

Social Media as Practices: an Ethnographic Critique of ‘Affordances’ and ‘Context Collapse’.

Elisabetta Costa,
Assistant professor, Department of Media and Journalism, University of Groningen, the
Netherlands.
Honorary Research Fellow at UCL Department of Anthropology, London, UK.

Working papers for the EASA Media Anthropology Network’s 60th e- Seminar.

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/>

Abstract

Drawing on data gathered during ethnographic fieldwork in Mardin, a medium-sized town in southeast Turkey, this paper examines people’s production of different online social spaces. The paper shows that social media users actively appropriate online platforms and change privacy settings in order to keep different social spheres and social groups apart. Social media users actively mould online social environments that largely resemble those existing in the offline world. Keeping different online social contexts divided from one another is the taken for granted way of using social media in Mardin. By contrast, social media scholars have extensively discussed the effects of social media in terms of *context collapse* (among others see Marvin 2013; Marwick and Boyd 2011; Marwick and Ellison 2012; Vitak 2012; Wesch 2008, 2009). This in turn has been described as a consequence of platform’s architecture and *affordances*. This paper shows that the theory of *context collapse* does not account for the uses of social media in Mardin. It demonstrates that the concept of *affordance* has been largely used to describe “intrinsic” properties of a platform and its architecture, which are instead the results of pattern of usage within Anglo-American contexts. The paper concludes by suggesting the importance of considering social media as an open set of situated practices, rather than architectures provided with unchangeable and intrinsic properties.

Keywords

Turkey, social media, Facebook, context, affordance, practice, scalable sociality.

Introduction

“Really? Do people in Milan and London only have one Facebook account? Don’t they use pseudonyms or fake profiles? I can’t believe it. How could it be possible?”

A young Kurdish man from Mardin, a medium-sized town in southeast Turkey, expressed in this way his surprise at hearing that in other parts of the world social media users tend to have only one Facebook account that is used mostly under real name and identity. In Mardin people often have multiple Facebook profiles used with different groups of people, and can employ them under fake names and pseudonyms. They often create different closed groups within the same account, massively use the private chat of Facebook for one-to-one communication, or deliberately take advantage of the visibility offered by more public accounts. The public-facing Facebook inhabited by few hundreds friends, relatives and neighbors, is indeed only one kind of space within a configuration of different online environments and scalable socialities (Miller et al. 2016), and it is purposely used to broadcast updates, images and news to a large audience. The public Facebook wall is ruled by clear social norms. Here people have produced a clear normativity that fit the expectations of one specific audience, e.g. the general public formed by

family members, friends and neighbors. In Mardin social media users carefully mould their online space in order to keep different social spheres apart. Keeping different online social contexts divided from one another is the normal way of using social media. Interlocutors of my research mastered Facebook privacy settings excellently and often changed them in order to intentionally create online spaces that are divided from each other. In each online context they follow social norms, values and codes of behaviors that reproduce and remediate (Bolter and Grusin 1999) those existing in the social contexts of the offline world.

Media scholars have extensively discussed the effects of social media in terms of *context collapse* (among others see Marvin 2013; Marwick and Boyd 2011; Marwick and Ellison 2012; Vitak 2012; Wesch 2008; 2009), seen as the collapsing of several contexts upon one another (Wesch 2009). The concept draws from Erving Goffman's argument according to which people portray different images of themselves to different audiences in different social contexts (Goffman 1959). Danah boyd (2002), inspired by the work of Joshua Meyrowitz (1985), introduced the expression *collapsed context* in her first study on social media and used it in many other research (among others 2008a; 2008b; 2010; 2014). Meyrowitz's (1985) main goal was to study social interactions in the context of media environments. He argued that media professionals who speak in front of a camera transcend physical boundaries and talk to different publics, with the result that places lose the social significance they had before. Likewise, social media users would be "forced to grapple simultaneously with otherwise unrelated social contexts that are rooted in different norms and seemingly demand different social responses" (boyd 2014: 31). The concept of *context collapse* has remained largely unchallenged in the literature on social media. Yet, more recently, Davis and Jurgenson (2014) highlighted limits and ambiguities of this theory, and proposed a theoretical refinement that could balance the emphasis given to the "normative structure of social media platforms" (2014: 479), by bringing into attention the active role of social actors and their context.

