Social Media: What's the Deal?

Social media is near ubiquitous. Wherever there is a computer and an internet connection- the world over, seemingly- some form of online media is being accessed. YouTube, Facebook, Myspace, Wikipedia/leaks, the blogosphere, are all areas of some type of interaction: whether in producing media by uploading, to consuming by downloading, watching, or just surveying, to commenting on, as well as frequent updating (as in current-statuses, profiles, fact pages), etc. Social media have become part of the fabric of our lives, the same as a casual stroll down a street corner acknowledges Starbucks and a 7-11 without lifting an eyebrow. As result they have become enmeshed in both our public and private lives. They've become a means of individual representation. Personal expression, however, is constantly under strict scrutiny. This essay will revolve around three (varying) situations by which conflict is elicited or expressed in the realm of social media: personal status updates, teacher's reputations and online responsibilities, and social media used as a tool against government suppression and repression. All at first glance seem quite different, but after a careful analysis, their underlying themes should be made explicit.

"Founded in February 2004, Facebook is a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and coworkers" around the clock.[1] One's personal page is there 24 hours a day. Just the same, our constant status-updates and uploaded links remain (for those we allow to see) as a testament of our feelings, convictions, and sporadic whims. Conflicts arise when we post things we really didn't want to discuss. Take Tina (a friend of mine whose name has been changed) for example. A few days after a rough break-up with her boy friend, and still feeling a little uneasy, changed her relationship status from "in a relationship" to "single." Immediately, her Facebook page was bombarded with just as many

condolences as blunt inquiries as to when and why and how she was feeling. She was enraged: "is this the kind of stuff people worry about, what do they care!?"

Our online selves, if you will, aren't limited to some ideal representation of ourselves, but are believed to be a separate existence all their own. (For example, it seems almost taboo, or out of place to try and resume a conversation in person which was started during an online commenting frenzy). We're free to portray ourselves in any manner we wish. Yet a simple relationship status can shatter our security. We assume that if we as individuals can control our virtual selves, we can control how others see us (virtually). Thus lying at the intersection between feeling obligated to portray ourselves honestly-as "single" for example- and being conscious of it being a public page, is the sudden shock of our *real* private life coming into public scrutiny: beyond the confines of our intended limitations. "What do they care?" as she most deservedly asked, bubbles in irony since her page was open to friend's comments. Another question might well be asked "how do we expect people to adequately respond to our postings?" My point isn't to ridicule her response, but to highlight what seems to be a pitfall in our online and, possibly real life, communication. We expect others to exercise restraint in their comments about our online space as if the boundary between public discourse and giving "too much information" is clear cut. It's analogous to going and flaunting to a friend a tie/dress you adore, clearly waiting to see if he/she approves, while wanting them to be honest, expecting them to affirm your initial belief. When they're honest, you feel insecure. The communication of certain expected rules is taken for granted, and the private vs. public dichotomy is accentuated.

As new and experienced teachers are using social media, the private vs. public dichotomy expressed earlier takes on another dimension. What for some is a reasonable status update or comment, "friend" acceptance, or uploaded picture, can mean career life or suicide for teachers.[2]

In spite of these outlets being controlled by the user, the representations and expressions left virtually have far reaching consequences. As the authors of *Have You Googled Your Teacher Lately? Teachers' Use of Social Networking Sites* explain: "In a world where social connections and friendships are newly defined by user-generated content on the Web, it is unclear where privacy ends and professional life begins."[3] The responsibility to maintain a degree of professionalism at all times leaves social media applications in a precarious position. Are the risks of a leak, however slight, of one's personal page or uploaded YouTube video worth a reputation, a career?

During high school, before Facebook was the craze, and MySpace was all the hype, my entire English class demanded our Teacher befriend us. He refused, stating that only after we graduated could we become his "friends." Prudence might well have dictated his stance. Yet opportunities for integrating many of these online social networking applications into eager educational systems in the future might well be dismissed by many real and perceived fears.[4] Society is forced to grapple with a new existential threat. The public vs. private conflict thus absorbs another important dimension.

Thirdly, interactive media itself is a contentious battleground. YouTube for example gives any and everyone (with access of course) the opportunity to express their own story, viewpoint, or analysis in the form of short movies, sounds, homemade video, etc. Thus many who feel their struggles aren't given credence or the time of day use YouTube to create space in what was and (often still is) an experiential void. From activists to lay people, from showing footage of violent occupation to a monologue, YouTube is a venue for voice. What is most striking are the conflicts that arise when social media is repressed by States.

The attack on the Mavi Marmara in May of 2010 is a case in point. Immediately after firing upon and boarding a Turkish aid ship killing a number of unarmed civilians, Israeli forces confiscated all media taken by passengers. Directly following the raid, Israeli media "uploaded a series of videos of the attack on the flotilla to YouTube...[shaping] the U.S. media's understanding of the raid."[5] Members on board, aware of the attempts to obfuscate what was happening, tried in vain to keep hold of the shreds of evidence in their possession of the invasion. As a result, those who successfully kept their recordings with them initiated what Diana Allan and Curtis Brown deem "A multifaceted online information war…not only on YouTube but also on Twitter, Facebook, and in the blogosphere," a battle of redemption for the truth.[6] How could this happen, one might ask? Social media has created a virtual space that embodies the physical, the real, and the experienced. It is contested space. Israel (but certainly not limited to it by any means) has sought dominance in the virtual realm to win the hearts and minds of the tech savvy, thus limiting the narrative of its actions there too. The activists published the remaining footage of the invasion still in their possession, critiquing the Israeli propaganda. The original Israeli narrative however, scattering social media networks and mainstream corporate media in the US, remained dominant. The damage was done.

