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Curators of databases: circulating images, managing attention and making value on social media

Abstract

This article examines the relationships between cultural spaces, the image-making practices of smartphone users, and social media platforms. I argue that social media platforms depend on the curatorial capacities of smartphone users who observe everyday life and register it online. Social media platforms use databases and analytics to continuously assemble identities, cultural practices and social spaces in relation to one another. In addition to targeted advertising value is created by leveraging a continuous circulation of meaning and attention. Using the example of a music festival, I examine how the production of value involves channelling the productive activity of smartphone users in material cultural spaces.

Introduction

In the space of a decade social media have emerged as a key technology for capturing and channelling human attention. Social media platforms bring together the mediation of everyday life with a technical apparatus that rationalises and valorises those communicative practices. They are a significant site in the development of a mode of media driven not only by ideological or representational forms of control, but also by the effort to manage participation and social space in order to harness and modulate an ongoing circulation of meaning, attention and data. Social media platforms are used to monitor and respond to populations as much as they are to persuade them with specific messages. In doing so, they enable open-ended and reflexive forms of value production to emerge. To conceptualise how social media platforms create value we need to examine how they are implicated in the construction of material cultural spaces and the management of the participation of users and cultural intermediaries.

Social media platforms are increasingly mobile and visual with flows of content being created using smartphones by users within their everyday life. In 2012 Facebook purchased Instagram for \$1 billion. Instagram is a mobile photo sharing app that at the time of purchase made no revenue. The purchase ensured that one of the largest flows of images of everyday life continued to move through Facebook's assembly of networks, databases and algorithms. Facebook acquired the attention and data that Instagram's flows of images generate and the

technology and design talent in photo-sharing and mobile apps in the company. The move was a both a defensive one aimed at preventing competitors from gaining control of the company and an investment in the potential value of mobile image sharing. By 2013 Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg claimed that Facebook and Instagram together dominated mobile attention. One in five minutes on a mobile device is spent on the platforms giving them 'more mobile time spent than any of the next largest services including YouTube, Pandora, Yahoo, Twitter, Pinterest, Tumblr, AOL, Snapchat and LinkedIn combined' (Ciaccia 2013). The effort of Facebook, Instagram and partnering brands and cultural producers to valorise this attention extends beyond established paid advertising models. Media organisations, cultural events and brands are developing ways to capture attention and create value on Instagram by using accounts, hashtags, cultural intermediaries and participants to locate themselves in flows of images related to cultural life.

Media industries have long relied on audiences' creative and communicative capacities to watch content and interpret, adapt and incorporate it into their social lives and identities. With interactive media this audience productivity is extended to the active creation and circulation of content and the generation of data by submitting to monitoring of their activities, social relationships and preferences. Critical and industry accounts of Facebook as a channel for marketing communication have predominantly focused on the social network's ability to provide marketers with free user-generated content and with detailed consumer data that allows them to target advertising to specific audiences. In these accounts Instagram is valuable because the platform provides Facebook with more attention to sell to advertisers and more data to refine the targeting of advertisements.

By focusing our attention on the circulation of images we can account for the management of participation and attention in the production of value on social media. Such an account necessarily goes beyond the simple critique that social media creates value only by collecting user data to target paid advertisements. In this article I propose that conceptualizing how value is made on social media involves examining how the analytic capacities of platforms are interrelated with the flows of images created by smartphone users within material cultural spaces. On the social and mobile web images are more than just representations of people, events and places. They also capture attention and generate data and networks. An image is a device that holds in place a network of associations and affects in time and place that can be tracked and responded to.

An individual within a cultural space, using a smartphone to create and circulate images through social media platforms is engaged in the productive activity of 'structuring feeling' (Hearn 2010). This activity involves the affective labour of structuring image-based relationships between people, places and practices. The analytics and algorithms of social media platforms depend on flows of data that reflect the ongoing relationships of everyday life. Those algorithms don't need to understand the content of human communication and relationships as much as they need to be able to predict and respond to them (Andrejevic 2013). The audience converts their affective judgments and understanding of the place of their identities in the social world into images and associated dispositions, expressions and connections that can be valorised. Containing and leveraging this communicative activity on social media platforms requires a combination of cultural and analytic strategies.