In this paper I show that the concept of *context collapse* does not account for the uses of social media in Mardin. My ethnographic evidence demonstrates that Facebook users tend to communicate to imagined audiences that already existed in the offline world, and they follow clear social norms in different online social situations. My research participants were not forced to struggle with the emergence of new online spaces that mixed up unrelated social contexts. Mardinites, indeed, actively shaped online contexts of interactions, assessed and adjusted their presentation accordingly. There is no collapse of contexts on social media in Mardin. This is the consequence of two main factors: social media users make a massive use of privacy settings and have an active role in creating and crafting different online environments; the public-facing Facebook resembles the traditional social context of wedding ceremonies.

This ethnographic evidence raises important questions on the relationship between users and platforms. It shows that Facebook's architecture is not an immutable and normative structure. *The collapse of context*, indeed, has been portrayed as a consequence of platform's *affordances*, defined as the properties of an environment which make possible and facilitate certain types of practices (boyd 2014). According to Marwick and boyd (2011), the collapse of social contexts that were previously segmented in the offline world, is a consequence of social media's affordances, such as persistence, visibility, spreadability and searchability. I argue that the concept of *affordance* has been often used to describe properties of a platform and its architecture, which are instead the results of specific situated patterns of usage within particular social contexts. This concept invokes technological-centric assumptions on qualities and properties of social media. By contrast, my findings advocate for a perspective that views social media a set of practices that cannot be defined a-priori, and are not predetermined outside of their situated everyday actions and habits of usage (Gray 2015; Bräuchler B. and J. Postill 2010; Couldry 2004; Moores 2005). I suggest that social media studies would benefit from non-media

centric approaches. The notion of *affordance*, as property of a platform, closes the opportunity to grasp the varieties of practices of social media uses, which largely differ across social and cultural contexts¹. Therefore, I advocate a shift in the theoretical conversation about social media from a focus on *affordances* to a focus on *practices*.

Social media uses in Mardin: multiple accounts, fake profiles, close groups and private chats.

The ethnographic evidence presented in this paper stresses the capacity of social media users to creatively appropriate social media in ways that are not accounted for by the theory of *context collapse*. The data emerges from a wider ethnographic study into the practices of social media usage in Mardin, a medium-sized town located in the Kurdish region of Turkey, and inhabited by a majority of Sunni Muslim Kurds and Arabs. The research was part of the larger *WhyWePost* project, based at UCL Department of Anthropology, and dedicated to understanding the uses and consequences of social media around the world (see Miller et al. 2016). Mardin is a peculiar town in Turkey. It is a multi-cultural and multi-religious city that has developed significantly since late '90s. Despite the long history of political violence, the town became a touristic destination. Historic stone houses located on the top of a mountain facing the Mesopotamia flat valley attracted tourists from Turkey and abroad. Then in summer 2015 the escalation of violence between the Turkish State and PKK has interrupted the peace process, slowed down tourism, and started a new difficult chapter in the history of the region and the country. The research was carried out over 15 months in 2013 and 2014 among the youth (aged 15-35) living in the new developing area of this fast-changing town. Here urbanization, economic development, expansion of nuclear family, and extension of education to women have transformed people's everyday life and their social relations. In this context, social media are associated with imaginaries of progress, and embed both the positive and the negative ideals associated with it. For many young Mardinites, mobile phones and the internet have become a venue to practice modernity and distance themselves from the elders and the inhabitants of the less developed nearby towns².

I carried out participant observation online and offline, I did more than 100 in depth interviews, and I submitted almost 300 questionnaires. Facebook was the most used social media, and for this reason it dominates the material presented in this article. WhatsApp was also used, but mainly for one to one or small-group communication. Other platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram, were used only by a small minority of university students and university level educated youth, and have not been included in the analysis (Costa 2016). In the following pages I present stories that illustrate how people use social media in Mardin and create normative conditions for their use (Horst and Miller 2012), which do not satisfy the theory of *context collapse*.

Fatih is a 35 year old Kurdish man, married with two children, and owner of a small house furniture shop. When I asked him to tell me about his Facebook usage habits, Fatih appeared impatient. He was eager to reveal to me that he was simultaneously active on twelve different Facebook accounts: one was used with relatives from his hometown; one with work friends; one with friends from school and hometown; one with female friends; one with female intimate friends; one with foreign girls; one was used for online gaming; one for business; one was used under the name of the 4 year old daughter; one under the name of the 6 year old son; two more accounts were allegedly used for politics, but he didn't want to tell me more about it (see Costa 2016). Fatih was a master in changing his Facebook's privacy settings, and he cared deeply

1 See Miller, D. et al. (2016). *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press.

2 To know more on the uses of social media in Mardin, see Costa E. (2016). *Social Media in Southeast Turkey*. London: UCL Press.

about keeping different spheres divided. He did not want his wife, mistresses, children and family members to be informed about the existence of other women. Yet, he was not so concerned about the wife, who was illiterate and therefore excluded from social media.

