# Halmstad University

DiVA✡

http://.diva-portal.org

# Social intermediaries and the location of agency: a conceptual reconfiguration of social network sites

Martin Berg*

Halmstad University, School of Social and Health Sciences, Halmstad, Sweden

## Abstract

Over recent years significant changes in the nature of online communication have taken place, not the least because of the emergence of Web 2.0 and the subsequent proliferation of Social Network Sites (SNS). These changes illuminate the need for having a precise conceptual apparatus that can grasp the complexity of contemporary online phenomena and their social dynamics. Exploring various accounts of SNS as part of the wider Web 2.0 realm, this paper approaches the widespread assumption that SNS bring forth a number of changes in the social as well as institutional arrangements surrounding their being used. Distinguishing between an instrumental and an institutional approach towards SNS, this paper suggests that contemporary research on SNS is roughly divided into two broad streams, one that focuses on how SNS are brought into service by users, and the other on how SNS bring users into service. The difference between these approaches is framed by suggesting a conceptual separation between individual-oriented and system-oriented agency. In order to overcome the difficulties attached to understanding the social dynamics of SNS as a distinct application within the Web 2.0 realm, it is argued that the term 'social intermediaries' offers a way to conceptualise SNS with respect to their functional position in the social realm, thus providing an important alternative to contemporary instrumental and institutional accounts.

# Introduction

Over recent years significant changes in the nature of online communication have taken place, not the least because of the emergence of Web 2.0 and the subsequent proliferation of what boyd and Ellison (2007) have termed Social Network Sites (SNS). These changes have provided researchers, scholars and critics with a multi-levelled field of investigation, while at the same time illuminating the need for having a precise conceptual apparatus that can grasp the complexity of contemporary online phenomena and their social dynamics. Exploring various accounts of SNS as part of the wider Web 2.0 realm, this paper approaches the widespread assumption that SNS bring forth a number of changes in the social as well as institutional arrangements surrounding their being used. Web 2.0 is often regarded as a 'cluster of technologies, devices, and applications that support the proliferation of social spaces in the Internet' (Castells, 2009, p. 65). These social spaces are often assumed to facilitate activities such as sharing, sorting and categorising data that is reviewed and commented upon. Even though this instrumental view of Web 2.0 is prevailing, it is possible to discern a parallel track in contemporary research that positions individual instrumentality as inferior to issues of power and institutional exploitation. Whereas the instrumental view primarily locates agency at the level of individual users and the personal benefits associated with the performance of various technologically mediated actions, the institutional view ascribes agency to the Web 2.0 applications which are assumed to commercially deploy their users as objects of inquiry and sources of information. The main difference between these approaches is that agency is located on different levels, and for this reason, a conceptual separation between individual-oriented and system-oriented agency is suggested. In this context, individual-oriented agency points at how attention is paid to how users can bring SNS into service, whereas system-oriented agency is a question of how SNS benefit from the users. Importantly, neither of these perspectives, nor the established conceptual framework, can account for the social dynamics of SNS as a distinct application within the Web 2.0 realm. In order to overcome these difficulties, it is hence argued that the term 'social intermediaries' offers a way to conceptualise SNS with respect to their functional position in the social realm, thus providing an important alternative to contemporary instrumental and institutional accounts.[1]

## Egocentric networks and individual-oriented agency

A vast majority of contemporary accounts of Web 2.0 applications depart from descriptions of the presumed functionality of front-end features as well as analyses of how traditional broadcast models are challenged in a continuously changing media landscape.[2] Assuming that the media landscape of

today offers vastly changed conditions for communication, it is frequently argued that Web 2.0 applications allow for an increased level of interactivity while at the same time facilitating a creative as well as collaborative processing of user-generated content of various kinds (see for instance Jenkins, 2008; Shirky, 2009, 2010; Gauntlett, 2011). An illuminating example of this latter perception is provided by Beer and Burrows who suggest that Web 2.0 can be regarded as 'dynamic matrices of information through which people observe others, expand the network, make new "friends", edit and update content, blog, remix, post, respond, share files, exhibit, tag and so on' (2007, para. 2.1). Taking this definition into consideration, it is apparent that the umbrella concept Web 2.0 cannot fully account for the vast array of features to which it refers. Elaborating on this idea, Beer (2008) underscores that one of the key problems facing researchers when trying to make sense of contemporary online cultures is the plethora of definitions and concepts that tend to be inconsistent and characterised by a certain fluidity. In the context of Web 2.0 applications, the difficulties attached to defining their general characteristics become especially apparent in the case of SNS. It is widely claimed that SNS allow for the creation of a public or semi-public profile which facilitates various form of connectivity. With such a unidirectional focus on how the performance of various tasks is facilitated by SNS, many researchers tend to presume an individual-centred agency, thus ignoring, or perhaps defusing the importance of database actions and structuring mechanisms. Approaching the social significance of SNS by focusing on individual concerns and front-end features, it is hard to account for the conditions under which SNS are utilised. Furthermore, such an approach easily fails to elucidate how SNS are part and parcel of new media business models and their attempts to manipulate and predict online interaction (Andrejevic, 2011).

