

Platform Phenomenologies: Social Media as Experiential Infrastructures of Urban Public Life

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Introduction

Platforms have emerged as some of the most disruptive, yet also increasingly ordinary, dynamics of contemporary urban life. As Barns (2019) notes, even as platforms might be understood as proprietary technological ecologies, which thrive on user surveillance and extracting value from user data, they are also reshaping everyday socio-spatial experience with indefinite consequences. For Barns, negotiating this ‘pivot’ between the technical, commercial and embodied implications of an emergent platform urbanism will require diverse epistemologies (see also contributions to Rodgers and Moore, 2018). In this chapter, we argue for a phenomenological perspective on social media, approaching them as experiential infrastructures of everyday urban communication. While our argument is primarily conceptual, we will also draw on recent research we have conducted into the role social media have played in mediating public exchanges about a controversial cycling program in Walthamstow, East London, UK. We will pay particular attention to how such exchanges emerge through real-time-like experiences of locality, mediated by both the technical features of social media platforms and their everyday practical dynamics. These temporalities of social media amount to relatively novel forms of urban public life, the stakes and consequences of which are ambiguous.

Early accounts of social media and public life often tended towards more celebratory narratives of a new participatory media culture. But a prominent counter-narrative has developed, in both academic scholarship and popular discourse, in which the power of social media platforms is progressively being challenged. Like other platforms, social media are increasingly understood as interoperable ‘walled gardens’ built up by large, monopolistic companies devoted to extracting economic value from user contributions and metadata (e.g.

van Dijck, 2013). For van Dijck et al. (2018), the unprecedented size and power of social media, as companies and technological ecosystems, demands we think about how these and other platforms might be encouraged or even forced to better serve public values and the common good. Concerns are increasingly being directed, in other words, to ‘platform governance’. As Gorwa (2019) points out, platform governance entails thinking about how the algorithmic architectures of platforms govern the behaviour of their users, and in turn how platform companies might be pressured to self-govern, or otherwise be governed through local legal mechanisms.

This chapter contributes to these critical literatures on social media as emergent infrastructures of governance beyond the state. Yet in making our argument we will also sound a cautionary note around how we should approach the power of social media platforms, not only as companies, but in particular as algorithmically-mediated infrastructures. As Langlois (2012: 102-103) points out, the ‘participatory’ claim around social media is in part true: in principle, anyone can establish an account and express views within minimal censorious intervention. However, such platforms become mediums of governance not just by enabling new voices, but by establishing new technical and cultural environments with a relatively internalised logic to manage the flow and visibility of meaning and information (ibid). The norms and values that inform these internalised logics in social media are – like in other data-driven, cloud-based digital platforms – black-boxed into their functioning algorithms (see Lee and Larsen, 2019). The proliferation of algorithms, as a form of ‘secondary agency’ (encoded to make subsequent decisions without human use or authorisation, cf. Kitchin and Dodge, 2011; Mackenzie, 2006), has become one of the most prominent and even mythical problems of contemporary scholarship. Algorithms are a problem not only because they appear to be so powerful in their effects, but also because they

are opaque in their inner workings (Bucher, 2018: 41-65; Ziewitz, 2016). This problem of algorithmic opacity often leads to an interpretation of social media (and other digital media) as ‘subtle’ forms of urban power, in which communication and everyday experience is silently structured by pervasive, computational mediation (cf. Rodgers et al., 2014: 1061).

There are however conceptual and empirical limits to analysing the politics of algorithms and software in these ways. As Annany and Crawford (2016) argue, even if we could pin down a given platform’s technical architectures or data, or make an algorithm’s workings transparent, that would not sufficiently address questions of political or public accountability. The algorithmic architectures of social media platforms clearly matter, but they do not work in isolation: technical designs or autonomous decision-making capacities only become political as part of situated practices and material spaces (cf. Crawford, 2016; Willems, 2019). Our response is to put forward a phenomenological perspective on social media as infrastructures of urban public life. This helps us to negotiate an apparent tension between two ways of thinking about social media as ‘infrastructures’ of urban communication: technical and experienced. On the one hand, social media are translocal, standardised technical systems that structure and stylize social interaction in particular ways (cf. Alaimo and Kallinikos, 2019). Yet on the other hand, the translocal standardisation of social media is experienced and enacted through localised, embodied activities at particular moments. As we will show, a phenomenological approach does not choose between these two ways of thinking about social media infrastructures, but rather approaches the technical through the experiential.

