

Introduction to the Social Media + Society Special Issue on Selfies: Me-diated Inter-faces

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Abstract

This introduction to the special issue entitled *Me-diated Inter-faces begins* by bringing into question the concept of *positioning*: what is it that we are doing when we take a position within the study of social media? Reviewing the work of the inaugural manifestos of the journal *Social Media + Society* on one hand, and the introduction to the special issue on selfies for the *International Journal of Communications* on the other, this introduction provides both critical and creative in-roads for thinking and re-thinking digital self-images shared on social media. Given the constantly changing nature of social media, this paper is a call to researchers of social media to not fall prey to the ossification of our current positions since theorizing the “social” in social media means always at once theorizing the body. As such this intro offers numerous and diverse perspectives on the body that might inform emerging thoughts on the socially media body. The introduction then provides an overview of the papers in this special issue and concludes by offering openings and ruptures for further discussion, rather than closure of conclusions.

Keywords

mediation, selfies, social media

In 1948, Maurice Merleau-Ponty conducted a series of seven radio lectures collectively entitled the *World of Perception*. These radiocasts introduced broadly and descriptively some of the central ideas he later expanded on in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In a poetic section on perceiving Animal Life, he cites the poet Claudel:

There is a Japanese engraving, which shows an elephant surrounded by blind men. They have been sent as a delegation to identify this monumental intrusion into our human affairs. The first one has put his arms around one of the feet and declares, “It’s a tree.” “True” says the second, who has found the ears, “and here are the leaves.” “Absolutely not,” says the third, who is running his hand down the animal’s side, “it’s a wall.” The fourth, who has grabbed hold of the tail, cries, “It’s a piece of string.” “It’s a pipe,” reports the fifth, who had hold of the trunk . . . (p. 77)

What kinds of insights are offered here into the inevitable question of positioning and perception? Does taking a position mean we cannot imagine the whole? Do we ever hold just one position? And can we consider a position a singularity? While the story appears to privilege sight as a metaphor for knowledge, it also asks us to question what the stakes are in taking a position and what the limitations and affordances

might be. Perhaps, this story suggests that taking a position is best informed by listening to other positions and that one position alone is not sufficient?

Perhaps a final inquiry that may give us pause is, “Why did not anyone bother to talk to the elephant?”

The word “position” comes from the Latin root *ponere*, which means “to place,” and broadly speaking positioning has to do with placing someone or something in relation to other people or things. As Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy Smith, and others have argued, positioning is an act that is hardly passive or value-neutral.

We would like to *position* this Special Issue of *Social Media + Society* (SM+S) between the two publications—two sets of texts—to which the contributors here have all been variously connected. These are the first issue of the journal SM+S and the Special Issue on Selfies for the *International Journal of*

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Communication. Apart from positioning the papers herein between these two pivotal publications, we would also like to invite readers to think about these two publications as navigational points in a speculative cartography where we will position *ourselves* in the expanding constellations of work and ideas about social media and online imaging. Appropriately, our Special Issue is called *Me-diated Inter-faces* and the common threads among all our contributions navigate positions concerning subjectivities, identities, branding, intimacy, and visibility. We also engage themes of activism amidst entanglements of bodies, audiences, profits, politics, technologies, and social media platforms while attending to the mutually forming and informing aspects of macro and micro registers.

The Positions of the SM+S Manifestos

Zizi Papacharissi's inaugural issue of SM+S was a collection of 56 short 2- to 3-page manifestos including her own. In her introduction, she asserts—and echoed by many others in the publication—“social media” is not entirely novel because “media has always been social!” (Papacharissi, 2015). This proclamation too is an act of positioning. It acts to ground social media studies within the realm of media studies, as retaining some similar characteristics and qualities as old media and as deserving of comparative treatment alongside historical precedents.

Many other authors in the collection also took positions around the gray beast of social media: padding down ears and fondling the tail. Although the interconnectedness of *social* and *media* was proposed at the start of the collection, upon deeper reading, most authors then tended to migrate and cozy down, toward one of two positions around the elephant that social media studies entails: they settled down on either the *social* or the *media* side of the beast. The proponents of uppercase SOCIAL media studies encouraged ethnography (Madianou, 2015), a return to face-to-face interactions, examinations of interpersonal relations, critiques of discourse, and the recognition of compassion in research as we remember we are implicitly working with capital-P People in social media studies (Lim, 2015; Livingstone, 2015). The advocates of social uppercase MEDIA studies encouraged technological criticism of interfaces, algorithms (Baym, 2015), privatization, surveillance, governance, and the systematic relations between producers, distributors, contributors, designers, and owners.

