



Selected Papers of Internet Research 15:  
The 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Daegu, Korea, 22-24 October 2014

## THE PRODUCTION OF ONLINE SPACE: FACEBOOK AND ALGORITHMIC METAPOWER

Martin Berg  
Halmstad University

### Abstract

Throughout the history of Internet studies, online space has been conceptualised in dramatically different ways. In the early days of internet research, online space was commonly described as a separate social sphere governed by the absence of mundane regulations. In cyberspace, as Peter Steiner (1993) noted in his now famous illustration, "nobody knows you're a dog" and in fact, it was often assumed that online space did not only allow for an increased connectivity but also that the basic conditions for self and subjectivity to some extent were altered. The social order online and the lack of corporeality in this seemingly unbound space were frequently thought of as helping people to transcend everyday power relations related to gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, class and so forth. Since these days, the internet has undergone a vast array of changes and today online space is rarely understood as different from everyday life offline. As Berg (2011) explains, the field of internet studies has taken a socio-spatial turn which has underpinned extensive explorations of the intertwinement between online and offline spaces, thus de-emphasising the importance of how certain kinds of online spatiality are produced and experienced.

Online and offline spaces are increasingly thought of as merged and researchers tend to assume that social network sites such as Facebook are deeply embedded in everyday life social practices. Despite this common assumption, current research on social network sites is roughly divided in two separate fields which emphasize either instrumental or institutional characteristics (Berg 2012). Whereas the immensely popular instrumental approach emphasizes various aspects of how users put social network sites into play, the institutional perspective focuses on how social network sites put users into play through various kinds of exploitive data harvesting. Although early accounts of online space frequently explored the altered conditions for self and subjectivity, contemporary research, with some exceptions, rarely put these matters under scrutiny. A number of recently published papers point at an emerging interest in the effects of embedded algorithms and their potential function as social social structures. Although researchers such as David Beer (2009), Taina Bucher (2012a, 2012b), Robert W. Gehl (2011) and Astrig Mager (2014) provide excellent accounts of how software and algorithms sink into the background of people's everyday life and

Suggested Citation (APA): Berg, M. (2014, October 22-24). *The production of online space: facebook and algorithmic metapower*. Paper presented at Internet Research 15: The 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Daegu, Korea: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

affect social interaction through subtle structuring processes, it remains unclear if and to what extent these changes alter the conditions self and subjectivity.

Explicitly focusing on Facebook, this paper aims at exploring the effects of algorithms as social structures and strives at advancing the study of how algorithms contribute to a production of online space and its impact on various social processes concerning self and subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> The opening section revolves around a literature review which establishes an understanding of how the algorithmic processing of personal and interactional data on Facebook forms the basis for the emergence of a certain kind of "metapower". The following section describes core aspects of the Facebook interface which are subsequently elaborated by turning to an empirical study of approximately 470 self-reflexive diary entries about Facebook use, authored by self-selected Facebook users from Sweden between the ages of 22 and 68. The final section of this paper aims at elaborating the theoretical and empirical readings by turning to the core readings in the emerging field of software studies (Kitchin & Dodge 2011, Manovich 2013) along with the works of Henri Lefebvre (1999/1974), Georg Simmel (2009/1908) and George H. Mead (1934). In overall terms, this paper suggests that spatiality is still an important facet of contemporary online sphere yet in a radically different sense than early accounts of online space proposed. By exploring the changed characteristics of online space, this paper advances the ongoing discussion of algorithms as social structures as well as the possible surfacing of new forms of power and their general implications for everyday life (online). These are all matters that need to be taken seriously if research is supposed to establish an understanding of the complex nature of the digital world and the ways in which it feeds into, affects and become part of material social spaces.

## References

Beer, D. (2009). "Power through the algorithm? Participatory web cultures and the technological unconscious." *New media & society*. 11(6): 985-1002.

Berg, M. (2011). *Checking in at the Urban Playground: Digital Geographies and Electronic Flâneurs. Networked Sociability and Individualism: Technology for Personal and Professional Relationships*. F. Comunello. Hershey, PA, Information Science Reference: 171-196.

Berg, Martin. (2012). Social intermediaries and the location of agency: a conceptual reconfiguration of social network sites. *Contemporary Social Science*, 7(3), 321-333.

Berg, M. (forthcoming). "Participatory trouble: Towards an understanding of algorithmic structures on Facebook." *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial research on Cyberspace* 8(3).

---

<sup>1</sup> These matters have also been approached in Berg (forthcoming).

Bucher, T. (2012a). Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook. *New Media & Society*.

Bucher, T. (2012b). "A Technicity of Attention: How Software 'Makes Sense'." *Culture Machine* 13: 1-23.

Gehl, R. W. (2011). "The archive and the processor: The internal logic of Web 2.0." *New Media & Society* 13(8): 1228-1244.

Kitchin, R. & Dodge, M. (2011). *Code/space: Software and everyday life*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Lefebvre, H. (1999/1974). *The Production of Space*. Oxford, Blackwell.

Mager, A. (2014). "Defining Algorithmic Ideology: Using Ideology Critique to Scrutinize Corporate Search Engines." *tripleC* 12(1): 28-39.

Manovich, L. (2013). *Software takes command*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Mead, G. H., Ed. (1934). *Mind, self, and society : from the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Simmel, G. (1950). *The metropolis and mental life*. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. K. H. Wolff. New York, Free Press: 409–424.

Simmel, G. (1978). *The philosophy of money*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Simmel, G. (2009/1908). *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*. Leiden, Brill.

Steiner, P. (1993). On the Internet, Nobody Knows You're a Dog. *The New Yorker*. New York. 69: 61.