Social media and the McDonaldization of friendship

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Abstract: This article employs the concept of McDonaldization introduced by George Ritzer in 1993 in his Weberian analysis of the processes of formal rationalization characteristic of late modern consumer society to reflect on the social and cultural implications of the most recent wave of communication technologies – social media. It argues that social media smuggle formal rationality into the elementary forms of social interaction, most clearly illustrated through the way they redefine the notion of friendship. In an attempt to lay the ground for a "multiperspectivist approach" (Kellner, 1999) to this phenomenon, the article enters the Weberian argument into a conversation with other styles of theorizing social media such as Marxism, Critical Theory and sociological phenomenology.

Key words: social media, McDonaldization, formal rationality, friendship, social interaction

Brief Retrospection: The Ethics and Poetics of Friendship

I have to admit I put the word "friendship" in my title as a bit of bait. It is sure to attract readership. We all long for friendship. We hurt for friendship; we worry about the fate of friendship in our technology-saturated world. But rest assured - my title is not a marketing ploy. I take friendship very seriously. Thus, I will invite an array of social theories and theorists to engage with the issues of friendship that emerge in the context of social media – a new, bustling and yet insufficiently understood site on which our quest for friendship unfolds these days.

Needless to say, friendship is a highly contested notion. It is contested on grounds of linguistic, cultural and ideological differences. In her book "Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language" Eva Hoffman recounts her linguistic experience as an immigrant to Canada. Hoffman writes that when they needed to translate their lives into a new language, English, her Polish-Jewish parents stubbornly insisted on referring to people they just knew as "acquaintances," and only called "friends" their closest and tested relations. More than once I have had a similar resistance reading about the results of studies on making friends on the Internet. Survey questionnaires often ask international samples of respondents to indicate how many new friends they have made online. "But what do you mean by friends? I would wonder. What would a Brazilian respondent have in mind when he or she answers this question? How about a Polish-Jewish one?"

Friendship has been an object of philosophical reflection since the dawn of civilization. Aristotle distinguished between utilitarian, hedonistic and ethical friendship. For him, perfect friendship was the latter type, in which people bonded on the basis of their characters and moral values and wanted what is good for each other. A genuine friend is someone who loves or likes another person for the sake of that other person. Wanting what is good for the sake of another he calls "good will" (eunoia), and friendship is reciprocal good will, provided that each recognizes the presence of this attitude in the other. Aristotle made it clear that the number of people with whom one can sustain the kind of relationship he calls a perfect friendship is small. He believed that this kind of friendship could exist only when one spent a lot of time with the other person, participating in joint activities and engaging in mutually beneficial behavior (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Centuries later, Antoan de Saint Exupery tries to convey a similar understanding of the special quality of friendship to a visitor from another planet through the following dialogue between his characters the Little Prince and fox. The Little Prince asks fox to play with him and fox replies he cannot, because he is not tamed:

> "I am looking for friends. What does that mean -- tame?"
> "It is an act too often neglected," said the fox. "It means to establish ties."
> "To establish ties?"
> "Just that," said the fox. "To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world...."
> "People have forgotten this truth," the fox said. "But you mustn't forget it. You become responsible forever for what you've tamed…"
> Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, 1943

Nowadays, friendship is questioned and contested on new grounds– technological ones. We have many new words for friendship that make our search for it even more confusing: strong and weak ties, social networks, social capital, to name just a few. We have a verb for it too – friending. That is something that our new media technologies allow us to do. Friending today is a "socio-technical practice" that involves creating a profile on a social networking platform and then extending an invitation to another profile to

become your friend. The patient work of taming and the uniqueness of the figure of the friend as per Saint-Exupéry have been swept aside and replaced by a brief sequence of clicks and a multiplicity of post-stamp images staring and smiling at us from the computer screen. This is a far cry from the unique rose that a little prince painstakingly tames - waters and protects from the caterpillars. This is much more like the rose garden, or rose farm, with its multiple roses to which the prince famously says: "You're beautiful, but you're empty...One couldn't die for you" (Saint-Exupéry, 1943).