Besim is an 18 year old male student in the first year of a vocational school. Besim has three Facebook profiles and one WhatsApp account. The first Facebook account is public, and the content is visible to more than one thousand Facebook friends: school friends, neighbors, relatives, and strangers he met online while playing games. This profile has his real name and real profile picture, and is used to achieve fame and popularity among his friends and family members. He shares a lot of photographs, usually portraying himself alone or with male friends during holiday trips, special dinners, and in occasion of special events. Images are here normative and conventional: several self-portraits in which he aims to portray himself looking handsome, happy, well-dressed, and surrounded by many good friends. The second account is held under a fake name and is used exclusively with few hundreds school male and female friends. He changed the privacy settings not to be found by anybody, and to be free to share funny YouTube videos, anecdotes and jokes. He uses this account to share memes, songs, music and to freely enjoy the company of his friends, secured by the privacy assured by fake name and fake profile picture. He does not share any photo though, not to be recognized by relatives, acquaintances and girlfriend; but all his Facebook friends know who he is. He shares amusing photos with close and intimate friends on a couple of WhatsApp groups of school-friends with whom every day he shares numerous pictures and videos that are comic, funny, irreverent and disrespectful, such as images of himself smoking, or grimacing under the strain of holding up a gym weight. When he went to western Turkey to the seaside for a holiday, he shared pictures of himself wearing swimming trunks. These images would have been considered unacceptable and highly disrespectful towards his relatives, if posted on the public Facebook. The third Facebook account is used with few other close male friends and his girl-friend, who is unaware of the second profile, as she does not approve of him having other girls as Facebook friends. On this account Besim privately shares attractive self-portrait pictures with his sweetheart, who in turn reciprocates by sending him her self-portraits. Besim changes the privacy settings before posting any photo, as he wants to keep the image with the girlfriend completely private; and, as it is often the case, flirting relationships are often maintained through the private exchange of best portraits and pictures.

Isilay is a 21 year old unemployed woman who is waiting for a man to ask her hand in marriage. She is a massive Facebook user. She spends many hours every day on her small Smartphone, where she uses Facebook under a fake profile. Her profile picture is the image of a baby she found on the internet, and her name is the acronyms of a famous Turkish pop singer she is fan of. Her Facebook friends, who are mainly peers from school and neighborhood, know about her real identity, but her parents, relatives and family's friends don't have any clue about her being online. Her parents think that social media are inappropriate for unmarried women. They fear that social media can damage the reputation of their daughter and consequently that of the whole family. To keep her public profile anonymous, Isilay does not post images of herself, nor those of her friends on the wall potentially visible to all. She is also very cautious to write comments that can reveal her and her friends' identity, but she has created a closed Facebook group to communicate and share photos with few of her best friends. She also continuously use the private chat to talk with them and with strangers from other towns in Turkey that she met online. She loves looking at relatives and friends' images, and she likes gossiping about their life. She uses Facebook to gaze at other people's life, but she does not want to be gazed by anyone.

In Mardin a person might have up to 12 Facebook profiles, but people more commonly use two, three or four Facebook accounts, or create different closed groups within the same account in

order to create divided and delimited social contexts inhabited by different audiences. Social media users very rarely accept the default privacy settings proposed by Facebook, and frequently change these to keep different social spheres apart. They sometimes turn their Facebook wall into a private space to store and share confidential images with their sweetheart or very few selected friends. People massively use the private Facebook chat for one to one communication, or create (semi) anonymous Facebook profiles with fake names and fake profile pictures. By doing so, young women from rural or conservative backgrounds escape the control of parents and family; young men better court (and harass) women without being recognized; supporters and sympathizers of leftwing Kurdish groups access political websites and share political content escaping strict State and social surveillance. Facebook users actively change their privacy settings to create and mold different online spaces and keep different groups of people apart. They produce a configuration of different online contexts that vary in number and kinds of people that inhabit them. In Mardin, social media related practices vary significantly among genders, ages and social classes. Yet, everybody is concerned about maintaining an appropriate presentation of the self in front of different audiences, and is actively involved in following the social norms ruling these different online settings.

