

ว่าด้วยการหาตัวตน: พิจารณโซเชียลมีเดียผ่านทัศนะของ ฌ็อง ฌาคส์ รูสโซ

The Quest of the Self: Social Media through J.J. Rousseau's Eyes

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ในยุคปัจจุบันโซเชียลมีเดียกลายเป็นส่วนหนึ่งในชีวิตของคนนับล้าน และมีอิทธิพลทั้งด้านบวกและด้านลบต่อผู้ใช้ จึงเป็นปรากฏการณ์ที่น่าสนใจ ควรค่าแก่การนำศึกษาอย่างรอบด้าน บทความนี้พยายามศึกษาโซเชียลมีเดียด้วยการใช้มุมมองของนักปรัชญาที่ชื่อ ฌ็อง-ฌาคส์ รูสโซ ผู้ซึ่งเล็งเห็นความซับซ้อนและปัญหาของสังคมสมัยใหม่มาตั้งแต่ในยุคสมัยของเขา ความน่าสนใจและเป็นประโยชน์ของรูสโซอยู่ที่การที่เขาให้ความสนใจอย่างยิ่งกับตัวตนของปัจเจกบุคคล (self) ซึ่งนอกจากจะถือเป็นองค์ประกอบหลักของโลกโซเชียลมีเดียยังดูเป็นสิ่งที่ถูกระทบหนักหน่วงที่สุดในปรากฏการณ์การเกิดขึ้นของโซเชียลมีเดีย บทความนี้จะผสมผสานตัวบทของรูสโซและงานศึกษาทางสังคมศาสตร์เพื่อชี้ให้เห็นความเชื่อมโยงระหว่างโลกทัศน์ของรูสโซและโลกเสมือนบนโซเชียลมีเดีย โดยจะเสนอว่าการสะท้อนคิด (self-reflection) และความตั้งมั่นในความจริงแท้ (authenticity) ซึ่งเป็นแกนหลักในความคิดของรูสโซ เป็นสิ่งสำคัญที่จะใช้ด้านอิทธิพลด้านลบของโซเชียลมีเดียและสร้างความสัมพันธ์ที่ดีทั้งระหว่างบุคคลและภายในตัวปัจเจกบุคคลเอง ทั้งบนโลกออนไลน์และออฟไลน์

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Abstract

Social media has permeated the modern world; it has become a part of everyday life of millions. However, its dark side has also been discovered. Prevalent use of social media is seen to have resulted in depression, authenticity in relationships, and manipulation. These phenomena call for an all-rounded discussion for a deeper understanding and awareness on the issue. In this vein, this paper attempts to examine social media from an alternative view using the lens of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a philosopher who recognized the complexity of the modern society and its malaise ahead of his time. Rousseau is most illuminating because his main subject of study, i.e. an individual self, is also an integral part of the social media platform. Plus, the self seems to be the most affected. Combining reading of philosophical texts with social sciences research on social media, this paper will draw parallels between civil society in Rousseau's view and virtual reality on social media. It will be argued that self-reflection and authenticity, which are at the core of Rousseau's thinking, is crucial to counter the ills of social media, and create a healthier relationship between people as well as within an individual, both online and offline.

Keywords: *Social media, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The self, Recognition, Authenticity*

Introduction

Only within a decade's time, social media has permeated the modern world in countless aspects. It has become a part of everyday life millions. Social media is not used only as a means of communication, but also as an indispensable instrument for business, social movements, and for some, personal liberation. It has changed the way we communicate, build and maintain relationships in society both in a small and large scale. However, alongside its instrumental value, social media has brought new kinds of issues. Prevalent use of social media is seen to have resulted in depression, inauthenticity in relationships, and manipulation. Such immense effects on individuals and society call for an all-rounded discussion for a deeper understanding of social media.

