

Jan Geismar og Henrik Olsen:

Lurkers on social media

RESUMÉ

I denne artikel vil vi argumentere for, at lurking som fænomen er mere nuanceret end hvad den nuværende litteratur giver udtryk for, samt at lurking i høj grad er baseret på konteksten, hvori den optræder. Lurking-begrebet burde derfor omdefineres således, at det tager hensyn til, at lurkere aktivt dyrker netværk på deres egen facon. Vi vil foretage en eksplorativ, empirisk undersøgelse ved at interviewe lurkere om deres motiver for lurking på Facebook med fokus på, hvordan deres netværk skaber social kapital, hvorfor de lurker, og hvad de står til at vinde/miste ved ikke at deltage mere aktivt.

ABSTRACT

In this article, we will argue that the phenomenon of lurking is more nuanced than most literature suggests and that lurking is deeply context dependent. The very term 'lurking' may thus need to be reconfigured to take into account that lurkers actively network in their own ways. We will conduct an exploratory empirical study by interviewing a group of lurkers about their motives for lurking on Facebook, with focus on networking to afford social capital. Why do they choose to lurk, and what do they stand to gain or lose in terms of social capital by not partaking more actively?

EMNEORD

Lurking, social kapital, motiver, sociale medier, eksplorativt studie

KEYWORDS

Lurking, social capital, motives, social media, explorative study

Introduction

The English verb 'to lurk' traditionally refers to 'lying in wait', often with malicious intent. In the context of social media, however, the concept has become richer. Several online dictionaries now note that *lurking* can refer to persistently reading or observing goings on without participating (Rafaeli *et al.* 2004). For the purpose of research on lurkers, there are varying but quite similar definitions of lurking behaviour. Lurking has been defined as: regular visiting a community but only reluctantly or rarely posting (Rafaeli *et al.* 2004); a "persistent but silent audience" (Soroka and Rafaeli 2006, 2); and "persistent peripheral participation" (Yeow *et al.* 2006, 3). On this basis, we define lurkers as members of online communities who rarely or never create public content but persistently access the community to read and observe the content created by others. By 'public content', we do not mean content accessible to *everyone* but instead content accessible to *everyone in the sender's network*.

Since the emergence of the internet, research has persistently found that lurkers dominate online communities in terms of membership numbers (Katz 1998; Nonnecke and Preece 2000; Nielsen 2006; van Dijck 2009). Many studies, however, appear to neglect this fact and base their analysis on possibly misguided samples because they attempt to generalise based on active users alone (Preece *et al.* 2004, 203). This might create a skewed understanding of online communities since lurkers remain largely unresearched (Bechmann and Lomborg 2012). We thus believe that lurkers deserve further study in order to adjust general understandings of the social dynamics in social media.

In this paper, we seek to explore the motives behind lurking through empirical research. That is to say, what do lurkers stand to gain or lose by only partaking peripherally in social media? We conceptualise these gains and losses in terms of social capital through networking. Some research has already been carried out on the subjects of lurkers in social media (Preece *et al.* 2004; 2005; Rafaeli *et al.* 2004; Soroka and Rafaeli 2006; Rau *et al.* 2008) and of generating social capital in social media (Williams 2006; Ellison *et al.* 2008; 2009; 2010; 2014; Burke *et al.* 2011), but there is a clear lack of literature combining the two. We wish to discover what drives people to be involved in social media if it is not to interact, communicate, or form movements (Shapiro 2009) or public opinion but instead to become lurkers when studies show that

participating in social communication increases social capital and learning (Putnam 1995; 2000; Rafaeli *et al.* 2004; Küçük 2009).

We further narrow our focus by looking only at the social medium Facebook. It is entirely possible and very likely that lurking is expressed differently and for different reasons in other social media such as LinkedIn or Twitter, and we encourage research on these sites as well. Our research question is thus:

What do lurkers get out of (not) networking on Facebook in terms of social capital?

To qualify our research question, we will first elaborate on how Facebook might afford (Gibson 1979; Hutchby 2000) social capital in new ways compared to older media. To understand why lurkers choose to be present on Facebook, we have conducted an explorative empirical study by interviewing a group of lurkers. This paper will present the results and an analysis of their networking to afford social capital.

