Social media and personal relationships: online intimacies and networked friendship

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BOOK REVIEW

**Social media and personal relationships: online intimacies and networked friendship**, by Deborah Chambers, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 224 pp., £55.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-230-36417-2, £55.00

*Social media and personal relationships* is structured around eight themes: conceptualising intimacy and friendship; friendship and self-presentation online; social media and teenage friendships; home families and new media; digital dating and romance; virtual communities and online social capital; and mediated intimacies. A summary of these themes follows along with reflections on how they could be addressed in further detail.

The book begins by asserting ‘growing evidence suggests that technology is contributing to a dramatic reconfiguration of our ideas about intimacy and friendship’. This technology is represented by ‘sites such as Facebook, My Space and Friendster’ which, ‘after reshaping the landscape of business, culture and research’, is ‘forging new ways of being intimate and doing intimacy’ (p. 3).

The following chapter *Conceptualising intimacy and friendship* traces the ‘detraditionalisation’ of intimacy from the 1970s to the present. It highlights the more informal, diverse and fluid nature of social relationships embodied in social networks. We are told, as reflexive selves, we are a work in progress and social networks are our new tools; they afford ‘elective intimacy’ (p. 46) where acts of disclosure cement bonds to create the ‘families we choose’ (p. 48). We manage these relationships in ‘public’ in the sense public ‘no longer means outside the home’ (p. 57). The chapter ends by introducing the tension between building a community and self-promotion.

This theme is explored in more detail in *Friendship and self-presentation online*. Symbolic interactionism is recruited to help understand how users ‘actively participate in forms of impression management that were once the preserve of celebrities, politicians and others in the public eye’ (p. 63). Impression management creates a public ‘digital other’ (p. 66) which is said to complicate and politicise our notions of privacy. The offline and online, private and public intersect now to the extent that employers react to declarations on Facebook: as a result individuals are forced to become ‘entrepreneurs of their own lives’ (p. 81).

*Social media and teenage friendships* argues digital media has therefore ‘changed young people’s transition to adulthood’ (p. 84). We are told there are be new pressures on young people; the cliché about growing up in public that used to apply to famous child prodigies now applies to all teenage social network users. Once ephemeral and disembodied ‘social dramas’ now can become permanent digital records for all to revisit. These young ‘entrepreneurs’ are entitled to feel abandoned because social networks ‘seem to be amplifying the long term trend of social and cultural segregation from the adult world’ (p. 101).

*Home families and new media* explores this apparent segregation manifest in the ‘gap between children’s and parent’s understanding and skills in using social media’ (p. 103). The result is a tension between young people’s expectations and wishes and more conservative adult norms and anxieties. New arrangements are said to be reconfiguring family life particularly child-parent relations. However, we are shown social media can also unite families internationally and across generations.
Digital dating and romance reassembles the book’s earlier themes; ‘the fluidity and choice apparently offered by online dating fits in neatly with today’s ethos of elective intimacy’ (p. 139). The reflexive self who is engaged in impression management is discussed: it is suggested we are project managing the outcomes of our mediated romantic encounters. We are also shown social media affords new outlets for dysfunctional behaviour such as stalking. Again, it is argued new media’s disruptive consequences are more sharply experienced by teenagers and young people: ‘for them new media is reconfiguring their notions of privacy and publicity and their concepts of personal and intimate’ (p. 140). However, ‘surprisingly’ a ‘conventional culture of intimacy’ remains. While the pressures of living in the work-dominated, fragmented off-line world have led us to isolation and alienation, online dating allows us re-enact ‘traditional romance’ (p. 141). This may be a deceptive over-simplification. We are shown romance may be just another project that has been assimilated into the all-encroaching neo-liberalist ideological world view: we set our own performance management targets.

Virtual communities and online social capital asks what is a virtual community and where do they exist? This chapter argues that virtual communities are usually tethered to offline geographies: ‘personalised public networks correspond closely with physical or institutional spaces people inhabit’ (p. 160). This, however, disguises another contradiction; we are reminded social networks also afford what Castells calls ‘mass self-communication’ to appeal to a global audience. The possibility is raised social capital can be leveraged within such networks. People with larger social networks can exploit weak ties to, for example, find a job. The virtual community we are informed is not a substitute for off line interaction but an enhancement which reduces the temporal and financial costs of networking. The drawback for society is that homophilous networks facilitate ‘zones of exclusion configured by class race and gender’ (p. 154).

The book ends by arguing ‘mediated intimacies and looser ties are being moulded by commercial agendas’ and asks us ‘does this matter?’ (p. 171). A process of ‘deep commodification’ is resulting in the ‘corporate colonisation’ of intimate acts and the subsequent contamination and redefinition of the language of intimacy. Our inner selves have become corporate products and therefore the conceptualisation of ‘friendship’ has become an arena for a ‘clash of values’ (p. 174). A ‘stronger public and collective awareness’ is advocated so social media operates in our interests and not in the interests of ‘commercial forces’.

It is a reflection of the contrast between the dynamism of socio-technical change and the ability of researchers to respond it, that this book’s use of case studies and examples often limit the scope and relevance of its discussions. For example, smartphone apps such as Grindr and Tinder allow users to triangulate available data including looks, desires and geographical proximity for the purpose of facilitating commitment-free sexual encounters. Arguably, these are having more profound effects on our notions intimacy. The ‘social and moral implications of media use’ (p. 38) are illustrated by reference to David Cameron’s text to Rebekah Brooks which was revealed during the Leveson inquiry. The practice of ‘sexting’ would, perhaps, have made a better case study. This sending, via smartphones, of private explicit self-portraits or ‘selfies’ to lovers is a newly afforded intimate act. Recipients, by forwarding or broadcasting the images on social networks, can perpetrate devastating effects on the sender. These betrayals can often embody sexual double standards that are further evidenced in social network-based misogynistic abuse or ‘trolling’ such as the recent ‘Slane Girl’ incident. Similarly, Photobucket is cited as a website used for uploading and sharing images but nothing is said about Tumblr and Instagram. My Space is mentioned more often than Twitter, especially in relation to teenage practice, but there is nothing about teenage favourites such as 9gag and 4chan and, although Second Life and World of Warcraft are cited, the popularity of socialising in games such as Minecraft is underplayed. Equally, the references to My Space indicate the research is dominated by North
American culture. Meanwhile, Friendster has become an Asian-Pacific phenomenon and Sina Weibo, China’s alternative to Twitter, continues to develop cultural significance.

There are many further missed opportunities to engage with both the semantics and grammar of digital technology. For example, in terms of semantics the Internet is discussed routinely when the context clearly suggests we should be thinking about the World Wide Web. The distinction is important; the Internet refers to the physical communication infrastructure of the Web, the servers, routers and cables. Social networks are facilitated by software; the hyperlinking of resources described by Universal Resource Identifiers on the Web.

Castells’ concepts of interpersonal and mass communication are discussed often in this book. In terms of grammar, for example, a simple dot before the @ on Twitter changes the dynamics of the message. The dot breaks ‘breaks’ Twitter’s native (built-in) reply threading so that interpersonal exchanges are fully readable to all your followers not just the followers you share with the message’s recipient. This is an example of how subtle the distinctions are on social networks between interpersonal and mass communication.

However, despite these minor criticisms there is much to recommend this book in the way it synthesises the research of leading digital scholars such as boyd, Ito and Livingstone and the extent it draws on the theoretical frameworks of Bauman, Beck, Giddens, Goffman and many others to help us understand the effects of digital media on our personal and public lives.

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