play on maladjustments, and to integrate the individual into a technological world" (Ellul 1973, xvii). Rational propaganda, on the other hand, provides facts but in an incomplete or misleading context.

Technology creates problems that propaganda is intended to solve. Propaganda institutions include corporations, lobby groups, and so on. The two are always in association with one another. Gouldner argued that ideology was in a dialectical relationship with technology. McLuhan, in reviewing the sociologist Alvin Gouldner's book, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology*, used the analogy of figure and ground to note that as new communications technologies, such as the newspaper and then the telegraph, were invented, the figure of the new technology appeared on a ground of what he called "electric information." This was because, McLuhan noted, "Western man always has his eye on the figure and not the ground" (1979, 246).

Harmonizing the rational practices of propaganda with the social practices of the large virtual group

Ong (1982) has characterized the transition from orality to literacy the "technologization of the word." Technologization in this sense means the creation of a new set of social practices. I noted that the social constructivist approach to technology would define social software, not in terms of its characteristics as a combination of hardware and software, but as a set of social practices. In the same way, propaganda in Ellul's terms is a set of practices that is synthesized within the larger practices of technique. Community life is replicated as a sped-up series of episodic encounters for users of social software. In this way, propaganda as a set of social practices is in harmony with the social practices of social software:

> Ideally, advertising aims at the goal of a programmed harmony among all human impulses and aspirations and endeavors. Using handicraft methods, it stretches out toward the ultimate electronic goal of a collective consciousness. When all production and all consumption are brought into a preestablished harmony with all desire and all effort, then advertising will have liquidated itself by its own success (McLuhan 1964, 202).

McLuhan's insight into the creative practices of advertising was that advertising had discovered Freud. His view of advertising was that of a dream world, intended to appeal to subconscious desires. Rational propaganda provides factual information, but in a misleading context and framed within implications for action that, if taken in context, would be irrational – as irrational as the human subconscious. This, then, is Facebook's philosophy of being – that of the unlimited

capacity of technology to bring together the potential vagaries of demand and consumption, with the hyper-speed of symbolic production.

Notes

Brown, J., & Duguid, P. (1991). Organizational learning and communities-of-practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning, and innovation. *Organization Science*, 2, 102-11.

Deibert, R. (1997). *Parchment, printing, and hypermedia: Communication in world order transformation*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Ellul, J. (1973). K. Kellen, tr. *Propaganda: The formation of men's attitudes*. New York: Vintage. [1965].

Etzioni, A., and Etzioni, O. (1999). Face-to-face and computer-mediated communities: A comparative analysis. *The Information Society*, 15, 241-48.

Facebook expands into MySpace's territory. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/25/technology/25social.html.

Feenberg, A., & Bakardjieva, M. (2004). *Community in the digital age: Philosophy and practice*. In A. Feenberg, & D. Barney (Eds.), 1-28. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Grant, G. (1969). *Technology and empire : Perspectives on North America*. Toronto: Anansi.

Innis, H. (1951). *The bias of communication*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Kellner, D. (1998). Virilio, war, and technology: Some critical reflections. *Illuminations*. Retrieved June, 13, 2007 from http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuninations/kell29.htm.

Leach, E. (1989). *Claude Lévi-Strauss*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

McLuhan, M. & McLuhan, E. (1988). *The laws of media: The new science*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York: New American Library.

___. (1979, January). Review of the dialectic of ideology and technology: The origins of grammar and future of ideology. In Gouldner, A. W. *Technology and Culture*, 20(1), 244-246.

Meyrowitz, J. (1985). *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ong, W. (1982). *The presence of the word and orality and literacy: The technologization of the word*. London: Routledge.

Schuler, D., & Day, P. Eds. (2004). *Shaping the network society: The new role of civil society in cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Virilio, P. (2006). Speed and politics. (M. Polizzotti, Trans.). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.