Book Review

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Jose van Dijck:
Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media.
Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2013.

In the beginning of the book, we get to know the Alvin family. Their everyday life story illustrates and makes tangible how social media are engrained in our everyday lives by now. And the Alvins are not alone: according to Jose van Dijck, there are 1.2 billion users logging on to social media sites worldwide as of December 2011. Social media that ideologically and technically embody the web 2.0 based on user-generated content have become one of the major forms of engaging online. Platforms such as YouTube, Wikipedia and Facebook are our daily companions. This initial, compelling narrative paves the way for an analysis of what Raymond Williams (1981) has called the *structure of feeling* namely that our culture is largely characterized by connectivity.

Jose van Dijck's book *The Culture of Connectivity* is an ambitious project. The professor of Comparative Media Studies attempts nothing less than to write a history of social media, media that are not more than a decade old, encompassing services that seem to be appearing and disappearing ever more quickly. While others still engage with the notion of social media as new media, trying to figure out what's so new about them, van Dijck has already identified their short past as a major endeavour to be studied.

As part of the larger narrative, the author theorizes connectivity that is different from the social value of connectedness as a major trait of our current culture. Connectivity in contrast to connectedness refers to automated forms of connections that are engineered and manipulated (p. 12) and which have quickly developed into valuable revenue (p. 4). The

social media platforms that are considered in the book encompass, according to the author, both connectedness and connectivity. The distinction, however, is increasingly blurred.

In order to analyse our current culture of connectivity, van Dijck combines two lines of thought. By coalescing a political economy perspective with actor-network theory, van Dijck aims to "disassemble platforms and reassemble sociality" (p. 24). Consequently, she develops a complex analytical framework for the analysis of social media platforms. Derived from the two combined approaches, her platform analysis is comprised of six components – technology, usage/user, content, ownership, governance and business models – and configures a complex web for the analysis of platforms as mediators.

In her analytical framework, *technology* is understood as the way in which platforms are providers of "software, (sometimes) hardware, and services that help code social activities into a computational architecture" (p. 29). It is, hence, a question of how the technological infrastructure ((meta)data, algorithm, protocol, interface, and default) " shap[e] the performance of social acts instead of merely facilitating them" (p. 29). The second dimension, *usage/users*, considers the engagement with the platform and its technological features. Here, the author considers both implicit and explicit forms of usage, making a distinction between the intended usage and the actual appropriation. The *content* dimensions refer to objects that are produced and circulate in conjunction with the technological affordances of the platforms. The remaining three dimensions – ownership, governance and business models – are derived from the political economy perspective and consider the socioeconomic structures of the platforms.

Besides the ambitious aim to combine these well-established and (with respect to each other) heterogeneous approaches, the author applies the scheme developed to five platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube and Wikipedia, which are arguably the biggest and currently most important services. Given the fast-paced changes in social media platforms, the choice might, however, be outdated within less than year. For all five platforms, van Dijck discusses the five components of her analysis: ownership, governance, business models, content, user/usage and technology. Through her analysis, she disentangles the microsystems of the particular platforms to re-assemble them in the concluding chapter in the notion of the ecosystem of connective media – "a system that nourishes and, in turn, is nourished by social and cultural norms that simultaneously evolve in our everyday world" (p. 21).

As indicated earlier, the choice of specific platforms for the analysis is contestable; however, it is not only the choice but also the organizing logic of the book as such that could be discussed. Well-structured, every chapter follows an analytical model and, in this way, the book gains a lot in clarity. One is, nonetheless, left wondering how the guiding principles of the current connective culture are actualized and how they changed over time *across platforms*. In that sense, rather than analysing singular platforms, the features of connective cultures could have been the guiding principles. This would also have put less emphasis on the concrete platforms that are changing so quickly when it comes to user numbers and revenues, etc. Overall, the book provides a helpful set of analytical stories on how

specific platforms evolved and developed as techno-cultural constructs and economic entities. However, the grander narrative of connective culture, which is expressed through the character of the platforms, remains in the background rather than being fleshed out completely.

Despite the potential of an alternative structure, the book is very timely and needed. It constitutes an important contribution to our understanding of the current media ecology or, as van Dijck formulates it, the ecosystem of connective media. Especially in conjunction with other current works on social media logics and datafication (van Dijck & Poell, 2013), the work of Jose van Dijck constitutes a prolific and important critical contribution to the discussion of social media and their role for our culture.

Closing with the framing narrative of the Alvin family, the reader also gets a taste of different forms of resistance to the dominant culture of connectivity. Whether successful or not, this reminds us of how looking back helps us to look forward and potentially imagine possible different futures. Ending on this positive note, as the book does, I recommend it to everybody who has some interest in developing an understanding of social media from a critical perspective inside and outside academic discourse.

References

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