

REDEFINING COMMUNITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WIKIPEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

Easy and immediate communication in the network apparently facilitates dissemination of information on social networking sites. (henceforth SNSs) (Westerman, Spence, Der Heide 171-183) Wikipedia too is a widely-used source of information. On both types of networks, users upload information. Community is one of the founding principles of both social media and Wikipedia. Just like social media, Wikipedia runs on individual user-based inputs, and there are predetermined formats in which information is to be shared. Users are 'prosumers' on social media; and Wikipedia users, too, fulfill the role of data producers and consumers. Wikipedia, like social networking sites, has specific privacy policies, terms and agreements, and punitive strictures. However, the paper examines whether there is any difference between Wikipedia and social networking sites, underneath apparent similarities.

Keywords: *digital capitalism, digital labour, Wikipedia, social media, community, communication*

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DIGITAL CAPITALISM, DIGITAL LABOUR AND PROFIT

Some features of Wikipedia that distinguish it from conventional social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn. The most important of them perhaps is the conspicuous absence of a profit-making business model. (Angelova) The antithetical perspectives of Manuel Castells's 'informationalism' (Castells, 2004, 3) and Daniel Schiller's 'digital capitalism' (Schiller 1) can be referred to in this context. Castells points out that in informationalism, i.e. the economy that is dominated by exchange of information on the digital networks, the traits of capitalism are evident but the networks also empower users to exercise their rights. Castells's analysis is not concerned with digital labour and its exploitation. In contrast, Dan Schiller identifies that this new economy based on digital networks characteristically embodies the principles of capitalism— for instance, exploitation of labour, limitation of access to resources and hegemonic control of capital over labour. (Schiller 5-7)

Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Sevignani (288) claim that prosumers ('producer' of data through online activities and 'consumers' of the digital resources available in the sites) voluntarily contribute digital labour to generate 'data commodities' that capitalist bodies running SNSs sell to prospective advertisers for profit. Users themselves, too, perhaps are sold to prospective advertisers for targeted advertising. The prosumers, thus, are also commodities themselves as the popularity of a site is determined by the online activities and the login time of the users. This capitalist system can function because data churning is ensued by the selling of 'data commodities' for targeted advertising.

The absence of a capitalist interest in Wikipedia neither requires the digital platform to involve digital labour, nor exploitation. Although individual users are responsible for uploading the information on Wikipedia, yet their ‘labour’ cannot be identified as the exploitative digital labour that sustains the profit-mechanism of digital capitalism. Rather this can be categorized as ‘digital work’, that Fuchs and Sevignani defines as—

‘a specific form of informational work that is employed together with the human brain to organize human experiences in such a way that symbolic representations, social relations, artefacts, social systems and communities emerge as new qualities.’ (257)

The principles of digital labour underlie the digital work of users’ communication in SNSs, whereas in the digital work of Wikipedia users, the exploitative mechanism of digital labour is absent. Exploitation of users through digital labour is primarily ensured by the ‘alienation of labour’ (Fuchs and Sevignani 5-7), in which labour power, the object of labour, the instruments of labour and the created products are beyond the control and possession of digital labourers. Users can’t control the digital networks; the pattern of communication is predetermined. The technology, the content, the company structure, its market value—nothing can be determined by users. The data in the networks are monopolised by the sites. According the Data Use Policy on Facebook, users may have control over their data inputs, but it can limit users’ access to manipulating, circulating and consuming the data. Users have to comply to predetermined rules of the sites, and even abide by the norms of digital representation of their identities.

Facebook even states in the policies regarding users’ rights that ‘certain principles guide Facebook... Achieving these principles should be constrained only by limitations of law, technology, and evolving social norms.’ LinkedIn tells users, ‘On the condition that you comply with all your obligations... we grant you a limited, revocable, nonexclusive, nonassignable, nonsublicenseable license and right to access the Services.’ Twitter limits each update to 140 Roman letters. Thus, the elusive promise of endless possibilities of connectivity on social media (Castells, 2009, 137-153) is contradicted by the constraints imposed on users’ access.

