

The “social media” maneuver

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Social media. Think about it. For those concerned with how the participatory logics of digital media may undermine the elitist logics of broadcast media, social media is a concept, and, of course, a set of social, economic, and political practices, rich with strengths and vulnerabilities. This is because the very term “social media” is the product of diverse strategies of discursive colonization and boundary drawing. It is a contested concept, one that implies digital media logics of activism, interactivity, exuberance, community-building, diversity, pluralism, horizontality, and free expression, but also one used by those in the fields of news, entertainment, politics, and commerce, who constantly seek to fix and freeze its understanding in ways that suit their own interests and identities. This is but one among many features of a hybrid media system in which the sometimes-competing and sometimes-complementary logics of older and newer media constantly interact to shape the flow of information. Allow me to briefly illustrate my point with what is, for a scholar of media and politics at any rate, an unusual case.

Those with even a cursory knowledge of British radio will recognize the name Steve Wright. Wright is a longstanding BBC radio DJ, whose irreverent and satirical *Radio 1* show, *Steve Wright in the Afternoon*, was a monster hit from the early 1980s to the early 1990s—in other words, during the apotheosis of broadcast media dominance and just before cable, satellite, and then the internet started to nibble away at, but not completely consume, the casual assumption of a mass, unified, collective broadcast experience. Wright and his production team’s humor was a mainstay of British broadcast media culture for over a decade, though by the early-1990s there were many who thought that he and his “posse,” as he called them, were not particularly cool.

Wright left the BBC in 1993 but returned in 1999 to great fanfare, with a nostalgic

relaunch of the *Afternoon* format, only this time it was to be aired on BBC Radio 2, the more genteel, mainstream, and decidedly middle-aged, middle-of-the-road station where former Radio 1 DJs go when they are harshly deemed too old and unfashionable for Radio 1. In this still hugely successful show (Wright draws more than eight million weekly listeners), whose popularity itself reveals the continuing confidence and power of the BBC, there is one particular daily feature that speaks volumes about the colonization and boundary drawing strategies to which I refer. Alongside the inane snippets of information about what is going on “over on the front pages of the newspapers,” the latest developments “over in Hollywood” (Wright is fond of topographic turns of phrase); alongside the weird character voices, the celebrity promotional interviews, and the album-oriented rock oldies, every afternoon there is a 30-second segment of this three-hour long show, the absurdity of which should strike any scholar of digital media. I will call this the “over on social media” segment, because Wright introduces this daily offering with lines like: “Let’s see what’s going on over on social media,” or “Today, over on Facebook people are talking about...”, and so on.

Acting as if “social media” or “Facebook” are things akin to a unified broadcast radio “station” like his own *Radio 2*, Wright then proceeds to describe one or two things that some people who use Facebook or Twitter might be discussing that day. Consider the absurdity of this maneuver. The idea that there is a single, unified event or process about which we are expected to even agree is “going on over on social media” is a discursive shift, an act of linguistic power in which the one-to-many logics of broadcast media seek to tame and contain everything that is *social* about social media—the community-building, the interactivity, the DIY ethos, the gigantic, sprawling, decentralized and

diverse networks of networks of human expression that are the creation, partly, yes, of a small group of Silicon Valley software engineers, but more significantly, the 864 million individuals who use Facebook actively every day, and in their own way (Facebook, 2015). A social platform, environment, network, community—call it what you will, and think of it what you will—is here subject to an act of reductive essentialism that renders it categorized, managed, integrated.

And it's not just Wright. Over the last five years this discursive maneuver has grown in use and can now be seen at work across many different media genres, particularly news reporting, where phrases like “the reaction on social media was...” or “let's see what people on social media are saying” are now routinely mobilized in professionally produced news of all kinds. This can be a valuable way of providing a proxy for the public's reaction, but it is also a means of putting the internet in its place: an act of containment, of labelling, and of positioning in a hierarchy. The maneuver can be seen at work in political campaign back rooms, where the settled popularity of Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr has enabled campaign professionals to get to grips with something they can label, analyze, harvest, separate out but also integrate. And it is at work in the highest levels of government and the security services, where the term social media can be mobilized in attempts to legitimize mass surveillance of the seemingly ceaseless chaos of interactions that were once thought to be beyond the reach of regulation and control.

Reference

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