

**Facebook Prod-User Culture: A Study of the Emerging Configurations of Form and Content, Time, the Body and the Real in Contemporary Social Media**

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This essay offers a brief overview of the unpublished PhD thesis “Facebook Prod-User Culture: A Study of the Emerging Configuration of Form and Content, Time, the Body and the Real in Contemporary Social Media”, recently defended at Cairo University. It develops out of the general assumption that culture and technological evolution are intertwined spheres that are becoming less and less distinguishable in our ultra-technological age. The latter has shaped the former especially in the area of communication technologies ever since the invention of radio and television, and the former influences the latter in myriad, constantly changing ways. Technological inventions are said to answer human needs. They are created because of a certain vision of man. Today’s social media embeddedness in our daily lives is redefining this techno-cultural osmosis. It has even taken it a step further to be considered ontologically significant and almost becoming cognitively encrusted in our systems.

We have today entered a symbiotic relationship, as users, with recent online technologies. They influence us, and we create them in what is today termed prod-usage culture. We produce their content and exchange it in the creative process of giving the world our meanings. They in turn are redrawing our cultural maps. It can safely be said that democratised, wireless, portable and smart media have inaugurated a new era with new conceptualisations of reality and of culture. Its digital form and content, shrunk spatio-temporal economies of signification and mediated messages are all new delineators of present culture.

The research explores this new area of culture today positioned at the centre of academic interest for its rich cultural production. Posting, commenting,

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sharing links and photos, memetic production, videos of self, live-streaming everyday practices, in short, content that is produced and circulated by millions of social media users. This activity that has become an everyday practice has empowered its producers, becoming a novel extraterritorial space in their lives where they have become their own creative selves, able to represent independent views and voice what they think is truth, or parodies of it, in pictures, in words, in audios and videos where they are able to reproduce, manipulate and recreate reality. They dwell in a new world of techno-potentialities where they are shaping reality in the virtual, as they, temporally and spatially, live it, perceive it, invent it, make it happen as it is simultaneously happening to them.

The meeting point of technology as extensions of the self (McLuhan, 1964) and its subsequent human empowerment, and of culture, as the meaning-making activity of active consumers of the technology, constitute the core substance of this research. The study delves into an issue, today, in the process of understanding and configuration: the nature of digital meaning and content-production by millions of social media users in relation to virtual form and content, time conceptualisation, body imaging and notions of the real they create and exchange in cyberspace. These issues, as formulated in multimedia users' posting on Facebook, are analysed in the light of a selection of culinary posts; memes, being short and viral digital structures considered cultural units descending from earlier phases of cyberculture; and, lastly, photos, especially deliberate acts of body-posing in the virtual world.

Being a major change in the mechanisms of generating meaning(s) and in re-defining culture altogether, this new cultural reality is in need of mapping its structuring parts and understanding their interaction and effects on foundational cultural significations today caught inside complex and accelerated processes of change. The current study examines the merging of previously separated and often opposed categories as a new cultural phenomenon, especially at the level of creation of content epitomised by the new ground-breaking role of prod-user and prod-usage (Bruns, 2008), the new agency that dissolved the former division between the spheres of production and consumption.

The study investigates similar cases of merger of cultural paradigms, and their drawing dynamic maps disclosing new significations, such as the form and content produced by the former audience become real actors, and textual and visual artisans. The dissolution of older categories and the formation of new ones are investigated within post-war cybernetic epistemology, today, more than ever, at the forefront of the techno-cultural picture. The machinery of cultural generation is scrutinised within the tripartite epistemic structure of: medium,



user (agency) and meaning, and how they function together, the nature of the form and content they generate and the cultural significations and new realities that ensue from this new meaning-generating mechanism. Overall, the variables of the equation of cultural production have changed and therefore invited the urge and the need to be examined in depth in hope of understanding the contiguities of a culture today in the making. The “cultural stage” of a conceived technology (Williams, 1974) has acquired modern significations with platforms like Facebook today deserving research after establishing itself as an everyday practice in the life of the people.

