

The networked social milieu: the charms and woes of digital (non)space

Summary

The rapid growth of digital social networks (DSNs) has sparked considerable scholarly interest due to their distinctive role in human communication. They introduce new dynamics by separating communication from traditional time and place constraints, adding media effects to reality, and creating unique social phenomena. The paper addresses the issue how Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia can be applied as a framework for analyzing social communication on DSNs.

DSNs serve as liminal spaces that transform traditional social structures and interpersonal communication norms. They create a new layer of social experience by downplaying the significance of physical proximity and allowing constant, geographically unbound interaction. These networks blur the borders between public and private life, and through widespread use, they become a normalized part of everyday life. They embody a synthesis of the characteristics of different social spaces, becoming a digital heterotopia that some embrace and admire, while others resist and distrust.

While technological advancements have enabled tremendous change in organizing interpersonal communication and social life, the rise of DSNs is not purely technological but also cultural phenomenon. This shift mirrors broader changes

in social behavior, communication norms, and community structures, as DSNs enable users to maintain relationships across distances, find like-minded individuals globally, and integrate the digital and physical aspects of their lives. As these networks become an integral part of daily life, they lose their status as "exclusive" spaces and become deeply embedded into the social fabric. However, despite being designed to facilitate human interaction, DSNs do not fully replicate the complexity of human communication. Artificial intelligence (AI) plays a growing role in personalizing user experiences and automating processes, but its grasp of human interaction is limited: AI algorithms rely on quantitative data like clicks and likes to predict behavior but lack the empathy and contextual understanding that humans possess. As AI enters digital interactions, the heterotopic functioning of social networks moves to another qualitative level, where human and non-human agency interact in an interdependent way: algorithms change by learning from human behavior and the data they generate, and human behavior adapts to changes in the results of algorithms. This interaction drives the further evolution of DSNs, shapes behavior and creates new social phenomena.

Looking forward, the evolution of DSNs and their influence on society is

uncertain, but key challenges lie in their impact on communication patterns, social cohesion, and individual identity. AI's role in shaping these interactions may both strengthen human connections and distort reality, or even deepen social divisions. The increasing shift of communication to digital platforms, including interactions with

AI-driven tools like chatbots, may reduce the quality of face-to-face communication and weaken emotional bonds. There is also a risk of over-immersion in digital spaces, which could undermine the episodic, transitional nature that heterotopia represents, turning it into a permanent reality rather than a space for occasional engagement.

Keywords: heterotopia, digital social networks (DSNs), social interaction, identity, artificial intelligence (AI).