This phenomenon can be read as an instance of Foucauldian governmentality (Foucault, 1978) in which individuals are modelled in desired ways for websites to facilitate control on them. It also manifests the prevalence of the Foucauldian bio-power in which the subjects’

heterogeneous biological identities are eclipsed to reinforce the power of the authorities. (Foucault, 1978) The fact that all SNS users are to represent themselves through structured profiles, using a limited number and types of digital tools, facilitates the homogenization of their identities. Homogenization has often been regarded as a prime characteristic of capitalism. (Friedman, 279) This, therefore, proves to be a potent tool for even digital capitalists to minimize possibilities of dissent among its subjects.

In contrast, Wikipedia claims that the ‘openness’ of its platform enables users to be editors, who can reshape the digital resources through their use. This openness of the networks apparently follows Castells’s ideas of informationalism and the network society granting endless power to individual users. Castells claims that the open structure of networks enables individual users to mould and remould the networks through repeated use of the resources. (2004, 23) Meanwhile, SNSs with their restrictions imposed on users’ access and the system of digital governmentality espouse the principles of Schiller’s (1) digital capitalism. However, Castells’ network society is built around the new kind of capitalism, i.e. informationalism that too involves a distinct mechanism of profit. The functions of Wikipedia, a non-profit digital organization, therefore, cannot be analysed from the perspective of informationalism. It is, in fact, a system that democratizes access to information, (Wallace and van Fleet 100-103) while SNSs restricts access to it by imposing digital governmentality.

INFORMATION AND INDIVIDUAL USERS

Social media try to keep the maximum number of users logged on to the site for profit. On sites like Facebook and Twitter, the quality of users’ informational input is secondary as long as it does not interfere with the business model. The act of communication is highlighted as the primary activity of SNS users. For instance, Facebook claims that ‘Millions of people use Facebook everyday to keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos, and learn more about the people they meet.’ The lack of acknowledgement of their labour input reinforces their exploitation. Twitter states that ‘Twitter is the best way to connect with people, express yourself and discover what's happening.’ (Italics mine) Incidentally, the address to the individual user is obvious in Twitter’s description.

SNSs apparently blur the distinction between labour and leisure for users, so that the latter remain unaware of their exploitation. (Fuchs and Sevignani 237-293) Fuchs even identifies an undertone of valorizing the labour that keeps users away from the knowledge of exploitation.

However, digital capitalists now project the networks as an empowering tool, and not simply a form of leisure. SNSs apparently have outgrown the need for the labour-leisure discourse. Earlier online communication witnessed the dominance of playfulness (Danet 19-26), but SNSs now identify online social networking as a serious necessity for users, and even as a route to development, and something that apparently enables political protests like the Arab Spring movement. (Smith) The discourse of users' self-gratification-- that for their own benefit, users generate data on the networks—is widely used. (Ross 23-24) For instance, Facebook claims that the site has the 'mission to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected'. Even the unpaid users' act of designing apps for Facebook is shown as more of a privilege for users, than something profitable for the site.

Hence, perhaps it is more appropriate to claim that users are neither acknowledged as labourers, nor as playbourers; for in 'playbour', the idea of labour is prevalent. They are, instead, projected as the beneficiaries of the sites. Fuchs refers to the aspect of playbour and benefits of SNSs interchangeably; but the difference is evident. Digital labour in SNSs, rather, can be identified as the neoliberal representation labour as a source of individual benefits, (Hong 984-1002) leisure being merely one of them.

SNSs involve a profit-making system in which users generate and consume data, and in the process determine the popularity of a particular SNS that draws hordes of advertisers to the site. These sites accrue million dollar revenues selling their popularity to their sponsors. This impacts the structure of SNSs. The login time of users, cumulatively, determines how popular a site is and how worthwhile it is for advertisers to invest in the site. Hence, the idea of a unique user and the user profile are important features in regular SNSs. Even in order to use the communication tools of regular SNSs, users need to log into the network. Hence, each user profile can be taken as a unit of its popularity. The system is maintained by unique username-password combination of each user.

The absence of any direct profit-making business model allows Wikipedia to function without individual account-based functioning method. Unique identities of the users are important in Wikipedia as far as the quality of data inputs is concerned; for example, users violating the norms of Wikipedia are tracked and banned from making further contributions for some time. Otherwise, to access the Wikipedia resources users do not have to log into the site with username and password.