Focusing on the experience of social media entails an emphasis on the contingencies and even ambiguities surrounding their political implications for urban life. In turn, such an approach also raises questions about what form our scholarly critiques should take. We argue

in particular against what Sedgwick (2003: 123-151) might term a ‘paranoid’ reading of social media platforms – one oriented from the outset to anticipating, unveiling, theorizing and critiquing platforms as oppressive or violent. Instead, the phenomenological approach we outline provides the basis for ‘reparative’ (Sedgwick, 2003) or ‘postcritical’ (Felski, 2015) readings¹ of the more indefinite political implications that social media platforms might have in practice for urban communication and public life.

Planning, Participation and Social Media Platforms

Our conceptual argument is informed by recent collaborative research² we have undertaken on the relationships of urban planning, participation and social media platforms in Walthamstow, East London, UK. We have focused specifically on the local implementation of the ‘Mini-Holland’ transportation scheme of the London Borough of Waltham Forest. This scheme, officially named ‘Enjoy Waltham Forest’ by the Council, was one of three funded by Transport for London to the tune of £30 million, and entailed making a series of significant changes to the borough’s road infrastructure, in order to enhance the environment for cyclists and pedestrians. Combining qualitative and data analytics approaches, we have examined how the scheme and related issues have been promoted, explained, mobilised, consulted on, ridiculed, ephemerally mentioned, and perhaps above all antagonistically debated via different social media platforms. The ‘antagonistic’ dimension has been particularly important since social media helped make possible some animated and often theatrical

¹ While writers such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Rita Felski come from a literary tradition, their arguments are also clearly relevant for developing alternative approaches to the politics of digital technologies (e.g. Ash, 2017; Velkova and Kaun, 2019). We are grateful to Niels van Doorn for encouraging us, at the University of Manchester workshop leading to this book, to consider the possible links that queer theory and reparative/postcritical approaches might have with our own emphasis on the phenomenology of public address, which relies in significant part on the work of Michael Warner (2002).

²This research project was funded by an EPSRC pilot grant. Besides the authors of this paper, the other main project member was Andrea Ballatore at Birkbeck, University of London.

protests against the scheme, surprising the Council and attracting national media attention (e.g. see Hill, 2015).

We focused in particular on three prominent digital platforms through which different kinds of publics convened around the scheme: Twitter, Facebook and a more bespoke platform called Commonplace. Our examination of Twitter, quantitatively our largest dataset, clearly showed that the platform was dominated by cycling campaigners and key politicians. While we found many instances of acrimonious exchanges on the platform, Twitter appeared to be a locus for campaigners and politicians to consolidate their support for the scheme or expand their network through reciprocal mentions and retweets. Facebook, by contrast, hosted a wider range of perspectives. In part because it is a platform environment more embedded into and interwoven with its users' broader everyday experience and identity maintenance, and in part because the platform permits and indeed encourages more extensive and recursive contributions. On Facebook, exchanges often centred on disputes about the value of cycling and its possible ties with encroaching gentrification. These disputes exemplified increasingly familiar forms of contemporary political division, for example, between middle class/working class, elite/ordinary, young/old and facts/emotions. Although apparently antagonistic, such Facebook exchanges could also be interpreted as agonistic, as proposed by Mouffe (2013): defined by political pluralism rather than consensus. Meanwhile, the Council managed much of their interaction with local publics using Commonplace, a platform produced by London-based developers that is specifically designed for urban regeneration consultations.

Commonplace is based around a map interface, where participants are presented with a geographically delineated area – a 'commonplace' – and invited to pin comments and emotional metrics to locations. What is notable about Commonplace is that its avowed mission involves disrupting conventional approaches to public consultation. While its paying

clients are able to present their project with information of their choosing, access a real-time project dashboard, and easily generate infographics, they also must accept the Commonplace terms and conditions, in which clients agree to cede control over the resulting, publicly-displayed map of user comments.