Flows of images and affinity

The circulation of images on social media platforms is organised by users and algorithms. Hashtags, tags, likes, comments and shares are 'manual' devices users employ to position images within a larger flow. Algorithms are 'automated' devices that determine how images circulate within a network based on a set of rules. Although those rules are 'invisible' to users, over time they intuitively learn how they work by observing the shape of flows of content through their network. Users often know that posting certain kinds of content at certain times or places will attain more or less interaction from peers in their network. Efforts users make to position content – for instance by tagging or liking an image – create data that algorithms use to manage the circulation of content in general by recognising patterns of interaction over time. Images on Instagram are organised by users who choose filters, attach hashtags, like or comment to attract attention. On Facebook images flow through the news feed. Considering that Facebook owns Instagram, and that many users circulate Instagram photos through their Facebook profile, I take these flows to be interrelated.

Facebook uses an algorithm to determine how content flows through the news feeds of users. The algorithm is constantly developing to take account of information generated by users. This information includes who they interact with, what kinds of content they engage with, together with the times, frequency and place of those interactions. The algorithm uses many data points to shape content flows in the network. Those data points are constantly emerging as the platform develops ways to increase user engagement. Facebook explain the algorithm prioritises the approximately twenty per cent of available content in a user's network to show in the news feed each day. Their testing of the algorithm shows that 'when we stop ranking and instead show posts in chronological order, the number of stories people read and the likes and

comments they make decrease' (Bakstrom 2013). The algorithm is central to the production of value because it is a device that manages the quantity and quality of attention Facebook captures.

Judgments about affinity are an important component of the algorithm. Affinity is a measure of the capacity of actors in the network to affect each other. It is a way of calculating how likely two users are to pay attention to each other. The algorithm doesn't 'understand' the meanings embedded in relationships of affinity, it is just able to recognise them being performed and then to predict them as they accumulate over time. Facebook's privacy policy is illustrative here, it explains that the platform will make suggestions to users by 'scanning and comparing' textual and visual content users (including brands) circulate and interact with. In late 2013 Facebook announced they had adapted the algorithm to favour 'high quality content' because that increases engagement (Kacholia and Ji 2013). This ongoing development of the algorithm is an example of the work of 'fine-tuning affectivity' (Packer 2013: 298). Social media platforms create value by capturing attention and channelling it for brands and cultural producers. The algorithms of social media aim to control human behaviour through 'constantly refining' the 'collecting, storing and processing of data' (Packer 2013: 298) to produce valuable formations of attention. The capacity of the algorithm is enhanced by the quality of data it has access to. The more integrated the production of data is with everyday life the more the algorithm can accommodate flows of content to specific times, places and relationships.

Using the example of a popular music festival, I briefly illustrate here how images work as a device for registering relationships and experiences from material cultural spaces on the databases of social media. This illustration is constructed from participant-observation at the festival over several years, interviews with festival-goers and analysis of flows of images online. I argue that the integration of smartphones into material cultural spaces is driven in part by the forms of attention cultural producers and brands seek on social media. Splendour in the Grass is a music and arts festival held in Byron Bay each year. The festival features music performances by international acts and an extensive arts program. Festival goers use their smartphones to capture images of themselves, their peers, and the performances of musicians, artists and brands. As they capture the images they use filters, hashtags and tags to position them within a flow of content produced by the festival, partnering brands, and their peers. Following the 2013 festival there were over 40 000 images on Instagram tagged with Splendour related hashtags like #splendourinthegrass, #splendourbender, and #splendourstyle. Considering that most images are not tagged or are circulated via private Facebook profiles or Instagram accounts, the images tagged on these hashtags are just a small selection of the many more images circulated

through the platforms portraying the Splendour experience. These images create extensive links between users' social networks, the festival and partnering brands.

The experience of a music festival is affective and embodied. While part of the audience's activity is directed toward conscious judgments of taste like what they wear, what band they like, or whether a performance is good or bad; much of the experience is about how the festival feels. The event is experienced via each festival goer's capacity to give and get attention within the cacophony of bodies and performances taking place. Using smartphones and mobile apps like Instagram festival goers 'register' their positions within the festival's networks of affect. The flow of images related to the festival can be understood in terms of the networks of attention and data they produce. Within the festival site audience members undertake the relational work of attracting and channelling attention through social media platforms. While Splendour don't direct any of this image-making, they do establish the cultural and spatial coordinates within which it takes place. Through the flow of images festival goers reproduce the cultural schema of the festival and represent their own identities as part of it. Scrolling through the images produced by festival goers, professional photographers, style hunters, celebrities and brands at the festival reveals a repetitive performance of aesthetics, mood and disposition.

