PANOPTIC TENSIONS ON RHIZOME: UNDERSTANDING THE IDEOLOGICAL MODEL OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Among many different views and interpretations on the socio-technical underpinnings of social media in new media literature, clarifying two specific standpoints is important for the understanding of ideological model peculiar to social media. As a social phenomenon, the function of the social web, which encompasses social media, has two major concerns. While it is identified through the lens of egalitarianism as ever democratic media, which facilitate decentralized power dynamics and resistance to the dominant hierarchy, it is recognized that social media strengthen the centralized control by facilitating the surveillance of authority along with the technological advancement. Applying the methods of concept analysis, this paper first identifies three basic assumptions -social media, rhizome and panopticism- which are related to the said phenomenon. Then it critically scrutinizes how the concepts of rhizome and panopticism feature in the key facets of social media and their paradoxical functioning in the social media sphere. Dissecting the governing and end-user sides, it finally attempts to reveal the dyad and enigmatic ideological model of social media.

KEYWORDS: *social media, rhizome, panopticism, surveillance*

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1 INTRODUCTION

Research on new media has been increasingly inundated by the enquiries of political and cultural intersections of social media in the past decade. Most studies focus their attention on the egalitarian or democratic notion of social media while a few concentrates on authoritative involvement compared to the former.

This study examines both perspectives of the theoretical foundation of social media with two seemingly converse philosophical progenitors: rhizome and panopticism. Furthermore, rhizome and panopticism were discussed here as two metaphors for the grammar of social media. Finally, this paper presents a thematic overview of the two concepts and examines critically how they intersect with social media.
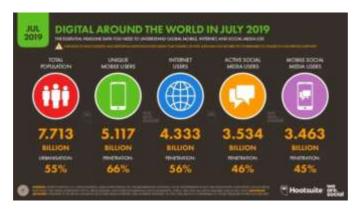
1.1 Assumptions

1.1.1 Social Media

Social media refers to a combination of social web applications that designate a different media ecosystem due to its technological algorithm and user behaviour practice. As an umbrella term, this combination consists of social networks (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, VK), blogs (e.g. Blogspot, WordPress, Tumblr), microblogs (e.g. Twitter, Weibo), wikis (e.g. Wikipedia), content communities (e.g. YouTube, Flicker, Instagram) and virtual worlds: virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft, EverQuest), virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life) (Fuchs 2014; Sheldon 2015). The following succinct definition summarizes the characteristics and functioning mechanisms of social media in general.

"Social media are Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others." (Carr & Hayes 2015)

Due to their wide-ranging nature, interactive functioning mode and the ability for social upheavals and dissension movements to be presented promptly and extensively without conformist media parameters, social media have become the central social gravitational point of the digital media age. What is evident from the literature is that social media has made by far the most revolutionary shift ever in the media landscape exemplifying three major facets in the power of society: social prevalence, social influence and social mobilization.

The first is social prevalence. The following figures stand as evidence for the rapid growth and prevalence of social media. As of July 2019, with the world's population standing just above 7.7 billion of which over 4.3 billion are internet users, the number of active social media users passes 3.5 billion.

(Source: *Digital 2019: Q3 Global Digital Statshot*)

Figure 1: Global Social Media Usage

According to Datareportal, even though it shows that more than 46% of world's total population now uses social media, when it comes to people aged 13 and above, who are the 'eligible audience', the rate increases to 59%. It is noticeable that the growth of this penetration rate increased in more than a quarter of a billion only in the last 12 months (Kemp 2019).

