The term “social media” points to a broad range of technologies and practices that rest upon the traditional Internet, but extends into other spaces such as mobile networks and virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life). The current scope of social media is impressive, given that most social media were hardly known or did not exist a decade ago. In 2008, 2.5 trillion text messages were sent among some three billion mobile phones. Blogs, wikis, online videos, and particular social media applications like Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace became regular features in the lives of people wherever web access is generally available. Facebook now has over 175 million active users and is currently growing at a rate of 600,000 new users per day (Smith, 2009). Similarly, Twitter grew 725% in 2008, with 4.43 million unique visitors in December, 2008 (Ostrow, 2009). While many of these applications may have begun with informal personal and social purposes, they have quickly expanded across our culture. They have penetrated workplaces, where companies employ social media for both internal and external communications. They are used in politics, as was clearly the case in the recent U.S. presidential campaign. They are supplanting traditional journalism and have even managed to draw people away from their television sets. Through this quick expansion throughout the networked world, social media have become important sites of public pedagogy, places where we go to learn, and places where we learn indirectly as we come to understand ourselves in relation to others and our culture through social media interactions.

Critics such as Andrew Keen (2008), Sven Birkets (2006), Mark Bauerlein (2008), and others have argued that the rise of the amateur journalist, encyclopedist, videographer, and so on obscures the more valuable voices of experts, resulting in a public forum where learning is hampered by misinformation. Proponents of social media like Clay Shirky (2008), David Weinberger (2008), Henry Jenkins (2008), and Howard Rheingold (2003) have argued that emerging technologies offer new modes of organization and communication and thus new means to learn. This pro-con argument is undertaken in academic books and journals and more broadly popular venues like Encyclopedia Brittanica’s blog. In some respects, these debates echo issues we have had with emerging media technologies dating back to Plato’s treatment of writing in the Phaedrus and extending through the printing press, cinema, television, video games, and now the Internet. This should not be taken as a belittling of the concerns of social media critics but rather as a recognition that it is not surprising that we might struggle with adapting to new
technologies. The answer has never been to “shut off” the technology (even if that were a practical option) but rather to develop new practices, new institutions, and even new identities. These technologies are certainly not determining factors in these developments but rather are a part of the cultural-material conditions through which changes occur.

When one intersects social media with the concept of public pedagogy several general permutations emerge. Henry Giroux (2005) terms neoliberal public pedagogy “a powerful ensemble of ideological and institutional forces whose aim is to produce competitive, self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain” (¶ 13). Giroux, however, also envisions a critical pedagogy that would operate by creating “public spaces for engaging students in robust dialogue, challenging them to think critically about received knowledge and energizing them to recognize their own power as individual and social agents” (2005, ¶ 25). As such, the combination of public social media and pedagogy results in practices that run the ideological gamut, including:

- Traditional courses and classrooms that study the cultural effects of social media, including face-to-face and online courses.
- Courses and classrooms that make use of social media for any educational purpose, including the kinds of critical, activist purposes Giroux describes.
- The use of social media for any number of cultural purposes by any number of people (e.g., networks of friends on Facebook, maintaining professional associations through LinkedIn, players collaborating in guilds in World of Warcraft, stay-at-home moms arranging to get together through MeetUp.com, anorexic teens using Yahoo Groups to support each other’s eating disorders, Democrats building grassroots movements through Barack Obama’s website, etc.).
- Commercial and governmental interests employing social media as a public relations, marketing, and/or advertising tool, as an additional means for achieving the same ideological ends one might find at work also in television, newspapers, and elsewhere.
- The use of social media in the workplace as a new site and means of labor including global corporate communications, employee training, and project management.
- The gathering of personal data from social media users for a range of commercial purposes, where we teach corporations about ourselves: our habits, interests, and predilections.

In short, the emergence of social media alters the cultural conceptions of public and private spaces in a manner that destabilizes the conventions that have allowed us to consider a “public pedagogy” separated from formal schooling and other sites of learning. With the development of networked media, a conventional public space can become the site of formal schooling when a student accesses an online course in a library or a mall food court. The traditional classroom becomes a site of public pedagogy when students use mobile phones and laptops to check their Facebook accounts. As such, in the context of Giroux’s critique of public pedagogy and call for critical intervention, social media offers both new challenges and new opportunities by linking or mixing public and private spaces in ways that require us to rethink pedagogic practice.