Situating the use of SNS as deeply embedded in everyday life, current research on the social significance of these sites often strikes a balance between online and offline modes of social interaction. In line with such an understanding, it has been demonstrated that SNS are mainly used to maintain and sustain offline relationships (Lampe et al., 2006; Ellison et al., 2007). Similarly, it has been shown that online and offline networks supplement, rather than replace each other, and thus as boyd (2008) suggests, provide their users with a 'networked public' that supports social interaction in a fashion similar to offline contexts (see also McKenna et al., 2002; Valenzuela et al., 2009; Vergeer & Pelzer, 2009). Although these observations are important for the study of SNS, a singular focus on how SNS are instrumentally deployed in everyday life runs the risk of supporting an understanding of these phenomena as user-driven and thus also unproblematic. Without

explicitly recognising that most SNS are commercial products and thus deeply embedded in the mechanisms of contemporary capitalist society, boyd and Ellison (2007) support such an understanding when maintaining that the emergence of SNS marks a fundamental shift in the history of online interaction. Arguing that this shift involves a move from thematically organised online communities to 'egocentric' networks revolving around individuals, the authors fail to notice that SNS also involve the emergence of a certain kind of mechanisms that codify, constrain and regulate social interaction. To take but one example, Facebook allows for the sharing of certain kinds of information in a limited number of forms, and by default displays only selected information to users. The latter feature is mainly driven by the algorithm 'EdgeRank' that has been described as 'the secret sauce that makes Facebook's News Feed tick' (Kincaid, 2010). Instead of illuminating these aspects of SNS, researchers are frequently inclined to focus mainly on the concerns and practices of individual users, which is exemplified by the recent interest in Toffler's (1980) term 'prosumer' along with Bruns' (2008) term 'produser' that both refer to processes of technological and cultural change while placing the individual at the centre of attention (see also Beer & Burrows, 2010; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Bird, 2011).

A particularly important example of how research on SNS fails to account for more than front-end matters is found in the ways in which personal integrity and privacy concerns have been discussed. Recent investigations into the nature of SNS frequently return to problems related to how personal information is handled and secured. Although studies have demonstrated that the public nature of SNS remains unclear to many users (Stutzman, 2006) and that there is a fundamental discrepancy between users' desire for privacy protection and their actual behaviour (Acquisti & Gross, 2006), questions of privacy and integrity are most often discussed without taking back-end processes of monitoring into account (Andrejevic, 2011). Rather, these matters have been treated by paying attention to complicated privacy settings and the difficulties associated with upholding personal integrity online (see also Dwyer et al., 2007; Debatin et al., 2009).

Although illuminating important characteristics of SNS, research that mainly considers front-end characteristics and dimensions of personal utility forecloses any possibility to critically analyse the institutional facets of these phenomena. Understanding SNS as providing the infrastructural basis for users to pursue their personal interests and goals, the question of how the presumed interactivity is intertwined with the social situation in which it occurs (as suggested by Mead, 1934; Giddens, 1991; Simmel, 2009/1908 among others) is left out of consideration. On this note, Jarrett (2008)