Not surprisingly, we find ourselves amidst a storm of laud and lament surrounding social media and all the new socio-technical practices they give rise to, friending being one of them. I am not prepared to full-heartedly join any one of these choirs. Instead, I have chosen to take the evocative notion of friendship as my entry point for an exploration of the social world that we inhabit as more or less avid users of social media. In this exploration I will summon the tools and troops of different theoretical schools to tackle the problem at hand. In my endeavour, I steer away from the realm of romantic fiction and toward the drier ground of social science. The Little Prince will still be there, in the back seat but – may be to his horror – I will now drive by McDonald's to grab some fodder for my analytical mill. In the following section, I will present briefly George Ritzer's (1993) theory of McDonaldization with its six defining principles: (1) efficiency; (2) quantifiability (or) calculability; (3) predictability; (4) control; (5) replacement of human technology with non-human technology; (6) tendency to produce irrational consequences. Next, I will test the organization and workings of social media platforms against each of these principles. Reaching beyond the premises of McDonald's and McDonaldization, I will then go on to inquire into the sources and implications of the practices supported by social media platforms through other theoretical lenses, namely critical theory and sociological phenomenology, hoping to achieve a "multiperspectivist" (Kellner, 1999) understanding of the transformation of friendship as a concept and a social relation.

McDonaldization – the Pervasive Rationalization of Late Modern Society

The McDonaldization of society is a thesis proposed by American sociologist George Ritzer (1993) as an update and extension of Max Weber's rationalization theory. Ritzer follows Weber in highlighting formal rationality as the dominant mode of organization of modern, and by extension, late modern society. The main difference between Weber's time and ours, Ritzer claims, is that whereas administrative bureaucracy was the pivotal manifestation of formal rationality in early modernity, nowadays formal

rationality has taken over many other sectors of society deeply penetrating into our essential daily activities. Thus, Ritzer argues, at present we can find the paradigmatic case of formal rationalization in the fast food restaurant: "Max Weber was right about the inexorable march of formal rationality but … his paradigm case of that type of rationality and the spearhead in its expansion, the bureaucracy, have been superseded in contemporary American society by the fast-food restaurant." (Ritzer, 2007, p. 45).

Walking through McDonald's doors, customers step into its meal-making machine operating on the six principles identified by Weber as the main pillars of rationalization: efficiency – seeking to find the most direct means to a given end; quantifiability (or), calculability - prioritizing elements that can be counted and quantified; predictability, making sure that things operate in the same way across contexts; maximizing control over uncertainties, especially uncertainties stemming from the idiosyncrasies of human beings; replacement of human technology with non-human technology; and finally, the tendency to produce a series of irrational consequences. (see Ritzer, 2007)

Pursuing *efficiency*, McDonald's eliminates cooks, waiters and cleaners by offloading the work previously done by them on consumers. At McDonald's we carry our own tray, apply our own condiments, clean up after our meal thus saving the company the salaries of the workers who could have done all these things for us while receiving a slight price reduction as our part of the deal . But McDonald's is far from being a pioneer or a lone user of this strategy. Self-service arrangements came about with ATMs, gas station pumps, super markets and many other places that force the consumer to do unpaid work in lieu of paid employees. Should it come as a big surprise that the media industry has followed suit by inventing reality tv formats where members of the audience are drawn as a low-paid work force to fill in for expensive writers and performers? Ultimately, the self-service paradigm has established itself in the form of the much famed user-generated content stuffing the empty templates offered by blogging platforms, video- and photo-sharing sites, and ultimately, social networking sites.

Quantification and calculability in McDonald's and throughout the fast food industry is expressed through the heavy emphasis on quantity over quality captured in the labels of signature products: Big Mac; "Triple Whopper," "Biggies," "Super Big Gulp." Quantification too has been creeping across modern society and culture and no area of social relations has remained immune to it (Sandel, M., 2012).

Predictability in McDonald's is equivalent to uniformity – across their burgers, the interior design and organization of their restaurants, the format of their menus, the uniforms of their employees. Entering a McDonald's restaurant we know where to look, what to order, what to expect. This offers convenience and a sense of security.

Predictability cannot be sustained without *control* over deviant behaviour. McDonald's exercises control through means such as surveillance designs that steer both employees and customers into performing desired activities in desired ways. The *replacement of people by non-human technologies* is one of the most effective mechanisms for strengthening control because humans with their personal interests, interpretations, preferences and whims have proven to be the most unpredictable factor, the weakest link in the chain of efficiency, productivity and profit constituting the backbone of McDonaldization. Seen from a broader perspective, McDonaldization represents a perfect illustration of the "control revolution" spreading from the sphere of production into that of consumption by means of technologies and techniques that steer streams of customers and their habits and wants (Beniger, 1986).