Depending on the particular spaces and uses of social media one examines, one can uncover a variety of public, pedagogic functions. Trebor Scholz (2008) argues that social media have found success because

People like to be where other people are. They enjoy using these platforms: from entertainment, to staying in touch with friends and family, to chatting, remixing, collaborating, sharing, and gossiping, to getting a job through the mighty power of weak links.
It’s a tradeoff. Presence does not produce objects but life as such that is put to work and monetary value is created through the affective labor of users who are either not aware of this fact or do not mind it (yet). (¶ 32)

In short, if the primary function of the web is to develop new means of production through what Scholz terms “immaterial free labor” (¶ 29), then the public pedagogic function of social media would be to instruct users in their participation in such labor. And this labor might take many forms. It is the many user hours contributed by participants in Linden Labs’ Second Life, which have resulted in the creation of the buildings, objects, and attractions in the virtual world. It is the comments and feedback on shopping sites like Amazon or eBay that give these sites much added value. It might even be the five million Facebook users who each recently contributed a note detailing “25 random things” about themselves at an approximate cost of 800,000 hours of worktime productivity (Suddath, 2009). It is undoubtedly the case that fortunes have been made from the time, effort, and information freely given by social media users. Though generally speaking those users have not been paid (in some cases, like creators of products in Second Life, users have made money), one might argue that users have received services in exchange for their immaterial labor. Regardless of how one might judge this situation however, there is a general, public-pedagogic effect from social media that is shifting our practices in terms of the communities we build, our communication practices, and even our sense of identity, particularly the ways in which we define and maintain privacy. However, these shifts are hardly uniform across the wide array of available social media applications, the variety of user practices associated with those applications, and the myriad of technologies, locations, laws, policies, and other contexts that shape our engagement with social media.

Social Media, Actor Networks, and Software Studies

Given this complexity, examining the cultural-pedagogic effects of social media involves the development of new interdisciplinary critical methods. In the early days of the Internet, it was commonplace, at least in our popular-cultural imagination, to think of the virtual world as separate from the real world. The development of social media, mobile technologies, and GPS-based or locative media has shifted that view to one of a world interpenetrated by networked media and continually linked with online social relations. Public online spaces now reach into traditional private spaces, like the home, and private, secured, and encrypted online spaces can be accessed in traditionally public spaces. Investigations of the material conditions and contexts of any communication must now include a consideration of the available media networks. As Lev Manovich (2008) argues,

if we want to understand contemporary techniques of control, communication, representation, simulation, analysis, decision-making, memory, vision, writing, and interaction, our analysis can’t be complete until we consider this software layer. Which means that all disciplines which deal with contemporary society and culture—architecture, design, art criticism, sociology, political science, humanities, science and technology studies, and so on—need to account for the role of software and its effects in whatever subjects they investigate. (p. 7)

This begins with recognizing that an analysis of social media might start with an examination of the particular applications at work. In his analysis of social media, Manovich (2008) invokes Michel de Certeau’s The Practice of Everyday Life (1984), particularly the distinction de Certeau makes between the “strategies” developed by the state and corporations and the “tactics”
practiced by everyday people in response to those strategies. Manovich notes that in the time since de Certeau published his work “companies have developed new kinds of strategies. These strategies mimic people’s tactics of bricolage, re-assembly and remix. In other words: the logic of tactics has now become the logic of strategies” (p. 231). While this observation can hold true across the culture, the advent of social media has allowed for an intensification of this trend.

Software has long held an advantage over other products in its capacity to appeal to the end-user’s desire for customization, for a tactical use of itself. That is, one can certainly identify strategies in an operating system or a word processing program, but part of those strategies has been a built-in capacity for tactical customization in terms of user preferences, shortcuts, and other features. Social media have taken this process further in the encouragement of mash-ups (the combination of two or more existing social media applications, such as combining Google Maps and Craig’s List to show a map of available apartments in a city), developer communities, personal webspaces, and so on. Social media companies profit when their users invest their time and information on their websites, so their strategies have turned to an encouragement and proliferation of user tactics. (That said, it should be noted this profit has been viewed more in terms of potential than realized earnings; even widely successful social media applications like YouTube and Twitter have yet to make a profit.) In turn though, social media users have invented an expanded set of tactics that push the limits of these social media strategies, especially in the remixing of existing (and often copyrighted) media. These tactics then potentially challenge the terms of intellectual property on which social media continue to operate.

It is in this context that one encounters some of the greater challenges that social media presents to how we understand pedagogy. Although in education theory learning has long been viewed as a social activity, more broadly we continue to evaluate formal learning as an individual process with individual exams and grades. This certainly extends into the professional world where we are usually evaluated for our individual performance. Even when we think of the operation of public pedagogy, we primarily imagine the impact of media or space on individuals where the individuals are typically consumers or recipients of media rather than participants. Inasmuch as learning has been deemed an individual process, pedagogy, whether formal or in the public sphere, has traditionally relied upon the force of institutions to secure meaning. In other words, the conventional pedagogical relationship has been between individual learners and institutions that deliver and manage pedagogical experiences. As de Certeau (1984) contends,

> the fiction of the “treasury” hidden in the work, a sort of strong-box full of meaning, is obviously not based on the productivity of the reader, but on the social institution that overdetermines his relationship with the text. Reading is as it were overprinted by a relationship of forces (between teachers and pupils, or between producers and consumers) whose instrument it becomes. (p. 171)

