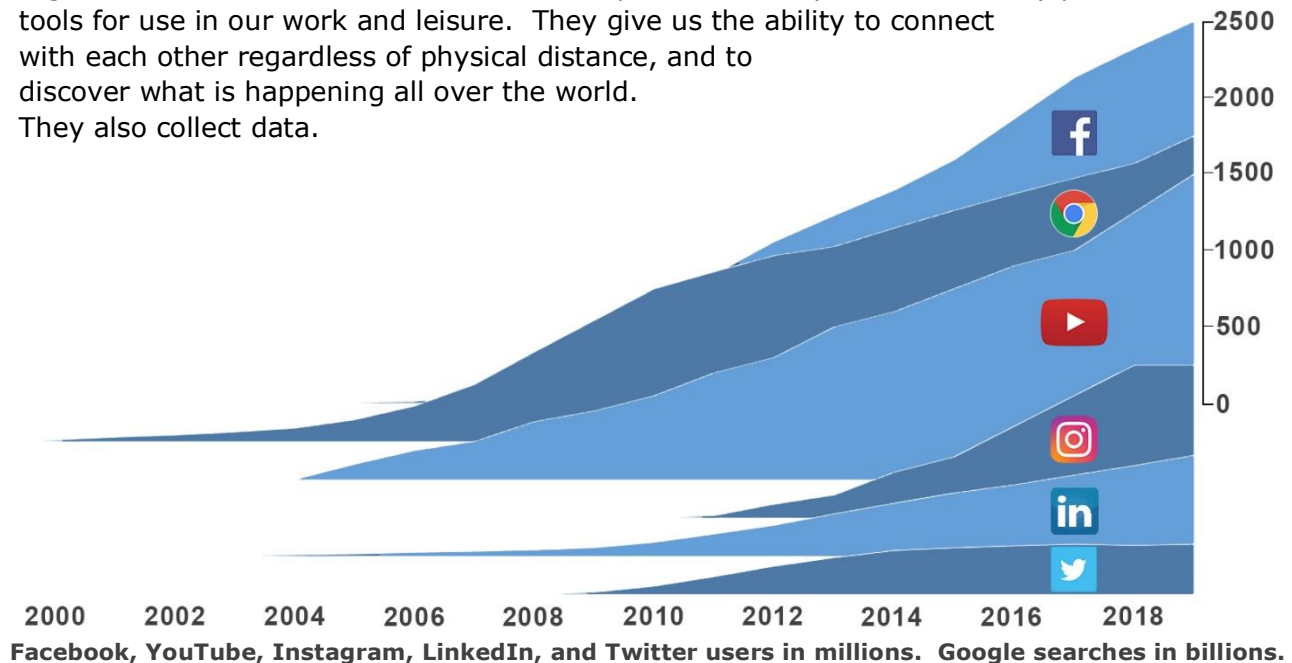


Data Collection and the Need for the Double Movement

Mitchell Beckner

Google processes over 63,000 search requests every second, and every day over one fifth of the world's population logs in to Facebook to post their photographs, thoughts, and opinions on every subject imaginable. The invention of digital computers and the World Wide Web has taken the process of gathering and sharing information to unprecedented levels.

The figure below shows the growth of several online platforms. These sites and organizations deliver our news, answer our questions, and provide incredibly powerful tools for use in our work and leisure. They give us the ability to connect with each other regardless of physical distance, and to discover what is happening all over the world. They also collect data.



While it might be expected that the global communication made possible through the internet and social media would lead to greater understanding between individuals and groups, in practice it has often led to the strengthening of societal divisions. In addition, companies like Google and Facebook collect immense amounts of behavioral data on their users. This data has been used to create a new information industry in which, with or without their consent, users are the suppliers of the raw material as well as the targets of the marketing that results. Analytical tools divide individuals into segments based on the data collected. Then customized advertisements and tactics are created to entice the user into purchasing products or services. Modern consumerism has drawn society into becoming a willing participant in the growth of this new information capitalism.

In the past, major economic advancements such as the industrial revolution have been followed by what economist Karl Polanyi referred to as a double movement. Social programs and controls evolved in response to the new developments in order to balance their destructive tendencies, and harness them for the overall good of society. Due to the complex nature of the recent technological advances, the speed at which they have evolved, and the current neoliberal economic environment, the appropriate regulation and oversight required for Polanyi's double movement has yet to emerge.