The final characteristic of formal rationality that Ritzer discusses, once again based on Weber, are the *irrational consequences* that it often brings about. War, environmental and social disasters are common results when the principles of efficiency, quantification, etc. are pushed to the extreme. In the McDonald's case, the irrational consequences of maximum efficiency are the wide-spread obesity and poor health among the loyal customers of the chain. More generally, Ritzer argues that formal-rational systems are "unreasonable" systems because they deny the basic humanity of the people who work within or are served by them. "Although in other contexts rationality and reason are often used interchangeably, here they are employed to mean antithetical phenomena" (Ritzer, 2007, p. 56)

Social Media and McDonaldization

I will now return to the main object of my analysis, social media. I will argue that social media present us with a disturbing example of the relentless march of McDonaldization through domains of the social and cultural world stretching beyond production and consumption and reaching into the subtle workings of sociality and subjectivity. Social media achieve an unprecedented degree of *efficiency* by making users the producers of the content published on their sites. This phenomenon has been celebrated as

"produsage" (Bruns, 2008), and "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2006). It has been argued that social media have opened up an exciting terrain for user creativity where everyone can be an author, follower, fan, and critic vis-à-vis anybody else; and move between these roles fluently. This is of course great news, yet at the same time produsage is quite clearly the latest twist in the same self-service movement that made everyone simultaneously a customer, a cook, a bartender, a cashier and a cleaner in McDonald's restaurants. Efficiency marches further with the success of communication formats that reduce expression to a fixed number of characters. Our textual burgers contain only a few and basic ingredients. Twitter gives us the benefits of purging all words that do not represent the most direct means to an end. Facebook, conveniently serves us with a button to register our "likes" thus saving us the need to expend time and imagination on crafting an approving comment.

Secondly, let us consider the element of *quantification and calculability* present in social media. Utilitarian friendship has always existed and hence the number and social standing of our friends has always been a matter of importance. Never before, however, has the impulse to quantify and calculate social relations been as powerful as it is in the age of social media. It is evident in the rampant desire to amass friends; in the obsessive counting of hits, followers and likes. In interviews with bloggers carried out in Calgary, Canada between 2007-2008, Georgia Gaden and I noticed that even those bloggers who stated that their blog was intended to be read exclusively by family and friends had installed hit counters. Reflecting on their writing practices, some of the bloggers admitted that they tended to change the content they put out depending on what was being read or "hit" the most. "I have become such a stats whore!" – one of them exclaimed thus capturing the calculative spirit permeating blogging even at that early stage (Bakardjieva & Gaden, 2012). Later on, the success of blogging, as Gaden's work indicates, came to be measured in the revenue generated through advertising and other forms of monetization such as reviewing products, using affiliate links, and acting as brand ambassadors (Gaden Jones, 2012). Already by 2009, 70 percent of bloggers said they were blogging for brands and corporate blogs dominated the blogosphere (Dean, 2010).

Numbers loomed large in a different way in our focus group discussions with Facebook users in approximately the same period (2008-2009). Respondents reported the rush to accumulate friends and to compete with others as to how many friends each had. A young woman associated the urge to build massive friend collections with the collections of stamps and Pokemon cards at which she and her brother

tried to outdo one another when they were kids. Respondents also spoke of the puzzlement as to how to handle and navigate the resultant collections, which could be easily seen as "friend farms." The running of these farms necessitated practices akin to scientific management, or bureaucratic administration, or to paraphrase Mitt Romney's unfortunate expression, they demanded that "friends be put in folders" and every folder had to be assigned its requisite privacy settings, attention level and "grooming" effort. Pushing further afield in the direction of economic rationality, both analysts and users adopted the notion of "social capital" as a key to understanding the utility of social networking online.

As Ellison et al. (2007) summarize: "Social capital broadly refers to the resources accumulated through the relationships among people" (p. 1145). As such, the notion is open to both academic and lay-person interpretation, and is being used in many different senses and contexts. At the same time, it retains the quantitative and calculable dimensions at its core – the capacity of capital to be accumulated, maintained, increased or expended – across contexts and applications. Perceived as a source of social capital, friendship becomes a matter-of-fact and a matter of calculation. The accumulation of social capital thus becomes the dominant preoccupation and ideology of social-media-supported interactions. The logic of economic efficiency, the measure of market success sneaks into the heart of social relations and evicts their ethical meaning (see also Dahlgren, 2014, Somers, 2008).