Academia is quick to react to such interesting and complex issue. There is an incredibly large amount of study on social media which will continue to expand due to the dynamic and fast-evolving nature of the platforms. However, the inconclusiveness of results in existing literature is striking. This paper posits that it might need more conceptualization and philosophical contemplation in order to achieve a holistic understanding of so influential a medium. Therefore, this paper has chosen to view social media via a highly philosophical, metaphysical concept, the self, as put forward

by a very eclectic philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to attempt to provide a fresher meta-analysis on social media.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first is an overview of contemporary literature on social media in relation to the concept of the self. The second part explores the nature of the self as well as the idea of the self as put forward by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Combining close reading of texts with the anthropological and sociological study on social media, this paper will draw parallels between civil society in Rousseau's view and virtual reality on social media. In the third part, it will be argued that self-reflection and authenticity, which are at the core of Rousseau's thinking, is crucial to counter the ills of social media, and create a healthier relationship between people as well as within the individual, both online and offline.

Literature Review

1. General literature on social media

Broadly, social media refers to internet platforms that allow users to create their profile, gives content to their profiles, and form a network as well as maintain connections. In this paper the term social media is used very loosely; social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and social broadcasting sites such as YouTube or Instagram, Snapchat, are included. In 2019, it is estimated that there will be around 2.77 billion social media users worldwide and will rise to 3.02 billion in 2021 (Clement. 2019). This reflects the enormous presence of social media in everyday life. Apart from its ubiquity and influence that can clearly be felt in the society, social media's great dynamics also has attracted considerable attention from academia. Moreover, due to social media being such a young platform, research possibility has been endless. Existing literature on social media has been growing in number as in scope, ranging from works on definition (Boyd & Ellison. 2007), the nature and categorization for media genres and platforms, different ways that the platforms have been put to use, as well as potential uses (Kaplan, & Haenlein. 2010; Ngai, Tao, & Moon. 2015), and the effects social media has on users.

Discussions about the impacts of social media are common in public media; the topic is also predominant in social media scholarship. Miller (2016) has highlighted that most research topics can be considered under the title 'the impact of social media on...'. Existing research has very much covered the impacts on individual life and collective life, i.e. interpersonal communication, society, political community. They can be positive, such as increased self-esteem, perceived cooperation, perceived support, or political participation (Khosravi, Rezvani, & Wiewiora. 2016; Kittilson, & Dalton, 2011). Studies have also shown negative effects of social media, for example,

increased exposure to harm, social isolation, depression, damage to self-esteem (Cookingham, & Ryan. 2015), and low productivity (Brook. 2015). Some study also shows mixed or neutral effects of social media. (Best, Menkelow, & Taylor. 2014; Oh, Ozkaya, & Larose. 2014). Therefore, we can infer from this point that, despite the vast literature landscape, the knowledge currently available on the issue is quite dispersed and far from conclusive. Moreover, among existing literature, a large amount of research on social media including all aforementioned study, is empirical. It has been put forward that academia tends to study “specific phenomena rather than write about the nature of social media per se” (Miller. 2016). Therefore, the results derived from such research are often too specific to apply generally outside research sample groups. Those that focus on social media theory’s impacts vary greatly. Some research is set to be developed further for practical or specific use, for example in medicine, marketing, and technology. There has been some meta-analysis or systematic review of existing research, but comparatively very few. Some meta-analysis was conducted in order to establish a further understanding in a particular area of study. (Laranjo et al. 2014), (Boulianne. 2015) Nevertheless, there is still an “overall” lack of theory in social media research. (Van Osch, & Coursaris. 2015) In some occasions, literature on social media use “raises more questions than it answers. (Bolton et al. 2013)”

Our literature review goes along with the view of Miller (2016) that social media has been considered from many angles; the prominent ones being media and cultural studies, sociology as well as anthropology, on issues ranging from definition to specific phenomena or impacts. Further study is commonly called for, and indeed needed, but it is still unclear which direction would render social media studies fruitful. In order to improve the results, Miller (2016) suggests a more comprehensive, multidisciplinary, ethnographic style qualitative work within large scale comparative surveys, applied and policy directed report is needed. Although departing from the same point, this paper posits that a different path should also be pursued. Contrasting with empirical research which dominates the literature landscape, issues surrounding social media invite philosophical contemplation and conceptualization which might be helpful in incorporating empirical findings, thereby contribute to a more general yet deeper understanding of the technology and its uses.