Theoretical focus

In discussing network theory, we will adopt a micro-perspective on interpersonal ties in the formation of social networks, drawing specifically upon the work of Granovetter (1973) and Wellman and Gulia (1999). To outline social capital, we adopt Putnam's (2000) perception of social capital as both an individual and a public good because his theories are explicitly related to social networks. In order to finally relate these theories to social media, we will bring the work of Ellison *et al.* (2008; 2009; 2010) into the debate. By adopting Putnam's view of social capital as a private good, we thus perceive social capital as an individual luxury in terms of entertainment, professional opportunities, and emotional relief.

Networking

To better understand the intentions of lurking behaviour in social media and to shed light on how social media afford networking to afford social capital, it is relevant to consider network theory. We wish to examine how strong and weak ties (Granovetter 1973; Wellman and Gulia 1999) relate to networks in

social media and to use this to explore why users might want to refrain from actively networking.

The tie analogy was created by Mark Granovetter, who describes three types of social ties: strong ties, weak ties and absent ties (Granovetter 1973). His definition is: "The strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (Granovetter 1973, 1361). Strong and weak ties refer to the degree of connection that people share: "A tie is said to exist between communicators wherever they exchange or share resources such as goods, services, social support or information" (Haythornthwaite 2002, 386). Strong ties express a close relationship between individuals who might have personal or emotional bonds, whereas weak ties are those further removed from an individual (Haythornthwaite 2002). Haythornthwaite introduces the term 'latent ties', referring to connections that are practically possible but have not yet been activated through social interaction. If a latent tie is approached, it could become a weak tie (*ibid.*, 389). The tie strength analogy is effective for analysing interpersonal relationships and explaining what motivates people to use certain media from a network perspective.

What further motivates our use of network theory is the finding that individuals with many strong ties usually maintain their relationships on several types of media (*ibid.*, 390). Seeing as more strongly tied nodes feel a greater need to communicate, they might add media to their repertoire more easily than would be possible for weaker nodes, for whom it might be seen as an inconvenience (*ibid.*). It is thus interesting to explore which types of ties lurkers seek to forge, strengthen, or maintain on Facebook.

Lastly, there are a number of studies on the relationship between relational ties and capital (Smith *et al.* 1992; Putnam 2000; Ellison *et al.* 2008; 2009; 2010; 2014; Reimer *et al.* 2008; Hogan *et al.* 2011). We would like to contribute to this field by exploring how social capital can be acquired through different means, such as lurking on online social media.

Social capital

According to Putnam (2000, 18-19), "The core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value [...] Social capital refers to connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." Putnam argues that life is simply easier in a community with a substantial stock of social capital (ibid.). Social capital is, then, an expendable value generated through social networks and used for a variety of purposes in social life.

Social capital has numerous dimensions. Putnam argues that, of all the dimensions of social capital, perhaps the most important is the distinction between *bridging* and *bonding* capital (Putnam 2000, 22). Bonding capital is generated by strong ties and works to undergird close relations, while bridging capital is generated by weak ties and works to link an individual to external assets for a more diffuse set of services. Based on Granovetter's work, Putnam describes how bonding social capital is good for getting by whereas bridging social capital is good for getting ahead (ibid., 23). Bridging social capital can help one seek jobs, political allies, apartments, new friends, and information on diffuse topics in general. Robison *et al.* (2002) discuss more dimensions: *transformability, decay, durability, maintainability, reflexivity*. Reflexivity is of particular importance to this paper and refers to the range of services available from a source, hinting at the necessity of bridged capital since a broader, more heterogeneous network makes available more diverse services.

Based on theory and practice, it is widely accepted that a strong correlation exists between social capital and participation in social networks (Putnam 2000; Robison *et al.* 2002; Ellison *et al.* 2009), which makes sense when considering that social capital is harvested through networks that require maintenance (Putnam 2000). To this end, Ellison *et al.* (2010) introduce a further dimension of social capital, which they call *maintained social capital*, referring to a value that relates to those ties that are maintained only through a Facebook friendship. This capital, they argue, boosts the user's ability to *maintain* relationships with minimal effort.