The quantification and calculation tendencies that swept over rank-and-file users are, of course, only ripples compared to the tidal wave of "big data" that splashed into the databases of social networking sites and service providers. The mind-boggling quantities of figures indicating socio-demographic positions, age, weight, consumer preferences, ideological beliefs, spending habits, interpersonal affiliations, etc. turned into the industry's most important staple (Gehl, 2014). That is where social data began to transform into real economic capital. When adequate approaches for churning these figures and translating them into consumer profiles and finely personalized advertising messages started to emerge, the quantity was sure to transform into quality – a level of control over consumer choices and behavior previously unimagined.

Control (and respectively, power) in social media has numerous, both blatant and capillary, manifestations. Control in this environment stems from different centres and takes various forms. Control could involve the muscular or gentle moulding of user behaviour, the content users produce and consume

as well as choices they make concerning offline objects, subjects and activities. One cannot sign in on Facebook if he or she does not provide a valid e-mail address; does not fill out the required registration information, or does not accept the terms and conditions of service (the EUA). One is forbidden from holding more than one account and is encouraged to create a profile following a script of established categories. Beyond these obvious, but taken for granted, pushes and shoves, Jose van Dijck (2013) describes how opaque algorithms shape users' experience on Facebook. Through a set of proprietary ranking algorithms Facebook's platform automatically determines the value and importance of our friends and exhibits content originating from them more or less prominently thus controlling the visibility of their news items and ideas. Algorithms identify people whom we may know and may be interested in befriending and serve their names to us without us asking. This adds up to what van Dijck calls "programmed sociality," or "platformed sociality" where our kind big brother Mark Zuckerberg becomes a key social broker who knows what is good for us, introduces us to the right people and teaches us the right moves in interacting with them. To ensure that we behave, the right moves lie ready at hand encoded in intuitive interfaces that can be activated by a simple twist of the wrist.

Opaque algorithms and business agreements bring to the action third-party players who base their decisions on what products to advertise on our Facebook pages on the intricate knowledge of who we are, who we associate with and our past behaviour, carefully accumulated, sorted out and projected into the future. Thus we find our Facebook profile page populated with our friends' images, pronouncements, witty snippets and exclamations, all impishly mixed up with rider boots, cruise ships, designer clothes, eye-glass frames – you name it. In fact we have named it, directly or not – at some point in the recent past and Facebook is happy to oblige.

Control has another side that deserves to be acknowledged, one related to users' own practical rationally in managing their social affairs. Social media enable users to present a public profile that they can carefully control choosing what aspects of their lives and characters to put on display (in Goffman's terms, to do rational face work). The interface of social networking sites like Facebook can support users in making reflexive and rational observations and choices related to the organization and conduct of their social life. Having control over the range, rhythm and content of one's interactions, feels very much like personal empowerment, however, it is infinitely weaker compared to the control lying at the hands of corporate players - platform providers and authorized third parties - that have the power to determine the

look, shape and feel of the environment in which these interactions take place. In the 1980s, Langdon Winner (1986) expressed scepticism about the degree of personal empowerment allegedly stemming from the use of personal computers. He compared it to a person flying a hang glider in the face of the US Air Force. This metaphor rings true again when comparing the control and power waged by social media platform providers to that of users. Secondly, the personal control exerted by the means and rules of Facebook and other social media platforms requires that users buy into the ideology of rationalization and instrumentalization of both personality and friendship. As such, it involves reduction, impoverishment and ultimately dehumanization. You maintain folders full of friends, but you would not die for them, and they would not die for you. Even if we do not raise the bar as high as dying, and if we leave the aspirations for perfect friendship aside, the role of this "social capital" in times of real need, distress or hardship is yet to be established. The nutritional value of the fast friendship supported by social media in fact may not exceed that of a Big Mac.

One may expect that in this jolly carrousel of friends and products flying round and round there is little *predictability*, but that would be wrong. The features our friends put to the fore fall into the same categories. They appear in the same places and are often presented in a similar fashion. The acts and gestures our friends extend to us are also easy to predict. After all, they are encoded in the available interface features as discussed above. We can safely expect that our friends will shower us with happy stories and reflections, will recommend places to go and things to buy; and most certainly they (or at least a solid number of them) will "like" what we have had to share.