In Mardin people keep different spheres divided, but also enjoy the opportunities of visibility offered by the public-facing Facebook, which is usually inhabited by the general public of relatives, family's friends and neighbors. Here social media users do not flatten into the same space pre-existing offline contexts, but rather intentionally re-create a public environment that already existed in the public spaces of the town and in people's imaginary. Therefore, even in the case of the public-facing Facebook, there is no *context collapse*. Mardinites keep different contexts apart by massively using the privacy settings available, and on the public-facing social media they reproduce an important traditional public context of the offline world, the wedding ceremony.

Wedding ceremonies and photography on the public-facing Facebook

On the public-facing Facebook my interlocutors followed clear social norms on what and how to post images, status updates and comments. In what follows, I focus on the Facebook photos shared by 200 research participants aged between sixteen and thirty-five, because nearly all people in this age range are active social media users. The visual analysis of these images, and the conversations and the interviews I had with hundreds of social media users, highlight the presence of clear and largely uncontested social norms ruling online public spaces. Also, all participants expressed a clear understanding of the audience they communicate too. This shows that the public space of Facebook has strong similarities with the wedding ceremonies that have a vital importance in the social life of the town and the region. For many years weddings have been the only public happening where women and men met, and where different extended families and networks of friends gathered together. They were the only events where women had the opportunity to show themselves in public and where they could be chosen as bride by young men's mothers, aunts or older sisters. Even now, with the expansion of new mix-gendered public spaces, such as shopping malls and modern cafes, weddings continue to maintain their crucial social role (Costa 2016). On summer people can attend up to ten, twelve, twenty or even more weddings, and participants like to gaze at others and to be observed. This is the occasion where people present in public an embellished self, show fancy clothes, and women display sophisticated hairstyle and expensive jewels. At wedding men and women compete for social recognition and prestige while following traditional codes of behaviors, exactly like on Facebook.

Self-portraits constitute the majority of the photos posted online (Costa 2016). Young people post a lot of individual portraits, and love changing their profile pictures many times every month in

order to have a high number of 'likes'. These images are formal, people keep conventional pose and look straight into the camera lenses. The goal is showing beauty, social and economic success. Pictures portraying groups of friends are less frequent, and sentiments are rarely expressed, with few exceptions, such as the case of women hugging babies who are members of their own family. People prefer to share informal images with friends in the private spaces of Facebook and WhatsApp, where they can be more spontaneous. Then, on the public facing Facebook, tagging others is not common because it often requires an explicit permission from the person who is tagged. Formality, conventionality and frontal postures are the results of the attention and care that social media users dedicate to their online public appearance. This aims at impressing others, reinforce social status, and increase their reputation.

Online, just like at weddings, the presentation of the self produces gossips and comments that have their own life outside their control of their owner and beyond defined places and times. Therefore, people aim at creating an image that conforms to the expectations that society holds about the social lives of specific individuals. The photographic images posted in this space reproduces that same formality of posture and dress that people have at weddings; and the public-facing Facebook reproduces the social context of wedding ceremonies. Furthermore, people are strongly concerned about the prospective of uncontrolled usage of images once they are posted on the wall. The strongest social fear related to Facebook is the possibility that photographs can be stolen and used to deliberately dishonor the owners of the picture and, by extension, their family. This concern has a long history in the town and in the region. Honor, seen as a series of clear expectations about appropriate ways for men and women to appear and behave in public (Baxter 2007), has always been important in Mardin. Yet, the fear of social repercussions generating from the uncontrolled circulation of people's images assumes new connotation with the diffusion of social media. Facebook has increased the chance of images circulations, but the imagined audience remains the same. The *imagined audience* on the public-facing social media is not different from the imagined audience at weddings.

The analysis of the photographic material, the interviews and conversations with social media users, and the participant observation in the offline spaces of the town, show the reproduction of an online public social context that resembles the traditional offline context of wedding ceremonies. Social media users contextualize their online performance and have a very clear image of the audience they are talking to. There is no context collapse, but rather the reproduction of a traditional social situation, where self-presentation continues to be characterized by formality and conventionality.