underscores that the term interactivity presumes an already existent agency which is necessarily rooted in the social mechanisms of Web 2.0 applications such as SNS. Arguing against more cheerful interpretations of SNS that seem to understand these applications and sites as disembedded from the social and political reality of which they are part, Jarrett makes clear that their singularly most important function is to provide users with the means to engage in social interaction and various forms of informational production. Although SNS are often claimed to facilitate the articulation of individual and social action, Jarrett emphasises that such a change in agency goes hand in hand with the social environment in which it occurs. This means that SNS do not so much allow for a high level of interactivity as for the creation of a desire and capacity to interact. Any attempt to grasp these matters thus needs to take a critical stance towards the idea that SNS promote an increased level of interactivity while also providing a playground for the production and consumption of user-generated content. In so doing, as Jarrett suggests, the notion of interactivity would be found to offer a 'contingent freedom, complete with an effective set of chains binding people to the neoliberal hegemony' (2008, para. 33). Similarly, Allen (2008) maintains that the broader realm of Web 2.0 needs to be understood as a multimodal phenomenon that not only involves design and basic functionality but also certain business models aiming at putting 'people and data together in meaningful exchanges' (2008, para. 7). Following this line of thought, Allen suggests that we are dealing with services that bring a new kind of media consumer into being as a result of the constant encouragement to create, maintain and expand various forms of content.

In the above discussion, it has been argued that many accounts of SNS direct their attention to front-end characteristics while focusing on the presumed concerns of users. While these matters are important to consider, it would be a mistake not to expand the scope of analysis beyond the visible surface of these sites. Importantly, SNS amount to both a communicative means and the very boundaries of the online social situation. This state of affairs suggests that Web 2.0 in general and SNS in particular undeniably need to be conceptualised by taking into account a wider array of issues than the ones presented above. Front-end characteristics are fundamentally important for the experience of using SNS but in order to account for the social dynamics of these social spaces, it is decisive not to assume that users enter the communicative situation as agential subjects unencumbered by the constraints of those very spaces. Such an understanding, however, is most often promoted within this stream of research since it fails to acknowledge that front-end characteristics are largely the result of complex back-end structures, algorithms and processes.

# Labour under siege and system-oriented agency

The widespread approach towards SNS from the perspective of front-end matters and individual concerns has not been left without substantial criticism. Instead of focusing on the visible surface of these sites and on how they are put into use, a number of researchers have turned their attention to back-end mechanisms in order to account for how users are exploited for the purpose of revenue (see for instance Fuchs, 2008, 2010 for a general account of these matters). Gehl provides an illuminating example of this approach when putting forward a definition of Web 2.0 that seems to be a world apart from the instrumentally oriented interpretations that were outlined above. Focusing mainly on back-end features and overall socio-economic circumstances, he argues that the realm of Web 2.0 applications should be understood as 'the new media capitalist technique of relying upon users to supply and rank online media content, then using the attention this content generates to present advertisements to audiences' (2011, p. 2). This argument involves an analytical leap, from front-end characteristics into back-end mechanisms, while simultaneously situating both as deeply embedded in macroscopical processes that characterise late modernity. These matters are particularly visible in the case of SNS since their framing of user activities, to a larger extent than other Web 2.0 applications, depend upon back-end mechanisms.

Paying close attention to back-end processes and mechanisms as well as the economic forces in which these are embedded, Gehl points at the insufficiency of simply illuminating the various kinds of actions and interactions in which users engage. Rather, he maintains that these sites forcefully encourage users to focus solely on the interface through which '[t]hey are expected to process digital objects by sharing content, making connections, ranking cultural artifacts, and producing digital content' (2011, p. 2). Along with Andrejevic (2011) among others, Gehl calls for an analysis of hegemony rather than intentionality in the wider context of Web 2.0 applications. A similar idea is put forward by Zimmer (2008b, para. 2), who suggests that there is a certain rhetoric suggesting 'that everyone can and should use new Internet technologies to organise and share information, to interact within communities, and to express oneself' (see also Beer & Burrows, 2007).

Although the course of history of internet studies is permeated with an expectation and desire for technologically supported social spaces to facilitate creative empowerment and democratisation (see for instance Rheingold, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Benedikt, 2000/1991), we are now dealing with a certain kind of mechanisms that affect the ways in which online social interaction is formed. Importantly, these mechanisms are part of certain business models that rely on the continuous exploitation of free labour, and necessarily need to be ascribed with a certain amount of agency. The

extensive commercialisation of SNS has led to the creation of algorithms and mechanisms that encourage users to interact (i.e. provide data) and this means that 'the desires of users did not grow in a vacuum; they are largely created by the market machine in the first place' (Scholz, 2008, para. 2). Following Scholtz's argument, it is clear that SNS cannot be solely conceptualised as social spaces in which 'prosumers' engage in collaborative practices of sharing, sorting and categorising data. Rather, there is an obvious need to consider how these practices partially result from and are motivated by external structures and processes.