The analysis of the former changes mirrors a culture in the process of mutation in terms of its new technology-mediated configurations of form, content, time, the body and the real. The study focuses on these five major concepts that are discretely changing in the Facebook activity of its prod-users. It traces them back to their discourse of emergence namely the cybernetic order that sought to do away with phenomenological time and body, and the limited freedoms of form and of reality. Cybernetics shed light on the insufficiency in the notions of form, time and the body dictated by Cartesian ideology and transcended their limitations by invading the realm of desire with technological tools, imagining alternative forms and an alternative body. Information would be the means to distill reality of its complexities. Human interiority would be reversed in the novel concept of communication where humans become nodal points inside information networks, connecting together in the form of data. Technology would change cumulative temporality into a presentist moment or a forever flowing present. The body would be delivered, in the translucence of screens, of its density, its daunting corpo(reality) and, most of all, of its spatio-temporal confinement.

It is within this worldview that Facebook form and content are analysed in chapter one in the light of Marshall McLuhan’s epigrammatic formula “the medium is the message” (1964) and of Vilém Flusser’s theorising of technic images as denominators of a meta-coded post-historical culture (1985). A selection of postings on culinary pages, memes and photo-posing exemplify forms of visual digitalised meaning where the fusion of form and content, medium and message are playing a role in reformulating cultural significations in concord with the ways cybernetics epistemically redrew the post-war world where humans, as information processes, create meanings via new media that can navigate speed. This technic time compression is among the factors that allowed the medium to dominate over its content and to surpass it (chapter one).



The time conceptualisations formulated in the activity of Facebook users who are crystallising a culture of the “now” is dissected in chapter two to fathom how the ubiquitousness of the virtual medium has encrusted itself in everyday life becoming an established everyday cultural practice of millions, producing a plethora of new significations about time and related everyday issues. The study investigates the real-time technology in the light of Michel de Certeau’s theory and methodology. The breaking down of borders between formerly incongruous spheres of living and sealed areas of culture, further dislodging the high-low paradigm, are explored in Facebook culinary pages, memes and photo-posing as examples of the interception of the everyday with the tools of virtuality (chapter two).

The third chapter on the emergent body configurations in Facebook culinary posts, memes and photo-posing draws a detailed picture, in its theoretic part, of the epistemic point of convergence of cybernetic thinking with post-humanism to explain the forms of dis/embodiment we witness in Facebook digital material drawing on Stelarc’s phrase: “information is the prothesis that props up the obsolete body” (1995, 91). Photo-posing, on the other hand, explores another aspect of the work of modern technology, where the body is at the climax of desire of being screen seen and mediated. The chapter also investigates the virtual signification and foregrounding of other bodies-objects in what is today termed post-anthropocentrism. These new configurations of the body are formulated in terms of the cybernetic paradigm’s core vision/dream of de-centring the Cartesian duality of body and mind by extracting the human body from the weight and woes of its corporeality and interiority to unleash it as information in cyberspace. This cybernetic obsolescence of the body translates in the part speaking for the whole in the culinary posts selected. In other words, body organs, particularly hands, replace the body and interact with food as itself another body in digi-virtual tutoring. Disembodiment is also a salient feature of memetic production expressing endless millennial anxieties and ironies. As for photo-posing, the body dreams of ubiquity and self-designing in viral images that digitally inhabit and instantaneously enhance the present moment bracketing away aging, death and human otherness (chapter three).

The study’s last object of research is the real in social media prod-usage which it approaches from a Baudrillardian optic for the informative material it provides in times of ubiquitous multi-media filtering real life and simulating it. The study, in this final chapter, brings together the axiomatic threads it has woven all along to articulate the erosion of the principle of reality in the work of prod-usage and the epistemic emptying of the content of the real which the study equates in its



conclusion to the original idea it departed from: the medium being the message where the digital content, like the real, acquiesces to the power of fluid hyperreal form. The research assesses the new user praxis of the virtual medium, as it is making its way into everyday life, heralded in McLuhan and Baudrillard's work. It explores how the virtual medium is creating radical conceptual changes concerning major foundational cultural notions like the absorption of meaning in form, the relation to the other, to objects, the prevalence of simulations of reality devoid of the cause-effect sequence, and last, but not least, the omniscience of images and their endless multiplication in virtuality (chapter four).

These foundational cultural conceptualisations necessitated closer examination and understanding of the mechanisms of their generation and of their far-reaching effects on culture, a realm rapidly evolving today as the technology still promises more to come in terms of a birthing fully fledged virtual world. In other words, the new reality emerging from social media ramified activity is ultimately shaping a whole new way of life with new definitions and alternative visions the current research has sought to examine in detail in its consecutive chapters.

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