The combination of networking theory and social capital theory has a purpose: Putnam and Robison *et al.* describe how different social networks

may yield social capital that differ in a number of ways, while Granovetter, alongside Wellman and Gulia, help further by shedding light on the anatomy of the networks that might generate social capital. The combination of these perspectives helps accurately describe what social services can be 'purchased' with which social currency generated in which specific setting.

Facebook and social capital

Before moving on, we will explain what qualifies Facebook as a social network that yields social capital. The development of the internet introduced new possibilities for networking: With it, the public could access exactly the information it wanted, with the result that interest-based niches began forming online. This can quickly lead to massive amounts of relationships, but how useful is the social capital that such relationships generate? On the one hand, people have been known to engage in deep friendships and talk about their inner feelings online, thus forming strong ties as well as to utilise the capabilities for global communication to gather information from and about far-off places (Bakardjieva 2003, 302). On the other hand, it is debatable whether strong or weak ties forged online are as useful as ones made in real life. Surely a tie from another country can provide more diverse information than can people in your own neighbourhood, but in terms of the reflexivity (Robison *et al.* 2002, 11) of the social capital such ties generate, online-exclusive ties might seem ultimately less useful since the lack of physical presence greatly limits the array of services for which one can ask.

Social media such as Facebook, however, seek to create social networks in different ways, namely by connecting people who already know each other in real life with ties of mutual recognition to bolster their relationship in addition to connecting people with no real-life connection. Facebook has a variety of affordances, but of particular interest to us is the option for users to create and maintain an explicit network of both homogeneous and heterogeneous connections (Ellison *et al.* 2009), which are important aspects of bonding and bridging social capital. Facebook affords its users to share information as they choose with their networks, providing numerous options for posting and chatting with various degrees of privacy. Facebook also includes options for creating events and inviting others, making it easier to organise with groups of people. By most standards, Facebook is a *metamedium*

(Jensen 2010) since it combines all previous forms of communication – textual, oral, visual, auditory – into one.

But Facebook is different from earlier digital communities in one remarkable way: It invites its users to befriend and communicate with people they know in real life, including people with whom they share strong, weak, and even latent ties. While it is possible to meet people in groups and niches, friends from real life seem to be the main focus (Ellison *et al.* 2010). This means that ties made in real life become reinforced by the *explicit* announcement of mutual social recognition (Rau *et al.* 2008), and as long as neither party consciously breaks this tie, they remain Facebook friends forever, being connected by an explicit tie. This ‘reinforcement’ is quite literal: The durability of a tie made in real life seems to grow significantly when complemented by a friendship announcement on Facebook (*ibid.*; Ellison *et al.* 2010).

Ellison and her colleagues have conducted a number of studies on the link between social capital and Facebook friends (Ellison *et al.* 2008; 2009; 2010). First and foremost, they find that social media are indeed used to reinforce offline friendships more often than to create new ones. More interestingly, they find a strong correlation between intensity of Facebook use and both bridging and bonding capital, varying in accordance with the users’ satisfaction with life and self-esteem (Ellison *et al.* 2010). Moreover, people with low self-esteem can gain considerable bridging social capital by using Facebook (Ellison *et al.* 2008). They explain, in part, these correlations with the introduction of the term *maintained social capital* as described above, and they argue that social activity on Facebook may afford a capital that provides easy maintenance of relational ties. So, while many would argue that social media should not substitute for real social life, much research suggests that use of social media can complement and strengthen ties of all sorts (Ellison *et al.* 2010).

Even with the vast range of technical affordances offered by the medium in terms of networking and increasing social capital, it is perhaps possible to utilise Facebook for these gains in certain ways without actively participating but just by *lurking*. Lurkers may choose to use Facebook either only to read updates from other people or only out of sight from the public.

