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The Case for Many Internets

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The Case for Many Internets

Abstract

Internet studies research often concentrates on mainstream platforms, practices, and users at the expense of people and technologies at the margin. This article introduces a collection of essays that addresses the gap in research, taking a number of different approaches. Indeed, arguing for a diverse and multi-faceted understanding of digital technologies can take a number of forms, including studying platforms that are incredibly common yet rarely investigated, looking at practices that fall outside the scope of mainstream communication research, and investigating communities that are non-Western, non-urban, and/or non-heteronormative. Research in these areas is crucial in developing a broader understanding of online platforms, and for expanding theoretical frameworks related to technology, media, and communication.

Keywords

internet studies, social media

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

The case for many Internets

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Abstract

Internet studies research often concentrates on mainstream platforms, practices, and users at the expense of people and technologies at the margin. This article introduces a collection of essays that addresses the gap in research, taking a number of different approaches. Indeed, arguing for a diverse and multi-faceted understanding of digital technologies can take a number of forms, including studying platforms that are incredibly common yet rarely investigated, looking at practices that fall outside the scope of mainstream communication research, and investigating communities that are non-Western, non-urban, and/or non-heteronormative. Research in these areas is crucial in developing a broader understanding of online platforms, and for expanding theoretical frameworks related to technology, media, and communication.

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Multiplicity is built into the very meaning of the word Internet, with its invocation of connections, ties, and meshes. References to this multiplicity come through in many (if not most) of the pressing social and political issues of online technologies, including contemporary discussions of net neutrality, with online service providers squaring off against information activists in debates around whether to charge more for faster Internet connections (Pickard, 2008); in the experiences of people who live in rural and mountainous areas where broadband infrastructure is limited and wireless connections spotty (Gray, 2009); in cases of national censorship, when governments set up firewalls to limit the content constituents can access (Lerner, 2010), or when entire countries have their Internet access sequestered from users in other countries due to fears of cybercrime (Burrell, 2012); or when people concerned with online privacy use special browsers, apps, and private networks to protect their personal information (Brunton & Nissenbaum, 2015). In each example, the different interactions and experiences of Internet use diverge so widely that the idea of a single, unified technology becomes untenable and, moreover, not useful. And yet, it is common to talk of the Internet as if it is unified, singular, and cohesive, with the assumption that one person's understanding of being online is more or less interchangeable with someone else's.

This forum is interested in the many Internets that exist as a result of necessity and invention, curiosity and desperation, mischief and accident. Each of the short articles in this collection addresses different experiences of and relationships to online platforms. This attention to other Internets is important in broad sense for the acknowledgment of Internet multiplicity. But this concentration on alterity is also crucial as an intervention in mainstream Internet studies research that tends to concentrate on dominant platforms and privileged users at the expense of less obvious, less visible, and more marginalized platforms, practices, and people.

Working from the margins offers a way of evaluating the many promises that came with the mass adoption of online technologies: erasing difference, fostering tolerance, collapsing distances of time and space. As the web has become increasingly integrated into everyday forms and practices communication, so has the reach of these promises expanded. These promises come alternately from designers, users, and journalists looking to explain (and sell) technologies to themselves as much as each other. The objective of these articles is to compare these promises to the lived experiences of countercultural communities, asking what happens to socio-cultural differences in online contexts. How do experiences of otherness shape experiences of and relationships to technology?

Where others have re-written the history of the Internet in terms of alternative technologies (Driscoll, 2016), ignored media (Brunton, 2013), and retelling dominant business narratives (Sapnar Ankerson, 2012), the articles in this section consider platforms and users that are in some way marginal. Internet studies research overwhelmingly concentrates on an incredibly narrow set of platforms, typically Facebook and Twitter. Airi Lampinen addresses the need for a more expansive view of social media research, asking "how might our conceptualizations of social media and social interaction change if we were to explore a wider range of systems to enrich our theorizing?" Moving beyond conjecture, Lampinen demonstrates the need for diversifying the scope of social media research by pointing to implications of studying platforms like Airbnb, Internet relay chats (IRCs), and ScoopINON.

A diversified understanding of online interactions is partly about a willingness to investigate multiple platforms, but also about examining a broad range of practices. Veronica Barassi presents this argument in the context of social movements and digital technologies. Situating her work within the “practice turn” of social media research, Barassi goes on to argue that within the growing attention to social media activism, a key oversight has been the acknowledgment of “the relationships between political data flows and digital traces” where there is a need to “highlight the multiple and complex ways in which social media use is tightly interconnected to the processes of political profiling.” Drawing together surveillance theory and research in media activism, for Barassi, the many-ness of the Internet includes attention to the multiple ways that online activity can be tracked, traced, and compiled.

A perennial challenge in Internet studies research (as in other fields) has been to expand investigations beyond White, Western users in rich, urban settings. A robust accounting of the Internet-as-multiple demands considering users from other backgrounds, with other perspectives, in other parts of the world. Xinru Sun provides precisely such an analysis in her investigation of WeChat users in rural China. Using frameworks of self-writing and double articulation, Sun describes the ways in which culture and local values shape identity work. In particular, Sun is attentive to divergences between online and offline technologies in terms of collective dialogue and community rituals.

Jin Cao and Lei Guo take another approach to repositioning mainstream orientations to digital technologies by looking at the practices of queer activists in China. Taking into account contexts of censorship and prejudice, Cao and Guo evaluate the activist capacities and political affordances of social media platforms. Their arguments speak to longstanding debates within scholarship on social media and activism, where thinkers have disagreed on the role of online platforms in supporting versus devaluing agendas within social movements (e.g. Doctorow, 2011; Gladwell, 2010; Thrift, 2014). For queer activists in China, analysis of online practices reveals the many tactics of working within existing platforms and constraints to achieve their activist mandates; rather than overt displays of counter-hegemonic values, Cao and Guo point to subtle experimentations within state regulations and ordinances.

Research from feminist theory, human-computing interaction, Internet studies, and science and technology studies has shown that technologies developed by people of privilege tend to reflect those conditions of privilege (see Ames, Go, Kaye, & Spasojevic, 2011; Crivellaro et al., 2016; Eubanks, 2012; Haimson, Brubaker, Dombrowski, & Hayes, 2016, respectively). By insisting on a multiplicity of Internets, this forum continues the work of scholars invested in identifying the politics and ideologies of technological artifacts. Studying the experiences and practices of marginalized communities allows us to see gaps of power where improvised practices of technology point to the divergence between what designers intended and what users needed. By bringing multiple communities into this conversation, we can see how these alternative practices in fact develop simultaneously, where different contexts and experiences of otherness underscore the richness, complexity, and diversity of online technologies.

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Jessa Lingel is an Assistant Professor at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. She received her PhD in communication and information from Rutgers University. She has an MLIS from Pratt Institute and an MA from New York University. Her research interests include information inequalities and technological distributions of power.

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