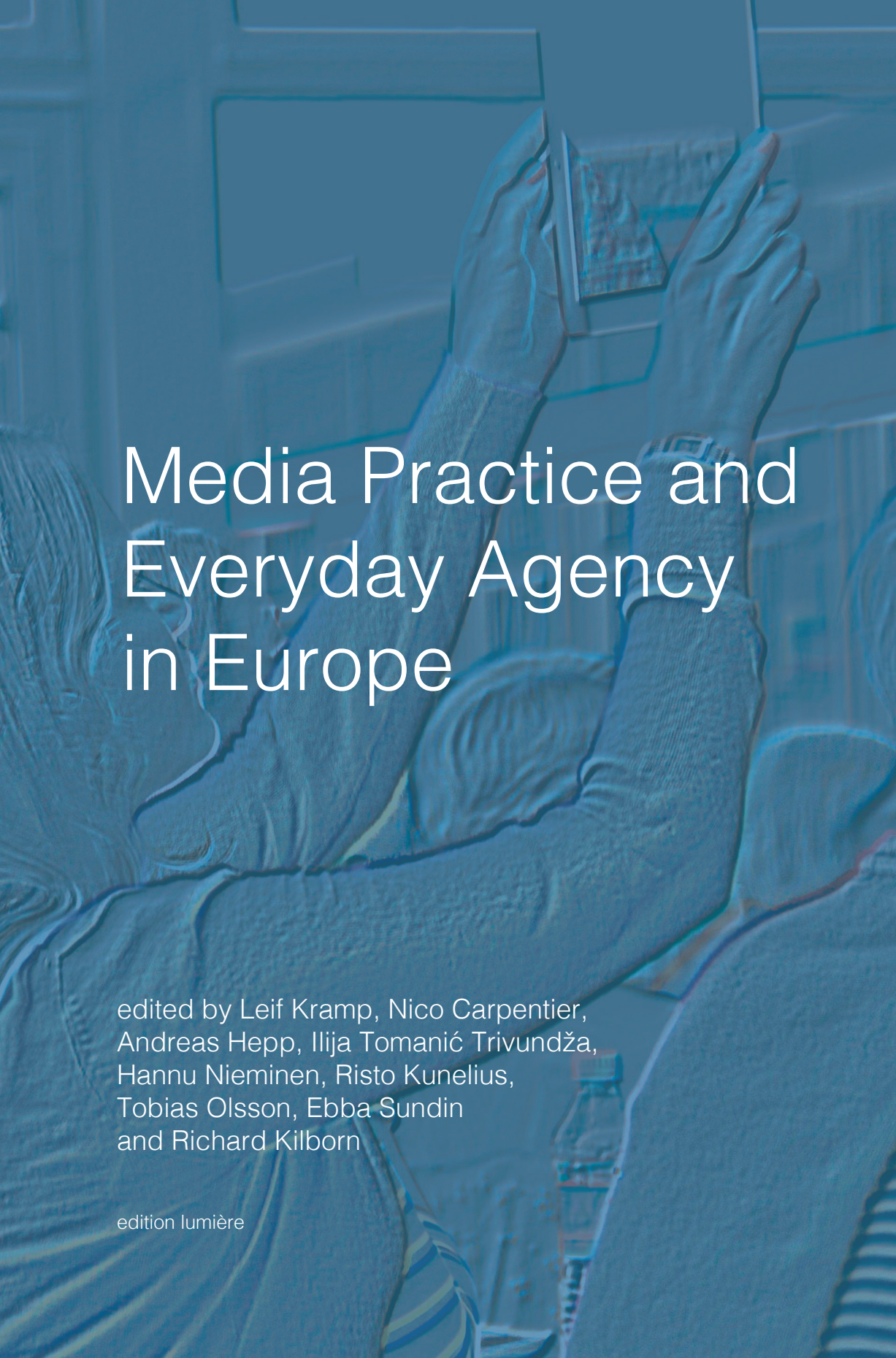

Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe

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PART 2
The European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School 2013 and its Participants