In part, we offer this collection as a response to Nancy Baym's (2015) manifesto calling for “our work to challenge what we study” (p. 1). Traditionally, Euro-American style manifestos were characterized by “a rhetorical space of high modernist earnestness, meta-narrativist univocality and programmatic assertiveness” (Kurasawa, 2007, p. 12). If the goal of a manifesto is to “make public” (manifest) a belief, desire, hope, or position we must ask whether such a prototypical style fits our current various and situated contexts of pervasive ambiguity, change, and ephemerality. However, what is

most valuable about manifestos, and Zizi Papacharissi's inaugural issue of SM+S succeeds in providing, are the intellectual provocations and diverse “gestures aimed at political mobilization” (Kurasawa, 2007, p. 12) that provide us with distinct vantage points from which to depart.

The Positions of the Selfies Issue

Our Special Issue is also positioned in relation to a second set of texts, the Special issue on selfies in the *International Journal of Communication*. It too is a collection that played in the realm of positioning but in a different way. In the context of paternalistic and patriarchal discourse engines of mass, online, and social media selfies became entangled in discourses loudly pathologizing the practice of taking these mobile self portraits by aligning them tightly with notions of sin, vanity, self-absorption, and narcissism. This practice of alignment became so prevalent in dominant discourse outlets that the space for considering selfies *otherwise* was effectively shut down. As members of a Facebook network of researchers on selfies,¹ we noticed that discourses framed selfies in reductive and overly determined ways. Selfies, in this view, did not just cause bad things, but were themselves as-if fundamentally evil. Terri and Nancy's introduction (Baym & Senft, 2015) played out as a series of discursive disruptions unraveling the knots that stitched selfies to pathology, selfies to narcissism, and selfies to gendered networked practices of self-absorption. Their introduction was an act of displacing and uprooting of these discourses. This discursive un-threading needed to be accomplished before selfies could be addressed from any alternative positions.

Given the work of these two sets of texts, we are in a place to be able to resist taking an either/or dualistic view on any of these diverse positions on socially mediated self-representation. As a result, we embrace the position of scholarly curiosity regarding the investments and implications of the competing paradigms that are manifested through linguistic, semiotic, and cognitive utterances within social media studies. Moving under the skin of discursive currents, we now aim to investigate both everyday practices and experimental forms of expression and organization. Attending to specific practices in their complexity helps us question the “relation between the linguistic, cognitive and semiotic, which are always actualized realities of the incorporeal dimension of creation and break/rupture” (Lazzarato, 2013). Our destination is to move beyond the surface and into the *deep musculature* of the elephant. It is there we aim to make space for warm and deep insights to manifest.

Broadly, if social media is *kind of* similar to “old media” and if selfies are *kind of* similar to photography, then the potential hazard is that we fall into old habits of treating a seemingly new phenomenon from the same old positions. If we treat the body as (uppercase) SOCIAL media, then we too would encourage ethnography, face-to-face communication, and relations perhaps to a certain extent at the expense of

technological considerations. If we address the body from the position of social (uppercase) MEDIA studies, then we may raise concern over surveillance, privacy, and the legalities of sending images of the body online. We may examine interfaces, filters, and bodies online; counting, categorizing, and mapping faces on different platforms.

But, and here is the crux of where we believe there ought to be fundamental insight from studying *bodies* via social media to more broadly inform how we study anything related to social media, when we take a position on research regarding socially mediated bodies, we are both taking a position on social media and we are taking a position on *bodies*.

If we are at all concerned, uncomfortable, or excluded, if we at all have an inkling that the socially mediated body ought to be somehow fractionally understood differently to how it has been conceived historically, then we must dare to forge with curiosity and humility, diverse *positions* on mediated bodies which may then inform more broadly the positions we take on the technologies, platforms, algorithms, images, tools, and networks that mediate them.