In their push to ensure predictability and convenience, platforms providers have worked hard to *replace human actions by non-human technology*. They have, effectively coded common social acts into proprietary algorithms and in the process have, inevitably, reduced and standardized them. Formerly casual, and hence diverse and unpredictable, speech acts have been turned into "formalized inscriptions" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 7) which flow across persons and social situations.

 In fact, the rationalization of interactions and relationships on social media has extended so far that it has become possible to replace human friends with software robots, also known as "socialbots." A few examples from the computer science literature should demonstrate how that works, and what makes it possible. Two engineers (@tinypirate and @AeroFade, 2012) describe their approach in creating an

effective Twitter bot that has managed to infiltrate a social network of Twitter users and to re-shape its structure thus: The socialbot named James M. Titus was an account on Twitter that was designed to pass itself for a human user. To effectively imitate a real person, James automatically posted cute cat photos "scraped from Flickr" (p. 41) on his "own" blog Kitteh Fashun. Thus some of the essential persona markers the platform and its users recognize were put in place. On Twitter to be someone means to have followers. So, James M. Titus was supplied with a number of bot-friends that followed it along. At the same time, these bots followed some of the target users trying to weave them all into a web of mutual followship centered on James. To look real and socially engaging, every couple of hours James tweeted "vague rants and random notes on his day" (p. 41) selected from a list the design team had generated.

When a target user addressed James personally, he would send back "a random generic response, such as "right on baby!", "lolariffic," "sweet as," or "hahahahah are you kidding me?" As the designers of the experiment suggest: "We believe that the very short messages allowed on Twitter enable many bot-like behaviors to be easily masked or explained away by the targets interacting with James" (p. 41). This is another way of saying that many acts of human behavior on Twitter are so bot-like (programmed, reductive, controlled, predictable) that the socialbot has no trouble blending seamlessly into the stream of "platformed sociality" generated by such behavior.   With the help of James, the designers achieved their goal to reshape the social graph of the network comprising 500 target users. Users who had not shared connections previously became part of Titus' host of followers. Extrapolating from this experiment, the designers conclude that in the future, strategically deployed socialbots could "subtly shape and influence targets across much larger user networks" (p. 41) as well as shape group consensus in a particular direction.

Socialbot infiltration of Facebook has also proven to be possible and effective. Boschmaf et al. (2011), have shown that putting together fake accounts complete with e-mails, pictures and relationship histories is not an insurmountable task provided the vast resources of the Web. In their experiment designed to infiltrate Facebook with believable robotic entities, the team created what they call a bot-net, a group of interconnected socialbots. To make their robo-users not only beievable, but also attractive, the designers supplied them with pictures gleaned from the site *hotornot.com* where human users post their photos to be rated for hotness. The programming of the socialbots was based on a meticulous break down of the typical actions of human users supported by the platform. They included sending or accepting connection

requests, writing on a friend's wall, and collecting personal information from befriended users. Thus, thanks to the highly structured and standardised nature of user profiles and activities performed on Facebook, the research team was able to replace humans by non-human technological entities that mimicked human user behaviour reasonably closely. These non-humans registered remarkable success in being accepted as friends in real users' social networks. Over seven weeks, 25 socialbots scored 19.3 percent acceptance among the 5,000 randomly selected users they contacted with friend requests. Later on, using the triadic closure principle, the bots went on to invite the friends of their human friends and reached an average acceptance rate of 59.1 percent.

The goals of experiments like that are related to testing and increasing platform security. However, other studies show that there is already an emerging black market for socialbot accounts, and that these accounts are used for a variety of manipulative purposes from marketing to political astroturfing. Thus, a new form of insidious control can be seen looming on social media, one that, threatens to turn friendship into a servant of big-brotherhood.

Critical Theory and Social Media

My analysis so far has relied exclusively on Ritzer's contemporary rendering of Weber's rationalization theory. Other critical accounts have mobilized the analytical tools offered by an array of schools of thought, from Marxist political economy, through the Frankfurt School to Italian Autonomism, and poststructralism to show that users' online activities have been hijacked by monetization, capitalist profit and exploitation. The encroachment of formal rationality complete with proprietary enclosure of formerly free, spontaneous human interaction into privately owned and managed social media platforms, leads to the profound commodification of identity and sociality. Content generated online – from the creative work of art to the trivial comment on a friend's post - emerges from the "free labour" of users, which according to (Terranova, 2004) is freely given and shamelessly exploited. Robert Gehl (2014), has argued that one of the factors for Facebook's success was the methodical development of features and algorithms that disciplined users' behaviour and channeled it into the profiling standards employed by the marketing industry. Facebook imposed on users a regime of self-presentation and social interaction that made it easier to collect from them precisely the information that marketers wanted most. That is where Gehl finds the explanation of Facebook's triumph over a platform such as MySpace which allowed much freer

