Control: A Perspective on Social Media

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Abstract: *The architectures of social media were promoted at the beginning (in the 2000s) as a democratization of social relationships and the construction of a public sphere that was essentially giving a voice to everyone. This illusion of freedom was quickly dismantled when it became clear that companies such as Facebook and Google were, in fact, changing and also normalizing social relations. So what are the social media and how do they work from the point of view of governmentality and control? Is it as simple as to say that social networks and Web 2.0 manipulate their users? And, if so, how do they do it? In this paper, I will look at the practices associated with social media using some of Foucault's ideas and concepts, like disciplinary power, governmentality, biopolitics and so on, and also Deleuze's idea of a "society of control," created by the dissipation of power in the rhizome we now know as Web 2.0. How does power work in a decentralized environment? Is it the companies that offer the platforms for social interactions that hold the power? I argue that power has become a network, a rhizome, not merely a relationship, and each and every one of its users/nodes contributes to the development of a biopower that regulates and normalizes life. The pop-cultural argument that is prevalent these days is that the life we see on social media is not "real," but that is not the case, it is as real as it can be because people strive towards that normalized life. There are two examples I use to explain my point: the so-called "influencer" culture (the culmination of social media marketing of the self) and the Google Selfish Ledger (an idea leaked from Google that says the company can use the data it gathers about its users to change their behavior in accordance with "Google's values").*

Keywords: *social media, power, control, Foucault, Deleuze*

In spite of the fact that social media have been around for the last 20 years in some form or another, we are still struggling to understand their workings, their effects and their specificity, especially when compared to traditional media. In this paper, I will look at social media as a technology of power. Are social media an essentially new form of apparatus that wield a specific form of power?

At the beginning, in the 2000s, social media were seen as a democratic tool that offered a voice to everyone, much like what blogging did before the rise of Facebook. Basically, this means that social media were free and everyone with an Internet connection became a creator of "content," replacing traditional media like newspapers and television. The most visible difference between legacy media and social media is that the former is centralized (editorial control is very apparent and the effort to construct public opinions is very transparent), while the latter is decentralized (there is no apparent control). Thus, legacy media are a very obvious technology of power that exerts control over the public sphere. Social media, on the other hand, seem to be out of control. But is there another form of power at play?

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Foucault developed his analysis of power in his various writings. I will use the accounts he provides in *History of Sexuality*, where he talks about "sovereign power," historically exerted directly, indirectly and in an absolute way, as "right of death":

> [The sovereign] could legitimately wage war, and require his subjects to take part in the defense of the state; without directly proposing their death, he was empowered to expose their life […]. But if someone dared to rise up against him and transgress his laws, then he could exercise a direct power over the offender's life. (Foucault 1978: 135)

This ancient form of power based on the sovereign's right to decide who lives and who dies eventually turned into a "power over life," a power that administers life:

> […] a power whose task is to take charge of life needs continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms […] distributing the living in the domain of value and utility. Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendor; […] it effects distributions around the norm." (Foucault 1978: 144)

Thus, the technology of power shifted from laws to norms (which are social conventions). The law is incorporated into the norms of a "continuum of apparatuses (medical, administrative and so on)" (Foucault 1978: 144). Foucault calls this a "normalizing society" (144) and he goes even further, adding that all the developments in nineteenth-century judicial systems were only reinforcements of this normalizing power. It is essential to notice that, for Foucault, normalization is the result of the rise of capitalism, the development of scientific thought and also industry. This form of power is not established solely in official institutions, but in society as a whole, as micromanagement of life in order to make it better, more productive and more effective. These unofficial institutions of the normalizing society are the family, peers, the public sphere, and the norms they enforce are unwritten rules that govern one's life, working through positive and negative social reinforcement of behavior.

From "disciplinary power" to "societies of control"

In 1990, Deleuze published his famous "Postscript on the Societies of Control," a groundbreaking and visionary perspective on how Foucault's disciplinary institutions have started to lose their power and how society is moving towards something he called "control." Deleuze begins his essay with a description of Foucault's ideas on disciplinary power. As we have already seen, different from sovereign power, the disciplinary power that was developed in the eighteenth and

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nineteenth centuries was a "normalizing power"; its ideal type was the prison (or the Panopticon), and all the other institutions were modeled after it. Deleuze explains that all these institutions, all these environments were closed, governed by their own rules: the family, then the school, the army, the factory, the hospital; their purpose was to create and administer a productive force – life. However, as sovereign power was superseded by disciplinary power, so it will be superseded by something else.

