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Kreps, DGP and Pearson, E

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Community as Commodity

Abstract

Despite utopian claims that the internet generally and Social Networking Sites (SNS) (including multi-user virtual environments, or MUVE) in particular herald a challenge to the dominance of capitalist ideologies in technological societies, there is growing evidence that SNS and MUVE are actually part of a hegemonic transnational agenda of conservative venture capital which reinforces hierarchies of consumption. By appropriating these various virtual social networks (either as part of the development of the infrastructure or 'after the fact'), these SNS in fact demonstrate the continued and thriving hegemony of capitalism in the wired world. Using the works of Gramsci and Gill to provide a critical grounding, this paper will examine some of the flagship SNS of Web 2.0 — particularly Facebook — and explore how, rather than challenging existing top-down hierarchies and structures, these social networks have in fact been appropriated by them.

Keywords

Social networking, virtual communities, culture, politics, venture capital

Community as Commodity

Introduction

Social Networking Sites, or SNS, are one of the most publicly discussed innovations of the internet and particularly of “Web 2.0.” Whilst community-building and social networking are certainly not new, the speed, scope and reach facilitated by these sites has heralded unprecedented innovation in the ways in which networked individuals approach their social networking. Social Networking Sites continue to grow, yet the balance between the technological features of such sites which support social networking and those which facilitate online advertising remains precarious and frequently makes national and international news. One factor that has received little attention in the literature is cultural fit – which emphasizes the need for venture capital to be directed toward economically unexploited but pre-existing activities for maximum return on investment.

Whilst much has been written about the implications of social networks themselves, there has been little research into the nature and activities of those who develop and maintain the platforms upon which these networks rest. In particular, the venture capital which often seeds the growth of these sites is often treated as an anonymous and unremarkable part of the process. This paper seeks to interrogate these aspects of SNS by using cultural concepts originally developed by Antonio Gramsci — such as issues of hegemony and cultural fit. Facebook and Google’s OpenSocial will be used as specific case examples to exemplify these issues.

The Phenomenon of Massive Virtual Communities

Since the turn of the millennium — and especially since the bursting of the dot com bubble — we have seen the World Wide Web grow from a static resource into an interactive space that is now commonly referred to as Web 2.0 (boyd 2007). From the once purely text-based communities of the early web, social networking and interaction has now developed to include visually-rich environments (at least 180 or so at the time of writing) which are quickly developing a strong presence online (Plant 2004). Gaming consoles (Playstation, Xbox, etc) have brought MUVE into the global mainstream, and browser-based MUVE (Metaplace, Croquet etc) are due for launch in 2008. Linden Labs, makers of SecondLife, are already staking their claim by rushing through a SecondLife-browser beta. The interactive 2D internet of Web 2.0 and the burgeoning 3D internet of MUVE are fast becoming a mainstay of many people’s daily lives.

From their introduction, social networking sites (SNS) such as MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, Habbo and the many, many others, and MUVE such as World of Warcraft, SecondLife, Entropia Universe and so on, have attracted tens of millions of users, many of whom have integrated these activities into their daily lives. These sites allow users to connect or reconnect with people both locally and globally, through email, instant messaging, sharing in business or social exchanges, video conferencing, and to even immerse themselves in virtual worlds that constitute both an escape from the real and a place within which to undertake real socialisation (Turkle 1995; Hardy 2002). Through SNS and MUVE we are able to (rediscover and) talk to (old) friends from school or college, connect to existing or potential business contacts, or make new acquaintances regardless of the limits of physical geography. We are able to build

relationships with people without being so rigidly bound by region, nationality, ethnicity, social role, family, or occupation as to the kinds of companionships we can forge and call our own. This allows us to meet people based on shared interests, political views, or other social activities, or on common language or shared racial or sexuality-based identities. It is the formation of these communities of interest (cf: Anderson 1983/2006; Feenberg & Bakardjieva 2004) which is arguably SNS and MUVE biggest strength.