Through this research we have found that social media appear to support new kinds of ‘participation’ in urban public life. From the perspective of local politicians, bureaucrats and activists, these new forms of participation were unpredictable. They could embody a useful source of public consensus, aligning with local council proposals. But just as easily, social media could be hotbeds of divisive, antagonistic exchange; places in which so-called ‘post-truth’ claims flourish within digitally-mediated ‘echo chambers’ or ‘filter bubbles’. They could also be an emotional and organizational catalyst for organized protest (cf. Gerbaudo, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015). On the basis of social media exchanges, hundreds of residents opposing the scheme turned up at two notable protests: one at the Town Hall vote on the scheme; and a second months later at its official opening, on a normally quiet local street. But regardless of whether they supported consensus, antagonism or protest, social media seem to challenge the status, authority and relatively predictable logic of more formal consultative exercises (see Moore et al., forthcoming).

But platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Commonplace are not just venues where like-minded people might cloister (e.g. to oppose or support a local issue), or organizational and emotional catalysts for occasional protests. They also afford a new *pace* to local public affairs, built around “tiny acts of political participation” (Margetts et al., 2016: 34): innumerable, publicly expressed – and often archived – claims, commentaries, anxieties, or bits of content relating to an urban neighbourhood and its transformation. These tiny acts,

particularly in conjunction with mobile technologies, subsist especially well when users react, comment and share with others in apparent ‘real-time’. Elsewhere, we have termed this involvement as ‘ambient participation’ (Rodgers et al., forthcoming). Social media provide a venue for participation that is not usually defined by discrete objectives, nor clearly directed towards institutions, but instead is dispersed, incidental and – importantly – most often orientated to the moment. Our argument, in other words, is that social media platforms are not only helping to bring about new types and spaces of urban publicness, but also new temporalities.

Publicness, Social Media and Temporality

Paradigmatic city spaces such as the agora, salon or coffeehouse have often been advanced as models of the public sphere. As Sharma (2014: 13) argues, however, such spatially-inclined embodiments of publicness were also temporal. They required their participants to have free time, for one, but they also organized public discourses temporally. As Warner (2002) points out, most uses of the word ‘public’ fall back on either a narrowly *social* idea of the public as a body of people (notably the social totality of ‘the public’), or a narrowly *spatial* idea of a bounded public (for example a speaker and audience in a delimited physical space). Warner proposes an additional, *temporal* sense of publics, which often works in conjunction with public bodies and spaces. He does so through a discussion of ‘textual publics’, which are defined not so much by social groups or spaces, nor by texts per se, but by practices of addressing a public via texts (which for our purpose can include digitally-mediated communication). Importantly, practices of public address involve a ‘chicken-and-egg circularity’. The public will only survive insofar as it continues to be addressed into the future. Yet to address that public, one must also take for

granted its existence in the past. The ‘dailiness’ of broadcasting (Scannell, 1996) and traditional print news are archetypal examples of how this temporal circularity of publicness is mediated. However, this kind of temporally punctuated publicness, along relatively clear and reflexively understood intervals, is comparatively absent in social media.

While the extensive literature on social media and publicness has not ignored questions of time and temporality, it has more often tended to emphasize sociality and spatiality. Social media are seen to make possible, for example, alternative types or categories of publics that augment or challenge the mass public sphere, such as personal, calculated, hyperlocal, ad hoc or ephemeral publics (Bruns and Burgess, 2015; Highfield, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2015; Schmidt, 2013). Social media are also seen to blur the boundaries of private and public spheres, providing a means through which private matters increasingly become public concerns, and public matters more frequently enter into private life (Papacharissi, 2010). In as far as the public sphere finds its material ‘shape’ through the specificities of different mediums (Carpignano, 1999), social media have been seen to reshape publicness through their novel structural affordances. boyd’s (2010) account of ‘networked publics’ argues that social media are distinct from analogue forms of publicness in how they automatically archive user contributions, which can then be easily retrieved, replicated, modified, searched, and also potentially (and unpredictably) scaled up to very large audiences.³

³ It should be noted that boyd’s analysis was written before the ‘ephemeral turn’ of social media (Haber, 2019). Newer, non-archiving social media such as Snapchat and TikTok entail different structural affordances, and arguably different forms of publicness.