First, Deleuze notices the crisis of the disciplinary institutions: the constant need for reforms is a certain sign that their power is waning. Instead, the disciplinary society is replaced by the "society of control." "Discipline" is a strict and rigid structure which Deleuze calls a *mold*, a casting, but control is always fluid, always changing and adapting so as to contain everything – Deleuze's *modulation*. Deleuze offers the example of waged labor: the factory is based on a maximum production / minimum wage system, but the new form, the corporation, modulates wages through competition. Similarly, "*perpetual training* replaces the *school*, and continuous control replaces examination" (Deleuze 1992: 5).

This similarity between all the traditional disciplinary institutions and the corporation in a society of control prompts Deleuze to claim:

> In the disciplinary society one was always starting again (from the school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory), while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything – the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation. (Deleuze 1992: 5)

This "universal system of deformation" is, from my point of view, the never-ending competition, the *agon*. Societies of control as described by Deleuze, based on the corporation model (very different from the prison model of disciplinary societies), take the one and only most important characteristic of the model and "normalize" it – *agon*. Deleuze claims that "one is never finished with anything" because there is no end to this competition. McKenzie Wark, in her book *Gamer Theory*, describes this idea as *agony*, using the metaphor of "the cave" to talk about the "real world" as opposed to the "gamespace":

> You observe that world after world, cave after cave, what prevails is the same agon, the same digital logic of one versus the other, ending in victory or defeat. Agony rules! Everything has value only when ranked against something else; everyone has value only when ranked against someone else. Every situation is win-lose, unless it is win-win. […] The real world appears as a video arcadia divided into many and varied games. Work is a

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> rat race. Politics is a horse race. The economy is a casino. Even the utopian justice to come in the afterlife is foreclosed: *He who dies with the most toys wins*. Games are no longer a pastime, outside or alongside of life. They are now the very form of life, and death, and time itself. (Wark 2007: [006])

Wark talks about games, but is there any other cultural form that mimics so well this competition-based, corporation-modeled society of control? She goes as far as to say that there are no differences between the "real world" and the "gamespace" or rather, that the gamespace *is* the real world. This agonic logic of the gamespace/society of control turns individuals into ever changing positions on leaderboards. In Deleuze's account, individuals, no longer distinguishable from the masses, become "*dividuals*" – that is, data: "the man of control is undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network" (Deleuze 1992: 6), a password, a code, an account, a social media profile.

We can understand Deleuze's society of control as a corporate model of a normalizing society. Corporate norms, which are based on competition, or *agon*, are being dispersed in a rhizomatic structure. Of course, the corporation itself is a rhizome, without a center, a beginning or an end, without topography; rather, the corporation employs a network topology, an architecture that is very similar to that of social networks, a collection of nodes that are interconnected. However, these connections are only temporary and by no means durable or rigid; they are flexible and fluid, or, in the words of Deleuze: "Control is short-term and of rapid rates of turnover, but also continuous and without limit, while discipline was of long duration, infinite and discontinuous" (Deleuze 1992: 6).

The architecture of social media

At first sight, the architecture of social media networks is very simple: a rhizomatic structure of nodes, that is, users, interacting in some way or another. From one point of view, this is the "democratic" interpretation of social media, the one which claims that everyone has a voice on social networks, a voice which is by no means more or less valid than any other voice on the platform. Another assumption that stems from the beginning stages of social networks concerns social media as outlets for user generated content, which turns them into a global public sphere. However, the "social" in "social media" might only be a simulacrum. Geert Lovink argues that "the social – to remain inside Baudrillard's vocabulary – is reanimated as a simulacrum of its own ability to create meaningful and lasting social relations" (Lovink 2012: n.p.). Are the nodes in social networks mere users or are they actually consumers? I would argue that what the users consume on social media platforms is the platform architecture itself. Social networks reenact social relationships stripped of their complexity and allow a certain construction of the

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self. Their architectures are almost always based on a normalization of social interactions, but also on a normalization of the "virtual" self.

