



Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Oddities in New Media

Highfield, T. (2016). *Social media and everyday politics*. Malden, USA: Polity Press. Pp. 211. CAD \$ 26.65 paperback.

Allmer, T. (2015). *Critical theory and social media: Between emancipation and commodification*. New York: Routledge. Pp. 234. CAD 26.65 hardcover.

Charles, A. (2014). *Interactivity 2: New media, politics and society*. Oxford, UK: Peter Lang Ltd.. Pp. 247. CAD \$ 42.84 paperback.

Book Review

By Dilli Bikram Edingo¹

Communication and Culture (York/Ryerson joint program), York University, Canada

The revolution in Internet-based digital networks and interactive platforms most palpably demarcated by the dot.com revolution in the early 1990s and the Web 2.0 phenomenon in the mid-2000s and their towering impacts on diverse aspects of social, cultural, economic, educational and political activities have emerged as a new interdisciplinary field of research studies, attracting an increasing number of scholars, researchers and academicians. In an array of researchers as such, Highfield, Allmer and Charles have studied new media and its social, political, ideological and economic implications from different thematic and critical angles. They have explored some oddities inherent in the structure of new media and its uses. Highfield orients his theoretical arguments towards the arena of political debates, implications and dynamics in daily digital lives, whereas Allmer concentrates on capitalist corporate ideology, power politics, economic significance and social media. Charles picks up diverse issues that frequently trouble new media users in their daily digital lives. The commonalities and differences among these three books offer a wider and more comprehensive framework for critiquing social media

¹ Dilli Bikram Edingo is a PhD candidate in the Department of Communication and Culture (York/Ryerson joint program) at York University, Canada. He can be reached at edingodilli29@gmail.com

in relation to diverse social, political and cultural consequences of its multipurpose re/usability.

Social media as a platform for banalizing politics

For the last two decades, many research and academic studies have extensively examined and theorized on the impacts of social media on political life, movements and ways of civic and political engagements. The uses of social media in major political events such as elections, political campaigns and mass movements and protests for political changes such as the US presidential elections of 2012 and 2016 and against incumbent governments such as the Arab Spring have been continuously studied, re/examining how social media impacts mass demonstration and formations of collective solidarity as witnessed during the Occupy Wall Street and Spanish Indignados (Gravante & Pomu, 2016). Most of the studies expose social media as an instrumental or tool of politics, power and counter-power. Foucault (2008) argues that when the liberal art of governing replaced the traditional art of governing based on the principle of reason *detat* (reason of the state – state as the dominant center of power), the sovereign centers of power and politics such as the government, elite politicians guided by their ideologies and their political institutions have been replaced by ordinary people/citizens as the sources and networks of power. Along with the development of digital/new media and novel ways of political processes that intersect with other fields of the ideological, cultural, social and economic lives of the ordinary people, the traditional mechanisms of holding power centers and exerting political power, predicated on hierarchical systems, have been challenged and, in many cases, replaced by new democratic and subversive practices of decentralizing power in democratic systems and by horizontal paradigms of power exertions and political engagements supported by new media networks.

New media has expanded the traditional notion of politics that mostly refers to the formal and ideological politics and institutionalized or well-organized events such as political campaigns, elections and riots to include the consideration of everyday lives and activities as essentially political in nature. Highfield in *Social media and everyday politics* elaborates on new/social media as a new medium and space for accomplishing politics and argues that even the mundane, banal and informal aspects of the ordinary people's daily lives (personal and everyday experiences) can be political. He opines that politics "then is not just formal, as shaped and discussed by established political actors and the mainstream media, but highly informal" (p. 7). He analyzed the political cycles, the uses of social media and their impacts on political events, from 2009 to 2015, in both the macro levels (election cycles and movements for political changes) and micro levels (everyday uses of social media platforms) of political events and processes to theorize on the intersectionality between the political and the personal dimensions of social media; for him, globally and instantly accessible online platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook and others were not meant for politics, but personal uses among relatives and friends or limited numbers of familiar people. They have now become easily accessible media and platforms for ordinary citizens to participate

in political discourse that includes all of the everyday talks and topics on politics and acts of sharing political views through social media using algorithmic language and coding such as hashtags. The ordinary citizens inexorably engage themselves daily in political discourses through social media platforms; social media has made politics integral topics or parts and parcels of their daily digital lives.