So why do lurkers lurk? Nonnecke and her colleagues researched this subject with regard to online discussion boards (Nonnecke and Preece 2000; Preece *et al.* 2004) and have identified a number of reasons: Lurkers can get the information they need just by reading; they are still learning about the group before they dare engage in it actively; they are simply shy; and they claim they have nothing to add. The reasons put forth by Nonnecke *et al.*, however, relate only to online discussion boards, and lurkers of social media such as Facebook remain widely unaccounted for. Bakardjieva's (2003) typologies also offer an attempt at understanding lurkers as *infosumers* (passive participants who come just for information), but as with other early literature on lurking motives, she only accounts for pragmatic, rational, information-seeking motives although it is reasonable to believe that there might also be a social dimension to lurking worth researching. We thus argue that social media lurkers require and deserve renewed study that focuses on their passive participation and accounts for social motives.

Empirical research

In order to explore *what lurkers get out of (not) networking in social media with regard to social capital*, we found it appropriate to *ask* them in an interpretivist, loosely structured manner. We operationalised our problem statement into questions about topics such as lurkers' Facebook (in)activity; number, types, and uses of Facebook-friends; and reasons for being on and having friends on Facebook. We then thoroughly analysed the answers before relating them to our original problem statement. We drew inspiration from many earlier studies of lurking (Preece *et al.* 2004; Rafaeli and Soroka 2006; Yeow *et al.* 2006), networking (Granovetter 1973; Haythornthwaite 2002; 2005; Wellman and Gulia 1999), and social capital (Robison *et al.* 2002; Williams 2006). By asking these questions and letting the conversation be guided by our respondents' responses, we hoped to spark discussions about socialising online, the concept of friendship, Facebook as a medium, and other issues.

Past literature on lurkers operationalises lurking behaviour simply as a prolonged absence in posting content to a given online community. Soroka and Rafaeli (2006) sample for frequent website visitors who have never posted, while Nonnecke and Preece (2000) operationalise lurkers as users who have not posted in the past three months. With these in mind, we set the

criteria for lurking respondents that they must log in on Facebook regularly but must not have posted, commented, or liked anything in the past year and preferably longer.

Because this study is of an explorative nature, we found it adequate to seek respondents by means of non-random sampling based on specific criteria (Kuzel 1999). We did not actively search for a diversity in age or gender among our respondents since we were not looking to talk about different types of lurkers but instead to explore the lurking phenomenon. To sample interviewees, we thus conducted a purposeful criteria-based snowball sampling (ibid., 41) by broadcasting our search for lurkers within our own networks.

Our search lead us to a sample consisting of four university students from the University of Copenhagen between 21 and 23 years of age, all male, and ranging in study progression from one to four years. It is evident that our sample is not representative for the total population, but given the explorative nature of this study in an unexplored field, we hope to collect hints toward more general insight into what lurkers can achieve by being in social media as well as to provide a platform for future study.

Our four respondents are thoroughly anonymised in this paper and have been given the pseudonyms of Max, Alfred, Kyle, and Owen. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, translated, condensed, and categorised to permit a structured analysis.

Enabling of social capital

Our respondents use Facebook fairly often, with only Alfred using it less than 'every other day'. In broad terms, our respondents have an easy answer as to why they choose to be in social media: to better structure and organise events in their real social lives and to easily keep contact with the people with whom they arrange such events. They also present a number of reasons for lurking on Facebook. Notably, they share a view that it is meaningless to contribute to the discourse of public Facebook posts: They perceive *most* public status updates to be filled with redundant information. In Alfred's words, "I don't think there's any relevant content for me. People just write random status updates and other things." In fact, the only status updates they made

themselves involved a change of Owen's mobile phone number and a notice that Max was going to study abroad for a year. Kyle mentions that he had once posted in accordance with his perception of the discourse of public posts: "Kyle has forgotten to buy biscuits" (Interview with Kyle), but he found no deeper meaning and chose not to continue posting updates. With regards to Facebook being a substitute for or a complement to socialising in the real world, all respondents consider it complementary. Max says, "Exactly by being on Facebook, I receive invitations that I wouldn't otherwise have received. For example, I get invitations to reunions through Facebook" (Interview with Max). Alfred even admits that his Facebook profile is a sort of phantom to make people feel connected to him and vice versa without the connection ever being utilised. These findings hint that even a minor presence on Facebook significantly *enables* networking abilities rather than just *enhances* them, which of course correlates directly with the ability to produce social capital.

