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Abstract
This article explores the idea that research into media communications and information has recently undergone a normative turn as more and more writers reflect on the ever deeper embedding of our lives in media, and the possible costs that this entails. Possible ways forward for deepening and addressing this normative turn are explored, based on the particular contribution to media and communications research of social theory.

Keywords
normative theory of social media, social theory, social media

> Oh, the loss I felt when I found out the secrets that I hold dear, that were so difficult to say out loud, that I had kept to myself, were being spread around the day as if they were nothing.
>
> Shin (2013, p. 94)

This quote, from a beautiful recent novel by Korean novelist Kyung-Sook Shin, captures a note of ethical questioning that we easily recognize now. In fact, the novel reflects back on a period of earlier democratic challenge to authoritarian rule in South Korea, long before the rise of social media. But it fits with how we are now becoming used to the idea that the "social" which social media platforms may not be the social we want, may conflict with our separate sense of how human life might be good.

In the era of digital media, a normative turn is under way in communications research which is quite different from the more specialist concern with journalistic ethics, even though that debate too has been ignited by the new practices of surveillance and revelation that digital media make possible. The sense of wider normative questioning about the consequences that media have for our lives is felt in books as diverse as Sherry Turkle's (2011) *Alone Together* and Jaron Lanier's (2011) *You are Not a Gadget*, and more recently in both Ulises Mejias' (2013) powerful polemic *Off the Network* and the more measured but still fiercely questioning tone of Jose Van Dijck's (2013) *The Culture of Connectivity*.

The impetus to such normative reflection is twofold: first, an unprecedented deepening of how media outputs and media-related expectations are embedded in our lives. And, second, the increasing salience of social media platforms in the stimulation of economic demand on which capitalism depends. The second point is complicated: for it is *because* of the unprecedented *super*saturation of life with media, and the resulting difficulty of generating economic value from the effectiveness of any one targeted message, that pushes value-creators toward generating value through data. That turn to data requires the generation of raw material *to be* tracked and measured—where else to turn than what we do in everyday life?—and this requires the orientation of our lives toward platforms for interacting online under conditions of continuous automatic monitoring.

No one doubts the pleasures and benefits of *some* aspects of social media—what major innovation in history has had no benefits? The issue is balance, and how we get enough distance from our own embedding in social media to assess that balance.

My suggested strategy is to turn our focus away from the brute fact of social media (in all its diversity) toward, more contentiously, the type of "social" now being constructed through social media. What is it for media to be social? What should be the role of media institutions in the construction of the social? Is it merely about providing means for the faster and wider dissemination of whatever we want to send, or can we expect something different from media (the protection of silence, of distance, what Roger Silverstone [2007] once called "proper distance")?

What sense can we make of the idea—quite tangible today—that we "ought" to be social online, that we "ought" to keep up with whatever outputs today's new social media apparatuses generate and require if *they* (not we) are to be sustained? And how can we make clearer sense of a different

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possibility: the possibility of being skeptical toward social media, but as skeptics engaged in rigorously researching "social media," surely one of the most complex and problematic "objects" of our time?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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