The Fate of Three Billion Friends: The Concept of the Individual in the

Age of Social Media

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Perhaps one of the most important developments in the last year of

social media has been the movement towards community guidelines,

regulation, and decentralization in social media platforms. Although

social media has been approached by a number of critical theorists, from

Fuchs to Zuboff, as an instrument of control and surveillance that must

be regulated, the reaction of many developers has been to "decentralize"

social media via, as shown by Jack Dorsey's "Blue Sky," project to use

blockchain technology. The argument put forward by Twitter is that users

should "own" their identity and the content via distributed storage

archived with cryptography, but that Twitter would remain simply an

interface for discovery.

Yet is this all simply an attempt to avoid regulation via

decentralization, rather than user empowerment? Although traditionally

we only conceive of two models for regulation – the state or the market

– many engineers are looking into how to run social media platforms more

like a commons, where communities can create decentralized,

self-governing social media spaces where those that violate community

norms can be banned from a community but not from the entire system or

lose their data.

However, this decentralized social media commons may not be the panacea

that is hoped for. We will delve into the case study of the failure of

the W3C Social Web Working Group. Started in 2015, this standards effort

was meant to prevent the centralization of power in platforms like

Facebook and Twitter, and the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) produced

standards that were used by federated social media platform like Mastodon.

The groups that have left Facebook and Twitter for these federated and

decentralized alternatives left due to censorship. These groups have so

far included Neo-nazis and other assorted ideologues of the right, many

of whom have gone on to alternative social networking software Mastodon

via their platform Gab. This is ironic insofar as in spite of the fact

that Mastodon was created to allow community self-governance to prevent

Nazis from taking over communities online. Mastodon’s developers have

decried Nazis using their software but could do nothing about it. The

price of a decentralized alternative to Twitter is that any community,

from progressives to Nazis, can create their own community online, and

the same toxicity seen on Facebook and Twitter simply repeats itself.

In this paper, we argue that the core of the toxicity of social media

lies not in issues of regulation or technology, but in an impoverished

view of social life based on a very peculiar concept of social networks.

Following work by Lovink and our earlier work on the assumptions of

Moreno's sociometry embedded in the very idea of a "social network" as a

locus of soft control, we put forward and develop the critique of humans

being reduced to individual "users" of social media, each with their own

"activity stream." This conceptual model, pioneered by  Six Apart and

Friendster and then embedded in Facebook and Twitter, embeds the locus

of social activity as the individual. This mistaken assumption was also

deeply embedded in the W3C Social Web standards and continues to be

embedded, following the work of Brekke and Golumbia, in blockchain

technology.

As a way out, we lean upon Stiegler's reinterpretation of Simondon to

re-theorize "users" not as a priori individuals, but as myriad

potentialities in process of a collective individuation. This process of

individuation takes place via technology (and so is a

"transindividuation"), and the peculiar models of information used in

technology can either destroy or foster the creation of autonomous

individuals. So while, as Stiegler put it, "five hundred million"

friends becomes an epistemological absurdity, the formation of

collective forms of knowledge and commons can be fostered when the

individual "activity stream" and "profile" are taken away. Instead, the

heart of social software moves to the collective and its sharing of

knowledge via annotation, discourse, and organization. As shown by the

later works of Stiegler's lab at IRI, by removing the individual as a

mere "node" in the "social" network, the social can be reattached to

information architectures in a manner that fosters, rather than

destroys, the formation of genuine individuals in our socio-technical world.