Certainly this observation might apply equally to media beyond the text. It is this understanding of pedagogical function that made a space for de Certeau’s counter-institutional tactics. One might view social media as providing an opportunity for everyday users, a general public, to circumvent this institutional overdetermination of pedagogical experiences. However, as Manovich points out, these tactical responses of *bricolage*, to use de Certeau’s term, have been incorporated within social media strategies and pedagogies. As such, though social media have made the composition and distribution of media easier (and thus empowered everyday users in some sense), they also represent a new mode of public pedagogy that brings those pedagogical forces into new cultural spaces and practices.
Actor-network theory (ANT) offers a collection of methods for investigating these shifting contexts. In a sense the term is misleading since the word “network” has come to be so closely associated with information technologies. These emerging technologies are obviously “networked,” but that does not mean that any analysis of them creates an “actor-network.” As Bruno Latour (2005) notes,

With Actor-Network you may describe something that doesn’t at all look like a network—an individual state of mind, a piece of machinery, a fictional character; conversely, you may describe a network—subways, sewages, telephones—which is not drawn in an “Actor-Networky” way. (p. 142)

Actor-network describes a method of study rather than an object of study; that is, the term “actor-network” is not meant to suggest strictly the study of those objects we conventionally term “networked.” For ANT, the “main tenet is that actors themselves make everything, including their own frames, their own theories, their own contexts, their own metaphysics, even their own ontologies” (p. 147). Of course, Latour’s “actors” are not people but something closer to Deleuzian machines: flows and exchanges of forces. In a sense, ANT takes up where de Certeau’s consideration of tactics and strategies leaves off. Mapping the intersection of human and non-human actors at a particular site of public pedagogy allows one to describe how tactics develop. Thus one might extend from the study of software to consider the other material, institutional, and discursive dimensions that might intersect any pedagogic practice.

For example, one might consider the practice of producing and uploading videos to YouTube, a common enough activity considering ten hours of video are uploaded to the site every minute (YouTube, 2009). YouTube already offers a significant context for the idiom of the short video. It incorporates tools, technical restrictions, and policies that shape video production. YouTube does not operate alone however. One would also consider the software employed for video editing, e.g., Apple’s iMovie. Video editing software communicates its own set of strategies and tactics for production. Beyond the software, there are a number of other forces that would need to be considered, beginning with cameras and microphones and extending to lighting, tripods, and a variety of other pieces of equipment. Once the video has been recorded, there are issues with access to computers, network speeds, data storage, and related technical matters. All of these elements make investigating the pedagogic function of social media quite different from an investigation where the user is conceived as consumer. ANT also would ask us to consider the non-technical network of forces and relations informing the production of a YouTube video. For example, when YouTube participants choose to re-enact the “Charlie Bit My Finger—Again!” (HDCYT, 2007) video or any other viral video, what are they learning? ANT offers a way to investigate such questions but requires the recognition that each site of production is comprised of specific forces and thus offers singular opportunities for critical intervention.

Conclusion

It is misleading to believe that one makes a choice today between pedagogies with or without social media. Traditional educational spaces from classrooms and campuses to scholarly publications and institutional partnerships are invested with social media. Public and private spaces from sidewalks to bedrooms are likewise interpenetrated by social media. Traditional sites of public pedagogy such as mass media are also intertwined with social media where users participate in new ways with their favorite media properties. The choices surrounding the uses to which social media will be put begin with a critical understanding of social media themselves. A
mere 15 years ago, for most people, access to media and information beyond that offered by mass media outlets largely took place through the filter of a library, and the information in the library was largely filtered through editorial review boards and presses. Fifteen years ago, what opportunity would an assistant professor of cultural anthropology at Kansas State University have had to reach out to the world? But today, Michael Wesch’s (2007) YouTube video, “The Machine is Us/ing Us,” has been viewed nearly eight million times. Wesch is obviously an outlier, but even a modest academic blog would offer readership that is significantly larger than the average academic might expect of his/her journal article. And certainly a blog or YouTube video or even a Facebook profile offers the average web user an ability to publish and reach a broad audience unthinkable at the beginning of this decade. They provide a means to pursue the kind of critical-interventionist pedagogy Giroux describes. But social media have not simply expanded the opportunities for pedagogues to intervene in public pedagogy, as Giroux calls for; they also perform a role in shaping the changing possibilities of cultural discourse.

In considering the public-pedagogic operation of social media, one must first wade through the conflicting utopic and dystopic declarations made about emerging technologies. Both sides may have valid points, but ultimately the terrain of social media is too discontinuous and mutative for such declarations to hold up for long. Reports like EDUCAUSE and the New Media Consortium’s annual Horizon Report continually advise educators of the necessity of catching up. It would not be unreasonable to cast a skeptical eye toward this ongoing pressure to match the speed of “innovation,” which is driven more by market demands than technological development. However that skepticism would find better ground if it rested upon a foundation of genuine, critical-pedagogical engagement with technology. Of course such engagement exists in some places, but the call of the Horizon Report and similar documents is for a broader effort. Social media are a part of our pedagogical experience from conventional classrooms to the many sites of public pedagogy, even if we have a limited understanding or even awareness of these emerging technologies at work around us. At the same time, social media have the potential to bring critical-pedagogical work into public spaces even as social media redefine what “public” might mean. If cultural studies theorists and educators wish to take up Giroux’s call to intervene in public pedagogy, they will need to understand and respond to the social media that occupy the spaces in which they work.

References