The second is the societal influence which is vast and diverse, and it is happening in increasingly many facets of social life. Consequently, scholars have been examining social media's influence in different aspects and on different grounds. To name a few areas from the scholarship; in political perspective: on elections (Selva & De Blasio 2014), on constituencies (Saye 2014), on expression (Barnidge et al. 2018), on awareness (Cacciatore et al. 2018), and on freedom and democracy (Diamond & Plattner 2012; Sunstein 2018); in economic perspective: on advertising and marketing (O'Brien 2014), on consumer behaviour (Dolan et al. 2015), on public relations (Allagui & Breslow 2016; Motion et al. 2019), and on labour (Fuchs & Fisher 2015); in socio-cultural perspective, on addiction and lifestyle (Perlow 2012), on race, ethnicity and identity (Papacharissi 2011; Langmia & Tyree 2017), and on society and culture at large (Bolter 2019).

The third is community mobilization. Among all the transformations which have taken place nearly over the past two decades by the intervention of social media, this has become the foremost and decisive. When the world goes through many societal upheavals propelled by social media, highly desirable contexts have been provided for the academia to study social media with a focus on the civic dimension (Jost et al. 2018). On the one hand, citizenry empowered collective social protests such as G20 summit protests in London 2009, Toronto 2010 and Hamburg 2017 (Wood et al. 2017), Arab Spring in 2010-2011 (Tufekci & Wilson 2012; Howard & Hussain 2013), and Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in 2011 (Gleason 2013) exemplify the greater leverage and communal immersive capacity of social media. On the other

hand, theories and concepts based on social dynamics triggered by social media such as digital activism, digital humanitarianism, crisis mapping, crowdsourcing, flash mobs and its modern counterpart smart mobs, clicktivism or slacktivism, connective action, cognitive surplus, virtual public sphere and so forth have emerged or been redefined in this dynamic breeding ground.

These three key factors have set the stage for social media to make their way profoundly and extensively into society and wield its influence in social debate.

1.1.2 The Rhizome

To put simply, the rhizome is a non-linear and acentered network of any given collection. In human life-world, it depicts a model for non-hierarchical structures in the entire material and non-material entities. First used only in the terminology of botany and dendrology, this influential idea and its function within society have been defined and philosophically conceptualized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their second book in the series of capitalism and schizophrenia: A Thousand Plateaus (1987).

Being the primary critics of the discourse of modernity, Deleuze and Guattari proposed the concept of rhizome as an alternative metaphor to arboreal, tree-root structure and dualism of thought.

"We are segmented in a binary fashion, following the great major dualist positions: social classes, but also men-women, adults-children, and so on. We are segmented in a circular fashion, in ever-larger circles, ever wider disks or coronas, like Joyce's 'letter': my affairs, my neighbourhood's affairs, my city's, my country's, the world's. We are segmented in a linear fashion, along a straight line or a number of straight lines, of which each segment represents an episode or 'proceeding': as soon as we finish one proceeding we begin another, forever proceduring or procedured, in the family, in the school, in the army, on the job." (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

In that case, the rhizome as a phenomenon contradicts these dualist, linear, centralized and hierarchical parameters in the historically dominant ideology.

"A rhizome as a subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicles. Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes. Plants with roots or radicles may be rhizomorphic in other respects altogether... Even some animals are [rhizomes], in their pack form... The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers... A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organization of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles." (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Deleuze and Guattari outline the six principles inherent in the rhizome: connection, multiplicity, cartography, heterogeneity, assigning rupture and decalcomania. The brief descriptions given below may be useful to understand what they are. Connection: in the rhizome connection points are random. '... unlike

trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). 'Connections do not have to be between same and same, or like and like' (Buchanan 2007). Multiplicity: the rhizome is a collection of dimensions. 'The rhizome is reducible neither to the one nor the multiple... It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). 'No point in the rhizome can be altered without altering the whole' (Buchanan 2007). 'There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object or to divide in the subject' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Cartography: 'the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Heterogeneity: 'the rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a general and without an organizing memory or central automation' (Miller 2013). Assigning rupture: 'the rhizome isn't amenable to any structural or generative model' (Buchanan 2007). 'A rhizome may be broken... but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Decalcomania: the rhizome is open to constant expansion. '[It] operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture and offshoots' (Buchanan 2007). So it doesn't reproduce itself, instead, transforms.