The widespread interest in front-end features, against which researchers such as Gehl, Zimmer and Scholz among others react, can to some amount be traced back to the point where O'Reilly coined the term Web 2.0. Until that day, the worldwide web had largely been characterised by static content and one-way directed publishing systems. In contrast, Web 2.0 was associated with a completely different architecture that allowed for participation and collaboration. It was not until some years later that O'Reilly publicly maintained that 'Web 2.0 was a pretty crappy name for what's happening /. . ./ [It] is not about front-end technologies. It's precisely about back-end, and it's about meaning and intelligence in the back-end' (quoted in Scholz, 2008).[3] Taking his words seriously, it seems plausible to suggest that many efforts to interpret the wider realm of Web 2.0 applications have been caught in a loop of continuously returning to the visually graspable, thus rendering back-end mechanisms and operations unimportant. Instead of questioning the underlying structures of this kind of online spaces, researchers have highlighted various aspects of participatory culture, the creative potential of user-generated content, and thereby positioning the 'prosumer' as a specific personage of the digital age. Although SNS and other kinds of applications within the Web 2.0 realm undeniably allow for a certain creativity and to some extent personal autonomy, it is decisive not forget that these sites and applications are 'always entrenched in market relationships, no matter if users are motivated by profit' (Scholz, 2008, para. 38). As have been made clear earlier, these matters are frequently overlooked, and this state of affairs makes it increasingly complicated to understand the externalities of Web 2.0 applications (Zimmer, 2008a).

In order to establish a fair understanding of SNS, it is important to separate the actual meaning of these sites from commercial attempts to, as Silver puts it, 'conflate community and commerce, citizen and consumer' (2008, para. 8). Such an approach necessarily needs to take into account that we are dealing with phenomena that are deeply embedded in a discursive formation chiefly emanating from corporate actors. Taking a critical stance toward corporate hegemony, that

obviously prefer profits in favour of public goods, is an important part of deconstructing the contradictory relationship between front-end features and back-end mechanisms. As Gehl argues, 'the smooth interfaces that users enjoy appear to be comprised solely of immediate connections and instant information' (2011, p. 2), but it is decisive to have in mind that these interfaces are but the tip of an iceberg. Continuing his argument, Gehl underscores that we are not simply dealing with 'spaces where users take control of content creation /. . ./ they are also devices designed to capture the affective labor of users and create archives of the digital material they produce' (2011, p. 3). Building upon aggregated data, profiling, surveillance, sorting and data mining, these archives construct virtual data-doubles of user activity in which selves are 'broken up into a series of data flows' (McStay, 2011, p. 311) based on traces and signifiers. It is thus important to have in mind that all kinds of social interaction on SNS 'become data points in algorithms for sorting, predicting, and managing our behaviour' (Andrejevic 2011, p. 287).

The corporate monitoring, storing and processing of data clearly involve a set of asymmetrical power relations through which 'the subjects of communication become objects of information' (Fuchs, 2011, p. 304). In effect, SNS and the wider realm of Web 2.0 applications are supported by an infrastructure that on the one hand fosters interaction, participation and creativity, but on the other hand 'enables companies easily to piggyback on user generated content' (Petersen, 2008, para. 1). Alluding the words of O'Reilly, Petersen elaborates this idea further and suggests that 'the architecture of participation sometimes turns into an architecture of exploitation' (2008, para. 1). Pointing at the necessity of acknowledging that the broader category of Web 2.0 phenomena is always deeply embedded in capitalist structures (see also Terranova, 2004), Petersen argues that '[i]t is when the technological infrastructure and design of these sites is combined with capitalism that the architecture begins to oscillate between exploitation and participation' (2008, para. 24). In a similar vein, Beer and Burrows (2007) underscore the importance of situating these phenomena in the context of what Thrift (2005) has termed 'knowing capitalism'. Thrift argues that software and social processes have become increasingly interwoven and that software affects everyday life from a background position. These changes do not only provide an 'automatic production of space which has important consequences for what we regard as the world's phenomenality' (Thrift, 2005, p. 153) but also challenge the very notion of how space is animated (see also Dean, 2010). Following this line of thought, Beer and Burrows point at the importance of recognising SNS as commercial spaces since they routinely harvest information about users, thus pointing at a problematic aspect of their being free to use. Even though these accounts more or less

declare Web 2.0 as a cluster of informational machines that routinely exploit users, thus creating desires and sometimes fear, it is important to note that these processes do not take place without the active participation of users. In this respect, this stream of research appears to neglect the fundamental insights of the perspective that favours an individual-oriented agency thus being incapable of grasping the meanings that are attached to SNS by users.