(less-structured) and wilder user expression and creativity. Thus users' self-presentations and interactions online have become a reservoir of information about habits, preferences, fears and desires that are data-mined and sold to marketers and advertisers. The audience-commodity (Smythe, 1994) has transformed into user-commodity. The burgers are actually us. Our sacred feelings and longings are packaged into profiles and sold to the highest bidder. The pauses in our intimate exchanges online are rented out as real estate to companies seeking to push their products on us. Our friendships are also commercially exploited in at least two ways: they are used to construct a map of affiliations in order to position us more accurately in the pool of people "like us" and they are mobilized as a chain of influence where we (through our choices and endorsements) become unpaid advertising agents vis-à-vis our social contacts. Friendship online becomes hard to distinguish from product peddling. Social networking overlaps with network marketing.

The pervasive profiling that data collected from users allow on the one hand, and the unlimited access to users at literally any point of their online trajectory, on the other, makes it possible to objectify the marketers' model of the user's character and life into a template that comes to shape what this user can and cannot see or do online. This, Joseph Turow (2011) argues, can become a major determinant of the user's life horizons and chances. It can have long-term effects on the user him or herself, on her family and children. Thus consumer profiling could create inequalities and injustices just as sharp and damaging as racial or ethnic profiling.

The self-fulfilling prophecy inherent in consumer profiling points to another side of social media the understanding of which draws on the insights from Foucault's theory of power and discipline. Power, as Foucault (1980) insists, is generative; it creates forms of life and human character. Individuals are complicit in their own disciplining by virtue of diligently shaping themselves in accordance with prevailing regimes of power. They embrace the subject positions offered to them in powerful discourses and employ the technologies of the Self available in their society (Foucault, 1988). Social media have become the paramount technologies of the Self for the generation of users that is growing up with them (Bakardjieva & Gaden, 2012). As such, they are tightly intertwined and even blended with the technologies of material and symbolic production, and the technologies of discipline and power. As individuals accept the invitation to express themselves by putting content on social media platforms, they agree to produce themselves as commodities to be alienated and exploited by the platforms' corporate

owners. As they jump at the opportunity to be participants in participatory culture they set out to pursue the status of celebrity by fighting for clicks and likes and pleasing the mass audience taste; or they accept the positions of fans who celebrate and reinforce the messages of professional or amateur cultural producers. As they follow the imperative to accumulate "social capital," they embrace the opportunity to "brand themselves" in ways that render higher value to their interests, experiences and skills (Marwick, 2013). As they exhibit publicly the slightest quivers of their thought, deed, want and feeling, they agree to be judged, weighed, ranked, and sanctioned by not only marketers, but also by a wide audience of "friends." Hence the necessity to perform for this audience; to anticipate its preferences and to adapt to them in pursuit of inclusion and popularity. The complex of these technologies furnishes the work that makes the individuals into who they are – online, but also offline as the two realms progressively interpenetrate one another.

Critical analyses of social media in the "digital labour" vein (Scholz, 2013) have bewailed the infinite degree of exploitation of the productive efforts of users online and in social media, specifically (Fuchs, 2013, 2014). They have exposed the numerous forms of market capture and commodification of personal information that produce new insidious forms of alienation (Andrejevich, 2013, de Kosnik, 2013). These critiques have typically focused on the injustice caused to users as productive agents generating economic value and corporate profit, but have spent little time reflecting on the dehumanization of social interaction and the damage done to the experience and ethics of dyadic relationships. In the circuits of what Jodi Dean (2010) calls "communicative capitalism," the production of social relations, a human capacity that had remained a zone of relatively free creativity and a potential source of "disalienation" (Lefebvfe, 1991) has been reorganized under the principles of market efficiency and commodification. Interpersonal sharing is mass-produced, standardized and automated. By claiming ownership over the notion of friendship, social media platforms seize the power to mould its cultural understanding in a formally rationalized manner. They reduce that relationship to its utilitarian and hedonistic modes and shed its ethical aspect as insignificant and unnecessary. As Dean (2013) puts it, convenience trumps commitment. The uniqueness of personality and attachment evaporates and each of our friends is one among many dots on a social network graph. Pushing individual thoughts and moods out to multiple audiences replaces reciprocal attention and the quest for mutual understanding. Thus, in a typical self-serve manner, users participate in the alienation of their own interpersonal relations. The tiny foothold of difference, originality, solidarity and resistance existing at the level of interpersonal relations is invaded by the forces

of marketization and governmentality. The very capacity for emancipation through the construction of unique personalities and bonds alternative to the mainstream is undermined. Social media manifest themselves as irrational systems as they deny users their basic humanity.