Our respondents thus use Facebook to enable and enhance their strong ties, while their weaker ties are kept in a static position on Facebook, where they can always be accessed if necessary. This suggests that the lurkers' greatest benefit from being present on Facebook involves bonding capital. We cannot conclude why lurkers appear to favour bonding social capital, but it certainly has benefits: As Putnam (2000, 23) describes it, bonding social capital is a virtual currency good for getting by in a social life because it facilitates everyday peace of mind through ongoing personal reassurance. Our respondents focus their maintenance efforts on their strong ties, and they let their efforts be assisted by Facebook's capacity for maintained social capital. However, their neglect of weak ties has led to a clearly visible low bridging social capital: None of them would write to a weak tie or broadcast a message among them regarding a job or apartment search. Their options for taking advantage of the strength of weak ties thus seem very limited. This becomes evident when considering the reflexivity of the social capital generated: As Robison *et al.* (2002) argue, no one source of social capital offers all of the services needed in life, and the best way to cover said services is to have an array of sources for bridging social capital to supplement the affordances of bonding social capital.

On the one hand, our respondents show clear signs of having compact social networks consisting primarily of strong ties, which provide large amounts of emotional support. This is evident in their use of their networks to set up social gatherings and chat about current goings on in their lives. On the other hand, these strong ties cannot support the vast range of services that a number of weaker ties could have. Setting up social gatherings or chatting with a good friend will rarely inform the individual about job openings or available apartments or about how to unclog a shower drain, fix a computer, or install a ceiling lamp. To get answers to diffuse subjects like these, a wide array of weak ties is often more useful than a narrower selection of close, well-meaning friends.

From this, we can conclude that the social capital of our respondents is less reflexible than if they also maintained their weak ties. Maintained social capital becomes particularly important in this regard as our respondents still explicitly acknowledge their ties, however weak they may be, which they hope prevents their ties from becoming latent or at least lengthens the process of decaying.

Nuances of lurking

We found that our respondents are surprisingly social in real life but less so in social media. All of our respondents state that they primarily use Facebook as a way of being available for invitations to social events. We found that they have a relatively large number of friends on Facebook that they consider close friends in real life, while they seem not to care for their weaker ties at all. They all use Facebook's chat function to varying degrees. Max and Alfred use it only to receive (but almost never to send) messages regarding social gatherings while Owen uses it more interactively to plan social gatherings with friends, and Kyle uses it rapidly as a substitute for texting on his phone. Interestingly, all of their communication on Facebook is with strong ties from their real lives. They show very little interest in their weaker ties and do not feel the need to communicate with them. Furthermore, they do not use Facebook to make new acquaintances. This gives the impression that they are lurkers and gives them an aura of inactivity, but the reality is that their socialising takes place in ways that are not publicly visible, such as private chats and in several different media. This is a very important point because it

hints that lurkers may be more nuanced than broadly assumed: Although our respondents post nothing publicly, they turn out not to be just passive viewers who take no part in social networks. Instead, they have consciously selected Facebook for its ability to support their strong ties through subtle, effortless (in)action. In other words, they are *not* necessarily as passive as the literature suggests but may simply have made the choice to engage in non-public ways.

This begs the question as to whether *lurker* is an appropriate term for our respondents. We sampled them using reasonable criteria based on literature on lurkers but have now found the term unfit and insufficient to describe them in full. As mentioned above, *lurker* has negative connotations, but our respondents use Facebook to keep themselves up to date with friends and subjects about which they care and to communicate privately with their strong ties. They lurk in the sense that they read others' public posts without giving any information in return while they communicate with the people about whom they genuinely wish to obtain information through other channels of the medium. This allows them to maintain their strong ties as they wish, regardless of their public activity. This means that their lurker status in a public context does not necessarily represent anti-social behaviour. Their behaviour might have been different if the medium had only afforded visible, public communication, and they had no alternative media to utilise instead. This draws us to the conclusion that lurking should be defined in the context of the medium in question: Evidently, lurkers are not just passive watchers, at least not on Facebook, where participation can happen in more subtle ways than most of the literature's definitions of lurkers take into account.