## Towards a reconfigured conceptual apparatus

From the preceding exploration it is clear that there are discrepancies in how the wider domain of Web 2.0 applications is approached and conceptualised. These differences are mainly due to where agency is located, and consequently how either front-end features or back-end mechanisms are emphasised. While the perspective that assumes an individual-oriented agency stresses the importance of front-end features and the presumed utility value of various applications and sites, little attention is paid to what is going on back-end. In contrast, the perspective that assumes a system-oriented agency challenges such an account of Web 2.0 applications by putting back-end features in the centre of attention and thereby highlighting the institutional characteristics of these phenomena. Although these perspectives occasionally converge, it is noticeable that their particular concerns are kept at a distance from each other since no satisfactory connection is established between the questions of how users can bring SNS into service and how SNS benefit from user activity. Elaborating this observation further, these differences are possible to perceive of as related to various degrees of structural sensitivity since the former perspective is rather reluctant to acknowledge the structural conditioning of interactions mediated by SNS, whereas the latter frequently neglects to account for the intentional use of these sites. By either bracketing social structures or eradicating the reflexive agency of users, neither of these perspectives fully account for the dialectical relationship between agency and structure. This state of affairs could to some extent be explained by the ideological assumptions by which these perspectives are fundamentally marked. Positioning Web 2.0 applications as mechanisms of utility, the former perspective provides an understanding which often echoes what Couldry terms the 'individualizing rhetoric of neoliberalism' (2011, p. 497). Mainly drawing on critical theory, the latter perspective, in contrast, brings forth a fairly pessimistic comprehension of these phenomena by highlighting the structural conditions of their being used.

While it is important to recognise that SNS allow for a certain amount of interactivity along with certain exploitative practices, neither of these divergent approaches account for how SNS assume a

functional position within the social realm. Earlier in this paper, it was argued that the very possibility to interact depends on the presence of other actors as well as the social space in which they are situated. For this reason, it is decisive to acknowledge that the back-end processing of harvested personal an interactional data not only serves for the purpose of exploitation, but also for structuring the social spaces in which user activity takes place. Following this line of thought, SNS intervene in the social realm by mediating social and symbolic content while at the same time regulating, and to some extent structuring that very content. Thus, not only do these sites mediate and process the informational exchange between users, but also affect the structure of the social situation by altering the visibility and spatial framing of other users and their shared information. The above discussion points at the difficulties attached to the divergent approaches towards SNS and illuminates the need for striking a balance between individual-oriented and system-oriented agency. Not only would it be erroneous to ascribe agency to either the individual user or to back-end mechanisms, but such a misdirected focus fails to account for the dialectical relationship between front-end characteristics and back-end mechanisms. It is clear that these core aspects of SNS are acting in concert, thus altering the conditions for the social situation. When these matters are taken into account, the need for a conceptual reconfiguration of SNS becomes clear.

As the above discussion demonstrates, SNS mediate social interaction while at the same time assuming the role of a communicative counterpart that intervenes in the social situation. For this reason, these sites are better understood in terms of social intermediaries. Conceptually, the term social intermediaries allows for an exploration of how the connection between front-end characteristics and back-end mechanisms provokes changes in the social dynamics. Importantly, social intermediaries provide the infrastructural circumstances for social interaction while simultaneously conditioning the spatial distribution of social occurrences through the user interface. Social intermediaries thus function as structuring links between actors in the sense that they do not simply deliver social or symbolic content from one point to the other but also, which is of pivotal importance, structure the content in various ways. This means that social intermediaries are not only situated between actors, but are also agents that intervene in social interactions and exchanges from that intermediate position. In this sense, social intermediaries enter the social realm as actors fuelled by back-end processing of personal and interactional data. Hence, social intermediaries do not only allow for a certain amount of interactivity or engage in exploitative use of personal and interactional data, but rather enter the social situation by altering the front-end characteristics through a constant back-end processing of data. In consequence, social intermediaries provoke changes at the level of social arithmetic, which could be understood as an 'arithmetically definable quantitative

determination of social formations' (Pyyhtinen, 2009, p. 109). This means that social intermediaries assume a functional position in the social realm of which they form a part at a given moment in time and space. Importantly, social intermediaries do not only operate in the social realm, but also tend to coincide with that realm in which social actors are embedded in relationships of mutual exchange.