SNS offer a range of different technological features, catering to a wide range of interests and practices. While their key technological features are fairly consistent, the cultures that emerge around SNS are varied. Some, like for example Ecademy or LinkedIn, are specifically professional; others like MySpace, more centred around music and music culture. Bebo, Habbo, ClubPenguin and others are almost exclusively for children or teenagers, and others still, like Facebook, attempt to bring many disparate social groups together in one multilayered virtual space. The great majority of MUVE are perhaps better represented by Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG), in which sometimes very large numbers of players interact with one another in a virtual world. Players assume the role of a fictional character or constructed identity, and take control over many of that character's actions. Newer MUVE coming on-stream in recent years include SecondLife, not an MMORPG but a virtual world. SecondLife is not a game in the sense that, although it has rules and objectives, it is an open virtual space which the users engage with to varying degrees as part of the process of interacting there.

Whilst there has been a fair amount of scholarship — for example in the Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC), and Human Computer Interaction (HCI) fields — concerning SNS and MUVE, much of it has focussed on the interactions and networking of such sites, and much of the criticism upon the meaning of friendship there: for example, does competitive ‘friending’ turn these so-called friends into mere cyber-acquaintance? Such ‘friendliness’ is no substitute for genuine friendship, according to Professor Ray Pahl, co-author of *Rethinking Friendship*, (Spencer & Pahl 2006), and only leaves us feeling dissatisfied. In his opinion, Facebook is a form of immaturity:

"It's not a real social network," he says, "it mimics the playground insecurities of primary school kids piling up best friends to find their social niche. When people grow up and settle down, they realise that real friendship isn't about turning on the computer – it requires real effort and taking the rough with the smooth." (Independent, 2007)

Scholarship in the IS field has similarly focussed on the ‘friendship’ issue, and on the nature of networked communication. The main strands of enquiry have focussed upon “the generation of online ties and their integration into the individual’s existing social network,” on the one hand, and the “role of new communication technologies as a new channels of communication,” on the other (Mesch & Talmud 2007). Other work in the computer science field has included an extraordinary hoovering up of data from 100,000 social networking site profiles into a semantic map of personal tastes, (Liu et al. 2006). Livingstone and Helsper’s work offers particularly interesting insight into how issues of “anonymity, disclosure of intimate information and exchange of resources” (2007) affect communication.

Facebook was originally built for Harvard college students, in February 2004, by Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg and his pals, and grew during that year to include Stanford, Columbia and Yale. By May 2005 it had grown to support more than 800 college networks, was expanding into high-school networks, and then went international in October. In May 2006 it 'grew up,' adding to its over six million users adult networks based around the workplace — at first college staff, but soon businesses, corporations, and institutions. By the end of 2006 it had twelve million users. The summer of 2007, however, was the pivotal moment for Facebook. In April there were twenty million users; in May they launched Facebook Platform, an Application Program Interface, or API allowing external developers to create and offer applications within Facebook, and by the time of writing (January 2008) the site boasted 59 million users. At the present rate of growth, Facebook will have more than 200 million active users by January 2009 (it is arguable, of course, whether all are 'active users'). Now active users can find not just old school or college friends and work colleagues, but members of the community groups they are involved in. Across these many networks and groupings new 'virtual' groupings are springing up daily — many simply for fun, to be discarded tomorrow (e.g. People Who Always Have To Spell Their Names For Other People); some with business in mind (e.g. the virtual twin of real-world trade association, Manchester Digital); political import (e.g. Support the Monks' protest in Burma); some with strange challenges, (e.g. If 100,000 people join this group I will run from Liverpool to Manchester) and some with more personal pleasures in mind. In many respects the networking taking place on Facebook is a replication of the networks in real-life – plus additional new contacts made on Facebook itself – which seems to be contrary to the many arguments regarding the 'immaturity' of social networking friendships.