2. Literature on the self in social media

Building on the need of theorisation of social media, this paper has chosen to focus on the concept of ‘the self’, which is an important philosophical concept that plays a major role in social media studies but seems to have been taken for granted. According to Kaplan, & Haenlein (2010), a well-accepted definition of social media has

been put forward as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web, and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” ‘User Generated Content’ is created from and circulated around each individual self who participates as a user. All social media applications generally encourage self-presentation and/or self-disclosure. To this effect, the degree of self-disclosure is an important indicator whereby classification of social media platforms can be made. For example, social networking sites such as Facebook are commonly understood as prominent social media not only because of their popularity among users, but also because the sites highly depend on users’ profiles and interaction between users. Blogs, collaborative projects such as Wikipedia, content communities such as YouTube are also regarded as social media due to the dependency of users’ collaboration as well as contribution. However, they are seen as less of a social media platform, probably because self-exposure of users is not required or not as intense as on social networking sites, despite their collaborative nature. In contrast, virtual online communities where users are allowed to create and maintain an online identity, which might be completely different from the ones in the offline world, belong in social media category because they generate social activities among users. Therefore, although the self is not elaborated literally, it is clear that the concept of the self is placed as the essence of social media.

According to Boyd & Ellison (2007), social network sites are primarily organized around people. The ecosystem of social media is essentially egocentric. As a result, whatever happens to or on the networks would have a direct impact on the user themselves. In this vein, it can also be said that such impacts, which have been in focus in social media scholarship, are closely related to the concept of the self. It can be seen that conceptualization of users’ being and well-being on social media platforms transcends empirical variables, thereby might allow an insight on the nature of both the platforms and the users.

This is not to say that social media scholarship does not employ theoretical concepts. Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), for example, is heavily referenced in social media scholarship. The idea of performing and presenting ourselves differently to different audience has been used to explain how users manage their audience (Rettberg. 2017). Social media is also well-acknowledged as a platform for the self. It is seen as a powerful means for self-expression, and self-definition. In a positive light, it can even be seen as a revolutionary political movement in itself, while in a negative way, it is seen as fostering and disseminates expression of narcissism and self-loathing, or profound loneliness within the user (Murray. 2015). However, direct discussions of the self are relatively few. It is clear that, despite the importance of the

concept, social media scholarship foregoes the discussion on the concept of the self per se.

A discussion of the self in a more interpretive and conceptual manner surprisingly comes from consumer research studies. In an influential and thorough-written paper, Belk (1988: 131) formed the concept of an extended self which regards possessions as “major contributor to and reflection of our identities”. The nature of the self includes its relation with other things, people, or environment. Both material and immaterial things constitute the self. They assert influence on not only how individual acts but also the construction of self. In 2013, Belk reexamines the concept of the extended self in a world permeated by digital technology. The virtual or digital world enables the self to extend and evolve further with less physical confinement. The construction of the self in digital environment, where social media is included, has become no longer a semi-private but a shared enterprise. The virtual self is incorporated and regarded as an extension of the core self (Belk. 2013; Belk. 2016). This study goes along with the views that suggest a break down or a blur in distinction between online and offline world (Kennedy. 2006; Hongladarom. 2011; Miller. 2016).

Rousseau and Social Media

1. The self and the unsurprising relevance of Rousseau

As the research gap in social media studies has been acknowledged, we move to discuss the topic in relation to Jean-Jacque Rousseau. Rousseau was a prominent figure during the French Enlightenment in the 18th Century. Surprisingly, he has since managed to remain relevant regarding several modern issues, for example politics, education, society, human behavior, and moral psychology. Such a surprise, however, is only apparent. Rousseau’s concern with people and power relations count as his major original contribution to modernity. Although 300 years have passed, Rousseau’s time was in a way as transformative as our time. Similarly, it was in many ways ‘an age of classifying and ordering knowledge’, brought about by the new arts and modern sciences (Pannabecker. 1995). New technologies and the unthinkable amount of knowledge for the time captivated people’s lives, and changed their ways of living. Thus, people were prompted to try to understand and cope with the changes. This predicament remains true today. Also, not only was Rousseau a thinker of modern society, he was also an ardent critic of it. His frustration with progress and its impacts within the society remains widely shared. His aspiration for liberty, fraternity, and equality in a just and human society resonates deeply still in modern times (Dent. 2005).