Crafting online contexts

Changing privacy settings, opening multiple Facebook accounts, creating anonymous and fake profiles, forming different close groups within the same account, unfriending people, blocking undesired acquaintances, massively using the private chat, are not practices of resistance to a rigid architecture that constrains and limits its users. Rather, in Mardin these are the natural and taken for granted way of using Facebook. The majority of my research participants didn't envisage any other ways of using this platform. The default settings and the intentions of the designers did not coincide with the actual uses. Mark Zuckerberg model of *radical transparency* encouraged people to have only one identity online. He argued, "The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly" (Kirkpatrick 2011: 199). The platform of Facebook was designed to be public by default, but Mardinites appropriated it in such a way that privacy was kept under control, and different social contexts were kept strictly divided. Not only these stories show that social media users do not face a *collapse of context*, seen as the flattening of multiple audiences into one (Marwick and boyd 2011), but they also demonstrate

that what has been described as *affordances* are rather local situated practices of usage. This is the case with other *affordances* too. For example, *visibility* (boyd 2014), does not account for the uses of this platform in Mardin. Here social media users can use Facebook to increase their visibility, or can take advantage of the online private spaces to communicate with illegitimate friends and sweethearts out of the gaze of neighbors and relatives. Private chats, fake and anonymous profiles, and closed groups constitute the ordinary way of using social media in Mardin. “Public by default and private through effort” (boyd 2014: 12) does not account for the common usage of social media in my field-site. People are private by default, and go public through big effort. In Mardin social media users change privacy settings and use Facebook as a private or semi-private space. Being visible and public is often more laborious than being private, because it implies a continuous monitoring of the public Facebook page and a carefully crafted performance of the self. *Persistence*, defined as the durability of online expression and content (boyd 2014), in Mardin is only partial because social media users frequently open and close their accounts. When young people change partner, have a quarrel with a friend, or want to hide something, often close their old account and open a new one. Also, social media users rarely share their friends’ photos and images, with the result that when an account is closed down, images and posts are lost. The content posted on the Facebook wall is temporary and ephemeral.

By integrating social media into their everyday lives, Mardinites have produced patterns of usage that reproduce long-standing boundaries between different social contexts of the offline world, and local meanings of private and public. Facebook users have actively constructed online social settings and adapted their self-presentation, language and content to the different audiences. Even the social context of the public facing Facebook wall, which was usually inhabited by few hundred relatives or friends, had a clear precedent in the offline world, which is the wedding ceremony. In Mardin the active moulding of online spaces is not an exception. It is the “natural” and taken for granted way of using social media. For all these reasons, the theory of context collapse does not account for my ethnographic data. Therefore, my research findings can be explained only by decentralizing social media in relation to people’s everyday uses. The ethnographic evidence shows that social media exist only through people’s practices, and that digital architectures and their properties cannot be studied, described and understood out of their situated practices of usage.

As a result, the concept of *context collapse*, which is presented as a theory for understanding the intrinsic properties of a platform and its architecture, appears as a Western-centric generalization. It has risen from research within particular Anglo-American contexts, and cannot be generalized to describe universal properties of a platform. The thesis on context collapse was inspired by the work of Joshua Meyrowitz (1985). Drawing on the example of media professionals who speak in front of a camera, Meyrowitz argued that places lost the social significance they had before, because physical boundaries have been transcended (1985). Danah boyd (2010) highlighted the similarities between the audience for media professionals and for social media users, drawing a parallelism between the collapse of context in broadcast media and on social media. She emphasizes the power of the architecture and minimize the agency of the users in transforming and moulding online spaces:

“Maintaining distinct contexts online is particularly tricky because of the persistent, replicable, searchable, and scalable nature of networked acts. People do try to segment contexts by discouraging unwanted audiences from participating or by trying to limit information to make searching more difficult or by using technologies that create partial walls through privacy settings. Yet a motivated individual can often circumvent any of these approaches.” (boyd 2010: 50-51)

Similarly, people's ability to use privacy settings in Twitter has been overlooked. Twitter has been described as a rigid architecture that flattens multiple audiences into one. Presenting verifiable and singular identities is described as an imperative requirement that limits the possibilities of diversified self-presentations (boyd 2008). The uses of multiple and fake accounts, pseudonyms, and nicknames, and concealment of information, are seen as strategies adopted by users to navigate the tensions produced by rigid social media architectures, which will eventually lead to the inevitable overlapping of different audiences (Marwick 2005). Furthermore, weddings have been presented as an occasion of context collisions that precede electronic media (boyd 2010). Yet, their significance has been dismissed. Weddings are defined as exceptional events "frequently scripted to make everyone comfortable" (boyd 2010: 51). Users' practices that do not conform to the technical norms operating on the platforms are seen as exceptions, as strategies of resistance to the structuring forces of technological design.