From being a focussed community built around the commonality of studenthood in the United States, it has grown into an international community where you can find almost all the people you know who might ever join an SNS — and many for whom Facebook is their very first experience of online social networking. The personal profile changes daily with the news feed of the activities of all of one's linked friends, who are forever sending one messages using new applications which users must first install — and send to everyone they know — before one receives the message. It is a virtual place of constant change and perhaps this busy-ness is as much a part of its appeal as its ubiquity.

From MySpace to OurSpace: Google and OpenSocial

The continued growth of SNS as it spreads out from specialized groups and subcultures to encompass wider social networks has been matched by growing debate and discussion (particularly in the media) about the place and function of such SNS within wider social practices. One common theme is the tensions between 'private' and 'public' behaviour on SNS as users try to negotiate the contradictions between the intellectually-known openness of these SNS and the intimacy and emotional contact they feel as they actively build their own fragment of the wider social networks. Another debate running parallel to this public/private tension is social/commercial conflicts exemplified by the introduction of Facebook's 'Beacon,' which will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

Such disparities are not new, and have only become more accentuated as these social networks have evolved from the grassroots-style Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) of the 80s and 90s, and other such text forums, to the massive virtual environments of today whose populations' rival cities and now even countries¹. Social networks and virtual communities are no longer dominated by amateur enterprises. SNS and MUVE are a big and growing business concern, often requiring the efforts of sometimes hundreds of professionals, and generating revenues that are attractive to investors².

This formalizing and commercialization of SNS and MUVE occurs not only in the underlying code and infrastructure, but is also encroaching on the front-end of these sites, the spaces where users meet, socialize, set up profiles or avatars, and build what they may feel to be organic, natural or unforced networks.

The dataportability project (dataportability.org) is one such formalization that will impact multiple, currently discrete SNS. Data portability involves cross-linking identity data — the profiles which form the core nodes of most SNS — across multiple platforms (i.e.: from Facebook to YouTube to del.ici.ous). Data portability will link large social network with large social network. Whilst the aggregate number of users from this cross-platform interoperability is difficult to estimate given the number of both inactive and multiple identities, it is easy to argue that the end result will be massive virtual communities of overlapping networks. The social networking patterns will mimic the underlying infrastructure of the internet itself.

One of the more immediate and intriguing outcomes of this push towards formal data portability in SNS is the OpenSocial initiative being led by Google³. It works by connecting the 'containers' of the various SNS, the codified structures which support the social interactions, and allowing information and applications to move freely from one container (say, Orkut) to another (MySpace). Whilst this raises issues of identity management and questions as to who controls the information being disclosed by users on an individual level, in terms of social networks on a macro level, OpenSocial allows for information to be passed on or tracked back — information which includes details and patterns ripe for exploitation by companies and marketers.

Unsurprisingly, this potential is not one of the features of OpenSocial hyped in the coverage: the focus instead is on how OpenSocial is the first true multiplatform initiative, and how a number of the largest and most influential SNS are taking part⁴.

¹ For example, the population of SecondLife is approximately three times that of the national population of New Zealand. (source: US Census Bureau, International Database: NZ <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idb/country/nzportal.html>. And SL:Blog http://secondlife.com/whatis/economy_stats.php

² For press coverage, cf:

http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/sep2007/tc20070924_995913.htm

³ Google themselves make an interesting case study in the tensions and contradictions between being non-commercial with 'hacker' ideologies ('information wants to be free') co-existing with the economic imperatives of Google as a corporate entity.

⁴ For the list of current OS partners, see:

<http://code.google.com/apis/opensocial/partners.html>

But not all: Facebook continues to hold out as more and more SNS sign on to develop compatibility with OpenSocial. Whilst the technical chatter regarding the cross-compatibility of apps and containers is interesting in its own right, what is more fascinating in terms of the discussion here is how both these approaches — OpenSocial's push towards openness of information exchange versus Facebook's extensive and popular but walled-off approach to massive social networks — demonstrate the movement towards the commodification of virtual communities.