User profiles in SNSs necessarily individualize users, segregate them as if they are nodes (Castells, 2004, 3) in a network; In fact, the very structure of the networks allows users to be isolated as nodes, making each of them an object of targeted advertising. Each user's digital activities are responsible for pushing up the popularity index of SNSs. The online activities of every user generate digital data. Individual identity, therefore, is an important feature of digital labour. The networks are maintained by individual user profiles and unique username-password combinations. Besides, the contradictory situation that in spite of the significance of individual access users' digital labour remains unacknowledged merely reinforces the exploitation of labour.

In contrast, Wikipedia users, through data inputs and access, function as a collective workforce and a unified audience. While SNSs like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter address an individual user in their terms of use and privacy policies, Wikipedia explicitly puts emphasis on 'we' and 'us' in its 'Terms of Use'. This reinforces the idea of community in Wikipedia. Even the data that are pooled in remain as a unified corpus in the Wikipedia page, under particular links working as rubrics. Its distinct process of standardization ensures this. Orthographic, etymological and conceptual variations are acknowledged with hyperlinks redirecting users to one specific page containing information on the particular topic. The pattern of information distribution in Wikipedia, therefore, is centripetal, in contrast to the abundance of information circulated in SNSs in a centrifugal form. Editorial policies of Wikipedia emphasise neutral representation of facts, whereas SNSs do not involve any detailed editorial standardisation, barring their strictures on insensitive and hurtful remarks. Incidentally, the consistent capitalist interest, the homogenizing procedure of users' activities may imply the presence of a centripetal pattern in the mechanism of SNSs as well, but that does not ensure the centripetal pattern of

representation and distribution of information. Rather it indicates the hegemonic control of digital capitalists over the network mechanism.

CONCLUSION: COMMUNITIES FOR COMMUNICATION

This centripetal pattern in Wikipedia sustains communities based on even various vernacular languages in Wikipedia. In the larger sphere of Wikipedia, these language-based communities face various challenges like community intolerance, lack of transparency in information, lack of neutrality, digital literacy and digital divide. Yet, the language-based communities in Wikipedia are far more sustainable than the eclectic selection of virtual communities, groups and pages, with porous borders, that are 'created' on popular SNSs, and that may even disappear overnight, or may reappear in some other name. For instance, Facebook archived the inactive groups while it rolled out a new group format in 2011, the 'communities' in Orkut were notorious for being hijacked and changing into renamed communities.

Overall, the idea of 'community', in its conventional sense of a cohesive group, seems rather tenuous in SNSs. In fact, the act of communication is foregrounded in SNSs, but with a simultaneous emphasis on individual identities. Hence, instead of reinforcing the sense of community, communication supersedes the purpose of community building in SNSs. Facebook states that 'Millions of people use Facebook everyday to keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos, and learn more about the people they meet.' Twitter specifies that it 'helps you (the user) create and share ideas and information instantly.' Also, as mentioned earlier, how, with their emphasis on isolated users, SNSs address individual users in the terms and agreements, and not users in collectivity.

Another reason for this perhaps is community building is a task executed by users in SNSs as a part of their labour. Since the users/digital labourers have no control over the technical and non-technical resources of the sites, they cannot ensure the sustainability of the 'real virtual' (Castells, 2010, 406) communities on the networks. On the contrary, in Wikipedia, language communities are rooted in 'real' sociolinguistic concerns; and users build the content of the site, primarily for building a unified corpus of knowledge, and not for building a space of random information that emerges from communication in SNSs.¹ There are various language options in several SNSs are merely language tools that may bring together member of the same language

communities, but as long as the users are in the networks of digital capitalists, they are digital labourers working for the commercial profit of the sites, and not quite for community building and knowledge formation.

Communities, communication, digital capitalism and the status of users distinguish Wikipedia from SNSs. It embodies the ideals of Web 2.0 by advocating the need for community; and thus empowers users through digital resources. At a time when digital capitalism is taking over the internet (Lovink, 212) by exploiting the popularity of the SNSs, and dissolving the power of individuals, Wikipedia till now has been sustaining the empowering principle of the World Wide Web, free from capitalist interests.

ENDNOTES

1. Homi Bhabha distinguishes between knowledge and information as the former being a subjective and interpretation of information, and the latter being objective data. 'Humanities a Culture of Knowledge', YouTube video, *NDTV Profit*, January 24, 2011, Time 3:30-3:33 mins. [Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFXaaFUYxLA> on December 22, 2014 at 1:57 pm]

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