At the level of social arithmetic, social intermediaries are characterised by an inbetweenness amongst social actors, and thus alter the conditions for communication and social interaction by introducing a third actor into the social situation. In this sense, social intermediaries partake in the social exchange while simultaneously providing the basis for a regulation governing that very exchange. In order to grasp the complexity of these processes, there is a need to illuminate the relational and intermediary mode of the social realm. An important foundation for this line of thought is found in Simmel's (2009/1908) account of the 'social', which he locates in the relational interplay between actors. The 'social' should thus not be understood as 'a static object but a fluctuating, dynamic reciprocity between individuals' (Pyyhtinen, 2009, p. 114). Such an understanding of the 'social' highlights the importance of considering the number of actors involved in a specific social situation. Distinguishing between the social forms of the dyad and the triad, Simmel argues that the arrival of a third actor brings about fundamental changes in the social situation. '[T]he entry of the third', Simmel writes, 'means transformation, reconciliation, abandonment of absolute opposition—of course occasionally even the instigation of such' (2009/1908, p. 101). As a social form, the triad allows for certain kinds of group formations that would not be possible without the arrival of the third. In his exploration of Simmel's account of the 'social', Pyyhtinen maintains that '[t]he "third" not only interrupts the supposedly immediate relation between the two elements of the dyad, but it is also capable of transforming it into a completely new figure: a social whole, a "we", which obtains a supra-individual life independent of the individuals' (2009, p. 108). Elaborating this idea further, Pyyhtinen suggests that, 'in the twosome the individuals are confronted only by one another /.../ but with the arrival of the third, the individuals may have a relation with the relation itself' (2009, pp. 117–118). Entering the social situation as a third actor, social intermediaries assume a complex functional position. Not only do they form the infrastructural condition of social interaction, but also alter the relationship between the other actors involved. As Pyyhtinen argues, 'the possibility of the dyad is conditioned by the third, and the actions of the third, in turn, already presuppose the dyad' (2009, p. 119). In consequence, as was pointed out by Jarrett (2008) earlier in this paper, social intermediaries not

only allow agential subjects to engage in various forms of social interaction, but rather install a certain desire and capacity to interact. We are thus dealing with a complex interplay between front-end characteristics and back-end processes, through which a social and spatial structuring is taking place. Returning to Pyyhtinen's idea that the third enables a relationship with 'the relation itself', it is important to note that the basis for such a relationship is formed by the back-end processing of harvested personal and interactional data. Hence, when social intermediaries enter the social situation as a third actor, they provide an informational feedback based upon interactions that have taken place at an earlier temporal stage.

## Conclusion

Drawing on an exploration of two streams of research, the above discussion has pointed out that contemporary research on SNS tends to locate agency at quite different levels. In order to establish an understanding of the social dynamics of these sites, there is clearly a need for a reconfigured conceptual apparatus. Drawing on Simmel's understanding of the 'social' it has been argued that the term 'social intermediaries' is more precise than the concept of SNS since it casts light on the functional position that these sites occupy in the social realm, rather than illuminating a particular relationship between user and system. In overall terms, social intermediaries are located in the tension between individual-oriented and system-oriented agency and intervene in the social realm as agents on own behalf. This implies that social intermediaries should not only be regarded as sites and applications that provide a means for individual pursuits or function as instruments for harvesting personal information but rather as distinct and somewhat independent entities. Understood in this way, social intermediaries enter the social situation as a third actor, while at the same time providing the infrastructural condition for that very situation. In contrast to the prevailing understanding of SNS, the term social intermediaries allows for an understanding of these phenomena as services that facilitate the establishment and sustainment of social ties between social actors. At the same time, social intermediaries enter the social realm as agential mechanisms that assume a functional position between actors wherefrom an exchange of social and symbolic content is facilitated. Furthermore, social intermediaries partake in such exchanges by means of regulatory standards and other forms of actions possible to undertake through the processing of harvested personal and interactional data. Understood in such a way, social intermediaries are always acting from a position between individuals while at the same time rendering themselves and their interventions more or less invisible. Social intermediaries thus always consist of both front-end characteristics and back-end mechanisms that, acting in concert with and towards the user, gain

momentum by taking up a position as a third actor in the field of communication and social interaction. This implies that the term social intermediaries bears a possibility to theorise the social dynamics of contemporary online phenomena from a perspective that strikes a balance between individual-oriented and system-oriented agency while simultaneously transcending the rhetorics, which are often attached to interpretations of these phenomena. In this sense, such a conceptualisation of social intermediaries provides an opportunity to shift focus towards the social realm as such, which facilitates the establishment of an understanding that can be critically related to a larger theoretical whole.