Gramsci, Gill, and the Hegemony of the Transnational Historic Bloc

Which brings us to the critical core of this paper. Commodification, consumerism, and the power of rich elites is the field of enquiry of cultural and political theorists and philosophers. One philosopher whose writings have had a profound affect on our understanding of power in society is Antonio Gramsci, who “recognised that social power is not a simple matter of domination on the one hand and subordination or resistance on the other.” Gramsci thus re-evaluated traditional Marxist understandings of modern capitalist societies by arguing that rather than being determined by underlying economic necessities, culture and politics formed a web of relations with the economy in which there is a continual shift of emphasis and influence. For this process he coined the term *hegemony*. “Rather than imposing their will,” Gramsci maintained, “‘dominant’ groups (or, more precisely, dominant alliances, coalitions or blocs) within democratic societies generally govern with a good degree of *consent* from the people they rule,” — they achieve *hegemony* — “and the maintenance of that consent is dependent upon an incessant repositioning of the relationship between rulers and ruled.” (Jones 2006:3). Insidiously, a dominant bloc, in order to maintain its dominance, must be able to “reach into the minds and lives of its subordinates, exercising its power as what appears to be a free expression of their own interests and desires.” (Jones 2006:4).

This aspect of unwitting collusion on the part of the ruled with the strategies and tactics of their rulers is perhaps the best known feature of Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony; that those strategies and tactics must constantly adapt to the shifting needs of the ruled is perhaps less appreciated. Dick Hebdige's work on sub-cultural groups perhaps expresses this dynamic best. A simple example of this approach is that of Punk. In the late 1970s, the wearing of safety pins in one's ear and of torn fabrics loosely arranged as clothing was a statement of rebellion, of rejection of fashion — similar to Dada earlier in the century (Hebdige 1979). By the early 1980s this 'look,' however, had become a fashion in itself. What was revolutionary had been absorbed, packaged, and sold back to the revolutionaries. Lifestyles becoming available in the shops, in this way, brings consumerism into sharp relief. Everything is allowed, so long as it can be absorbed into the dominant socio-economic model; i.e. if it contributes to the market. Thus the pluralistic nature of the modern consumerist society.

This dominance of the market economy has been analysed with brilliantly incisive clarity by Stephen Gill, Professor of Political Science at York University. Gill's work on the New World Order created after 1945 — of which the world after 1991 he describes as but the third phase — outlines the dominance of the market, of

transnational capital, the G7 (and more recently G8) and the central role of US power in supporting and spearheading this dominance. The world after the Second World War, with its Marshall Plan, its NATO, and its emerging EEC, involved what Gill terms (using Gramscian language) an *international historical bloc* built on a *pax Americana*. (Gill 2003:58) In the aftermath of this terrible worldwide conflict, the American New Deal state became the model for the whole Western world, albeit somewhat modified by the changes required by wartime mobilisation and the ‘military-industrial complex’ this had spawned. Roosevelt’s New Deal of the 1930s — although it went further, at the time, and was later substantially cut back — nonetheless represented a significant shift in political and domestic policy in the U.S., with its most lasting changes being an increased government control over the economy and money supply; intervention to control prices and agricultural production; the beginning of the federal welfare state, and the rise of trade union organizations. The Second World War tightened the relationship between government and economy through mandatory ‘mobilisation’ of industrial units and workforce for the production of arms. This mobilisation was not ‘stood down’ in 1945, as the Second World War became the Cold War, but evolved into what has since been termed the military-industrial complex — the combination of a nation’s armed forces, its suppliers of weapons systems, supplies and services, and its civil government. This military-industrial complex, moreover, through European and transatlantic treaties, special relationships and political settlements under American leadership, soon established an international military-industrial-complex, underpinning an American led economic model — an *international historical bloc*. (Gill 2003:58)