Highfield is not a cyberpessimist because he sees new media as promoting the political power and participation of new media users. As opposed to those who explore the ways and strategies social media has been structured to fundamentally and latently support the elite politicians, power institutions like governments, policymakers and corporate-media owners, he intimately observes and analyses the ways the banal uses of social media platforms and everyday politics of the ordinary people have now inextricably been intersected-personalization of what is political and politicization of what is personal. Redden (2015) makes a critical analysis of social media's political uses primarily in relation to protests and mass movements, which are constrained by "specific neoliberal political interventions" (p. 138). Hintz (2015) argues that social media cannot uplift protests and connective power demonstrations of the common people because it is a site/location controlled by private or corporate Internet policies. Similarly, Chun (2016) builds up her theoretical paradigm around the intrinsically and infrastructurally creepy attributes of new media that support neoliberal governments and corporate culture and further argues that new media is not for users' privacy or what is personal. Differently, Highfield shows that social/new media has transformed the analytical concept of what is personal and what is political as such in favour of ordinary citizens as they have got a new medium to participate in politics. He elaborates on the undesirable consequences of the interactions on social media platforms such as "voicing (in)difference and (in)tolerance" (p. 17), online racial violence (p. 19), "callout culture and shaming" (p. 24), "revenge porn and slut-shaming" (p. 26), doxing and cybervigilantism (p. 27) as the mundane and banal attributes of everyday politics—the acceptable components of politicizing of what is personal, mundane and informal.

Highfield's concept of everyday politics emphasizes that the political dynamicity is created by the dialogic/interactive relations between banal and extraordinary, formal and informal, and offline and online activities. Such a theoretical approach to social media and current politics assumes that all the new media users are active political actors and power agents in today's technology-dominated global society. For him, social media is power and counter-power, a platform for affective collective action (p. 108), a network of solidarity (p. 112) and a tactical tool or a space for subverting censorship (p. 116). His arguments about social media as a tactical power and collective action and its banal or mundane attributes offer a comprehensive and balanced framework substantiated by his empirical observation, analysis and conclusion. While Highfield's theoretical lens focuses on the performative and personal dimensions of social media and their political significance in everyday digital lives—a theory based on socio-political implications of social/new media, Allmer is fascinated by the political economy of digital and/or new media within the framework of Marxist ideology in the current neoliberal capitalism.

New media as a means of commodification

A brief comparison of Allmer with his contemporary new media critics and theorists reveals that his theoretical approach to social media and its political implications make a slightly different assertion than that of the other new media critics who do not find new media as an emancipatory power. As mentioned earlier, Chun (2016) finds new media as a neoliberal corporate owners' tool to shape the habits of neoliberal subjects for the formers' benefit. Langlois, Redden and Elmer (2015) present a similar argument that "data is being employed to accelerate prevalent neoliberal redefinitions of the role of the state and the transformation of citizenship into consumer practices, ... generate wealth, improve efficiencies, and encourage entrepreneurialism" (p. 1). Leister's (2015) critical inquiry into the political and economic dimensions of new media also makes an argumentative orientation towards the same point that the so-called emancipatory new media cannot escape censorship, and the "psychopowers" of corporate social media platforms always tend to overtly and covertly maximize corporate benefits by using the data of new media users. Similarly, Fuchs (2014) views new/social media as a capitalist tool or medium for suppressing new media users and optimizing their neoliberal profit-making processes by re/using and repurposing the users' data. Allmer in *Critical theory and Social media: Between emancipation and commodification* explores the constraints and emancipatory potentials of new media within the Marxist ideological/political notion of "dialectical relationship of productive forces and relations of productions" (pp. 26, 28, 41).