Possible contribution from Rousseau on social media might be drawn from his articulation of the human self which has been found lacking in contemporary literature. In Rousseau we find a multi-dimensional account of the self. “Rousseau’s major philosophical works are devoted to the development of an understanding of human nature more than anything else.” (Kelly, Masters & Stillman. 1995: xxi) He often claims that his philosophical project to be undertaking of ‘the study of man’ which had been overlooked or not construed properly by other scholars. According to Rousseau, a good understanding of our being must be established in order to further understand or solve complexities surrounding our lives.

Rousseau’s explores the concept of the self in twofold: as an object of study, and a subjective experience.

The writings that belong in the first category are *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (1750), *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), *Of the Social Contract*, and *Emile, or On Education* (1762). In these writings Rousseau gives an analysis of human beings as individuals and as social beings. In the *First Discourse* (1750/1990a: 1-27), Rousseau criticizes in full cultural and scientific progress along with the Enlightenment thinking. In the *Second Discourse* (1755/1990b: 117-199), Rousseau gives a conjectural genealogy of mankind and human society. He asserts that civil society is unnatural, so is the civil man. To understand the origin of inequality among men, one must study man as he truly is, i.e. the natural man in the state of nature. According to Rousseau, the natural man lived in isolation and had no regard for other people. He was governed by a sentiment called love-of-self (*amour-de-soi*), a natural passion aims at self-preservation. With the help of the ability to reason, to use language, and the ability called ‘perfectibility’ in order to overcome and find solutions to problems, the natural man moves to his social stage. Then he began to take full regard or other people with relation to oneself. In this stage, the sentiment of another kind called self-love or *amour-propre* started to play a much more important role. Under its influence, the civil man wanted to be better than everyone else. Thus, others’ ways of being as well as their opinions became important to him, since they were a source of recognition and reference. According to Rousseau, social life is one of inequalities and unfreedom (Rousseau. 1755/1990b). Certainly from the present day’s scientific viewpoint, Rousseau’s account is far from reliable; however, it does shed light on the human condition. With the passions concerning one’s own self and reasoning facilities combined, we make use of assessment towards ourselves, and others. This results in competition, multiplying needs and incessant drive to satisfy them. In Rousseau’s opinion, this is the source of all human ills, moral depravity, and unhappiness. Rousseau’s view of civil society is strikingly similar to our modern society. Later, in of the *Social*

Contract and Emile, Rousseau attempts to reconstruct a socio-political environment that could theoretically or potentially retain the natural human self in a civil society environment.

Rousseau's autobiographical writings are the other genre that is of particular significance. These include his later writings toward his death in 1778, namely the Confessions (written during 1764-70; published posthumously), and Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques (written during 1772-1776), and the Reveries of the Solitary Walker (written during 1776-1778). In these writings, Rousseau exclusively discusses his life, thoughts, emotions on a deep and intimate level. (Rousseau. 1789/1995) (Rousseau. 1782/2000) Unlike most philosophers who try to interpret the world objectively, Rousseau examined himself introspectively by taking into account his psychological experience. (Rousseau. 1789/1995) On such personal basis, he engaged his readers as well as his critics in his writings. (Rousseau. 1780/1990) As Masters has phrased it so beautifully, "[w]hatever the influence of Rousseau's life experiences or social milieu in the reformation of his thought -- and Jean-Jacques was clearly more aware of such influences than most philosophers in the Western tradition." (Masters. 1971: 255)

While Rousseau's social and political writings are about dissecting social institutions and their members, his autobiographical writings are set to examine the self from within. Both are two sides of the same coin. It is the journey of the self from and returning to the original, natural goodness, and the source of all goodness (Gutman. 1988). This self, however, is by no means one dimensional, but highly complex. The individuated self possesses both rational faculties: reason and language, and the irrational part, which is equally important: conscience, compassion, and passions. "Rousseau is at the origin point of a transformation in modern culture towards a deeper inwardness and a radical autonomy." (Taylor. 1989: 363) Rousseau's contribution on the modern self lies in legitimizing the inner voice of an individual. In this way, Rousseau's view of the self became a foundation of the idea of a modern individual self (Taylor. 1989).