Phenomenology of Social Media

But why are we, humans, so mindlessly attracted by social media? Why do we throw ourselves at them like moths into the flame to be sliced and diced, exploited and manipulated? What is wrong with us? What is wrong with us is at the same time what is right with us – our humanity. We are hopelessly social creatures in search of conviviality and meaning. In the natural attitude and parlance of everyday life, we often call this a quest for friendship. Neither our own Self nor the world into which we are thrown can mean anything without the Other/Others, our fellow-men and women with whom we form a we-relation.

The categorical apparatus of the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz (Schutz, & Luckmann, 1973) has been developed with the explicit purpose of illuminating the physical and social world as it is experienced by subjects. Schutz and his followers adopt the subjective view point of the naked human eye as the entry point of their analysis. How does the physical and social world look from that view point? – is their modest and yet infinitely intriguing question. I believe a comprehensive critique of social media has to incorporate that view point and to supplement the economic and political perspectives with an exploration of the ways in which the experienced social world of our contemporaries has been affected by the explosion of the new platforms for sociality and the new types of social relations or friendships they make possible.

For starters, the navigation map Schutz offers for such an exploration will be briefly presented. It was, incidentally, charted in the 1950s and thus may look somewhat simplistic to the late-modern eye. The major communication media in Schutz's time were letters, newspapers and radio. Television was still in its fuzzy diapers. As Schutz was centrally interested in the problems of intersubjectivity, he focused on the interaction between individuals, which in his age was still vastly conducted face-to-face. Yet his explorations of the experienced social world provide an important paradigm that deserves to be adapted and applied to the understanding of social media and the forms of sociality they engender (Zhao, 2006).

> I experience other men in various perspectives and my relation to them is arranged according to various levels of proximity, depth and anonymity in lived experience. The breadth of variations in my experience of the social world extends from the encounter with another man to vague attitudes, institutions, cultural structures and humanity in general. (Schutz, & Luckmann, 1973, p. 61)

For Schutz our experienced social world is structured into interlocking "zones of anonymity." Between the immediacy of the face-to-face relation with a fellow-man or woman experienced in a particular moment on the one end and the vague notion of anonymous people representing "functional types" (mail men, hockey players, politicians), on the other, lies a continuum of relations characterized by different levels of proximity, depth, engagement, coordination, mutuality or, in sum, different "gradations of immediacy." The main feature that distinguishes the different "zones" constituted by these relations is the "abundance of symptoms through which the conscious life of the other is accessible to me" (p. 69). This implies that the more symptoms of the conscious life of a person flow in the direction of his or her communication counterpart, the less anonymous the emergent relation is. Thus words on paper, speech and images, sighs and bursts of laughter would add up progressively to move a relation from anonymity to immediacy. Obviously, the media that transport these signs of conscious life between human beings would be deeply implicated in the way the social world is constituted and experienced. Mutual orientation and co-temporality (i.e. when we share a sector of the lifeworld at a particular moment and turn our attention to each other thus "growing older together") further strengthen the experienced immediacy and intimacy of what Schutz calls "the we-relation." The degree of immediacy or anonymity of our experienced relations is also affected by their attainability and restorability: "The sooner I can immediately experience the typical characteristics of someone as properties of a fellow-man, as components of his conscious life, the less anonymous is the typification in question" (Schutz, & Luckmann, 1973, p. 81). Needless to say, communication media, including social media, profoundly affect the sense of attainability and restorability of relations and make them more immediate. This is what blogging did for people who had moved away from home and were writing about their experiences in the new place thus rendering their conscious life available to their friends and family back home. Comments and responses from this audience constructed a sense of mutual orientation that resulted in a higher degree of immediacy. The restorability of relations with old friends was recognized by users as one of the most exciting characteristics of Facebook during the early stages of its adoption (Karakayali, & Kilic, 2013). This led to a differently imagined social world in which certain kinds of symptoms of the conscious life of another person were always ready at hand, only a few screens and chat windows away.