But One More Chance to Be Provocative

And so we want to crack open the way we consider the topic of positioning and the body vis-a-vis social media. To position means *to place* and so we question how to place and position the body vis-a-vis social media. How can we think about the body in non-hegemonic ways? Let us follow Donna Haraway by “holding space” for subjugated knowledge. Given that of all the authors of the 56 manifestos only one was located beyond the privileged academia of North America, Europe, and Australia, it would be not only interesting but also imperative to talk about the body beyond the hegemonic Cartesian subject–object divide. More specifically, the body as an entanglement (Barad, 2007); the body as an assemblage (Coleman & Ringrose, 2015; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987); the body as a phenomenon; the body as situated subject (De Beauvoir, 2009); the body as queer, queered, and queering; the body as “unexpected becoming” (Stryker & Aizura, 2013, p. 7); the body as mapping of affect (Ahmed, 2004); the body as post-human; the body as *somna* and *technics* (Sullivan & Murray, 2009); the body as glitch (Sunden, 2015); the body as erotic (Lorde, 1981); the body as four directions (McCabe, 2008); the body as multiplicities; the body as code (Hansen, 2006); the body as deservedly complex.

Through our interventions in this issue, we invite readers to consider the following: What happens when we are open to the idea that there are important possibilities beyond these dualistic approaches? Might we also encourage a move beyond other border lines that also limit our capacity to encourage a broad range of ontological starting points on the socially mediated body: lines that separate man/woman, nature/technology, online world/“real world,” black/white,

mind/body, self/other, center/periphery? In this Special Issue, we demonstrate and encourage approaches and methods that tangle with and blur the subject/object divide that is often overly visible in social media studies. We ask what methodological approaches we can use to assure we are describing socially mediated bodies productively and non-reductively. We deeply encourage thinking about the politics involved in this discussion lest our strong or presumed or taken-for-granted *positions* found our ontologies.

Thinking About the Body and Positioning

In keeping with the undercurrents of bodies, social media, and technology, this Special Issue is divided into two parts: Part 1 is called *Me-diated Bodies* and comprises three papers that trace and link along different paths the genealogies of these themes. These papers also discuss the online and offline connectivity and co-existence of images and bodies. Part 2 is called *Inter-faces*, and the three papers in this section work to interrupt traditional theoretical and methodological lines of investigation applied to research on social media images of the body. All three also mark pilot studies for more expansive research projects, and as such are presented as bookish foreplay to encourage movement in relation to bodies and technologies.

Taken as a whole, the papers in this special issue emerge transnationally and trans-disciplinarily and so are presented as an assemblage—a pastiche and thickly layered collage that embraces the ruptures and contingencies. We position this heterogeneous unity to encourage non-traditional thinking in relation to social media to mediated bodies. Like a collage, which “persistently troubles its own existence by acknowledging the virtual forces that both constitute and condition its insights” (Cambre, 2013), these pieces gesture to an always incomplete whole. We hope that the juxtaposed and overlapping fragments will resonate with each other and contribute to the emergence of further studies in this area.

Opening Part 1 (Me-diated bodies) of this Special Issue, Crystal Abidin’s paper examines the tacit labor of Singaporean beauty influencers. Keeping in line with a desire to challenge dominant subject positions, she presents the selfie as an example of what she terms “subversive frivolity” wherein the object of study is at once under-estimated and generally ignored for its generative capacity by (populist) gendered discourses while yielding significant gains both in terms of profit and self-actualization for the producer. In a sense, it is by being entangled in the aforementioned powerful gendered discourses on women, technology, and self-imaging practices that Influencers can be so successful—they are, in a way, hiding—and profiting—in plain sight.

The themes of positionality and subversion also play out in Tamar Tembeck’s paper on selfies of ill health. In this paper, Tembeck asks whether we can position selfies of ill health along the historical trajectory not of auto-bio-graphy

but rather of auto-patho-graphy—self-recorded images of people experiencing illness and malady. Tembeck examines the particular case of Karolyn Gehrig’s #HospitalGlam series wherein Gehrig’s production repurposes the selfie medium/practice in order to explore the relationships between illness and representation in everyday life, shedding light on the personal and political stakes of making ill health publicly visible online.