Often more implicit in the literature outlined above is that practices of addressing publics through social media involves unprecedented speed. John Tomlinson (2007, cited in Kaun, 2015) observes that, while industrial era technologies were characterised by speed, it was a form of speed which was mechanical and effortful. One notable example of this is the railway post office, seen in the UK and elsewhere. The railway post office located mail sorting practices within the moving train carriage, while also deploying a bag-and-hook apparatus that allowed pick up and drop off without stopping. This example epitomises what Harvey (1988) labelled ‘time-space compression’, in which the problem of time lag in communication across distance is minimised, if through considerable effort. For Tomlinson, post-industrial technologies are by comparison characterised by an experience of relative immediacy, and (seemingly) effortless speed. Immediacy and speed are common themes in discussions around so-called smart cities, the proponents of which often claim we are on the brink of, or might have even realised, a ‘real-time city’ (Kitchin, 2014). Weltevrede et al. (2014) have argued that totalising and often messianic claims that social media offer a ‘real-time’ experience (of urban life, or other sociospatial phenomena) have important limitations. Asserting that events on social media happen in real-time assumes an actual correspondence between events unfolding through platform environments and objective clock time. Weltevrede et al. (2014: 143) suggest that instead we should conceptualize ‘realtimeness’ as an experiential condition, a practical understanding of time fabricated through “and immanent to platforms, engines and their cultures.”

Realtimeness as an experiential condition becomes clearer by studying practices of public address within nested threads on Facebook. Threads related to the Mini-Holland transportation programme, on place-based Facebook groups such as Walthamstow Residents News, frequently began with a particular image or video alongside commentary. For

example, an image of attractive new cobblestone street pavements and planted trees, paired with a positive affirmation of the cycling scheme. Or a picture showing a long line of car lights, used to bemoan the traffic congestion the scheme was often alleged to produce. These occasionally provocative, but often relatively mundane, initial posts might produce over 100 comments within nested threads across 2 or 3 days, from initial post to last comment. The temporal structure of such Facebook threads, if measured according to clock time, is clearly asynchronous. In other words, such threads comprise a succession of ‘nows’ rather than a single ‘now’. Yet our analysis indicates that users affectively experience, and sometimes explicitly understand themselves to be partaking in, a real-time-like environment. As Kaun and Stiernsteft (2014: 116) argue, despite the constant archiving of public contributions, Facebook users primarily have a “temporal experience ... of immediacy, ephemerality, ‘liveness,’ and flow ... [they are] immersed in an atmosphere and an interface of rapid change and forgetfulness, rather than remembrance and preservation”. Indeed, antagonistic Facebook exchanges around the Mini-Holland scheme most often centred on the content (or alleged motives) of other users’ contributions, apparently made in that moment (i.e. at a proximate point in the thread), rather than addressing arguments built-up cumulatively.

Coleman (2018: 68) describes social media as affording users “a ‘temporal present’ where bodies, technologies and the socio-cultural matrix are intertwined and experienced in terms of ‘aliveness’, and ‘always-on-ness’”. Of course, it could quite plausibly be argued that such a temporal present of aliveness and always-on-ness could be associated with other mediated settings that existed long before, and continue alongside, social media. For example, face-to-face conversations amongst neighbours about all manner of public matters. Yet as the above example of Facebook threads illustrate, sharing practices through social media, experienced as real-time-like, are not the same as corporeal involvement at particular moments with others

(Zingale, 2013). Participants encounter one another, for example, through reading, typing, liking and sharing rather than hearing, speaking and gesturing. To better specify social media as a distinct form for experiencing and addressing urban public life, we will now elaborate on the conceptual features, and political implications, of a phenomenological perspective on social media as infrastructures of everyday communication.