The normalization of social interactions on these platforms is staged through the actions one may take: share, comment, like etc. One example we may quickly think of is that of Donald Trump, whose use of social media led to his being elected President of the US. Obviously, Trump's messages managed to create a "bubble" large enough for the normalization of his political views, no matter how extreme. Social media architectures do not create messages, but they do create patterns of reaction to messages, and the consumers can do nothing but use those patterns. According to Lovink,

> We all need a break from the social circus every now and then, but who can afford to cut off ties indefinitely? In the online context, the social requires our constant involvement, in the form of clicking. We need to make the actual link. Machines will not make the vital connection for us, no matter how much we delegate. It is no longer enough to build on your existing capital. What social media do is algorithmically expand your reach – or at least they promise to. (Lovink 2012: n.p.)

This engagement with social media, that is, with "the social," normalizes the "virtual" self because these platforms are also constructed with the logic of the corporate model in mind. There is an inherent *agon*, a constant competition for that instant gratification provided by "reactions." And of course this competitive environment promotes certain models, which become social norms: "Social media has been a clever trick to get them [the masses] talking. We have all been reactivated. The obscenity of common opinions and the everyday prostitutions of private details is now firmly embedded in software and in billions of users" (Lovink n.p.).

In his analysis of Kant's "Was ist Aufklärung?" Foucault proposes that Aufklärung (the Enlightenment) or "modernity" is not an age or a period, but an attitude towards reality, and he uses Baudelaire's ideas to explain what modern man (*sic*) is. For Foucault, modernity is the attitude that constructs the "heroic" in the present: "Modernity is not a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it is the will to 'heroize' the present" ("What Is Enlightenment?" 40). However, he goes on to say that this heroization is ironic and that modern man is not looking for himself, but always inventing himself. And the *locus* of this invention is art. Modern man is, in other words, inventing himself aesthetically. Similarly, social platform users will "heroize" their present and, because the platform itself encourages it, they will present themselves aesthetically. If anything, social media enables a corporate-like competition for aesthetics.

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We can see that the architectures of social media are, in all their simplicity, very complex. Papacharissi argues that

> Online social networks suggest genres of behavior through their architectural elements and submit the same architectural elements to the behavioral elements of their users, who customize them to connect better their offline and online interactions. So, while the architecture of social networking sites is suggestive, it does not have to be inherently limiting, depending of course on the culture and orientation of the online social network. (Papacharissi 2009: 203)

Obviously, as Foucault explained about the individual of modernity, the individual of social media also aesthetically constructs his or her self on the platform; moreover, this individual constructs his or her self morally. In the social media rhizome, form becomes not function, but morality. The biopolitics of daily life can be now found on social media because life and "living" have perhaps irreversibly moved to social media.

Some authors (Stark, Crawford 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen 2018) talk about "an emotional architecture" of social media, mostly revolving around the use of emoji-styled reactions that normalize social interactions within the platform. The most eloquent example of how biopolitics works in a social network is the Facebook emotional contagion experiment from 2013. During the experiment, Facebook manipulated the feeds of almost 700,000 users to see if they will experience any emotional contagion. Some of them were provided with mostly negative content, while others were offered mostly positive content. The experiment was successful: by filtering the content users received, there had been a change in the emotional state of those users, as shown by the content they subsequently posted (Kramer et al 2014). Of course, most commentators and authors have decried the fact that Facebook did not ask for users' consent to perform the experiment. On the other hand, I am more interested in the capability of the social platform to influence users' behavior directly. The emotional architecture of a social platform used to consist only in its structure, but things are rapidly changing: "more recently, Facebook has been granted a patent to use smartphone cameras and webcams to monitor user feelings and use it to deliver content and advertising tailored to their moods" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018: 150). Wahl-Jorgensen mentions that there is "an emotional turn" brought about by the social media's insistence on emotional output and reactions. Thus, what we are dealing with here is a normalization of emotion in the so-called public sphere of social media: "the emotional architectures of social media […] both facilitate and privilege emotional engagement, often in the direction of pro-social positivity, as a means of monetizing audience behavior" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019: 3).