In a Community, or Becoming a Commodity? Critical Reflections on the "Social" in Social Media

Tobias Olsson

1. Introduction

It is a truism to say that social networking media or – more vernacularly – "social media" have become ubiquitous today. All over at least the western world, it is ever present via electronic devices such as mobile phones, laptops, and tablets (of various fabrics) during most parts of our everyday lives (and nights). Its presence is, however, not only physcial and material, but also an important part of our everyday imaginary; we plan and think about what we could use them for during everyday activities (to share moments with friends, comment on news items, etc.) and we are instantly asked to participate by using them – for instance to like something on Facebook, to re-tweet a specifically well-founded formulation on Twitter, or to add a photo to our account on Instagram.

Despite their familiarity, the applications that we now habitually refer to as "social media", and have become so used to, have a rather short history. One way of describing their background is to start in the year 2005. This was the year in which the notion of Web 2.0 (O´Reilly, 2005) was established. In its early versions, the notion of Web 2.0 referred to recent developments of the internet and the concept was mainly preoccupied with explaining its new technological features. Nevertheless, the notion also pointed to social dimensions, such as how the web had taken on a more "user-friendly" and "interactive" character. By this time, in 2005, weblogs were the applications most often referred to as the typical materialisation of these new technical affordances, and they quickly became renowned under their short nickname – blogs. Within a couple of years, however, the blog was challenged as the number one Web 2.0 application by quickly emerging and developing social networking services (van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009), and these were offered by both big companies, such as Facebook, as well as smaller actors. These are also the applications that we have become used to referring to as social media.

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For all the merits of these applications (as enjoyable and very useful everyday life applications) they have also brought with them a number of important research questions to attend to. Hence, research literature on social media has been growing steadily during the last couple of years. This literature has, for instance, covered how to understand social media as a technological affordance (van Dijck, 2013), what it means to our established notions of media production (Olsson, 2013), and the ways in which it creates opportunities for surveillance (Fuchs, 2012). The present chapter is an effort to offer a small but, arguably, important contribution to this field of knowledge by looking into a very specific aspect of the workings of social media; namely how it puts us – as users – in a field of tension between being involved in the creation of (digital) communities while we are also – at the very same moment – becoming commodities.

This chapter will illustrate and discuss this tension with the help of a small but significant case – a Swedish community for everyday runners called jogg.se. It was established as a social networking site in 2006, by two dedicated, non-professional runners. Their ambition was –at first – to keep track of one another's training in order to stimulate and encourage exercise. Early on, the network grew as it attracted additional runners and today it has close to 100 000 active members. In 2013 the number of weekly visits has varied between 120-160 000 and the number of actual weekly visitors has varied between 20-70 000; the community (and its website) has a strong position among Swedish everyday exercisers. What does the case have to tell us about the field of tension between community and commodity?

2. Communities and commodities – theoretical reflections

2.1. Digital communities

From the very beginning, the internet triggered much reflection regarding its ability to help in creating community. This was an important thread in the early and mainly theoretical literature on the nature of the new, digital medium. With inspiration from classical debates in theories of communities, such as Tönnies' (1957) notions Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft, John Dewey's (1927[1991]) reflections of the decline of "the public", and Benedict Anderson's (1983) well-known notion of imagined communities, scholars spent much effort on reflecting about what digital media would mean to our sense of community and our community practices (Holmes, 1997; Jones, 1997; Smith & Kollock,

1999). This has emerged as a recurring thread in the literature on digital media, and the development of so called social media has not made this thread of theorising any less prevalent.