Approaching Social Media Infrastructures Phenomenologically

Social media are increasingly seen as complex infrastructures, as are platforms more generally, evidenced by many of the contributors to this book. One of the most direct ways of approaching media infrastructures is to better examine how the media we experience as content, texts or interfaces depend on often-hidden or usually-ignored material and technical artifacts, such as satellites, signal towers, printing presses and data centres (Parks and Starosielski, 2015). But media infrastructures are not always identifiable artifacts. For Larkin (2013: 329), infrastructures are anything which “create the grounds on which other objects operate” including for example financial instruments, biological conditions or social conventions. Similarly, Easterling (2016) describes ‘infrastructure space’ as extending from myriad physical (e.g. roads, canals, water pipes) and wireless networks (e.g. microwaves) to phenomena such as shared industrial standards. Infrastructures, in other words, “can be lightweight and portable as well as heavy and fixed” (Peters, 2015: 32), and perhaps because of this, ‘infrastructure’ has become one of the more elastic concepts in the social sciences and humanities (see Mattern, 2017: xxv-xxvii).

Plantin et al. (2018) argue that, while ‘platform’ and ‘infrastructure’ may seem like two alternative lenses for understanding digital objects, they are actually complementary, since

platforms and infrastructures are increasingly swapping traits. As platforms such as Facebook have evolved from websites into interoperable, technical ecosystems, they have enrolled a wide range of infrastructures external to the platform itself (Helmond, 2015). And in this process of enrolling infrastructures, platforms have themselves managed to become new kinds of coordinating infrastructures. Plantin et al. (2018) usefully outline two main ways scholars have approached infrastructure, which might inform the study of platforms. The first (and the one they explicitly emphasise) is to examine the historical development and evolution of infrastructures as large technical systems. The second is to examine the phenomenology of infrastructures, which means thinking about infrastructures more so in terms of what they *do* across a series of practical milieus, rather than what they are. Two political frames that potentially correspond with these approaches are well captured by Dourish and Bell (2011: 96-98). The first is ‘sociopolitical’, which sees infrastructures as ‘crystallizations of institutional relations’, and accordingly entails a focus on access to and control of infrastructures as such. The second focuses on experience, and draws attention to the politics of our everyday practical uses of and dependencies on infrastructures.

To further flesh out these approaches and political frames, let us momentarily consider a seemingly unexciting example: the wooden pallet. In February 2019, it emerged that, should the United Kingdom leave the European Union without an interim deal, it would not have enough pallets of the correct standard in order to move the commodities it needs (Neate, 2019). The first approach outlined by Plantin et al. (2018) might think about wooden pallets as a technical infrastructure. They might be seen for their sheer materiality, as “stuff you can kick” (Parks, 2015). Having such wooden pallets meet the correct technical specification might be what Callon (1984) calls an ‘obligatory passage point’: the narrow point of a funnel, around which a much larger network must converge. The second, more phenomenological

approach might study how it was that these pallets remained so hidden in the first place. How they became what Susan Leigh-Star (1998: 377) calls ‘boring’ things: the often-invisible entities that support certain practical and institutional arrangements, here relating to logistics systems and goods distribution.

Both of these approaches are valid, and our argument for the importance of the second approach entails combining elements from the first. Emphasizing the frequent invisibility of media infrastructures in practical settings does not preclude their study as technical artifacts, a point made in phenomenological perspectives on media (e.g. see Markham and Rodgers, 2017a). Phenomenological perspectives on media have been exemplified by the ‘practice turn’ in media studies (e.g. Couldry, 2004; Bräuchler and Postill, 2010) and related arguments for ‘non-media-centric’ approaches (Morley, 2009; Moores, 2018). These approaches emphasize the activities and settings through which phenomena emerge as media, rather than seeing these activities and settings as effects generated by media (e.g. media texts, technologies or producers). Such approaches thus shift attention from what media do to people, to what people do with media; or what Martin-Barbero (1993) conceptualised as ‘mediation’ over media (cf. Kember and Zylinksa, 2012). But this priority given to mediation does not advocate a naïve user- or human-centrism against the technical agency of media infrastructures. Instead, it avoids characterizing media and in particular digital technologies as encroaching on ‘humans’, who are often seen in a position of ‘resistance’ (cf. Rose, 2017; Kember and Zylinksa, 2012). Approaching social media as experiential infrastructures entails seeing them as a technological ‘enframing’ for everyday activities (Heidegger, 1977); as the often-hidden supports making everyday practices endure and recur over time (Sterne, 2003).