## Acknowledgements

## Notes on contributor

Martin Berg is a senior lecturer in sociology at Halmstad University but is currently appointed as senior researcher at the digital agency Good Old where he leads a three-year research project investigating online sociability and social network sites with financial support from The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation. Martin Berg received his PhD from Lund University in 2008. His award winning doctoral thesis 'The fabricated self: self-reflexive gender play and queer social psychology' established a theoretical framework based on the tensions between Judith Butler and George H. Mead while using an analysis of self-presentations and diaries of cross-dressers on the web-community qruiser.com as an empirical foundation.

## References

Acquisti, A. & Gross, R. (2006) Imagined communities: awareness, information sharing, and privacy on the Facebook, in: G. Danezis & P. Golle (Eds) Privacy enhancing technologies, 6th International Workshop, PET 2006 (New York, Springer).

Allen, M. (2008) Web 2.0: an argument against convergence, First Monday, 13. Available online at: http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2139/1946

Andrejevic, M. (2011) Surveillance and alienation in the online economy, Surveillance & Society, 8, 278–287.

Beer, D. (2008) Social network(ing) sites. . . revisiting the story so far: a response to danah boyd & Nicole Ellison, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13, 516–529.

Beer, D. & Burrows, R. (2007) Sociology and, of and in Web 2.0: some initial considerations, Sociological Research Online, 12, 17.

Beer, D. & Burrows, R. (2010) Consumption, prosumption and participatory web cultures: an introduction, Journal of Consumer Culture, 10, 3–12.

Benedikt, M. (2000/1991) Cyberspace: first steps, in: D. Bell & B. M. Kennedy (Eds) The cybercultures reader (London, Routledge).

Bird, E. S. (2011) Are we all produsers now? Cultural Studies, 25, 502–516.

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 (Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press).

boyd, D. M. & Ellison, N. B. (2007) Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13, 210–230.

Bruns, A. (2008) Blogs, Wikipedia, second life, and beyond: from production to produsage (New York, Peter Lang).

Castells, M. (2009) Communication power (Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press).

Couldry, N. (2011) More sociology, more culture, more politics: or, a modest proposal for 'convergence' studies, Cultural Studies, 25, 487–501.

Dean, J. (2010) Blog theory: feedback and capture in the circuits of drive (Cambridge, Polity Press).

Debatin, B., Lovejoy, J. P., Horn, A.-K. & Hughes, B. N. (2009) Facebook and online privacy: attitudes, behaviors, and unintended consequences, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 15, 83–108.

Dwyer, C., Hiltz, S. R. & Passerini, K. (2007) Trust and privacy concern within social networking sites: a comparison of Facebook and MySpace, Proceedings of the Thirteenth Americas Conference on Information Systems, Keystone, Colorado, August 9–12.

Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C. & Lampe, C. (2007) The benefits of Facebook 'friends': social capital and college students' use of online social network sites, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12, 1143–1168.

Fuchs, C. (2008) Internet and society: social theory in the information age (London & New York, Routledge).

Fuchs, C. (2010) Labor in informational capitalism and on the internet, Information Society, 26, 179–179.

Fuchs, C. (2011) Web 2.0, prosumption, and surveillance, Surveillance & Society, 8, 288–309.

Gauntlett, D. (2011) Making is connecting: the social meaning of creativity, from DIY and knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0 (Cambridge, Polity Press).

Gehl, R. W. (2011) The archive and the processor: the internal logic of Web 2.0, New Media & Society, 1–17.

Giddens, A. (1991) Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press).

Jarrett, K. (2008) Interactivity is evil! A critical investigation of Web 2.0, First Monday, 13. Available online at: http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2140/1947

Jenkins, H. (2008) Convergence culture: where old and new media collide (New York, New York University Press).

