

Happy Accidents - Facebook and the Autonomy of Affect

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September 22, 2011 Facebook introduced Timeline. Quite simply Timeline collects your Facebook and other online activities and shows them in your profile. Your friends will see what song you are listening to, where you are and what you do if you allow the platform to track and share your activities. According to the Facebook blog, “Now, you and your friends will finally be able to tell all the different parts of your story – from the small things you do each day to your biggest moments.”

In fact, these changes do not intrinsically seem that new. Similar activities have been shared by Facebook users all along. However what is new is the way the sharing begins to happen. While social media has been seen as a dual platform for users actively sharing content and passively providing data for corporations (Dijck 2009) we are now moving towards a digital environment that reduces the user to a passive content/data provider. Users’ information is shared by the platform automatically and autonomously without their intentional involvement. Facebook calls this ‘serendipity’ and ‘frictionless sharing’.

As a consequence, my paper argues that the Timeline entails a new, affective, turn in Facebook’s history. This affective turn cannot be reduced to a mere visual renewal of the Facebook user interface. Quite on the contrary we are witnessing a comprehensive transformation in how social networks function as cultural and political media environments.

This transformation is discussed in the context of non-subjective autonomy of an affect proposed by Brian Massumi (2002). Affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity. It is not a feeling or sensation but an ability to affect and be affected; a body’s passage from one state to another. Affection on the other hand is “each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second affecting body” (Massumi 2004, xvii). Affects are located somewhere between passivity and activity, a resonance that cannot be directed entirely to a practical end. The key here is that Massumi’s interpretation of affects allows us to understand them from a non-subjective position. We do not need to reduce affects into subjective emotions; in fact we can understand affects without the subjective involvement as potentials transmitted between both human and non-human bodies (Bennett 2010, 61).

With improvements such as serendipity and frictionless sharing Facebook is moving from a mere quantification of data into building and controlling its affects. This new model of value production is the perspective from which my paper provides a case based study on Facebook’s Timeline focusing on the cultural and political theme of affects and affective networks.

Works Cited

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