A number of key theoretical ideas have commonly reoccurred in these debates. With reference to the internet's specific affordances, it has often been ascribed the ability to connect spatially disconnected people. By doing this, it enables a construction of communities of spatially distant members and also makes it possible for members to imagine communities (Anderson, 1983) in new ways. This opportunity has also been made good use of by various sorts of online communities, and the research literature has analysed communities as varied as those of online gamers, fan communities (Jenkins, 2006), internet communities of people within diaspora (Mitra, 1997) and digital communities of political activism (Olsson, 2008). Despite differences between them, these various online communities have a number of properties in common, and in this context – for the analysis of jogg.se – three of them are specifically important: they are very often centred on niche interests, they are to a large extent being made use of for the sharing of knowledge centred on such niche interests, and they also tend to become important venues for the construction of identity of the members of these communities.

2.2. Digital commodities

Even though the internet, and the digital world more generally, has provided great opportunities for creating and maintaining communities online, the new ICT is also – simultaneously – a part of the economical world, and looked upon from this point of view, the digital world is also a world of commodities.

From the very outset, in the early days of internet research, it was brought to our attention that digital media technologies (just like any other media) were also derived from corporate ambitions (Sussman, 1997), and also how they immediately – right after their introduction into society – became a "logical extension of the corporate media and communication system" (McChesney, 1999:8). In a sense this was very easy spot as computer technology per se was very expensive by this time – a commodity for consumers to purchase at great cost. After having bought the indispensable and expensive computer, users continued to encounter the digital world as a commodified domain when having to pay for the necessary software, as well as an internet connection in order to access the world of digital media.

Having made these initial consumer efforts to get online, the digital commodification process was prolonged. As in the media world in general, large shares of the available (online) content was (and still is) provided by commercial content producers, which also meant that large shares of the online

experience were (and still are) commercially framed. As users we are – to refer to Dallas Smythe's (1981/2006: 233) by now classical formulation – commodified when we are sold by media companies to advertisers, who pay for our potential attention and spending power; as users we are interesting to advertisers as we might pay attention to their commercial online messages.

The development towards a more "user-friendly", "interactive" and "participatory" Web 2.0 (cf. O´Reilly, 2005; Benkler, 2006; Anderson, 2009) has reinforced the logic of commodification. With the advent of the participating user category "prosumers" (Toffler, 1981; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2006), or "produsers", users become even more intertwined in commodification processes – not only as potential targets for advertising messages, but also as contributors and co-creators of content for commercial platforms. This latter process has been very clearly identified by media scholar Des Freedman in his critical analysis of the logic of user co-creation: "[F]ar from signalling a democratisation of media production and distribution 'prosumption' is all too often incorporated within a system of commodity exchange controlled by existing elites" (Freedman, 2012: 88). As a consequence content co-produced by prosumers (or prod-users) is also made into a sellable product – a commodity. As such, the new media technology per se (Web 2.0) tends to deepen rather than change already existing business model structures of digital communication (see also Fuchs & Sandoval, 2013).

3. Jogg.se: In the tension between community and commodity

Referring to the theoretical reflections above, it is possible to argue that use of social media situates us, as users, in a field of tension between these two logics: on the one hand, the logic of community creation, and – on the other hand – a logic of becoming commodified. This might sound very abstract, even intangible, but in concrete everyday internet practices it is actually quite evident, which will be made explicit with the help of looking into a small empirical case – the Swedish internet community for joggers, jogg.se.[1]

In methodological terms the case has been analysed with the help of participant observations. I myself am a member of jogg.se and have been following the web community on an everyday basis for more than two years now (since May 2011). I am not one of its most frequent contributors, but I do make use of all of the website's functions. Hence, in terms of analytical strategy I can be considered to be an insider who applies theoretical concepts and perspectives to reach informed insights about the workings of the website and my own everyday practices related to it.

3.1. Jogg.se – a community of everyday runners

Jogg.se is a social networking platform for everyday runners. As it is a Swedish site it mainly connects Swedish runners, but also a few runners of other nationalities – for language reasons mainly Norwegian, Danish and Finnish. The Swedish exercisers are spread all over the country, from the very northern and not very populated areas to the more densely populated south. The users of the social networking site register as users, or rather members, and at the time of writing the website has close to 100 000 members.