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Social media and control

As a technology of power, are social media a normalization of social relations and practices, as Foucault explains about the unwritten rules of a "normalizing society" or is there a centralized control exerted by the corporations? Or, as Deleuze explains, control is so diluted in this whole rhizome that we have trouble even recognizing it?

Firstly, as we have already seen, the architectures of social media work on an emotional level. Facebook, for instance, is able to exert algorithmic control over the content being displayed, thus manipulating users' emotional interaction with the network and users' reactions with the goal of monetizing them. The "pro-social positivity," as the conclusion of the Facebook emotional contagion experiment shows, is paramount to keeping an environment that is able to sustain this monetization. This climate of positive socialization (even if it is controlled by the algorithm or not) will create "norms." If anything, the platform can only algorithmically (that is, automatically) control the content being displayed.

Secondly, this climate of positivity is eventually internalized within a "normalizing society." Obviously, the hero of this society is the one who plays best by the rules of positivity and authenticity. These rules become a specific form of morality, demanding that we act and react in certain ways in order to be socially acceptable. Of course, the algorithm contributes to this morality; for instance, Facebook updates their algorithm periodically in order to, in the words of Mark Zuckerberg, "improve our well-being and happiness" (qtd. in Vogelstein 2018). Since the platform is modeled after the corporation, with its logic of competition and perpetually changing leaderboards, control ends up becoming self-control; the norms of positivity end up being internalized. Whoever understands and internalizes the norms wins. These winners are today called "influencers."

Social media influencers are a fairly recent development on social networks; they have yet to attract the attention of researchers of outside fields such as marketing. However, it is generally accepted that a social media influencer is someone who uses various social media platforms on a regular basis and has a large number of followers. Social media influencers are not some shady aspect of social networks; they have become a serious profession, as proven by the fact that the US Federal Trade Commission released, in 2017, some guidelines to make their activity and their connections to corporations more transparent (Scott 2019). In short, we may say that social media influencing is a way to use the platform, its architecture, its effects and its algorithms to monetize oneself:

> A social media influencer is a user who has established credibility in a specific industry, has access to a huge audience and can persuade others to act based on their recommendations. And influencer has the tools and

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> authenticity to attract many viewers consistently and can motivate others to expand their social reach. An influencer may be anyone from a blogger to a celebrity to an online entrepreneur. They must simply be able to capitalize on a niche to attain widespread credibility. (Rivera, digitalmarketinginstitute.com)

As we can see, a social media influencer is defined, first and foremost, in terms of the monetization of their content and their ability to gather a large group of followers. Their tools are credibility and authenticity, which they use to determine the actions of these followers, to influence their decisions, lifestyles, political views, actions and reactions.

Influencers perfect the process of self-marketing or "personal branding," as it is called today, or, in other words, they turn their lives into art, in the sense Foucault notices about the modern individual. An influencer's power and capacity for control over their followers stems from this apparent authenticity of their online self. Influencers will document their lives on social media platforms (usually multiple ones), so there is no difference between the "real-life" self and the "virtual" self. Influencers construct themselves aesthetically on social media to convey the sense of authenticity that is vital for their credibility and, thus, for their success as "brands." Of course, the goal of the whole process is to obtain some form of monetization, usually through endorsement of corporate brands. This aesthetics is so well-developed that influencers have created styles of product-placement and photo filters, for instance. However,

> transitioning from an average Instagram or YouTube user to a professional "influencer" – that is, someone who leverages a social media following to influence others and make money – is not easy. After archiving old photos, redefining your aesthetic, and growing your follower base to at least quadruple digits, you'll want to approach brands. But the hardest deal to land is your first, several influencers say; companies want to see your promotional abilities and past campaign work. So many have adopted a new strategy: Fake it until you make it. (Lorenz 2018)

Essentially, the influencers' perceived authenticity and credibility, different from the celebrities' artificiality and elaborately produced lifestyles, create the premise for the engagement of their followers. They eventually become the centers of control in their own "bubbles," influencing the behavior of their following. This influence is assessed, measured and quantified, of course, in money. For instance, the site influencermarketinghub.com provides a tool to calculate how much one can earn from a single Instagram post. Cameron Dallas, for instance, a US influencer with about 21 million followers, posting mostly personal photos and videos, could

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earn from $42,000 to $70,000. influencermarketinghub.com intends to provide a platform for corporations and influencers to assess their worth based on a number of variables, like followers, number of posts, frequency of posts, engagement and so on.