Also, it is clear that some of these principles have been presented in opposition to the existing correlative phenomena such as connection vs. order or model; multiplicity vs. unity in subject or object; cartography vs. tracing (Yong et al. 2013).

Many authors (Poster 2001; Bell 2001; Buchanan 2007; Hess 2008; Miller 2013) have compared the above rhizomatic principles first with the Internet in general and then with the distinctive characteristics of the dynamic social web after 2001 at the time when it switched to web 2.0.

1.1.3 Panopticism

Panopticism is a paradigmatic idea of Michel Foucault (1926-1984), which is found in his analysis of discipline in relation to society and the self (Foucault 1995). Based on the architectural prototype of Jeremy Bentham's prison-panopticon, Foucault named the third chapter of his book Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison as Panopticism.

Bentham's panopticon is an architectural idea in which a watchtower is placed in the centre of a circular construction with separated cells facing the tower. In this method, every prisoner is isolated from the others, and observable from the centre, and as they cannot make sure the presence of supervisors, they always felt that they are constantly under surveillance. The rationale behind the panopticon was that inspectors gaining more power over the inmates by means of the power of surveillance (Bentham 1995).

"In sum, Bentham's panopticon involves three main assumptions: first, the omnipresence of the inspector, ensured by his total visibility; second, universal visibility of objects of surveillance; and third, the assumption of constant observation by the watched" (Manokha 2018). For Foucault while panopticon works as an external apparatus to keep the functioning of the prison in a disciplinary manner, a prison panoptic-like internal surveillance mechanism – panopticism - is operated in the modern society for the same purpose. In modern society, the coercion of the gaze of the watcher comes as 'discursive formations' from the dominant discourse governed by 'experts' who belong to different panoptic institutions. Discursive formations are the ideological practices brought forth by the social discourse to which 'experts' generate 'truth' in relation to 'normality' and 'deviance' (e.g. good versus evil, lawful versus criminal and so forth) (Foucault 1995).

"We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social worker'-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements." (Foucault 1995).

As such, panopticism disperses power and inscribes into the consciousness of the members of modern society until they accept the discursive formations through which they become their own guards.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study resides mainly in the domain of conceptual research whereby the general techniques of empirical research are not in effect. As a methodology of qualitative enquiry, it carries out research by observing and analyzing data, which are extracted from already presented scholarship, to draw succinct inferences to form a rational construct to fill the knowledge gap over a preferred phenomenon. Although some authors (Gilson & Goldberg 2015) say that conceptual papers do not have data, the term 'data' here means arguments and/or opinions, concepts and contexts which refer to the grounds or support the claims.

This conceptual paper has applied the basic steps of the method concept analysis (Nuopponen 2010) - creating the knowledge foundation, applying external and internal analyses in an integrated manner, and eventually leading the process to form conclusions. In sum, based on two divergent philosophical underpinnings in relation to social media, this paper has analyzed assumptions which were extracted from the literature on new media and philosophy, and synthesized the results to produce focused descriptions, leading to a coherent argument on the understanding of social media.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Social Media as Rhizome

Although digitalization largely accounts for the great move from old to new media as a technical phenomenon, the

transformation of Web 1.0 (elitist web) to Web 2.0 (massified web) goes beyond the technical limits and marks a seismic shift in power relations of media. Web 2.0, the basic technical platform of social media applications, mainly features radical decentralization, participation instead of publishing, user contribution and rich user experience, data controlling and mixing, device-independent software, and collective intelligence. More importantly, it gives the birth to "an architecture of participation" (O'Reilly 2007; O'Reilly & Battelle 2009). Triggering the authentic ideological transformation from broadcast to interactive media age, these attributes have left the top-down information distribution structure obsolete. Accordingly, the new communication method of social media clearly differs from the traditional pyramidal model of mass media in the production of media content, distribution methods of information, and media consumption patterns (Klinger & Svensson 2015).

