

The Power to Choose or Power to Lose? Networked Individualism and the Usage of Social Media

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The aim of the paper is to highlight some current characteristics of social media usage among individuals and to question the modern power of individuals to personalise their experience with media information. Social media are modern communication channels and a framework for communicating and establishing relationships. The paper therefore presents some global trends characteristic for modern society. The starting point is so-called networked individualism, typical for modern culture with an individual at the centre and lots of connections around him. Our society is a network society, so networking is one of the basic organisational principles. The paper problematises communication practices within social network sites and presents some explanations. The paper introduces a comparison between early text-based (anonymous) on-line communication (chat rooms and discussion forums), which were more topic oriented, and current networking and communication via social network sites, which are more person oriented. The major shift is from communication toward networking. Networking presupposes lots of networked and connected people, which has an influence on communication practices; because it is difficult to maintain deep and content-rich communication with lots of individuals, the phatic function of communication is prevailing. Within social network sites different types of information are exchanged. The motivation to be nice and conflict-avoidant influence what kind of information and what kind of communication we are looking for. The prevalence of “light” information is just one characteristic. The actual usage of social media also promotes the cultural logic of branding the self, which causes the modification of values. Nowadays the visibility and attention have become the driving force of most social media users.

The paper also highlights and discusses potential obstacles regarding modern usage of social media. The well-informed citizen is a precondition for robust democracy. The power of the citizen to choose what to consume and what kind of information best suits them is a welcome novelty but it also might confront us with problematic scenarios. That is to say social media optimism is based mainly on the techno-deterministic viewpoint of empowering technology. The power to choose also means the power not to choose or to avoid. Individuals have lots of ways to manage information and to filter information. But this is a double-edged sword, because now individuals have a much greater opportunity to skip or to ignore lots of information usually distributed by traditional media. The diversity of the communication channels and (media) information has the potential to make us less diverse. In terms of the power to choose and control information, the empowered citizen is therefore questioned in order to stress the importance of media literacy for the future development of societies. Digital technologies can be a very powerful tool, but nevertheless they are just technologies – their usage is a reflection of the individual. The paper stresses the potential danger when individuals build their knowledge mostly or solely upon information they choose themselves, or upon their Facebook friends. As we develop digital technologies, the digital divide is not vanishing. On the contrary; the gap between well- and poorly informed citizens is becoming even deeper.

Keywords: digital technologies, social media, networked individualism, communication, identity