Selected Papers of #AoIR2022:
The 23rd Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Dublin, Ireland / 2-5 Nov 2022

ONLINE SPACES, IMPOSSIBLE IMAGINARIES, AND SYNTHETIC SOCIALITY

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Social media enable the formation of unprecedented numbers of ties between people, and allow for communication at an unprecedented scale. However, not everyone wishes to be in contact with so many people at once; nor do social media users wish to hear everything that every other user has to say. To this end, technologies for making online ties have always been accompanied by features for breaking them. These include "unfriending," "unfollowing," "muting," and "blocking." Additionally, complimentary features of social media allow end users to prioritize specific communicants or messages over others. Examples of these kinds of feature include "favoriting" or Instagram's "close friends."

While one can more or less conflate "unfriending" with "breaking off a friendship," often the features for enhancing or diminishing the presence of others' voices on social media platforms create situations that are perplexingly new, and cannot be mapped easily onto familiar offline scenarios. We argue that these new, *sui generis* situations instantiate a set of social architectures and imaginaries that we describe collectively using the term, *synthetic sociality*.

In this paper, we analogize these synthetically social situations with Derrida's (1978) concept of *écriture*. He argues that written language isn't a derivative reflection of orality, but rather a self-contained set of communicative capacities that precedes and surrounds oral communication. Similarly, one of the reasons it can be difficult to understand socially mediated actions such as blocking, favoriting, or restricting through the lens of embodied sociality is that the underlying premise is fallacious: digital social media are no more derivative or reflective of embodied relations than writing is derivative or reflective of orality.

Sinnreich, A. & John, N. (2022, November). *Online spaces, impossible imaginaries, and synthetic sociality*. Paper presented at AoIR 2022: The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Dublin, Ireland: AoIR. Retrieved from http://spir.aoir.org.

To exemplify the concept of *synthetic sociality*, we present three forms of "born digital" (Rogers, 2013) social transactions: the "block" feature in Facebook, the "restrict" feature in Instagram, and "favorite" contacts in address book apps. In none of these cases are the resulting social architectures easily analogized to those achievable in a physical social environment. And, in each case, users have nonetheless developed a tacit set of practices, understandings, and terminologies that account for these "impossible" architectures. We interpret this as an indication that the human social imaginary is inherently attuned to *synthetic sociality*, and that socially mediated interactions aren't merely derivative or destructive of face-to-face sociality, but rather reflective of a broader set of latent social capacities that have expanded into the more complex topography of the online landscape — just as human expression and the production of meaning were complexified and extended through the shift from orality to *écriture.*

The "block" feature on Facebook renders the blocker and the blocked mutually invisible: neither will appear in searches or on one another's timelines or feeds. For (almost) all intents and purposes, each does not exist within the other's Facebook experience. This produces peculiar social situations. If these two people are in the same Facebook group, for instance, their posts will be invisible to one another. If these posts are part of a discussion, the discussion will appear disjointed to them, without any explicit indication to either party as to why.

The "restrict" feature in Instagram similarly creates a social situation that cannot be translated into embodied spaces. When an Instagram user "restricts" a follower, that follower is still able to see the user's posts, and is even able to interact with those posts (unlike people who have been blocked). Crucially, though, their comments are withheld from the feeds of all of the user's other followers. In other words, Instagram has engineered a situation whereby someone can add comments to a post, thinking that they have an audience, whereas in fact they are shouting into a void without any way of knowing that this is the case.

Features for privileging the communication of selected individuals also create synthetically social situations. For instance, "favoriting" certain contacts in an address book can grant them the ability to break through a phone's "Do not disturb" setting, or ensure that their emails rise immediately to the top of an inbox. In these scenarios, the "favorite" contact is effectively amplified relative to other voices, and granted something akin to a VIP pass to restricted information spaces.

Socially synthetic architectures reflect a dialectical feedback loop between the totality of human psychosocial capacity and the accelerating rate of networked platform development. Just as in the analogous case of *écriture*, we argue that *synthetic sociality* constitutes its own self-contained social logic, which precedes and surrounds the logic of face-to-face communication, and which generates a far more complex architecture of meaning, identity, and relationship than we can describe using the constrained lexicon of offline social relations. Key to this architecture is the fact that at least one party to a synthetically social situation lacks full knowledge of it: unbeknownst one or more actors, their voice has been amplified or silenced.

Synthetic sociality describes a broader architecture of social possibility enabled by the addition of social media platforms to our preexisting sociotechnical environment. The affordances of social media platforms are not handed down from on high, or birthed in their final form (Bijker & Law, 1992); to the contrary, this ever-changing feature set is continually reshaped through a contingent set of circumstances: the fact of online abuse and harassment (Massanari, 2017); the features for controlling the presence of others (Author, 2022); the economic incentives for social media platforms, which grant users control over their experience so that they remain on the platform (Light & Cassidy, 2014); and the large-scale political functions of social media (Gillespie, 2018).

In conclusion, by introducing the concept of *synthetic sociality*, we aim to provide a conceptual tool that will help scholars to avoid two common fallacious pitfalls. One is the notion, alluded to above, that online sociality is in some way reflective of, derivative of, or dependent upon a more primary sociality that inheres in to face-to-fact interaction (unfortunately, this fallacy is widely held even within the executive suites at major social media firms, who typically rely on their user bases to develop new ideas for platform affordances). The other is the concept, exemplified by the premise of "Dunbar's number" (Hill & Dunbar, 2003), that the new possibilities engendered by social media somehow beggar the human social imagination, melting our monkey brains by offering us social power and cultural nuance that we're unequipped to appreciate. As our framing of *synthetic sociality* demonstrates, neither of these fallacies is particularly helpful if we wish to understand the increasingly central role that social media play in human affairs.

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