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## Total Eclipse of the Social: What Journalism Can Learn from the Fundamentals of Facebook\*

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### Introduction


If global headlines are anything to go by, Facebook is proving to be no “friend” of public interest journalism. Government inquiries across the globe into the platform’s handling of fake accounts, advertising, privacy, and hate speech has revealed how social media sites pillage and plunder the information highway once dominated by traditional mainstream outlets (see, e.g., Halpern 2019; Hern 2017). Those in the business of news accuse Facebook of cannibalising content, gobbling up advertising revenue, and sharing information generated from the sweat and toil of “credible” journalists.

Facebook teaches us an important, yet under-appreciated, lesson when it comes to understanding the future of news and journalism in the digital age – the power of the “social.” Our initial essay highlights an urgent need to refocus our attention on journalism’s relationship to the broader social sphere. Too much scholarship and industry discussion now equates the “social” with technology and social networking sites as if they are one in the same. This, we suggest, devalues traditional and important scholarship that provides scope to consider the social in terms of our everyday integrations within which our social lives help us to make sense of who we are as individuals and ultimately as collectives. In our argument about the power of social interactions, we also critique the scholarship and journalism that is said to be of and for publics. In other words, long-held convictions that journalism forms and provides a “public sphere” ignores the need to appreciate social aspects of storytelling, wayfinding and journalism. We argue that social elements of journalism that are sometimes cast aside as “soft news” – that about community events and obituaries to the way journalists can or might connect people socially – are just as important to society as those said to spark public discussion and debate.

### Shifting Challenges (and Domains) of Social Spaces

If we rewind the clock back just a decade, it’s easy to forget that the relationship between journalism and Facebook wasn’t all bad. While the shift to digital classifieds had started

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eating into traditional advertising models during the early 2000s, mainstream news media was still arguably in control of the public conversation. Back then, scholars and industry were fascinated by Facebook as a “new play thing” in the digital sphere. Both journalists and Facebook positioned the platform as a relatively harmless phenomena, given its links to notions of “friending,” “liking,” and building “community.” Journalists began using Facebook to share and promote stories, to find news sources, and to move audiences connected to shared geographical spaces into easily accessible online communities. The idea that Facebook could, however, exploit the symbolic power of news media and set journalism aside as a social force wasn’t a key part of the initial discussion.

Despite the promises of Facebook as a fantastical social creation, it’s our contention that the platform has eclipsed journalism’s recognised standing within the social sphere in large part because journalists have not been reflexive about the digital turn outwards and have failed to appreciate the very purpose of journalism to fulfil its social potential. Furthermore, journalism, as a field, has become mired in its fascination with the internet’s technological innovation and reach. Tech-lovers view Facebook’s success as a product simply of its technology. News media companies tend not to be technology-first businesses, and have had to rely on technologists – and internet darlings – to match the useability and slickness of social networking platforms. Certainly, many news outlets still can’t meet the invention of new technology from outside its ranks, and will struggle to create their own proprietary platforms attractive enough to rival today’s trending virtual spaces.

But tensions around journalism and Facebook started at a deeper level than technological innovation. Facebook emerged from its unbridled and novel ability to socially connect people and serve as an anchor point for community formation across physical and digital realms. Used as a platform for people to connect with one another, to buy and sell wares, promote social status, share opinions or to commemorate, commiserate and celebrate,<sup>1</sup> Facebook rapidly became a medium of choice for social information and, as a result, generated increasing influence in the public sphere.

Here, we present three lessons that tensions between journalism and Facebook reveal potentials for journalism not just as a public space, but a social one.

## **Lesson 1: “Social” News Matters**

The first important lesson is that everyday people are interested and connect to “social” information beyond matters of politics and public debate, beyond stories that hold the powerful to account or shine lights in dark places (Hess 2016). While hard-nosed investigative journalism is certainly instrumental to what is considered good journalism, Facebook has filled a gap in the market that many news outlets had under-appreciated since the rise of the professional journalist.

There is perhaps no better illustration of this than the local news sector – the kind that serve small neighbourhoods, towns, and cities. Like Facebook, local news outlets, radio, and TV stations are also considered central to ideas of community and social connection. But because of this – in part at least – local news is frequently seen as less “sexy” than big media among industry and scholars (see, e.g., Nielsen 2015). Indeed, local newspapers were once encouraged by industry leaders to embrace Facebook<sup>2</sup> in the interests of being social media savvy and to keep up with the technological trends shaping the industry. Many journalists, have settled on encouraging audiences to use the social media

platform to comment on local issues, encouraging messages of condolences for lost community members, and for congratulations for local successes.