We can of course argue that social media technologies are not neutral and do contribute to shaping social interactions and communications. And we can also argue that users actively appropriate and adapt digital technologies to better reflect their own goals and lives. This is certainly not a new idea in social and communication sciences. Yet, I believe that in social media studies the agency of the users has been overlooked and dismissed. In my ethnographic data there is evidence that people use the platform in creative and active ways that both designers and media scholars have not envisaged. This ethnographic evidence shows that it is time to rethink the relationship between user agency and the structuring force of social media platforms.

Social media as practice

Social media studies have been largely dominated by media-centric approaches that emphasize the role of the architecture in shaping uses and content. For example, Van Dijck and Poell (2013) focused on the logic of social media, defined as "the strategies, mechanisms, and economies underpinning these platforms' dynamics" (2013: 3). They emphasized how properties of social media platforms shape contents and usage. Facebook's business model promotes openness and the gathering of user's data and the disclosure of friendships and connections (Van Dijck and Poell 2013). Other scholars (see for example Bucher 2012) highlighted the role played by software and algorithms in shaping friendship and sociability. The overall emphasis given to features and properties of the platform has come along with a specific usage of the concept of *affordance*, which emphasizes the power of social media architecture, and overlooks the relational component and the user agency. This use of the concept is different from others. The notion of *affordance* was embraced by social scientists and media scholars to describe the relationship between the properties of technologies and the structure of social relations, and to point out the technological qualities that are subsumed by users' practices (see Hutchby 2001, 2003; McVeigh-Schultz and Baym 2015; Nagy and Neff 2015; Madianou and Miller 2012). Scholars have conceptualized the concept of *affordance* to overcome deterministic accounts. Hutchby (2001) emphasized the relational component of *affordances*, which have been defined as the relationships between materiality of technology and practices of communication. Faraj & Azad (2012) advocated a focus on relationality between actions that occur among people and technologies. Miller and Madianou (2012) used the term *affordance* to address the contextualized user's perceptions of the platforms. In their ethnographic study on new media and migration they defined "new media as an environment of affordances" (Miller and Madianou 2012: 170), and put emphasis on the social and emotional consequences of choosing between different media's properties. The authors viewed *affordances* as communication opportunities defined by the relationship between them, and the relationship between these and the users. McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015) focused on the process of sense-making in shaping vernacular affordances. Nagy and Neff (2015) studied the imaginary

dimension of the affordances of digital technologies. In all these studies, *affordances* are understood as a part of language, imaginary and practices of social media users. Here the concept of *affordance* is conceived as relational, and is used to develop a middle-ground between technology determinism and social constructivism, and to overcome the duality of objects and subjects.

However, in social media and communication studies this concept has often been used to refer to properties and features of a technology that are separated from the social context and the work of human users. Within communication technology literature, *affordance* is mostly used to describe fixed qualities and features of a social media platform, which create possibilities for the users (e.g. Aakhus 2007; Vitak 2012; 2015; Postigo 2014; Trepte 2015; Wellman et al. 2003). It is this specific usage of *affordance* that has led to the formulation of essentialist claims on the properties of social media architectures, among which the theory of *context collapse* is one example. The term *affordance* should inscribe the possibilities not actualized by media users (Have and Pedersen 2015), but it fails to do so. I am not denying that social media platforms have specific properties that shape, constrain or generate practices. But I argue that these qualities cannot be known outside of their actual situated uses. My approach is in line with Oliver's study of e-learning technologies. Trying to measure affordances "becomes speculative rather than analytic" (Oliver 2005: 401), and *affordances* are "redundant as analytic objects" (Oliver 2005: 406). Therefore, I suggest that practice theories can enable media scholars to move away from the limits imposed by the affordance and algorithm paradigm, and can enable them to grasp the varieties of possible uses of social media.

In the last two decades media scholars have increasingly focused on media practices (e.g. Barassi 2015; Bräuchler and Postill 2010; Couldry 2004; Moores 2000). Practice has become an emerging theme in media studies, as a way to remove the problem of 'media effects', which is hard avoid if you focus on media text (Couldry 2004). As pointed out by Nick Couldry (2004), a focus on practices emerged to escape the constraints put by an emphasis on *text*. Theories of domestication in relation to new media and technologies (among others see Hirsch 1992 and Silverstone 1994), have also formulated theoretical frameworks that emphasize the role of practice and processes of technological appropriation. Ethnographic studies on the everyday practices of usage of the internet and new media are many³. By contrast, studies on social media are strongly anchored to concepts of structure, architecture, and algorithm. The field is dominated by research that build on software-centered approaches, which emphasize the role played by social media architecture in shaping and constraining the practices of its users. This trend goes along with the lack of studies on social media and the everyday life in non-western countries.

