The Democratizing Potential of an Online Leisure Space: Facebook and Critical Thought

Callie Spencer, Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA

Jeff Rose, Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA

ABSTRACT

Critical theorists have long examined cultural processes and their often deleterious effects on social and political movements. Using Kracauer’s mass ornament and Bourdieu’s construct of habitus, this study empirically investigates political participation and e-mobilization of civil society in the United States’ “democratic” regime. Through examining the popular social media application, Facebook, the authors sought to understand political participation and responses to a series of sociopolitical events over one month. Analyses explored the nature of the Facebook posts, evidence for various power inequalities, and the nature of political spaces created by Facebook users. Despite Facebook’s potential to be a social leveler and organizational tool for Hardt and Negri’s multitude, the authors’ analyses left them less than hopeful about the mobilizing potential of Facebook use in the United States. They outline cultural constraints inhibiting such political participation and point toward the possibilities of a more socially and politically active social media landscape.

Keywords: Habitus, Leisure, Mass Ornament, Multitude, Politics, Qualitative, Resistance

INTRODUCTION

A quick online search using the keywords “Facebook” and “democracy” returns 287,000,000 hits, in .15 seconds as Google proudly reports. Facebook’s use as a tool for democracy is not a topic that is rarely discussed; rather, it is hotly debated. Browsing through the first five pages of results, the majority of the discussion portrays Facebook as a “democratizing” space, with authors excitedly espousing the potential of Facebook as a tool for democracy. Gleaned from the titles of the search results, Facebook can be seen as “Democracy 2.0,” can “spark revolutions,” is the “best hope for democracy” in Singapore, Malaysia, and Iran, is “surrogate democracy,” “spurs democracy,” and we might be in the “dawn of a Facebook democracy.”

Examining recent press that Facebook has received, especially in regards to the “Arab Spring,” it is easy to see how one can positively construe Facebook as a revolutionary tool for democracy. In late 2010, what became known as the “Arab Spring” began as protestors in...
Tunisia spoke out against civil injustice as well as police and governmental corruption. This action instigated a widespread trans-national series of protests in several Northern African and Middle Eastern countries resulting in governments in Yemen, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia being overthrown. Facebook was doted on as being one of the main tools used to communicate, organize, and generally inform the public about the status of the uprisings.

In light of the Arab Spring and the Google search results, this debate seems to have more people on the affirmative side, seeing Facebook’s positive and democratizing potential. Facebook is not, however, without its critics. Critiquing the unprecedented conflation of corporate and public space occurring in Facebook post-IPO release, Coll (2012) states:

> Facebook’s huge valuation now puts pressure on the company’s strategists to increase its revenue-per-user. That means more ads, more data mining, and more creative thinking about new ways to commercialize the personal, cultural, political, and even revolutionary activity of users. There is something vaguely dystopian about oppressed peoples in Syria or Iran seeking dignity and liberation inside a corporate sovereign that is, for its part, creating great wealth for its founders and asserting control over its users. (p.1)

In this paper, we contend that Facebook is a contemporary example of Kracauer’s (1995) mass ornament, falling short of its democracy-promoting potential. Understanding the depth and complexity of mass ornaments illuminates critical analyses of sociopolitical conditions, as well as provides a platform for addressing Facebook’s larger potential for aiding in social justice movements throughout the world. A subjective reading of Facebook might enable a deciphering of the sorts of subjectivities that are both possible and foreclosed upon through Facebook’s *habitus*.

### Facebook as Kracauer’s “Mass Ornament”

1. Today’s schedule...at Blue Ridge Coll... most of today, had appt with student counselor at Blue Ridge at 1 om, have another meeting tonight at Our Community Place(not sure if going). I am tired and probrrly go home and sleep;
2. Back in Welland and in one piece:) I even managed to eat a danish today haha;
3. It HAPPENED !! IT FINALLY HAPPENED ......!!!!!!! I wanted to to wikipedia but my hands typed Facebook !!!:O:OBottom of Form;
4. It’s pretty tempting to get NFL Sunday ticket on my PS3 but DAMN that’s a high price tag;
5. Ok. I’m ready to go home now so time please speed up to quitting hour and slow down once you get there.

Thursday, September 22, 2011 at 12:35pm

I (Callie) logged onto my Facebook account, where I was greeted as usual with my “homepage” streaming “newsfeed” updates about my “friends.” Above are the first five “status updates” copied verbatim. At first glance, judging from the spelling errors, one might conclude that my Facebook friends are not very intelligent people. However, we contend that there is much more to be understood (other than gauging intelligence) about the Net Generation, the largest contingent of Facebook users, through a reading of their posts on Facebook. Kracauer (1995) argues that “the fundamental substance of an epoch and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally” (p. 75). These unheeded impulses, or “surface-level expressions” as he terms them, emanate from a spectacle that he calls “the mass ornament.” It is through the study of the mass ornament, specifically surface-level expressions, in which Kracauer believes that one can gain “unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state.
The Usability of Social Software
www.igi-global.com/chapter/usability-social-software/39794?camid=4v1a