Despite Bush senior’s talk of a New World Order in 1991, Gill argues that the *hegemony* of American capitalism became a *supremacy* after the first Gulf War, with the collapse of the Soviet bloc and its absorption into the Western economy. This 3rd phase New World Order was also a result of the gradual evolution, through the 1970s and 80s, of a more integrated global political economy in which organised labour had become increasingly marginalised, and capitalist elites with significant investment in many different nations had emerged. Such elites include those in “key positions in transnational companies, banks, universities, think tanks, media companies, governments and international organisations such as the IMF, World Bank and OECD,” linked by the discourse of neo-liberal globalisation. (Gill 2003:169). Thus the 1st and 2nd phase *international historical bloc* became transformed into an “American-centred and –led *transnational historical bloc*” (Gill 2003:59) at whose “apex are elements in the leading states in the G7 and capital linked to advanced sectors in international investment, production and finance” (Gill 2003:59) — increasingly American firms — whose activities “seek to make transnational capital a class ‘for itself’” (Gill 2003:169)

Again, it is axiomatic in the analysis Gramsci provides that any “ruling coalition will have to take on at least some of the values of those it attempts to lead, thereby reshaping its own ideals and imperatives” (Jones 2006:4). The exercise of power by a dominant bloc becomes a continuous and interpenetrative process, in which society becomes saturated with the meticulous negotiations between the desires of the dominant and the needs of the subjugated. Power becomes “something that is actively lived by the oppressed as a form of common sense” (Jones 2006:4). Power

as understood through the concept of hegemony becomes exceedingly difficult to pin down, since it is always “in the process of becoming” (Jones 2006:5).

Transnational Capital and Social Networking

It is our opinion that Social Networking Sites display precisely this constellation of behaviours between a dominant bloc of venture capitalists — who have achieved hegemony in the New World Order — and the tens of millions of us who willingly surrender our personal data and the conduct of our friendships and relationships to their marketplace.

There is an understanding amongst marketing professionals, for example, that “the reason that people are attracted to social networks in the first place is that reliance on user-generated content is seen as relatively free of traditional corporate content and advertising” (Goad & Mooney 2008). Moreover “if users perceive that a social network is becoming ‘polluted’ they will leave — and the evidence suggests that this can happen extremely quickly” (Goad & Mooney 2008). Indeed, there have been a number of developments during the very recent past that have begun to highlight a much more sinister underbelly to the social networking phenomenon described above. For example, the most successful SNS at present, Facebook, was guilty in the closing months of 2007 of appearing to become ‘polluted’ by advertising and privacy invasion, and was forced by overwhelming pressure from its users to back down. Called Beacon, the new system introduced by Facebook in the Autumn of 2007 tracks web shopping on partner sites outside Facebook and then sells advertising space within the social network based on purchases. This was seen by many as an invasion of privacy. A group on the website calling itself “Facebook: Stop Invading My Privacy” grew rapidly to more than 50,000 members, and several other organisations including political activism site MoveOn.org protested about the new system. At the end of November 2007 Facebook changed Beacon from an opt-out system to opt in. Mark Zuckerberg, the young founder and CEO of Facebook, issued a press release, published widely on national news websites, that Facebook users would now be able to switch off Beacon completely.

Facebook users thereby felt they had won a victory over the encroachment of the marketplace into their social space. The reality, of course, is that no such victory was achieved at all — only the appearance of one. As Zuckerberg himself recently stated, in answer to a question from a reporter at the launch of ‘Facebook Ads,’ Facebook “is an ad-supported business.”⁵ The Facebook Ads system has three basic components: Facebook Pages, Social Ads, and a reporting interface dubbed Insights. Just as users do, brands can create profile pages with applications and content, e.g. music sharing, discussion boards and widgets specific to the advertiser's product or service. They can also define the actions users can take with their pages, for instance declaring oneself a fan of the brand or RSVPing for an event. Facebook users can declare to all their Friends on the network that they are Fans of a particular brand, enabling them to visit the brand’s own Facebook Page for more information — and the opportunity to buy.