A sense of immediacy was imbued even in relationships between otherwise remote and strongly typified political actors and their spatially and temporally scattered constituency (Dumitirca, 2014).

Sociologist Shanyang Zhao (2004, 2006), following in the steps of Schutz, has proposed that the Internet has created a whole new experiential sphere, or realm of the lifeworld – one that can be called "there and now" (as opposed to the "here and now" of the embodied co-presence). In this realm, Zhao has argued, we experience a brand new kind of social relation. Others appear as "consociated contemporaries," fellow-men and women who are not immediately present spatially, but whose conscious life overlaps with ours in temporality and mutual orientation. I prefer to think not about a distinct and novel realm, but rather of a dynamic continuum of types of interpersonal relations that stretches between immediacy and anonymity, the granularity of which becomes finer as new media technologies and practices emerge. Social media mark a leap in the evolution of this continuum. They accelerate and intensify the radiation of multi-modal signs of our conscious life that can be intercepted by other persons, thus furnishing a thicker web of immediate relations. They offer exciting affordances that allow users to imagine and enact an infinite variety of new forms of interaction and relationships of gradated immediacy and richness. Where McDonaldization, driven by formal rationality, reduces the texture of human interaction to a set of standardized threads and patterns and deters and deflects mutual orientation, the daily practice of users draws on both the manifest and latent functionalities of social media to concoct a multitude of new interaction recipes and new kinds of friendships (see Lomborg, 2014). These are two contradictory tendencies in the development of social media and their pertaining cultures. This is the dialectic of digitization characterizing our moment in media history**.** Therefore, it behooves us to attend carefully to both the exploitative and dehumanizing logic of McDonaldization and to the driving forces and possible consequences of users' practical inventions that counter and subvert that logic. Because user inventions are highly contextualized and driven by concrete practical and substantive rationalities, they are much harder to grasp and project in a single trajectory. Several strands around which these developments converge, nevertheless, stand out: the relaxing of the boundaries between friends and strangers; in-group members and outsiders exhibited in the practices of community-building among people who do not share co-location in space and time; the discovery of affordances for the constitution of a kind of friendship (I choose for it the term solidarity) that becomes a foundation for collective action with previously anonymous counterparts and thirdly, the mundane transformation of the (inter)personal into the political that occurs when platform users discover and mutually reinforce their commitment to a public cause. This

involves the construction of relationships that transcend the personal and interpersonal and bring the political community into the individual's here and now as a living and breathing entity. Another trajectory is constituted by the ways in which social media users keep the McDonaldization of sociality and friendship at bay; the tactics they use to prevent it from taking over their social world. As formal rationality and capitalist efficiency creep across social media platforms, numerous forms of subversion and guerilla tactics (see de Certeau, 1984) proliferate. Users learn how to make the most of social media while protecting the integrity of the friendships that sustain their autonomous self-identity and humanity from the encroachment of platformed sociality. They find new ways to make and maintain friendships by resisting and twisting around the defaults and imperatives implicit in platforms.

Whether these efforts are equally distributed across different user populations; whether they are doomed – like flying a hang glider in the face of the US Air Force – or reasonably successful and under what circumstances – these are questions that future research will have to systematically raise and answer. More fundamentally, it is imperative that we ask: What would alternative social media that support alternative rationalities look like? Weber himself has theorized different types of rationalization and rationality, formal rationality being the dominant, but not the only one. His notion of substantive rationality refers to a type of rationalization based on values (Kalberg 1980). Feenberg (1999), building on the insights of the Frankfurt School, has pointed out the biased nature of technological rationality and has advocated for a "democratic rationalization" of technological development inclusive of the interests, needs and perspectives of broad circles of users. Habermas' (1984) concept of communicative rationality - brings to the fore the potential for rationality given with ordinary language that underpins interactions oriented toward mutual understanding and agreement as opposed to the instrumental and strategic pursuit of individual goals. How can such alternative rationalities become embedded in social media platforms and practices? Can they compete with the dehumanizing efficiency of McDonaldization? Who their agents and architects would be? The dialectics of digitization calls for critique, but also for emancipatory praxis, critical reflexivity and struggle. This would mean to confront the formal rationality of friending by recuperating and upholding the ethical rationality of friendship. Friendship and the forms of its mediation can and should be seen as a political project that is worth defending**.**

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