Kahn, D. H. (2010) Social intermediaries: creating a more responsible web through portable identity, cross-web reputation, and code-backed norms, The Columbia Science and Technology Review, XI, 176–242.

Kincaid, J. (2010) EdgeRank: the secret sauce that makes Facebook's news feed tick, TechCrunch, Available online at: http://techcrunch.com/2010/04/22/facebook-edgerank (accessed 1 April 2012).

Lampe, C., Ellison, N. & Steinfield, C. (2006) A face(book) in the crowd: social searching vs. social browsing, CSCW '06: Proceedings of the 2006 20th anniversary conference on Computer supported cooperative work, ACM, 167 – 170.

McKenna, K. Y. A., Green, A. S. & Gleason, M. E. J. (2002) Relationship formation on the internet: what's the big attraction? Journal of Social Issues, 58, 9–31.

McStay, A. (2011) Profiling phorm: an autopoietic approach to the audience-as-commodity, Surveillance & Society, 8, 310–322.

Mead, G. H. (1934) Mind, self, and society: from the standpoint of a social behaviorist (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press).

Petersen, S. M. (2008) Loser generated content: from participation to exploitation, First Monday, 13. Available online at: http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2141/1948

Pyyhtinen, O. (2009) Being-with: Georg Simmel's sociology of association, Theory, Culture & Society, 26, 108–128.

Rheingold, H. (1995) The virtual community: finding connection in a computerized world (London, Minerva).

Ritzer, G. & Jurgenson, N. (2010) Production, consumption, prosumption: the nature of capitalism in the age of the digital 'prosumer', Journal of Consumer Culture, 10, 13–36.

Scholz, T. (2008) Market ideology and the myths of Web 2.0, First Monday, 13. Available online at: http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2138/1945

Shirky, C. (2009) Here comes everybody: how change happens when people come together (London, Penguin Books).

Shirky, C. (2010) Cognitive surplus: creativity and generosity in a connected age (New York, The Penguin Press).

Silver, D. (2008) History, hype, and hope: an afterward, First Monday, 13. Available online at: http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2143/1950

Simmel, G. (2009/1908) Sociology: inquiries into the construction of social forms (Leiden, Brill).

Stutzman, F. (2006) An evaluation of identity-sharing behavior in social network communities, International Digital and Media Arts Journal, 3.

Terranova, T. (2004) Network culture: politics for the information age (London, Pluto Press).

Thrift, N. (2005) Knowing capitalism (London, Sage).

Toffler, A. (1980) The third wave (New York, William Morrow).

Turkle, S. (1995) Life on the screen: identity in the age of the internet (London, Phoenix).

Valenzuela, S., Park, N. & Kee, K. F. (2009) Is there social capital in a social network site?: Facebook use and college students' life satisfaction, trust, and participation, Journal of Computer-

Mediated Communication, 14, 875–901.

Vergeer, M. & Pelzer, B. (2009) Consequences of media and Internet use for offline and online network capital and well-being. A causal model approach, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 15, 189–210.

Zimmer, M. (2008a) The externalities of Search 2.0: the emerging privacy threats when the drive for the perfect search engine meets Web 2.0, First Monday, 13. Available online at: http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2136/1944

Zimmer, M. (2008b) Preface: critical perspectives on Web 2.0, First Monday, 13. Available online at: http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2137/1943

## Notes

* Halmstad University, School of Social and Health Sciences, PO Box 823, SE-301 18 Halmstad, Sweden. Email: martin.berg@hh.se

1 The concept of social intermediaries has been used elsewhere, most notably by Kahn (2010) for whom the term indicates various web-based tools for enabling portable identities across websites. In contrast, this paper suggests that the concepts of social intermediaries can be used as an alternative to SNS that allows for an understanding of the functional position that such intermediate agents assume.

2 The term front-end refers to the visible parts of Web 2.0 applications (i.e. the user interface) through which various kinds of informational input is made possible. In contrast, the term back-end is used to describe the invisible underlying mechanisms by which the same informational input is stored in databases and processed in order to provide a basis for the structuring of front-end experiences.

3 At the time of writing this paper (June 15, 2011), the web page to which Scholtz refers does not include O'Reilly's comment. A similar comment from the same author is however to be found at http://radar.oreilly.com/2007/10/todays-web-30-nonsense-blogsto.html (accessed 15 June 2011).