Little qualitative research on social media-related practices escapes the constraints posed by the affordance/architecture paradigm. Among others this includes the comparative project *WhyWePost*⁴ (Costa 2016; Haynes 2016; McDonald 2016; Miller 2016; Miller et al. 2016; Wang 2016) and the volume *Social Media and Personal Relationship* by Deborah Chambers (2013). In the manifesto of the journal *Social Media + Society*, Mary Gray (2015) claims for a curatorial theory of social media. She argues, "Social media scholarship could challenge the assumption that there is something settled or predetermined - predictable—about the meaning or

³ For a literature review see Coleman, G. (2010). 'Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media.' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39: 487–505.

⁴ *How the World Changed Social Media* (Miller et al. 2016) does not directly engage with practice theory. It does not elaborate the concept of practice any further, but rather presents the results of nine anthropological research that investigate social media-related practices in different countries around the world. To know more about practice theory in media studies and media anthropology see Bräuchler B. and J. Postill (Eds.) (2010). *Theorising media and practice*. Oxford: Berghahn.

potential of communication and information outside of their practiced, situated deployments” (2015: 2). Yet, it seems to me that studies on social media are far away from challenging the assumptions that media exist outside of their practices of usage. There is a strong need for a focus on practice, which can help us grasp the agency of the users and the role played by the social and cultural contexts. Theorizing social media as practice seems to be the only way to account for the uses of Facebook in Mardin.

Conclusion

Anthropological research on media (Bird 2003; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002) contributed to shift the paradigm of media research. In the early 2000s a new research approach that sees media as practice moved beyond the ongoing debates on text and production economy. Nick Couldry (2004) proposed a different paradigm that “treats media as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media” (2004: 117). He aimed at overcoming the constraints posed by the main approaches that have influenced media research. Media texts and production structures paradigms have dominated the field of media studies, but could not address the variety of ways in which media “are embedded in the interlocking fabric of social and cultural life” (2004: 129). Similarly, anthropological research on social media is compelling us to formulate a new research paradigm that moves beyond architecture-centered approaches. My ethnographic evidence cannot be explained by current theories that are centered on software, algorithms, social media-logics, and *affordances*. Mardinites have creatively used the platform of Facebook to suit their own needs. They have been involved in social media-related practices that challenge existing generalizations on the presumed properties and effects of Facebook. My research findings demonstrate that we need a paradigm shift in social media studies too. And once again the paradigm that enables us to overcome the limitations of previous approaches sees (social) media as an open set of practices.

Acknowledgments

The research on which this paper is based was supported by the European Research Council (grant ERC-2011-AdG-295486 Socnet).

REFERENCES

- Aakhus M. (2007). Communication as design. *Communication Monographs*, 74, 112–117.
- Barassi V. (2015). Social Media, Immediacy and the Time for Democracy: Critical Reflections on Social Media as ‘Temporalising Practices. In: Lina D. and O Leistert, (eds) *Critical Approaches to Social Media Protest: Contentions and Debates*. Rowan and Littlefield.
- Baxter, D. (2007). Honor thy sister: selfhood, gender, and agency in Palestinian culture. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 80(3), 737-75.
- Bird, S.E. (2003). *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World*. London: Routledge.
- Bolter J.D. and Grusin R. (2000). *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

- boyd d. (2002). *Faceted Id/Entity: Managing representation in a digital world*. Thesis submitted to the Program in Media Arts and Sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- boyd d. (2008). 'Facebook's Privacy Trainwreck: Exposure, Invasion, and Social Convergence.' *Convergence* 14(1): 13– 20
- boyd, d (2008). Why Youth Heart Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life. In D. Buckingham (Ed.) *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media* (pp. 119-142). Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- boyd, d (2010). "Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications." In Z. Papacharissi (ed.), *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites* (pp: 39-58)
- boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press.
- Bräuchler B. and J. Postill (Eds.), (2010). *Theorising media and practice*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Bucher T. (2012). The friendship assemblage: Investigating programmed sociality on Facebook. *Television & New Media* 14(6): 479–493.
- Chambers, D. (2013). *Social Media and Personal Relationship. Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Coleman, G. 2010. 'Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media.' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39: 487– 505.
- Costa, E. (2016). *Social Media in Southeast Turkey*. London: UCL Press.
- Couldry, N. (2004). Theorising Media as Practice, *Social Semiotics* 14 (2): 115-32.
- Davis, J. and Jurgenson, N. (2014). Context collapse: theorizing context collusions and collisions. *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol 17 (4): 476-485.
- Faraj S. and Azad B. (2012). The materiality of technology: An affordance perspective. In Leonardi P. M., Bonnie A. N. and Kallinikos J. (eds) *Materiality and Organizing: Social interaction in a technological world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ginsburg F., Abu-Lughod L., Larkin B. (2003). *Media Worlds: Anthropology in New Terrain*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- [Kirkpatrick D.](#) (2011). *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company that is Connecting the World*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Have I. and Pedersen B.S. (2016). *Digital Audiobooks: New Media, Users, and Experiences*. New York: Routledge.
- Hirsch, E. (1992). The Long Term and the Short Term of Domestic Consumption: An Ethnographic Case Study. in R. Silverstone, R. and E. Hirsch (eds) *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, (pp. 208-226). Routledge, London.