The phenomenological perspective we have outlined on social media also has implications in terms of political temperament. It focuses less on the “hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives” of platforms, and more on what urban communication via social media infrastructures “unfurls, calls forth, makes possible” (Felski, 2015: 12). Since Husserl, phenomenological approaches have been associated with ‘bracketing out’: the suspension of judgment, in order to focus on the study of experience. In studying platforms and other media, bracketing out means focusing on the dynamics of situated mediated experience and, if only temporarily, disregarding forces outside of that experience as explanations (Markham and Rodgers, 2017b). This approach is illustrated by our brief analysis of social media temporalities, as novel forms of real-time-like participation in urban public life (for a more detailed account, see Rodgers et al., forthcoming). We refrained from offering, for example, platform capitalism, Facebook’s corporate motives, or algorithmic calculations as explanations. Our analysis does not preclude or deny the relevance of such analyses. Instead, it defers the form of critique they imply, while making possible another: one focused on the political epistemology of everyday knowledge and communication, mediated by social media platforms as experiential infrastructures of urban life.

Conclusion

This chapter has put forward a phenomenological perspective for examining the emergence of social media platforms as increasingly ordinary, taken-for-granted infrastructures of urban communication. Through this lens, we explored how social media afford a real-time-like experience of locality, illustrating this with reference to recent research we conducted on the mediation of often-contentious public exchanges around a cycling program in Walthamstow, East London. This temporally-focused analysis of social media practices helps make visible

relatively novel ways of experiencing and addressing matters of urban public life. While we have emphasized the experience of social media infrastructures, our approach also retains an inherent concern for background technical qualities. The functional architectures of platforms such as Facebook both enframe and depend on user practice. As a result, our interest has been less in how social media make new urban phenomena or agents public, and more in how they constitute new environments reshaping how urban public life is mediated as a spatiotemporal process (cf. Carpignano, 1999).

The approach we have taken represents just one way of critiquing the urban politics of social media. Without doubt, it is a form of critique with blind spots, notably towards the politics we might associate with the practices and ideals of platform companies. Popular attention, for example, is increasingly being devoted to the intentionally ‘addictive’ design of social media interfaces, apparently substantiated by reports that executives are discouraging family members from having accounts on the very platforms they help create (Price, 2018). And despite the obvious role social media play in mediating politics today, for good or ill, platform companies continue to treat their ‘participating’ users as consumers rather than citizens of the state (Butt et al., 2016). We recognise and affirm the value of these and other critical issues and approaches relating to social media, and platforms more generally. But we would argue that scholarly analyses of a ‘platform urbanism’ would do well to reject a ‘deus ex machina’ (see Markham and Rodgers, 2017b: 11). By this, we mean resorting to a vague underlying driver, such as algorithmic agency or neoliberal logic, for observed practices, events and phenomena related to platforms. When carefully articulated, these and other deep explanations can have a valid place, but too often they act as a convenient plot device, abruptly closing the analysis and seemingly precluding other interpretations. Platforms and digital technologies are not seamless means of instrumental power, and a growing chorus of

critical scholarship has begun to point to their ‘glitches’ (Leszczynski, 2019), ‘quirks’ (Beer, 2019) and ‘lossiness’ (Payne, 2018). If publicness is transforming with social media, it will not be enough to challenge the power of platforms. Instead, we need way to think about ways of negotiating practices of public address that are intrinsically, and also problematically, reliant on platform technics. This might mean thinking through the political and ethical responses that might be appropriate and viable, in and through these new urban environments of everyday knowledge and communication.

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