

Issues in Social Media for the Arts 2019

## Blueskying a Social Media Platform for the Arts

Hosted by  
the Social Media Narratives Class  
Art and Technology Studies  
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### Google Groups: Isobel Harbison



isobelharbison

Nov 8



I am an art critic and art historian with a long-term interest in the relationship between art and media. Most recently, I have written about social media and the activity of prosumerism, how it's changing our social and political landscape, and how – as I see it – a lot of the performance and image-based exchanges involved in this widespread activity draw upon the mediums of performance and photography/film, the architectures of exhibition, the language and notional lifestyles associated with art and artists. Social media offers people the opportunity and infrastructure to be an artist for a day, week, month, a life, to curate profiles, accumulate visitors, attract eyeballs. To self-actualize. Meanwhile, many artists I know increasingly look at this activity with ambivalence, utilising its various functions but suspicious of the side-effects of overuse.

Is the experience of social media sometimes enjoyable? Absolutely. Is the experience universally positive? Absolutely not. For whatever sense of liberation, satisfaction, autonomy and community is felt through creation and communication on 'free' social media platforms comes at an enormous cost – precarious labour, intensified and monetized surveillance, political interference and collusion. Ecological damage. Not to mention social and individual harm of intense and widespread peer-

anxiety. In the UK, and as I see it in the US, we are living through a period of intense and potentially insurmountable precarity, instability and threat. Social media, as an industry, plays no small part.

While I think there will always be claims that social media corporations make about facilitating creative experience, networking creative people, and sharing creative products the broader consequences of this regular, unremunerated form of engagement cannot be ignored, particularly as we recognise the principle financial and political beneficiaries. I cannot and will not engage on Facebook (or Instagram) and am disturbed by Mark Zuckerberg's failure to engage with how divisive his platform has become, and how toxic his firm's incapacity or unwillingness to regulate its data brokering and advertising (most problematically, its political advertising), and its fierce policies of content-licencing. He knows the long-term value of this kind of large-scale invasiveness but continuously insists on marketing it in terms of democracy and freedom. It presents the very opposite.

My thoughts on social media's efficacy differ according to which political phase we're in. To my mind, its analysis needs to be undertaken in tandem with that of mainstream (broadcast, broadsheet, centrally distributed) media, and its relationship with politics (electoral processes, campaigning and ideologies of governance). During doctoral research between 2010 – 2014, I was largely critical of prosumerism's central and labour-exploiting indeterminacy between work and play. Subsequently, while writing that research into a book published last year, a writing period that followed the US presidential election and the UK EU referendum ('Brexit'), both in 2016, I realised how important it was to maintain these kind of platforms for communication and activism, as politics took a hard and terrifying turn right, discriminating against all of those with whom I most readily identify. I follow and learn from many who use new and social media to challenge political systems that fail to value us all: many of you students seem to be doing just this with your original and often incisive contributions. We do need platforms for self-presentation and self-representation now more than ever, just not platforms that allow such regular and destructive politico-corporate intervention, trading so barbarously on people's need for space, for solidarity and escape (see again, think again: creative freedom, satisfaction, autonomy...).

I write to and with you from the beginning of another phase. I live in London, where the UK's withdrawal from Europe is a constant source of consternation and disaccord. The news (broadcast and broadsheet) are consumed by it and an upcoming general election (12<sup>th</sup> December) hinges on the various parties' mandates for withdrawal or remain. Everyone is angry. We are divided. One key sticking point in the withdrawal agreement's negotiation with Europe since 2016 has been the border of Northern Ireland and how the UK (which includes 'Britain and Northern Ireland') will regulate the passage of goods, services, people and opportunities through it from the North (the UK) to the south (the Republic of Ireland), without imposing a policed border, the military regulation of which previously caused so much tension and conflict during the civil war (or, 'the Troubles', 1969 – 1998). During the last three years, Northern Ireland has been referred to by the UK's (London-based) media and by Westminster's politicians as an 'issue', and an obstructive 'object' to the UK's withdrawal and supposed sovereignty. So self-consumed have both mainstream media and politicians been to their own London-centric interests they have utterly failed to acknowledge and recognise the increasingly unstable and underrepresented situation in Northern Ireland itself, where education, health and welfare are suffering severe and dangerous financial cuts and, not disconnectedly, where sectarian violence is again on the rise. Riots, petrol bombs, and killings over the last year in Northern Ireland have been consistently unreported.