- Horst, H. and Miller, D., (2012) eds. *Digital Anthropology*. Oxford: Berg.
- Marvin, C. (2013) Your smart phones are hot pockets to us: context collapse in a mobilized age. *Mobile Media & Communication*, Vol 1 (1), pp: 153-159.
- Marwick, A. E., and boyd d. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, 13: 114–133
- Marwick, A. and Ellison, N. B. (2012). There isn't wifi in heaven! Negotiating visibility on Facebook memorial pages. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56, 378–400.
- McDonald T. (2016). *Social Media in Rural China*. London: UCL Press.
- McVeigh-Schultz J. and Baym N.K. (2015). Thinking of You: Vernacular Affordance in the Context of the Microsocial Relationship App, Couple. *Social Media + Society*. Vol 1, Issue 2.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. Edinburgh, UK: University of Edinburgh Social Science Research Centre.
- Gray, M. (2015). Putting social media in its place: A Curatorial Theory for Media's Noisy Social Worlds. *Social Media + Society*. Vol 1 (1).
- Haynes N. (2016). *Social Media in Northern Chile*. London: UCL Press.
- Hutchby, I. (2001). Technologies, texts, and affordances. *Sociology*, 35, 441 – 456.
- Hutchby, I. (2003). Affordances and the analysis of technologically mediated interaction: a response to Brian Rappert. *Sociology*, 37, 581 – 589.
- Medianou, M. and Miller D. (2013). Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16 :169-187.
- Meyrowitz, J. (1985). *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller D. (2016) *Social Media in an English village*. London: UCL Press.
- Miller D. et al. (2016). *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press.
- Moore S. (2005). *Media/Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Nagy, P. and Neff G. (2015). Imagined Affordance: Reconstructing a Keyword for Communication Theory. *Social Media + Society* 1(2): 1-9
- Nicolescu R. (2016). *Social Media in Southeast Italy*. London: UCL Press.
- Oliver, M. 2005. The problem with affordance. *E-Learning* 2, no. 4: 402–13.
- Postill J (2010) Introduction: Theorising media and practice. In: Bräuchler B, Postill J (eds) *Theorising Media and Practice*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn. Pp: 1–35.

Postigo H. (2014). The socio-technical architecture of digital labor: Converting play into YouTube money. *New Media & Society*.

Silverstone, R. (1994). *Television and Everyday Life*. London: Routledge

Trepte S. (2015). Social Media, Privacy, and Self-Disclosure: The Turbulence Caused by Social Media's Affordances. *Social Media + Society*. Vol 1 (1).

Van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2013). Understanding Social Media Logic. *Media and Communication*, 1(1), 2-14.

Vitak J. (2012). The impact of context collapse and privacy on social network site disclosures. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*. Vol. 56 (4)

Vitak J. (2015, May). Social media affordances: Enhancing or disrupting relationships? Presentation at the 65th Annual International Communication Association (ICA) Conference, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Wang A. (2016). *Social Media in Industrial China*. London: UCLPress.

Wellman B., Quan-Hasse A., Boase J., Chen W., Hampton K., da Diaz I. I., Kakuko M. (2003). The social affordances of the internet for networked individualism. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 8.

Wesch, M. (2008). Context Collapse. <http://mediatedcultures.net/youtube/context-collapse/>

Wesch, M. (2009) YouTube and You: Experiences of Self-awareness in the Context Collapse of the Recording Webcam. *Explorations in Media Ecology*. Vol 8 (2): 19-34.