Rousseau's view is thus illuminating not only because he has had much analysis on the self, but also his spirit of self-reflection. Under the context of the rapidly developing digital world, users are being affected in countless ways. Our 'selves' appear to be growing, changing, multiplying, under attack, or sometimes, lost. Therefore, the searching of the self remains essential to human lives.

2. On the quest to self: The Enlightenment to social media platform

Rousseau's ideas can be combined with many contemporary ideas in order to address social media in particular. Said combination not only prove Rousseau's

relevance in modern sciences, but also provides theoretical insights which is much needed.

Firstly, the concern on the human self and human condition which was centre to Rousseau's philosophical system is also present in media theory, especially in such a transformative time such as now. Like Rousseau, media theorists recognised the power of media and technological transformation that subsume all of us. Moreover, despite the difficulty in reflecting on the present condition, it is in accord that there is a pressing need to try and achieve it. (Hassan & Sutherland. 2016:1-3) Rousseau's analysis of the natural man, the civil man, and the dynamics of human relations can be combined with other contemporary thought previously explored such as the extended self in order to further explain social media. Social media is a new platform where the self is formed, constructed, presented, or represented. This process occurs in relation to the gaze of other people. Rousseau's understanding of human relation is based on the act of comparison or exchange in judgements made possible by reason. Social media not only embraces but deems user generated content, which is normally based on opinions, as essential. Moreover, as empirical studies have revealed, such perpetuation of opinions can have direct impacts on users. The idea of 'technologies of the self' which was originated in a study of Rousseau (Gutman. 1988) can also prove its relevance to social media in the same vein. Individuals uses social media as a technology to transform oneself into perceived better status with the help of other users who are also providing the content on the platform. Therefore, in social media where such gaze is tremendously intensified, its impacts on individuals will have ontological implications.

Rousseau's philosophy regarding technology has been discussed in Deneys-Tunney, Zarka, & Santos da Silva (2016) at length. Making a link with perfectibility which is another core concept of Rousseau's, Deneys-Tunney (2016: 60) claims that Rousseau is "the only philosopher of his time to have invented a philosophical concept out of technology." He foresaw the detrimental, authoritarian effect of technology which would become widely discussed from the 20th century onwards. Rousseau's analysis of human relation can be aptly used to explain the impact of social media, such as competing for attention, calculative behavior, damage to self-esteem, cyberbullying, or even changes in social norms. The desire to be distinct over one another, or amour-propre in Rousseau's term, might be a motivation for us to make use of one or multiple social media platforms. Even further, social media can become a platform on which one creates a false self, a persona only for profit, or to become popular.

According to Rousseau, the civil/social man is worse off than the natural man despite the latter's lack of amenities and development because his subjectivity relies on the recognition by other people. In striving to be 'someone of significance or superior, the social man becomes more dependent upon others' wills and opinions; his being becomes embedded in his social relations. In Rousseau's opinion, this very fact makes man unfree. Similarly, social media encourages people to "prioritize attention and visibility" (Marwick. 2013). In Rousseau's logic, social media users who will be akin to living in prison. Modern culture as we know it does not seem far off from what Rousseau had visualized: civil society has degenerated into a society of luxury, inequality, and corruption in virtues and morals. In the same vein, social media has many times been criticized as one of the main culprits for radical atomization, individualism, self-obsession, and disconnectedness in real-life relationships. On the other hand, it is fair to say that social media platforms encourage and provide space for subjectivity. Its novel nature, i.e. as virtual platform, overcomes physical space and border. It can be seen as an uncharted territory for anyone to develop their own identities and networks. More importantly, it also provides individuals with self-awareness which is crucial not only to create an online persona, but also to create an opportunity to create an authentic and meaningful self based on serious self-reflection. On this regard, it is most apt to refer to Rousseau's biography as supporting evidence. Like social media users, Rousseau wrote without being able to count on anyone for privacy. He lived with an awareness that his manuscripts, notes, or letters could, and had been published without his permission. In short, Rousseau had always lived under the public gaze. In such a context, Rousseau used his platforms to seek to understand and maintain himself, while simultaneously communicated with readers (Kelly. 2000: xi). On the preface of the First Discourse (Rousseau. 1750/1990: 3), Rousseau writes, "at all times there will be men destined to be subjugated by the opinions of their century, their country, their society...One must not write for such readers when one wants to live beyond one's century." We might be able to infer that this might also true in social media platforms. Social media use involves dealing with other people's input as well as opinions, which are difficult to control. However, self-reflection and self-awareness would be helpful for healthy, and successful navigation in the online world.