In summary, the lurkers to whom we spoke choose to be present in social media because they, if only unconsciously, recognise its affordances for maintaining social capital, though they only seem to care about its capacity to maintain bonding social capital. They find that, by being present in social media, their networks are almost automatically maintained, that is, with no effort on their part. By this logic, they lurk because they feel that using Facebook allows them to uphold social networks and generate social capital without participating.

Conclusion

As we have discussed, even though social media invite and afford easy networking and production and maintenance of social capital, some people choose to refrain from many core functions and lurk instead.

During our work on this paper, we found that the concept of lurking is deeply context dependent and that the very term *lurking* might need to be reconfigured. The current definition of lurking is problematic because it does not recognise that *lurkers* rarely lurk in all contexts in which they engage. Our respondents were lurkers according to the definition of never posting publicly on Facebook, but they appear to use the medium in other, more subtle ways. It also depends heavily on the context whether lurking is even problematic or is instead a preferred means of spreading information without too much noise. Expanding upon this point, it is also necessary to recall that we have only analysed a group of lurkers from a Putnamian perspective on social capital and that lurkers are very likely to appear different from different perspectives on social capital or even from perspectives focused on the formation of public opinion or the subject of visibility (Foucault 1977). We therefore encourage research into lurking in social media to take account of the genres and contexts across different social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn as well as their theoretical scopes and perspectives.

On the subject of networking, our respondents use Facebook primarily to enable strong ties in real life while showing little interest in weaker ties. This has opened our eyes to the discussion of when or whether weak ties can become latent ties if not maintained and vice versa. In accordance with Haythornthwaite's definition of a latent tie (2002, 389), ties on Facebook that are not maintained for a very long time might become latent since the tie is practically available but no longer active. However, if one has a Facebook friend who is similar to a latent tie, that person might post information publicly, and the simple act of reading this information could turn this person into a weak tie. This further invites a response from anyone reading the information, which could again mean the difference between being a weak and a latent tie. Contacting a weaker tie on Facebook also removes the pressure of having to approach them in a personal manner such as face-to-face or auditory communication. We have thus found reason to believe that keeping an individual as a Facebook friend makes the person perceived as

more easily available for reactivation. Facebook thus becomes the modern means of storing all of one's known ties, and with the affordances it presents, it shows great capacity for activating one's inactive ties.

Bonding social capital thus seemed to be the primary gain from our respondent's use of Facebook, and they use Facebook's affordances for maintaining social capital to make it more durable. However, their total lack of weak ties on Facebook and unwillingness to form any inevitably leads to low gains in bridging social capital. This suggests that Facebook lurkers could be said to have less social capital volume than non-lurkers because the latter use more of Facebook's affordances to maintain their weak ties. Confirming this though would require further study. In conclusion, simply by being present on Facebook, lurkers seem to be able to maintain bonding social capital that they may otherwise lose.

Future studies

Our study has sought to provide initial exploratory insight into the field of lurking on Facebook. Therefore, almost by definition, there is more research to be carried out. Moreover, our research method has boundaries that limit us from answering certain questions: Looking back at previous studies and what they lack in order to answer our research question, we found that it would also have been interesting to conduct a quantitative study with a standardised survey designed to rank the Facebook usage and social capital of each respondent, assisted by open-ended questions. This data would allow the researcher to compare the social capital of lurkers with that of non-lurkers and explore what lurkers achieve in social media compared to non-lurkers, and open-ended questions could grant insight into lurkers' motivations for being in social media they turned out to not have the same level of social capital as non-lurkers.

Much of the medium theory we have utilised to argue that social media's affordances differ greatly from older media (Meyrowitz 1985; 1994; Jensen 2010) is concerned with the media matrix up until the point before social networking media like Facebook gained massive popularity. This means that Facebook does not enter into the equation of these theories about networking and social media. Because Facebook is a hypermedium, it could possibly have taken over several roles that were formerly occupied by other types of media

in occupational, organisational, and social contexts. This is evident in the ways our respondents use Facebook as a tool for both socialising and planning schoolwork. It could be that Facebook transforms the definition of 'absent' and 'latent' ties by keeping inactive ties along with access to information about the tie no more than one click away. This possibility may deserve further study.

Authors' note

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