This techno-ideological shift has opened the closed, unchanging structure of static media into fluidity. Web 2.0 and its legitimate socio-technical product, social media have upset the hierarchical and dualist tree structure, which has been a master narrative in broadcast media, and let non-hierarchical and multiple rhizomatic pathways to come out. As a result, underpinnings such as authority, centrality and dominance based on segmented political chemistry (Deleuze & Guattari 1987) are no longer possible in their unidirectional manner.

Many binary segmentations have blurred. Division of media producer and consumer merged into a new character 'prosumer'; author and reader dual relationships have amalgamated in hypertext; separation of real and unreal have become virtual. All of these transformations have come to life because of interactive mass user engagement, which is the key factor that accounts for social media. Media forms from printing press to television have increasingly attracted broader audience and the internet also in its static stage has done the same with many technical advancements. But social media, for the first time in the history of media, have taken the audience out from its long-held passive mould and entered into media landscape as active content providers. Active audience engagement is an intrinsic feature of social media. On the one hand, social media applications are pointless without audience participation and interactivity, on the other hand, the audience has to interact with the platform to consume social media. The interaction leads the audience to become media producers. This communicative mechanism is the root through which social media have strengthened their social immersive capacity explained in section 2.1 above.

Interactivity works on the network structure which has equal distribution with no personal and geographical relevance and makes a real-time mechanism which produces a vast amount of user-generated content. Arboreal static media provide content for the society to consume, but social media provide a platform for the society to make user-

generated content. On the same platform, audience can consume media contents and interact with them. Those interactions then become a part of the whole media content. This process grows denser and denser leaving the digital footprint in every step of the way on a database. In this manner, diverse mediated phenomena of social media become a rhizome which grows against arboreal media structure.

On the other hand, most of social media platforms are owned by for-profit companies. Their commercial scenarios like advertising campaigns, philanthropic-capitalist humanitarian projects and mercantile political trajectories have set the stage for the hierarchical supremacy. Even though these commercial enterprise tensions are there, rhizomatic questions make strong resistance to the traditional power dynamics on the front-end of the social web in an ever-successful manner today. However, the story is completely different when it comes to the back-end, which opens only to the authority.

3.2   Panopticism,   Networked Surveillance and Social Media

Social evolution from early 19th century to present-day has made a significant shift in the socio-technical systems related to the panoptic surveillance. Digital networks and big data are the key factors of this change and the most important data source connected to these factors is social media. In surveillance theory, several concepts and interpretations have emerged to capture this transformational phenomenon while marking a new era of post-panoptic surveillance. The concept

of 'surveillance assemblage' (Haggerty & Ericson 2000), Zuboff's contributions to the over-arching idea of 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff 2015, 2016) and the conception of 'participatory surveillance' (Albrechtslund 2008) which is principally based on social media, are significant out of the rest. Any of these concepts do not totally reject the Foucauldian prototype of panoptic surveillance. They share and redefine the same ideology of panopticism with the development of network surveillance and big data.

The panopticon has first come out from the prison walls and made the panoptic discipline over social conciseness to make a self-regulatory disciplinary society. Now in the age of social media, the panoptic surveillance has come to everyone's bedroom through their personal devices in multidirectional form with the power of watching every facet of the everyday life and make the disciplinary society in a more intricate and subtle manner. Remaining the basic components: the watcher, the gaze and the watched, in this evolutionary process, the technology and the associated lifeworld have changed. "In social media, the Panopticon is reversed because the controlled is alone in the middle of the 'prison' and controllers are all around her or him" (Romele et al. 2017). The gaze of the watcher has become more and more invisible and subtler. Also, it comes in the manner of entertainment, marketing or philanthropy.