⁵ For further details of this press conference, see: Schonfeld, E. (2007). Liveblogging Facebook Advertising Announcement (Social Ads + Beacon + Insights). Available online: <http://www.techcrunch.com/2007/11/06/liveblogging-facebook-advertising-announcement/>

This shift in framing of the economic activities of Facebook-as-business within Facebook-as-SNS does not, of course, mean that users have ousted such concerns from their ‘social’ space. These concerns have just been repositioned and reorientated to better fit the imaginary construct of SNS as a primarily *social* space and the implied balance between front-end social networking and back-end economic interests. From the perspective put forth in the previous section, Beacon is of interest precisely because it unbalanced the relationship between users and owners; the understated and understudied hegemonic relationship between these two sides of the SNS. In launching Beacon as originally intended — an opt-out, third-party, ‘behind-the-scenes’ collector of personal and commercial data — Facebook *assumed* that the consent of their users to such practices would automatically extend from existing subtle displays (such as AdWords) to this more obvious, explicit, even named and labelled displays of such authority over the data on which SNS rested. Data which the SNS users thought they, and not their hosts, owned and controlled.

Beacon, particularly in this early formulation, was a clumsy attempt to appropriate and repackage the SNS values of the extended social relationship based upon the community-of-interest (regardless of how deep or shallow such ties are, as is being debated in the IS literature) for economic and commercial purposes. The backlash against Beacon was not only against the exchange of personal data. It was also in reaction to the way Beacon, and by extension, Facebook’s management, shattered the ‘suspension of disbelief’ that had developed between the front-end users and the back-end business. For users of SNS such as Facebook, such sites must retain and foster the *appearance* of a divorce between the, non-hierarchical, non-commercial socializations on site and the businesses and commercial concerns that *run* the site. As was noted earlier, when this separation fails, users desert the “polluted” site.

However, this is all appearance. SNS are no longer hobby activities, but large commercial enterprises. And for them, the users and communities on these sites are resources to be exploited.

Again, Facebook provides an excellent example of these tensions between the social aspects of the network (the public face of the SNS) and the venture capitalism that goes on behind-the-scenes. If the question for users is ‘can I make friends through Facebook?’ then the question for owners and investors of such sites is, in the words of reporter Tom Hodgkinson (2008) in his coverage of this issue, “can you make money out of friendship?”

Hodgkinson’s report into the commercial foundations of Facebook is of particular interest, not only for its novelty — few if any of the media reports on this phenomena look at this aspect of Facebook-as-business, preferring to focus on the front-end, social activities it supports — but also for what it suggests about Facebook and similar SNS when considered from a Gramscian perspective. In particular, he highlights three inter-related aspects of Facebook operations which engage with the issues raised earlier in this paper.

Firstly, Facebook utilizes transnational networks like the internet, which are architecturally structured to transcend and subvert geography, whilst at the same time emphasising locality and the institutional, political or economic context in which the

user is physically situated. Facebook's own 'About Facebook' page constructs a rhetoric of communities-of-interest within communities-of-place. From the perspective of socialization, this may seem little more than a gimmick or an artefact of Facebook's evolution. But considered from an economic perspective, communities-of-interest within communities-of-place can be called by another name: markets. As Hodgkinson notes: "We are seeing the commodification of human relationships, the extraction of capitalistic value from friendships" (2008). Whether investors or advertisers wish to capture all Facebook users in a place (e.g.: Harvard), or of a type (e.g.: movie goers), or both (Harvard students who watch movies), this information is given freely and willingly by Facebook users. By adopting and repositioning themselves as 'social facilitators' rather than, say, market researchers, Facebook develops a hegemonic relationship with their users. It is only when Facebook over-assumes on the relationship, as with Beacon, that users become fully aware of and withdraw their consent. But when the illusion of divorce is maintained, the 'unwitting collusion' that Gramsci spoke of is perpetuated.