Unlike the orthodox Marxists' view of the base (the mode of production defined by the dialectical relationship between the proletariat and the capitalists in a specific time) as the sole determiner of the superstructure (politics, culture, legal system, education and more), Allmer builds up his theoretical arguments around the neo-Marxist's notion of dialectics or mutual making influence between the base (nature, media-technology, economy) and the superstructure (polity and culture). By principle, for him, new media — considered a determinant of the base — works as a creative factor in the totality of other productive forces such as labour-power, means of production, objects and instruments of labour and relations of productions such as property relations and interactions (p. 26). In a capitalist system, all creativities and emancipatory potentials of new media are subsumed to the further expedition of production processes. Allmer argues that social media platforms work as appropriated means of production (p. 40) or a means of commodifying the commons and as a strategic space for making more profits for private corporations. So, the creative power and role of new media users within the dialectical relationship of the base and the superstructure in current neoliberal capitalism are controlled by the interests and profit-motifs of corporate owners and limited to the valorization of production processes.

The results of Allmer's empirical case studies among Austrian students show that the uses of social media users' data and privacy for accumulating capital are the disadvantages of social media platforms. His political and economic analyses of Internet privacy and surveillance provide him with an in-depth understanding of the fundamental characteristics of the current corporate culture that sustains itself by commodifying the digital commons (their

profiles, information about their personal choices and patterns of their behaviours) and exploiting them on online public spaces. Instead of emancipating the new media users in a true sense, new media is used to create asymmetrical economic power relations in the present information society.

Allmer puts forward the theoretical argument that new media users and new media have creative power and play a creative role because they are the dynamic factors of dialectical/mutually affective relationship between the base and the superstructure under neoliberal capitalism. However, what is at the core of his arguments is that the keys of ultimate control do not belong to the new media users; the apparent freedom in their performativity on social media platforms is an illusion because ideologically and structurally (by the structure of new media) they are suppressed, exploited and subsumed to production processes. Next, Charles offers a pragmatic lens, which seems less theoretical compared to Allmer, for examining the absurdities, paradoxes, dualities and illusions of freedom and control that have emerged along with the advent of new/social media networks.

Absurdities, Deceptions and illusions as inextricable from social media

Charles focuses more on social, political and practical experiences and consequences of both destructive and constructive impacts of social media use, overwhelmingly drawing much attention of researchers interested in new media. Walck and Meyer (2016) critically explain the narrative of interactive emancipation or freedom on social media as an illusion because it is limited by “highly sophisticated algorithms that simulate control” (p. 89). Smith’s (2012) analytical observation on the Arab Revolution in 2011 exposes the paradoxical nature and dual service of social media simultaneously used as a tool by all the discordant agents. Charles’ *Interactivity 2: New Media, Politics and Society* is a work based on extensive research on paradoxes, absurdities, deceptions and illusions on new media in a cover of performative and interactive freedom and ubiquitous accessibility to foster a critical insight and awareness.

Charles does not take a completely cyberpessimistic stance though he agrees with George Orwell’s critical views on technology-saturated society as “a surveillance society, a hegemonized and homogenized realm, a media dictatorship of totalizing ideologies and corporate hyperpower” (p. 8). In his view, new media users themselves, to some extent, are responsible for allowing the totalizing ideologies and corporate hyperpowers to benefit from their uses of new media. The manifest and latent processes and strategies employed to use and play with the data of new media consumers are dependant more on the bottom-up approach or methodology than anything else, in which users themselves expose their personal content in “Youtopia” (YouTube+Utopia). With critical awareness of absurdities, deceptions and illusions prevalent in algorithmic networks of social media, he optimistically welcomes the advent of new media technologies that “herald a paradigm shift in our notions of politics, society and subjectivity” and generate “paradoxes whose absurdity reveals an impasse within received notions of identity, meaning and societal progression” (p. 13).