There are stories of neighbourly acts of kindness and eye-capturing or historic images of streetscapes and landscapes that evoke a sense of place and pride in the localities where we live. The “hard news” is preserved for the print or online news editions and to reinforce the narrative around what constitutes quality journalism. Yet when we look closely at some of this social content we can appreciate how important information nodes can be to constructing and reinforcing social imaginaries, understandings of community and place, morality, rituals and social honour. The gradual shift of death and memorial notices from newspapers to Facebook pages, for example, is perhaps one of the greatest indicators of its social power at the detriment of news competitors. Rather than handing this content over to Facebook on a silver platter, journalism shouldn't be so fast to dismiss its significance and value to the future of news.

## **Lesson 2: Journalism /s Social – Even without Social Media**

It is our contention that Facebook shows us how the very roots of information legitimacy appear to be germinated in the forgotten realm of the social sphere. Facebook's power and advertising appeal grew as more and more symbolic meaning became attached to its social function and rocket fuelled by technology. Unlike traditional news media, Facebook did not turn to its users for economic sustenance or membership fees – it was built on a traditional advertiser model and based on the social significance it had come to represent in people's everyday lives. In journalism studies – and journalism practice – however, the idea of the “social” remains myopically wedded to social media, as if the two cannot be wrestled apart.

Terms such as social journalism, social news, and the sociability of news, have been coined to explore how social networking is shaping journalism, from its celebrated Fifth Estate function to audience and journalistic engagement and participation with digital platforms. Facebook's rising dominance in the social sphere has highlighted the powerful interplay between social and public worlds and the interdependent relationship between the two. Theoretically speaking then, we argue that the dominance of the public sphere in journalism – with its emphasis on political action and participation, democracy, deliberation and public opinion – overshadows the importance of the wider social sphere.

Rather than being wedded to democratic theory and the Fourth Estate, the objective function of news and journalism needs to offer a much broader appreciation of the wider social sphere it plays a part, and when combined with a cultural overlay highlights issues of boundary formation, social order, connection, social honour, morality, place and meaning-making. The adoption of online social platforms and networks by journalism has not helped to fulfil journalism's role as a social sphere, but has diluted journalistic boundaries and removed from journalism some of its key social influences.

## **Lesson 3: News Media Must Appreciate the Social in the Interests of Power and Legitimacy**

Journalists and scholars alike must unpack the evolution of social platforms, such as Facebook, to acknowledge temporal and historical dimensions of how they came to “be.”

Those who study digital journalism, for example, increasingly highlight the importance of balancing continuity and change (Eldridge et al. 2019) and the role of a critical eye cast upon the past in order to move forward and into the next innovation (Zelizer 2019). Helpful perspectives are needed to seeing spaces such as Facebook not just as appearing on the global internet stage by fluke but as an intentional, capitalistic invention. The power of liminality and “communitas” illustrate differences between news and social media as audiences transition into digital spaces. Herwig (2009), for instance, highlights how sites such as Facebook are rich with social norms and expectations – from the initial membership sign-up to the use of terms such as “friends” and “followers” to “build community.” At the same time, however, news outlets have revealed continued deep connections to capitalism through paywalls and paid subscriptions, an antithesis to community-building.

The process by which journalism has transformed into custodians of the “public sphere” has eclipsed its role in the wider “social sphere” and at times the attention on social networking overshadows the richer significance of the social and cultural dimensions of news and its role in securing the future of journalism. News media already play a distinct role in not only establishing social norms which function as forms of control and order (Gutsche 2017), but in maintaining approved standards of daily life, institutional structures and practices, and dominant explanations of the world around us. In an era when social networking and social media are now part of the everyday lexicon of both journalism practice and studies, there has never been a more important time to reassess the notion and value and problems inherent in the very idea of the “social.”

## NOTES

1. We acknowledge that there are many pages and posts that can be discounted as self-indulgent drivel and information rot on Facebook, but much is not.
2. Consider conversations among press associations in Australia and Canada, where improving social networking via Facebook is considered part of core business for local journalists.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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