This tendency to freely give up information online without consulting privacy policies or other information management statements is an interesting phenomena, and one that anecdotal evidence suggests recurs across SNS sites, not just on Facebook. Again, the rhetoric of Facebook's public statements jars with the actions of behind-the-scenes led innovations like Beacon. On the 'About Facebook' page is the following statement on privacy:

At Facebook, we believe that people should have control over how they share their information and who can see it. People can only see the profiles of confirmed friends and the people in their networks. You can use our privacy settings at any time to control who can see what on Facebook. (2008)

This statement implies that privacy begins and ends with social network privacy — the front-end social exchange of information. On this important issue, this social focus continues as users follow link after link, and whereas the privacy statement on social exchange (what will be termed here 'front-end privacy' for simplicity's sake) is written in fairly plain, non-jargon language, the statement on the data Facebook-as-business collects ('back-end privacy') uses more opaque language, and shifts quickly from mentions of automatic information collection (though cookies and IP logging, though there is no mention of Beacon and the information it collects) back towards the social rhetoric of front-end privacy issues.

Whilst there are important privacy and data security issues here, in terms of issues of hegemony, this (unwitting?) surrender of personal information not only fuels the collusion between the rulers and ruled which puts the lie to the narratives of SNS as a non-hierarchical space. By using this information to fund its 'ad-supported business,' Facebook is in a sense appropriating and repackaging social networking innovations, ideas, and creativity, and repackaging them for safe consumption within existing social hierarchies. Users may feel they are creating something new, vibrant, *theirs*, not 'polluted' by existing structures and institutions. Punk may have felt the same way before they saw their styles and tropes for sale on the high street.

If it can be accepted that these users can be traded, repackaged, and sold as commodities, then what of their social ties? When considered from the perspective of

the hegemonic dominance of the commercial interests over the social, the social networks take on new importance. For users, their ties allow them to build social networks (both intimate and distant, or strong and weak to use Granovetter's term) — but, as noted above, these groups can also be articulated as a market. The 'commodification of friendship' can occur between two friends, or two hundred. Spencer and Pahl, (Spencer & Pahl 2006) concerned with social dynamics, argued against the 'friendliness' of online friends, but in economic terms, the strength of the tie or the 'genuine-ness' of the friend makes no difference. What is of interest to them is the information exchanged between these ties, across these networks (and with little concern for privacy policies). As long as the illusion of distance is maintained, the network is not 'polluted,' the behind-the-scenes operations of such SNS can maintain hegemony, (and may even, it could be argued, head towards some notion similar to supremacy).

What will be interesting to observe is whether, with the fall-out from Beacon, privacy and network information will be made accessible or protected on an individual basis or whether the lower common denominator approach will rule. That is, will information privacy levels be set differently for each individual in an exchange, or will an individual who has otherwise 'opted-out' have their information made accessible through their interactions with another user whose data is being collected? When considering the network as a market, the individual as a commodity, it may not be outrageous to expect owners and site operators to spread their nets as wide as they can.

Conclusion

Utopian rhetoric surrounding Web 2.0 social networking creates an image of a social space, mediated by transnational communication tools, that is democratic, anti-hierarchical, open, and unconcerned with excessive capitalist agendas. However, as this paper has argued, this perspective ignores the hidden aspects of Social Networking Sites as corporate entities with obligations to venture capital investors and shareholders. This paper puts forward the position that, rather than separate from the capitalist institutions and histories within which the internet is embedded, the internet, including SNS, is in fact a continuation of these practices and ideologies. Having made the move from hobby activity to corporate entity, SNS have been appropriated to become part of a hegemonic transnational capitalist strategy for globalised and unregulated market dominance.

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