Chapter 7
Social Networking Sites and Complex Technology Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNS) are integrated world wide web-based information, communication and community platforms that allow the creation of personal profiles, the upload and sharing of multimedia data, networking with other users with the help of “friends lists”, communication by tools such as e-mail, guest books, or forums. SNS combine a number of Internet technologies on one platform and are among the most popular Internet and web applications. Young people especially use them, which is why it is important to assess the implications of SNS usage by young people for society. In this paper, foundations of complex and dialectical SNS technology assessment are elaborated by introducing three different approaches of technology assessment: 1) technological determinism; 2) the social construction of technology; and 3) complex dialectical technology assessment. It is argued that technology assessment should be conceived as complex and dialectical and that it should try to identify contradictions of technology and society. An empirical study of SNS usage is presented as an example of complex, dialectical technology assessment.

INTRODUCTION

Technology assessment employs social theory, social research, and ethics for assessing the impacts that specific technologies have on society. The purpose of this paper is to distinguish various causal logics of technology assessment, to introduce the approach of complex dialectical technology assessment and to apply this approach to the realm of social networking sites.

Social networking sites (SNS) are integrated world wide web-based information, communication, and community platforms that allow the creation of personal profiles, the upload and sharing of multimedia data, networking with other users with the help of “friends lists”, communication by tools such as e-mail, guest books, or forums.
SNS combine a number of Internet technologies on one platform. In the list of the 100 most accessed web platforms, one finds the following SNS: Facebook (#2), Myspace (#12), VKontakte (#35), LinkedIn (#37), Orkut (#49), hi5 (#52), Kaixin001 (#54), Orkut.com (#63), Orkut India (#74), LiveJournal (#80), Mixi (#86), Renren (#92), Odoklassniki (#95)\(^1\). These data show that SNS are among the most popular web applications. It is therefore important to assess how the usage of SNS changes society. Technology assessment should be addressed by SNS research. However, depending on which approach of technology assessment one chooses, there will be a different assessment. It is therefore crucial to be aware of the different forms of technology assessment when assessing the impacts of SNS. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to grounding foundations of technology assessment in respect to SNS and young people.

Most SNS are commercial and profit-oriented. For accumulating capital, they use targeted advertising. They sell the users, their usage behaviour, and information about their uploaded data as a commodity to advertising clients that target users with individualized advertising messages that reflect the users’ behaviour and interests. Capital accumulation on SNS is based on permanent surveillance of personal data and personal user behaviour. SNS are not only capital accumulation machines, but also surveillance machines (Fuchs, 2009b). They are based on the principle of the prosumer/produsage commodity (Fuchs, 2008, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c) – users generate, upload and share content and personal information that is commodified by targeted advertising: advertising clients pay for getting access to this information in order to be enabled to target users with personalized advertising. The users and their data become commodified. For doing so, legal frameworks are needed that are formulated in the terms of use and privacy policies of SNS.

For example Facebook, the leading SNS, guarantees the legal use of targeted advertising on the site with the help of the following passage in the privacy policy:

4. How We Use Your Information […] to serve personalized advertising to you. We don’t share your information with advertisers without your consent. (An example of consent would be if you asked us to provide your shipping address to an advertiser to receive a free sample.) We allow advertisers to choose the characteristics of users who will see their advertisements and we may use any of the non-personally identifiable attributes we have collected (including information you may have decided not to show to other users, such as your birth year or other sensitive personal information or preferences) to select the appropriate audience for those advertisements. For example, we might use your interest in soccer to show you ads for soccer equipment, but we do not tell the soccer equipment company who you are. (Facebook Privacy Policy, version from December 9th, 2009; accessed on December 16th, 2009).

This example shows that surveillance on SNS is a particularly important topic. I will show in section 3, how users assess surveillance on SNS.

2% of the US Facebook users are aged 3-12, 20% 13-17, and 45% 18-34. 1% of MySpace users are aged 3-12, 14% 13-17, and 58% 18-34\(^2\). This means that 67% of the US Facebook users and 73% of the MySpace users are less than 35 years old, although only 47.6% of the total US population can be found in the same age range\(^3\). Young people are the main user group of SNS. It is therefore especially interesting to study their usage behaviour and attitudes towards SNS as well as the implications for society. Young people are new media “innovators” and “early adopters”, who are “active information seekers about new ideas”, have “a high degree of mass media exposure”,
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