"The emergence of social media has made the roles of watcher and watched and power relations in society more diffuse—

we are letting ourselves be watched collectively and (seemingly) voluntarily, and we eagerly watch each other and the watchers. The Panopticon as a metaphor could still be productive to explain how surveillance works and what it does, albeit in adjusted forms." (Galič et al. 2017)

When social media permeated throughout society encompassing more than 50% of the world population and entering their lives (figures in section 2.1), they generate a massive amount of big data achievable through data mining techniques. Among other types of data, social media big data is unique because they provide extremely vivid and real-time data. More importantly, they are voluntarily presented contents by a plethora of diverse users. In social media surveillance, five key features have been identified; that is, collaborative identity construction, lateral ties, social ties, changing interfaces, and re-contextualization (Trottier & Lyon 2012). These features cover all four main types of human communication. In addition, there are many commercial tools for social media monitoring to make the above five ways easy. For instance, *Hootsuite*, *TweetReach*, *Buzzsumo*, *Twazzup*, and *HowSociable* to name a few out of many. In this context, social media surveillance provides extraordinary opportunities for organization authorities (state and private) to obtain insights about individuals, understand public opinion and foresee future actions.

3.3 The Paradox of the Rhizome and Panopticism

The authoritative, arborescent and hierarchical social structure makes the tensions between front-end and back-end of the social media sphere. The social web and the 'new' panopticism is governed by this structure. By doing so, it works systematically and constantly in a new flaccid way to make the new disciplinary society in which the new non-finite rhizomatic social norms are practiced.

Social media, most of them owned by for-profit private companies, make profit through audience labour. Owners make only the media platform. While making consumable content for the platform, the audience do the production, exchange and consumption. Since the profit-making totally depends on user data (even advertising in social media rely on the user interface), social media is particularly designed to maximize the audience interaction. For this reason, it is essential to provide an ever-democratic media sphere which is free from traditional gatekeepers and parameters. Therefore, in social media, panoptic surveillance is inextricably bound with the user interaction. For the reason of maximization of interaction, on the one hand, audience exercise the democratic public communicative platform, while on the other hand, authorities have constant access to big data, which are the commodities of the information economy, through panoptic surveillance (Fisher 2014; Jin & Feenberg 2015). This juxtaposition makes social media a paradoxical phenomenon, which is a

rhizomatic sphere always with panoptic tensions.

However, the interesting phenomenon in social media is that these oppositions can interject the contingent functioning while depending on each other. Even though the ownership is authoritative and commercial, the freedom of the platform provides opportunities for communal, non-commodified and counterhegemonic scenarios to come out. Digital activist movements: Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street etc., collaborative and crowdsourcing civic projects which are recognized by Shirky as cognitive surplus (Shirky 2010), and digital commons like Wikipedia are the products of social media public. Subsequently, social media works for and against governing bodies as well as end users. This phenomenon makes social media a paradoxical and dynamic private and public sphere, at the same time.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Social media have made their way profoundly and extensively into the society. They have the ever-large popularity based on affordance and reach, the most rigorous power of influence, and the strongest community nexus in the history of media. They get the social immersive power because of their ideological model. This model, on the one hand, works against hierarchical, static media structure and establishes non-hierarchical, horizontal power dynamics on the front-end, on which users interact, of the social web. On the other hand, as they have a plenitude of social bonds,

they provide unprecedented opportunities for the state and private authorities to observe the fabric of the society and to foresee its changes. This function works on the back-end, to which only authorities have access.

These two sides of the social media ideological model resemble with two philosophical foundations: rhizome and panopticism. Even though they are conceptually paradoxical, in the platform of social media they interlock with each other. Blurring the division of binary opposites, rhizomatic characteristics have broken the master narrative of linear information flow, and taken the audience into the media as voluntary participants. In the same way, centralized panoptic surveillance has transformed from its static mould to a more flexible, liquid shape. In social media, surveillance is not unidirectional which comes from a few over many. Both have evolved into a many to many model. When individuals interact with social media, they know that they are being watched. Thus 'voluntary surveillance' is in action. In the age of social media, the two binary opposites interconnect and become interdependent: participatory democracy mixes with participatory surveillance.

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