Social media influencers can regulate and control their followers' lives in accordance with their logic. The consequence is the normalization of attitudes, emotions and aesthetics. This vocabulary and this practice have become so common that Pope Francis called the Virgin Mary "the first influencer" and encouraged people to follow her model (Scott 2019). Of course, influence does not necessarily mean it is linked to some corporate brand, but it does mean that it is a form of Deleuzian control.

Another example that highlights the endless possibilities for control in the age of social media is the Google Selfish Ledger. The Ledger is an idea developed by Google X, a shady research and development organization that deals with cutting edge technological innovations. The Selfish Ledger is actually a 2016 video designed to be used internally; eventually, it leaked and created a net-wide shock because of the type of total control it proposes.

The video begins with a brief explanation of Lamarck's theory of inheritance of acquired characteristics, or "soft inheritance," used by the French biologist in his theory of evolution. Just as our characteristics come together to form who we are, user data that is constantly harvested and analyzed can be put together into a "ledger" that describes who we are. Basically, Google suggests that total user data collection could be used to create descriptions of those users. Of course, this is by no means something new. We know that Google and Facebook, for instance, gather data about their users and use it to provide ads.

The video moves on to explain Dawkins' "selfish gene" theory: it is genes, not organisms or groups, who ensure their own survival, being metaphorically "selfish," that is, designed to reproduce themselves. Similarly, the Ledger software could act selfishly, under Google's coordination: "As an organization, Google would be responsible for offering suitable targets for a user's ledger." The purpose of this software would be "global good," defined in the video as "the reflection of Google's values as an organization." This is where the video becomes dystopian and unsettling: it goes on by saying that a user's behavior can be modified by offering suggestions, and this behavior, relationships, preferences, attitudes and so on can be gathered across generations, so that eventually the Ledger might be able to predict users' behaviors.

Google's Selfish Ledger might also employ something called "behavioral sequencing," similar to "gene sequencing." The video explains that by predicting users' behavior the Ledger algorithm might also be capable of removing "unwanted" behavior and suggesting only "desirable" behaviors: "By thinking of user data as multigenerational, it becomes possible for emerging users to benefit

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from the preceding generations behaviors and decisions. As new users enter the ecosystem, they begin to create their own trail of data. By comparing this emergent ledger with the mass of historical user data, it becomes possible to make increasingly accurate predictions about decisions and future behaviors" (Google Selfish Ledger video). What this means, and it is stated as such in the video, is that a user may die, but the collected data that makes up him- or herself lives on in the Ledger; similarly, when a user is born, they create a new strand of data. This kind of social engineering across populations and generations made possible by total data collection proves that a very subtle form of control can be at work in contemporary social media-oriented society. Ultimately, the Ledger is supposed to become somewhat of a genetic code that works for its own reproduction and development.

Google issued a response in which the company mentions that the video is only an experiment designed to be disturbing, and not related to Google products and services. However, as *The Verge*'s Vlad Savov notices, the company applied in 2015 for a patent regarding the detection and correction of potential errors in user behavior. Basically, there is an algorithm that creates a desirable behavior by modifying some variables in the way the user interacts with the service.

As we have seen, social media and the new service-based web create an entirely new dimension of control, one that we have yet to uncover. What is certain, though, is the fact that the corporate model of control is being internalized in society and in all the traditional institutions. To address these issues, we need new theoretical tools and concepts, or perhaps a reimagining of the old ones. It is certain today that there is no leaving social media and no escapist strategy can work; what we can do is become the gamer-theorists that Wark proposes in her *Gamer Theory*, using critical theory to reveal the underlying networks of control and the new governmentality that they bring.

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