Cristina Miguel’s paper examines intimate images that are shared on social media platforms of different genres: one on which people tend to have long-term friendships (Facebook) and one often intended for short-term intimate encounters (Badoo). Drawing on dense and rich empirical data, the variability in content and presentation of these intimate images is convincingly connected to the participant’s expressed gender identity. Miguel contests that a “sexual double standard” shapes what male as opposed to female participants define as an intimate image, thereby also influencing which images participants disclosed online and which ones they censored.

Leading into Part 2 of the issue (Inter-faces), Katie Warfield’s *Making the Cut* questions representationalism as the predominant ontological framework for looking at selfies. Working from several key writings by physicist and queer theorist Karen Barad, Warfield teases out some of the implications of rejecting representationalism and makes the case for using agential realism and notions of entanglement and intra-action as a post-positivist framework. Through these ideas, Warfield explores the possibilities for reconceptualising what she proposes to be a gendered co-constitutive relationships among images, bodies, self-reflecting cameras, in an age of quotidian corporeal social media.

Diving into the Instagram life of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) poster-girl Ruby Rose, Stefanie Duguay uses non-traditional theory and methods via actor–network theory to examine mediated images of bodies. Duguay adopts the relatively fresh “walk-through” method in which the interfaces and mediators that users encounter are treated as shaping the style of self-presentation of subjects online. Here, agency is not simply housed in the subject of the image, nor in the discourses that shape gender or sexuality; rather, the design of the interface, the social media platform, and the marketing of the platform shape the form of Rose’s visual persona and thus shape the queer publics drawn around her published images.

Gaby David and Carolina Cambre’s paper finishes off the Special Issue with a micro-sociological inquiry into how the “swipe logic” of Tinder can be considered to be redefining and resituating perceptions of intimacy. Drawing on some of the work of Brian Massumi, and Paul Virilio, and juxtaposing it with popular discursive accounts, as well as fieldwork data, Cambre and David take *screened intimacy* as a point of departure to examine the paradoxical levitas—an intimating connectivity characterized at once by increasing speed,

ethereality, volatility, and fragmentation—that has been introduced in real-time location-based mobile dating.

Working Toward an Imperfect Closure

The goal of this Special Issue, were we to pick one, would be convivial provocation. These pieces invoke big questions related to the constitution of subjectivities, our mediated experiences and assembled identities. These papers also include micro-narratives of personal experiences. But these scales are ultimately familiar bedfellows—the micro informing the macro, and the macro informing the micro: the variegated co-forming of the social and the media.

What we hope to do, in the end, is open up rather than conclude . . .

When we began the piece, we suggested cheekily that rather than sitting around the elephant—as metaphoric object/subject of study—perhaps we should just ask the elephant itself about its onto-epistemic self-perception. Although our tone is playful, we are serious about negotiating the many transient and multifaceted aspects of the research process in an effort to resist the traditional object/subject division between researched and researcher. Often, there is an assumption that the phenomenon under study cannot “talk back” in certain ways, and our role as researchers is to examine it, handle it, and deduce its meaning, purpose, and significance. Images like selfies, and socially mediated devices like cell phones and cameras, are phenomena that also envelop researchers and move to challenge the taken-for-granted of the process. It is not a matter of phenomena that is only looking outward; it is also always reflexively looking back at itself. It queers positionality from the get go: the elephant is always and already talking to us. We are learning ways to listen.

When we study something that is fluid and often self-reflective, it forces us to reflect upon our own positioning—the object/subject itself announces its own position. How can we not but reflect on our own and how it is irretrievably intermingled. In research we are interpellated: called to come—literally—face to face with our location, position, privilege, beliefs, and persuasions. How best are we to address these topics then? Perhaps the question ought to be less about how best can we position ourselves, and more how best the object/subject can teach us about ourselves and our own presumptions of positionality? A process that implicitly reveals to us our own location foists upon us a great measure of humility and responsibility. It is research that names us and stares us right in the eye—penetrating the genealogy that marks our very location.

Perhaps it is no fluke that the camera is often spoken about as a tool for “shooting” for in studying socially mediated camera work we are in fact shooting ourselves in the face—not in a violent erasing sense—but in a manner that confronts that surface which is opaque and blocking but also at once a gateway. We cannot remain outside. It perforates

and lets in light, shows the depth and significance of layers, which positioned us, and reminds us of our integral responsibility, as scholars, in our integral implicatedness in the production of research and knowledge.

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1. The Seflies Research Network on Facebook.

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