Here, now, social media (Twitter) has been invaluable: providing a platform for discourse between people in Ireland and Northern Ireland and their diasporas (of which I am one), alongside those in the UK and further afield to alert, discuss, analyse and congregate. To make positive things happen. This has intensified my understanding of how vital social media is in times of crisis, and I value how (albeit unregulated and corporate) social media has brought me into direct contact with curators, artists, writers and academics who feel similarly compelled to make change. And from this contact, already, urgent and important works of art have been made, works that have galvanised communities in tandem with social media's communication platforms. The word gets out. People are coming together in different ways. And the activities, performances, demonstrations and art take place away from the browser, in the other dimensional spaces of life, are affirming in unforeseen ways.

There is no doubt financial, judicial and ethical regulation is needed within wider imperatives to reform for the corporations we identify as

social media. But one major question is who is in the position to impose this, especially as those who are in such a position are the principle beneficiaries of its rogue mechanisms: corrosive forms of digital campaigning are still in play for upcoming elections in the UK and US despite the mounting evidence.

And while we wait for those of you (the artists, technologists, designers) brilliant enough to intervene, to forge new models, new platforms, new modes of platform-cooperativism, and here, within this/ your module, innovate new and critical online gallery structures, unearth or platform vital narratives otherwise unspoken, and collectively imagine more efficient and mutually equitable networking applications, as creative people we also need to be careful to distinguish what's available from what's necessary. To make good beyond. There are habits and systems we need to kick together.

I look forward to engaging with you all.



rwilliams20

Nov 9



Welcome Isobel!

I spent some time with your book *Performing Image*. I first want to introduce myself as someone who is very much a traditional artist- I work analog in painting mainly, and outside of that I admittedly struggle with wrapping my head around a lot of digital technology. So taking a course in ArtTech studies is out on limb for me and my practice. That being said I am delighted I found resonance and relatability in what I read in your book and this statement- this speaks to the importance of the issues of social media in everyone's lives. However un-versed I am in tech studies I do use social media in my personal life and developing art practice and have come across many obstacles- on the platform Instagram in particular. Their new "community guidelines" are a thinly veiled step towards total dystopia and censorship. I found this in my feminist body positive work on instagram being cracked down on as well as many of my friends- artists and sex workers, as well as women that just aren't afraid of their body. This speaks to Instagram's (and subsequently Facebook's although I don't engage in Facebook) shaping

as a patriarchal tool to further objectification and censorship of women's bodies when they aren't profitable to Instagram itself.

My work and thinking is very politically radical and in general my philosophy around politics is revolution over reform. When I ponder this in regards to social media, I think this aligns with what you're saying about the need for new platforms and presumably overthrowing old platforms. I want to pose the question about how you (and others) view twitter- is it a feasible social media platform to move forward with or is it just the lesser of evils in comparison to FB and instagram? Would you like to see an entirely new platform arise or twitter advance towards becoming a better platform? I don't actively use twitter so I can't speak on it much myself- but after my Instagram being deleted for supposedly "violating community guidelines" I'm considering it... I think for me socially connecting with people I know face to face Instagram just seems to be what we use to keep up with each other, like when I meet new people it's more often asked "what's your ig?" rather than "what's your twitter?". And why that is could be a rant in itself... my generation's obsession with fame/celebrity, the format being more visually forward, etc...



deanne

Nov 11

I admire your refusal to participate. I left FB too. I am on Instagram. The one thing I remember is that many of these platforms begin in the proverbial "garage or basement" (which is of course indicative of a certain kind of privilege) and they begin with so much seeming innocence and optimism, and "hey" we're all just here to have fun, and then even if that scenario does play out and becomes amazing, sooner or later they get purchased. ...

The ethical regulation point speaks strongly to me. I'm not sure how it can be "enforced" although I'm sure if the finances were placed there, it could occur.

Thanks for you very thoughtful remarks.

Cheers,

Deanne (p.s. I'm feeling like a negative nancy here:) , but I do find these google dox kinda messy to navigate and replies I've left haven't all stuck (I didn't click the "blue" button) and then each one has a different way of being navigated. Like this doc is more blog post style with comments (which I like). I \*should \*embrace the messiness and think about how my preferences have already been co-opted by tools like Instagram...

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Editor's note: Dr. Harbison's contribution was done as a statement and reply form instead of as a Google Doc. I thought it would be of interest to see how that worked once it was up, so it is my fault that this did not work as well as the Google Doc format. A plus was the amount of time Dr. Harbison spent responding to other statements, as evidenced by the transcripts for other panelists. Thanks. JM