Paradoxes and their absurdities, for Charles, are the results of selfish and careless disparities between new media users and the instrumental nature and infrastructure of new media platforms. In many cases, users share their posts on the Facebook wall about some particular events, issues and ideas, upload videos on YouTube and tweet their comments. But such posts and tweets do not go through any purgatory process of re/correction, updates and replacement even after they have become irrelevant. For instance, abusive content about persons allegedly charged with criminal offences continues to be re/circulated in the forms of memes that remain somewhere in the new media networks forever regardless of their new legal status of clean-chits. In this sense, online symbols or signs and codes may not provide the exact meaning intended during the time of tweeting, posting on the Facebook wall and uploading digitalized objects on YouTube over a long period of changing social, cultural and legal contexts. The deceptive gap between the users and new media structure, in many cases and contexts, makes irrecoverable damage to the social, political and moral status of target persons. Charles opines that new media is always structurally inclined to re/circulate any post and event, but it is the responsibility of users to purge it of irrelevant posts and fake news. As the fake news and irrelevant content, once exposed on social media platforms, remain there forever in the networks of algorithms beneath interfaces, they frequently incur moments of confusion and absurdities.

Charles questions the fundamental characteristics of the online symbols, codes or languages that are meant to communicate some meaningful and decipherable messages and invite new media users to actively participate in interactive performances for meaning-making; meaningful performances refer to the acts of decoding intended meanings coded in symbols, codes, signs or, in short, languages. By referring to the poststructuralist theorist Ronald Barthes' idea of *scriptible* (writerly) texts which have multiple meanings, he implies that the meanings intended during the time of coding cannot be exactly decoded or interpreted over a period of changing cultural, political/legal and social contexts; meanings are not linearly, orderly and fixed and hence not easily legible, as opposed to readerly texts, in which meanings are orderly, fixed and predetermined so as to perceive them easily (pp. 88-90). With this reference, what Charles obviously intends to suggest is that the communication based on disorderly symbols and codes, sounds and images on social media such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter do not guarantee a reliable way of deciphering and decoding the exact meanings that were intended at the time of coding. For him, interactivity, meant for meaning-making, based on such disorderly texts (images, words, symbols and more) is not real, but simply an illusion of performativity in which meanings are slippery.

Social media as an amorphous and multipurpose space

New and/or social media is an amorphous and multipurpose space where innumerable activities can be simultaneously performed and that can be simultaneously used for multiple purposes. Researchers have been increasingly attracted by the social, political, economic and cultural impacts of such ever-changing and amorphous nature of new media

technologies. Highfield, Allmer and Charles have critiqued new media from interdisciplinary perspectives concentrating on power and politics, Marxist ideology, corporate culture and social, cultural and political experiences. All of them endeavour their best to explore and explain the novel issues on the intersectionality of social media and other areas of human activities. Highfield has explored the ever-changing nature of new media and its impacts on the daily digital lives of the ordinary citizens; the way he expands the elitist notion of politics and power to include the everyday interactions of ordinary citizens and other mundane or banal events makes a new contribution to studies of the social, cultural and political significance of new media. Allmer provides a theoretical framework about the political economy of social media that is very helpful in further studies of ideological contexts and political implications of dynamic algorithms beneath new media interfaces. Highfield and Allmer have contributed to the scholarly efforts for expanding and re/building up theoretical paradigms in the area of new media studies. And, Charles has conducted extensive research to gather innumerable pieces of evidence that could be useful in further expanding or re/framing the existing new media theories and analyses.

While theorizing on the new media uses and politics, Highfield is not inclined to elaborate much on the other side of reality that new media users cannot consummately use new media as an emancipatory tool or space where ordinary citizens' daily politics are under constant restraints of state-power and structural limitations of the platforms. Similarly, Allmer's theoretical discussions could include more details about the paradoxical nature of the ways new media has expedited corporate production and the way it has also concurrently deskilled the new media users in many ways. The basic assumption of dialectical influence between the base and the superstructure is that new media users can also retain some decisive power that can subvert exploitation, domination and control through surveillance imposed by states and corporate-powers. But in reality, they cannot practice that subversive power so straightforwardly. And, theorizing less, Charles has offered us more like an empirical lens for taking an analytical look into social media and its undesirable impacts on the current media-saturated society.

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