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TEACHERS 'LIKING' THEIR WORK? EXPLORING THE DIGITAL LABOR OF NETWORKED PROFESSIONAL PUBLICS

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Background

Social media are now an important aspect of work in most professions – including school teaching. This paper explores the growing use of organized 'teacher communities' on social media platforms such as Facebook. These groups act as forums for teachers to discuss teaching matters, give advice, share and recommend resources, and generally sustain online public 'professional networks'.

To date, academic research has tended to frame teacher social media groups as relatively straightforward and unproblematic. Rarely, if ever, are teachers' professional uses of social media groups considered as a form of *work*. In contrast, this paper explores teachers' professional social media use as a form of 'virtual work' (Huws 2014, Webster & Randle 2016) and/or 'digital labor' (Scholz 2012, Fuchs & Sevignani 2013). In particular, the paper examines the phenomenon of large-scale thematic teacher Facebook groups. While these social media communities are usually celebrated as a means of professional learning and support, in what ways (and with what implications) should teacher Facebook groups be understood as 'work'?

Research questions and methods

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Our over-arching question is: in what ways – and with what outcomes - is a teacher Facebook group ‘work’? In more detail, the paper addresses the research questions:

- What form(s) of work is taking place when teachers engage with a thematic Facebook group?
- Who is working in a teacher Facebook group?
- What ‘digital labor’ practices are evident?

These questions are addressed through detailed examination of one large thematic Swedish Facebook group interested in a specific innovation in technology-based pedagogy. The thematic Facebook group examined in our project consisted of over 13,000 members. The paper mainly draws on a corpus of data collected through the Facebook Graph API over a three-year period. This corpus covers all postings, likes and comments – consisting of over 2,000 postings and nearly 14,000 comments. These data were analyzed through a combination of computational content analysis and detailed interaction analysis approaches.

Findings and discussion

The paper first considers the aspects of the thematic Facebook group that could be seen as professionally beneficial and/or valuable. In brief, the following characteristics emerged from our data:

- In contrast to many social media spaces, the group was an online setting where norms of respectful polite exchange and affective engagement were largely maintained.
- Teachers saw the group as a ready means of gaining useful information and advice, and thereby develop professional knowledge.
- For some participants the group clearly fulfilled a sense of community and belonging with likeminded teachers on a nationwide scale.
- Some members valued career-building benefits of developing a professional identity through participation in the group.

The paper considers how, in these terms, the thematic group appeared to embody many of the characteristics associated with ‘light-weight’ communities of peer production (Haythornthwaite 2009) – i.e. where “those with common interests or in spatially distributed teams can make tacit knowledge visible to improve their work [...] practices” (Gruzd *et al.* 2016, p.1189). The group members certainly saw themselves as pragmatic and entrepreneurial professionals who had found a beneficial means of online support. As a result, very few participants saw the group as as a form of work (let alone a problematic form of work).

Yet while perceived by teachers as a relatively beneficial and uncontroversial aspect of their working lives, the paper also goes on to consider a number of (largely

unrecognized) aspects of the Facebook group that did appear to constitute disadvantaging and/or disempowering forms of digital labor.

From this perspective, the paper reflects on the embedding of the thematic group within Facebook's business model of extracting surplus value from the unpaid labor of its users. Also problematic is Facebook's use of the thematic group to generate surplus value from the objectification of knowledge derived from teachers' professional experiences. Here the paper argues that this lends weight to Srnicek's (2016) contention that platforms such as Facebook are parasitical to other value producing industries.

Our analysis of usage data also points to the dependency of the group on the sustained efforts of a small clique of members. The sole group moderator was responsible for 20% of posts and 26% of comments, with another 20 core contributors responsible for the majority of remaining content production. Over three years, we found only 675 participants to have posted an original contribution. In this sense, it is argued that the group functioned to make the majority of members dependent on a niche of expert others.

The paper then considers how the Facebook platform restricted ways that teachers were able to engage in the group as skilled professionals. This was found to occur in at least four distinct ways, i.e.:

1. Facebook's dominant mode of passive interaction with the thematic group content, with content selection determined by the platform's algorithms rather than teacher expertise;
2. Facebook's dominant mode of most users 'lurking' and consuming content with little or no reciprocal exchange;
3. The way in which the thematic group functioned to discourage most participants from actively contributing their own knowledge – with most interactions lacking in substance beyond recommendations for pre-existing resources and products;
4. The notable homogeneity of content, interaction and exchange in the group – with most interactions tending toward a common deferential tone with little room for dissent, contradiction or deviation.

Finally, the paper highlights the role of the Facebook group in extending and intensifying teachers' engagement in work-related practices. Our usage data highlight substantial numbers of teachers engaging with the thematic group while at work in their 'face-to-face' workplaces, and therefore engaging in a near-simultaneous form of 'double work'. Conversely, we found teachers engaging with the thematic group throughout periods of the day, week and year that is considered 'free' or 'leisure' time.

Conclusions

These findings certainly highlight the need to approach professional uses of social media in a nuanced manner and to move beyond discussions of Facebook being either 'good' or 'bad'; 'empowering' or 'oppressive'. Instead, as with any form of online

collective we need to make sense of the thematic Facebook group in terms of “the logics that motivate and sustain it, and its personal, social, cultural and economic consequences” (Baym & Burnett 2009, p. 447). Our findings highlight longer-term implications that these practices might have for diminished professionalism and expertise of networked teacher professional publics. Discussions about professional uses of social media therefore need to better acknowledge the contradictory nature of the internet in supporting professionals to engage in collective work-related activities that “are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited” (Terranova 2000, p. 37).

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