The social networking site connects spatially distant members into a community of runners. All members have their interest in everyday running in common – arguably a rather typical niche interest. Within the website community they spend a lot of time sharing with other members. First of all they log their own training on the website, and if they do not change the default settings to their profile – which most members do not – they also share all logged information with all other members. On an everyday basis these logs include what sort of running they have been doing (threshold running, intervals, easy distance running, etc.), how far they have run, and at what pace they have been running. Members who run with a GPS-device can also log their route maps onto the website. The logged exercise information can then be commented on and "liked" by other members, who in turn can use it to be inspired for their own exercise; if, for instance, someone aims to reach a certain goal in their own running, they can easily compare their own training with the training undertaken by people who perform at the anticipated level. This – the logging and sharing of everyday exercise – is a major part of what the social networking platform is about.

Another important part of the platform concerns the sharing of knowledge. To a limited extent, knowledge related to exercise in general and running in particular is shared with the community by the company that produces the platform. The company provides some information such as instructional texts, inspiring reports and tests of running equipment (shoes, clothes, GPS watches, etc.). They also provide training programmes that are adjusted to the ambitions of different runners – both in terms of distance (from 10 km to Marathon (42.2 km)) and pace (for runners at different levels of training).

Most of the knowledge sharing, however, takes place among users themselves, within the website's public forum. The forum holds lively discussions about almost anything related to running. In the continuously growing archive of discussion threads users can both share and gain knowledge concerning almost any aspect of running, for instance: how to dress, what shoes to wear, how to increase cardiovascular capacity, what races to run, etc. Together with the logging of exercise, the forum and the sharing of knowledge within it makes up the very backbone of the website. Anyone who wants to become part of the

community thus has access to rich resources for enhancing their running skills – these are offered by community members to other community members and they are also very often brought to (semi) public debate in the forum.

The discussion threads in the forum do not, however, solely concern the sharing of knowledge. If they are looked upon from a slightly different point of view, they can also be understood as parts of user's ongoing identity constructions as members of jogg.se and – more generally – runners. In some discussion threads the instances of identity construction, rather than the sharing of knowledge, become specifically tangible. Discussion threads with a very humorous tone such as "the use of beer as a recovery drink", "the lack of beauty in men's tights", and "what to do with a frozen bum" (this is, after all, a Scandinavian social network) very often attract a lot of comments, likes and laughter and help create the sense of an in-group among members.

Another important part of what makes up the imagined community of runners is the calendar function. The calendar is continuously updated by users themselves. Within it they list forthcoming races and help members keep track of possible races to run. The members who decide to sign up for a race can log that on the calendar, which also makes it possible for other members to see who is going to run in a specific race. Apart from offering members the opportunity to plan their race schedules, the calendar thus also allows them to plan to meet other members at races.

One additional important part of the community is its bloggers. The bloggers are in fact ordinary members who contribute frequently with information about and reflections on their own training. These bloggers appear on the website's first page, and they offer more thoughtful and well-formulated reflections on their everyday lives as runners.

Obviously, in many instances jogg.se appears to be a rather typical internet community in precisely the ways in which internet communities have been perceived ever since the early 1990s. It is indeed a community of interest, which precisely connects spatially disconnected people. Within the community these people share their running experiences and their everyday exercise with one another. They also share knowledge in forum discussions and are constantly involved in the construction of community identity. Still, there is also at least one more side to jogg.se.

3.2. Becoming a commodity

These community practices take place within a very specific context. The fact that the platform – jogg.se – is owned by a private company makes the community construction practices above more complex. The private company who

owns the platform is not a big company, but a local company based in western Sweden. In this case it is not the size of the company that is of interest, however, but the commercial logic according to which it works.