To counter some objections, it might be useful to briefly reiterate Rousseau's contribution to both the study of the self and social media studies before we conclude. Firstly, Rousseau's concept of self is apt because it is multi-layered, and covers wide range of definitions of the concept of the self in the Western tradition, which might lead, and indeed have led to some confusion. Whether the self is innate, unified, naturally constructed, socially constructed, fragmented, or illusory is still an ongoing

debate. (Gallagher. 2013) However, even so, Rousseau's concept of the self is able to cover several aspects of the self. As previously discussed, primitive, minimal concept of the self can be found in the state of nature while the self that is operated under the gaze of the 'other' can be found in society. The self's activity, performance, or degeneration can be observed and examined. (Rousseau. 1755/1990) There might be some objection if there is a self to discuss at all, especially in a context of social media where users seem to be able to construct oneself has one wishes, for example to appear anonymous, or create a new identity or multiple identities which have nothing to do with the self in real life. Such concern might be due to common conflation or confusion between similar concepts, namely the self, representation and identity. The three concepts are often used interchangeably. While the nature of the first is still being debated, it is clear that the latter two is either given, created, or constructed. Even though Rousseau eventually support the project of creating an authentic self, his writings provide views on various aspects of the self. In Rousseau, one would find the self as a grounded individualized human being, the self as representation and also as identity which are receptive to external forces including online experiences. Thus, incorporating Rousseau in no way means excluding the complexity of online activities, but embracing them.

Another objection concerns methodology, especially if one method, such as literary critique can or should be imposed upon a distinct and novel context such as the online context or social media. Such common conception was the main factor that initially drew attention to social media studies. However, recent studies gradually have shifted towards the view that the demarcation between online and offline appears to have become less clear than previously believed. Online platforms had been integrated to the 'lifeworld' or users, i.e. become ingrained in users' common experience (Kennedy. 2006; Hongladarom. 2011; Miller. 2016). Additionally, empirical research has shown that traditional offline bullying and cyberbullying overlap to a great degree. Technology and online platforms was simply instrumental when it comes to bullying. Media platform is simply "another venue" where bullying takes place and where offline bullies operates. Thus, there is a real connection between online behavior and offline behavior. (Vazsonyi, Jiskrova, Kelley & Ksinan. 2016; Lister. 2008:168) Therefore, a rigid distinction between the online self and offline self, as well as the approach to the problem should at least be modified.

Moreover, directly connecting offline study with online counterpart is in fact not new. Given the novelty of the topic, diverse research devices are rather welcome within digital media studies. For example, online blogging has been studied in connection with how puritans in England had devised their diaries for self-reflection towards

religious salvation. (Serfaty. 2004 in Rettberg. 2017: 12) In the same vein, Rousseau's complex understanding of the self, would shed light onto the nature of 'a social media user' in a more fruitful way.

Conclusion

Certainly, it would not be sensible to entrust a dead philosopher to explain a living phenomenon such as life with social media. However, it is undeniable that the issues surrounding social media are philosophical in nature. Despite the presence of new technologies, the nature of the problem remains the same: how to understand, construct, develop, and remain a self in an ever-changing world. As Jean Starobinsky, a great Rousseau scholar, has once remarked, "[e]very generation discovers a new Rousseau, in which it finds the example of what it wants to be, to what it passionately rejects (Starobinski. 1971 in Master. 1971 :247)." Social media in the eye of Rousseau reflects our perennial strive to be our 'self'. Since the way backward is not an option, it is also upon us to attempt further to achieve a better, gentler, sociable way of being, while retaining their authentic self, or in Rousseau's term, remaining free. Returning to Rousseau gives us a fresher perspective to what human beings aspire to in the wake of new technology such as social media. The eclectic nature of Rousseau's method in discussing the self goes along with the research methods used and much needed in the study of social media as multi-layered object of study. It confirms that we must rethink our approaches to social media and social media study.

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