At Splendour, partnering brands build large themed activations where they attract festival attendees to drink, dance, socialise, take photos and circulate them online. For instance, Smirnoff built a large multi-level cocktail bar where artists painted murals on the walls throughout the festival weekend. The brands' installations are integrated with the aesthetics, experiences and mood of the festival. Festival goers engage with the spaces as part of their movement through an experience comprised of affective engagement with each other, mood-altering substances, and music and arts performances. The brand activations become part of the atmospherics and memories of the festival and are incorporated in the flow of images made by festival goers. The brands encourage fans to use specific hashtags, capture the branded space in their images, and like and tag branded images as they circulate in their networks. These activities embed the brand within the flows of images online. The festival assembles a productive audience, cultural resources, and brand activations within a purpose-built social space. Social media platforms enable cultural events like Splendour to leverage the productive activity of their audience by selling space and attention on the festival site.

Using Splendour here as a brief example we can trace a sequence of events organised around watching practices and the production and circulation of images. Audience members watch each other and the performances within the festival. These practices of watching are converted into

media texts using smartphones. To create an image using a smartphone festival goers depend on their capacity to observe, judge and affect one another. After capturing the image, they crop it and add filters that articulate its mood, and they log hashtags and tags that position it within social networks online. They watch the flow of images they contribute to, adding information to them in the form of likes, shares and comments. For instance, as they tag each other in images those images act as a device linking people together in time and place. Facebook's algorithms may even be able to automatically recognise faces, or even brand logos, within the images. These practices create valuable attention and data, but they begin in the first instance with the festival goer acting as a kind of curator who discerns, captures and adds detail to the texts that flow through social media. Smartphone users are cultural analysts who judge, link and position content in relation to places, people, and practices. Their everyday use of the smartphone helps to 'clean up' and rationalise the information in the databases of social media. The judgements social media algorithms make about affinity are based on this affective labour the audience undertakes with their smartphone. The audience are the first coders of the database, coding relationships of affect into social media's networks of affinity. The forms of purposive watching and surveillance social media develop depend in the first instance on this assembly of watching practices embedded in everyday life and cultural space.

Splendour constructs the material space containing cultural experiences and resources that festival goers curate and structure as flows of images on social media. The images that emanate from the festival are particularly valuable because they are carefully organised as part of users' ongoing construction of identity. The relationship between data collection and targeted advertising is not sufficient for accounting for social media's role in the production of value for cultural products and partnering brands. While a brand could partner with a social media platform like Facebook to target advertisements at users who posted images or content relating to a music festival, social media platforms also play a role in the production of value by influencing how brands engage with cultural space. By being present at a cultural event where consumers create images and position them in their social networks brands get caught up in the relationships of attention brokered by images and associated hashtags, tags, likes, comments, shares and algorithms.

Curators of databases

As participants use social media to curate everyday life they contribute to a process of analysis that is cumulative across their individual life and the populations of which they are a part. As they observe, classify, and sort flows of images they register information about their present life and the lives people like them are likely to lead. At present social media has up to a decade of

data about participants' lives. Media and communication researchers need to account for how this system will be able to operate as it accumulates data about the rhythms of everyday life, cultural practices and identities over the course of a lifespan. The more participants sort and classify, the more networks can determine how to position them within flows of images. The more effort participants make in the present to represent themselves online, the less control they may have in the future over the representational process they use to make sense of their world.

This assembly of media technologies is distinctive not only for the way it uses public social space, but also for the way social interactions and messages are contained within niche social networks. These flows of images are difficult to observe and account for as part of public processes of deliberation and understanding. We can't see algorithms that organise networks and shape flows of content, although we can sense and respond to some of their effects from our own position in the network. Each user is positioned at a different vantage point in flows of content with access to a different array of public and private content. Each of those different vantage points is created out of a unique combination of analytics, user inputs, and location in cultural space and time. Analysis of the collection of data for the targeting of advertisements and the ideological content of brand messages does not entirely account for how social media platforms make value. Media and communication researchers need to account for how social media manages and structures attention, participation and material space. The critical task is to examine how the analytic capacity of platforms is interdependent with stimulating users to observe, classify and curate. We need to be cautious about taking the content on social media to be broadly reflective of social life without also considering how that content is produced by assembling relationships between platform analytics, the everyday identity-making activities of users and the construction and management of social space. Social media creates value by assembling a range of technical, spatial and cultural technologies to shape flows of content that manage populations, harness attention and create value.

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