What the company behind jogg.se offers is – simply – a rather empty platform. There is of course no such thing as an empty platform, as these are always inscribed into intentions and ambitions among providers (van Dijck, 2009; Gillespie, 2009; Olsson, 2013). The point here, however, is that the platform as provided by the company does not hold much content in itself. Instead, the platform is an open space to which users can contribute, according to both implicit and explicit norms and regulations (Olsson & Svensson, 2012); the users produce what often is referred to as user generated content. One way of looking at this is to point to the simple but theoretically very interesting fact that it is the users and their everyday labour that makes up the actual website content. Users spend their spare time doing unpaid labour to provide jogg.se with useful content: they do the running needed to create logs to upload and share, they do the actual work of uploading these log files, they participate in and contribute to the forum and offer their experiences and potential expertise to other members, and so on. Considering the number of members – nearly 100 000 – and all the hours spent on creating content for the platform by many of these members, it is very reminiscent of a large scale but unpaid outsourcing project.

It is also the content produced by users that attracts new users. This is an obvious difference between the so called social media and previous media forms, which have largely relied on professionally produced content, even though user (or audience) created content has always played some part. Here, however, they are the actual and primary content providers.

Existing users, new users and potential users make up the actual commodity for the company (cf. Smythe, 1981; Fuchs, 2008). User's presence and potential attention is the value that is sold to advertisers, who are interested in getting in touch with a target group consisting of everyday runners. This is also why the website regularly contains banners from companies such as shoe trademarks (Asics, Adidas), sports clothing brands (Craft), and companies producing GPS devices (Garmin) – they buy the potential attention from a large group of users, who also are dedicated to the activities that their products are designed for. This is made very clear in the website's about section:

> Jogg.se is a venue to which our users have a clear sense of belonging. They stay for a long time and they often return. Hence, relevant products gain a lot of attention, generate many clicks, and are often discussed in the forum. […] The average age is 36 years and the sex ratio is 49 % women and 51 % men. The geographical spread across the country is good with slight preponderance of metropolitan areas (Jogg.se, 2013, About section, my translation from Swedish).

Basically, this is what the community of runners looks like when it is framed within a commercial discourse. The users are transformed from being parts of a community (which connects spatially distant members who share knowledge and experiences with one another) to become an attentive commodity with an attractive, sellable demographic profile.

4. Conclusion

The field of tension between community and commodity in social media is made very obvious by the case of jogg.se. The platform offered – for free – is made use of for the creation of what in many respects is a community of joggers. Users contribute, share and create identity. Meanwhile, the (user generated) content produced is also appropriated by the company who owns the platform, and the attention that the community brings is further commodified and sold to advertisers.

Obviously, jogg.se is a small and not necessarily very exciting example per se. It is, however, a good example in that its rather small size makes the tension very obvious. Despite differences in scale, social (networking) media tend to work according to the same fundamental principles: It is offered to users for free, who create the actual content that makes them useful, and also build social relations with their help – even community-like relationships. The user's attention to and presence are then commodified and sold to paying advertisers and the revenues from this are appropriated by the company owning the platform. There are of course variations between social media models, but a similar – and sometimes even exactly the same – fundamental logic is actualised in cases such as Facebook or Twitter.

In the existing literature on social media this tension is not always given much attention. This is partly a consequence of the fact that the very notion "social" in social media has not been treated with enough analytical care. That is, what is actually social about social media? In both public and scholarly debates social media has often been uncritically appropriated as sociable media – media that allows us to connect and interact ("to be social"). This is an emptied out notion of the social, to say the least, which effectively works against us when trying to look into additional and equally "social" dimensions of social media – such as the power relations (between providers and users) that are built into them. Among other things, this biased theorising often effectively disguises a simple, but still fundamental fact about social media – to paraphrase the famous Web 2.0-saying: if you are not paying for it, you and your online activities are the actual products that are being sold.

Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented as a part of the introductory chapter to an edited volume: Olsson, T. (2013) Producing the Internet: Critical Perspectives of Social Media. Gothenburg: Nordicom.

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