


2013

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Repository Citation

Wittkower, Dylan E., "A Phenomenology of SNS Sharing" (2013). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 3.
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/philosophy_fac_pubs/3

Original Publication Citation

Wittkower, Dylan E. "A Phenomenology of Sns Sharing." *Selected Papers of Internet Research* 14, (2013): 1-3.

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A Phenomenology of SNS Sharing

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Abstract

In this contribution to a phenomenology of social network sites (SNS), we see how the share button brings about an alteration in our being-with others. On the side of the sharer, we see an experience of the world in a mode of possible retroactive sociality, creating an enigma in the constitution and attention of the subject of a given experience. On the side of the receiver, we see how being shared with creates sometimes unwelcome retrospective ideation of the sharer's experience, and requires a choice whether, by liking or commenting, to bring the sharer into retroactive awareness of having been experiencing the shared alongside the receiver. Only if and when the shared has been received and the reception has been shared is asynchronous being-with at a distance constituted.

Keywords

SNS; phenomenology; sharing; Facebook; Heidegger

A Phenomenology of SNS Sharing

In this contribution to a phenomenology of social network sites (SNS), we see how the share button brings about an alteration in our being-with others. Similar phenomena have already been observed and theorized in other media, as in despatialized simultaneity and the decoupling of time and space (Thompson, 1995), remote connectivity in a mobile private sphere (Papacharissi, 2010), connected presence (Campbell and Park, 2008), and the space of flows (Castells, 2000). While the focus of this paper is SNS sharing, it is hoped that the analysis will be of a kind fundamental enough to be clearly applicable (although perhaps sometimes in different and incomplete ways) to these similar modes of mediated construction of shared experience.

The analysis takes place against the background of Heidegger's consideration of loneliness, and its goal is, first, to explicate the process whereby SNS allow the construction of asynchronous shared experience, and, second, to demonstrate that some of the user experiences resulting from sharing are rightly characterized as "shared experience" in a substantial sense.

Heidegger (1962) argues that it is only because our mode of being is fundamentally social—*Dasein* is always already *Mitsein*—that it is possible for us to be lonely. Loneliness follows from the ontic condition of not being with others of a being that is ontologically being-with others; loneliness, then, is being-with in a negative mode.

SNS "sharing" allows two or more persons to experience an object of attention together asynchronously and at a distance. Typical objects of such shared experience include an article or website, a song or video, or an image—as for example a funny cat picture, or a photograph of one's meal. The construction of a shared experience of this object of attention consists schematically of two processes, joined together by the technically necessary but experientially unrelated process of SNS posting: (1) the initial experience of the sharer prior to sharing and (2) the subsequent experience of the receiver following sharing.

(1). The pre-sharing experience of the sharer is an experience of the present as potentially at a later time retrospectively experienced by another as having been experienced along with the sharer, hence representing a distinct and unprecedented intermediate between the negative mode of being-with in loneliness and the positive mode of being-with in community. This is a novel experiential presence of the modal category of the possible, whose resolution into actual presence or non-presence of others is determined in the future—in Ihde's (1990) phenomenology of human-technology relations, it appears

as an asynchronous form of embodiment technics, but which produces an enigma position within the constitution and attention of the subject ((I/We-)-technology → world), forming an opposite extreme to his alterity relation (I → technology-(-world)).

Once habituated to the possibilities of retroactive construction of shared experience presented by SNS, we carry our networks along with us as persons or groups whom we are potentially in the future to have currently been with. The misspelled store sign we see now is experienced no longer as something that *would have been* funny to experience with an absent friend, but as something which is funny to potentially be retroactively currently experiencing with an absent friend—should we only choose to photograph and share it with that friend. This is similar to the internal narrativization of daily experience in anticipation of the possibility of later recounting to friends who may be concerned with or amused by the events experienced, but is substantially different in that sharing constructs the object itself as subject to shared experience, while narrative recounting can aim only towards an “as if” presence of the object of experience to the other. In the case of projected posterior narration, we ideate the later retelling as a layer placed on top of the current experience, whereas in the potentially shared experience we ideate the retroactive gaze of the absent friend through the very lens of our camera phone as an added co-present subjectivity—and this ideation affects our experience whether or not we choose, in the end, to post the picture.

(2). In the reception of the shared object of attention, the receiver experiences the object alongside a retrospective ideation of the sharer’s initial experience, which, however, is only experienced as potentially knowingly along-with the receiver, again representing an intermediate between negative and positive modes of being-with. When the receiver experiences the shared object she projects backwards the sharer’s experience of the object. She may seek to reconstruct the sharer’s experience in asking, for example, what’s supposed to be funny about it, or perhaps whether the sharer shared this as something to be celebrated and enjoyed or something to be lamented. In any case, if she considers indicating receipt of the shared object through commenting, liking, or sharing the post, she must imagine not only the sharer’s experience of the object, but the sharer’s ideation of the receiver’s experience of the object—roughly speaking, she must imagine the experiencing-together of the object by the sharer and the receiver. The retrospective construction of such a shared experience may be meaningful, creating a mutual feeling of warmth and closeness, or may even be highly disruptive, as in the case of a parent who comments upon a child’s drunken photograph.

The technical act of SNS sharing, being related only externally to the sharer’s experience of something as to be shared, often fails to reach all and only the ideationally intended recipients. While for the most part and for most users this is a feature rather than a bug, allowing for collateral benefits in accidental contributions to the maintenance and development of untargeted relationships, the receiver may be forced to engage in unwelcome ideation of the sharer—“who is my cousin such that she shared this?”; “does my former student really think this is funny?”—or may simply have been invited by implication into a group, context, or event of a too-intimate nature.

This transgressive form of sharing (“oversharing”), which creates a retrospective ideation of being-with the sharer against the will and preferences of the receiver, has a parallel in a transgressive form of receiving a shared experience. Having been accidentally included as potential recipient of a shared event, the recipient can create retroactive co-presence in the past experience against the will and preferences of the sharer. The parent may know full well that he is not among the community of intended recipients of the child’s post, and by replying to it may rightly be called a “creeper.” Both parties must recognize that the merely external relation between the ideational and technical acts of sharing creates accidental moments of publicity, which call for civil inattention (Goffman, 1971). In an offline example of these mirrored forms of transgression, while it is surely transgressive to use the bathroom with the door open while company is over, it is also surely transgressive, having accidentally walked into the bathroom in use, to assume that one has implicitly been invited to stay.

Only once the shared has been received and the reception has been shared is asynchronous being-with at a distance constituted—the circle must be closed at both ends, otherwise consisting only of an abstract and generic being-possibly-with on the part of the sharer and a being-merely-alongside on the

part of the receiver. By articulating these moments in the construction of asynchronous shared experience at a distance through SNS sharing we can see the intricate and rich modulations of being-with resulting from what we might call—following Heidegger’s analysis of loneliness—the sudden ontological being-online of our lives, in which synchronous, monomodal offline life is merely a negative mode of synchronous, multimodal being-online.

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