In a similar vein, Wikileaks struck a resounding chord in the United States especially, as well as around the world. Rather than being able to prevent its inevitable spread, the US embarked on a containment policy. As result, mainstream corporate media deemphasized the actual leaks by emphasizing the alleged sex crimes of Julian Assange (indictments still to be seen), as one MSNBC article displays in satire.[7] However government employees are still warned not to read the leaks.[8] The reproduction of Wikileaks releases' over the social media mainframe reverberate today as a threat to national security.

Yet in this chaos we still reminisce the incidents following Iran's elections and Twitters indelible mark upon our memory. The hype over Twitter served the rhetoric coming out of Washington well, to demonize the Iranian Regime. Now, it is the venue which the world has learned of vicious Ben Ali's abdication and dethronement, as seen in clips all over YouTube and other sites.[9] The events in Tunisia have again stirred the pool of praise for social media: ironically in spite of the United States's cooperation with Ali's regime the last 24 years.[10] As a Los Angeles Times article begins: "In Tunisia's state of unrest, protesters are using blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Wikileaks documents, YouTube and other methods to mobilize and report on what is going on," and their admiration for social media's organizing power is made evident.[11] Another author boasted "Social Media Made [the] Tunisian Uprising Possible."[12] It seems what we perceive as online media-led is often a reflection of a tumultuous lived experience just making its presence known. In spite of government repression of the web, as a friend of mine reports to me who is currently in Tunisia, popular mobilization is possible; but that experience is neither new nor is the social anxiety and or action against it. One columnist in the blogosphere responded, decrying in his title: "Social Media Didn't Oust Tunisia's President-The Tunisian People Did."[13]

Social media is tossed around like a political softball, not just by governments, but media outlets themselves who aren't sure where to classify it. Like any other form of expression which has the potential to challenge dominant narratives and representations, it is constantly under close surveillance. Yet its effectiveness is not so easily discernable. US corporate media, for example, did not become more critical of Israeli actions after those on board the Mavi Marmara proved their experience of being unjustly attacked.[14] YouTube's ability to broadcast these suppressed narratives, the violence of Israeli occupation, as well as other crimes against

humanity elsewhere in the Middle East (as well as elsewhere in the world for that matter!), have

not broached the chasm separating them and mainstream media representations. The Middle

East Media Research Institute remains the most extensive repository for video content and

translations used by media outlets and Government agencies in the United States and

elsewhere.[15] MEMRI's translated clips, from Arabic and other languages to English, utilized in

these media outlets, fall under program 'projects' such as: "The Jihad and Terrorist Watch,"

"The Reform Project [of the Arab and Muslim World]," while making known that it: "On a daily

basis…assists and lends support to all branches of the U.S [military]… in carrying out the War

on Terror.[16]

In spite of this, social media's influence remains meaningful. In December, Youth in

Gaza opened a Facebook page bellowing out their frustrations of living under Israeli Occupation

and Hamas rule. The "Gaza Youth Manifesto For Change," with 17, 874 people who "like" it, is

an appeal to the world to action, and to listen to their basic cries:

> "We want to be free. We want to be able to live a normal life. We want peace. Is that too much to ask? We
> are a peace movement consisting of young people in Gaza and supporters elsewhere that will not rest until
> the truth about Gaza is known by everybody in this whole world and in such a degree that no more silent
> consent or loud indifference will be accepted."[17]

Social media gives hope. Even if another Facebook Group, YouTube video, or Tweet

contradicts one's experience. As long as we know someone is watching, clicking, reading our

imprints on social media, then our voices are heard. Our experiences are given legitimacy in

their recognition. Just the same: student groups, community organizers, family-reunion planners,

the list goes on, use these tools to reduce the anxiety of not being heard, to "spread the word."

Everyone you befriend can see what you post. The opportunity for critical exchanging of ideas

is there.

Social media remains as integral to the framework of our lives as ever. Over 600 million people or more use Facebook, 50% accessing it every day.[1819] These interactive media tools of re-creation, of self representation, are now an inescapable part of our reality. They are just as frequently places and sources of conflict. The irony is that conflict is often what is most needed. In conflict we are forced to confront our own insecurities, as exemplified when someone changes their "relationship-status" prematurely. They force society to have to deal with resounding debates of where the lines of private and professional lives begin and end in an online-social networking-world like today. Finally, conflicts challenge us to confront the voices of the silenced, acknowledge and respect other's narratives, force us to recognize that everyone does not share the same privileges and securities we do, and demand we not tolerate it when those voices are suppressed by people or their governments.

ENDNOTES

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