From Stripping Off to Holding Your Guns: Lessons Learned So Far

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Abstract
This short essay will try to capture some of the lessons social media users have come to learn during the existence of social media era. I will highlight the need to take responsibility of the posts one makes and shares on social media and thus emphasize the importance of one’s critical thinking and digital literacy skills.

Keywords
self-presentation, invisible audiences, users of social media

Social media, which has existed barely over a decade, and which was first mainly used both for looking and keeping up with one’s “friends” as well as for creating virtual impressions of oneself, has presently developed into a medium which has given its users the power to change individual lives and influence the fate of nation states. Social media has become a platform for exercising one’s agency as its users have been given an opportunity to be creative, outspoken, and active; however, it has also become clear that never before have the critical thinking and digital literacy skills been more important than they are during the social media era.

In my mind, social media was first mainly a platform for striptease culture if to use Brian McNair’s (2002) term. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and all the other social media sites provided the ordinary people with an opportunity to “post themselves in to being” (if to rephrase Sundén, 2003). Sharing the textual and visual bits and pieces of one’s life were for some users almost equal with stripping off in front of numerous “friends” or “followers.” One rarely thought twice before posting one's drunken party photos or selfies in promiscuous poses, nor did one start to question whether it is acceptable to label one’s boss an idiot or share one’s extreme nationalist views. It was perfectly normal to express one’s actual, ought, and ideal selves on social media and not be afraid of the consequences because all these posts were primarily believed to be shared among the ideal audience, one’s “friends.”

In more recent years, however, a growing number of social media users have needed to learn that all these seemingly innocent “virtual” impression management performances that they are daily undertaking on networked publics do not usually come without implications in the “real life.” In other words, the previously promised and spoken for distinction between the “real” and the “virtual, or between the “public” and the “private” in this information saturated society, while numerous unlucky ones have been set up as cautionary examples of what the lack of adequate self-criticism, digital literacy skills, and good manners could lead up to. Among those unlucky ones have been, for instance, Estonian Minister of Finance who was made to step down for insulting his Facebook “friend,” another Minister, on Facebook; guys from the United Kingdom who were imprisoned for 4 years for planning a London riot on Facebook; and a guy from the United States who got arrested for posting hard-rock lyrics speaking of bloodshed after Boston marathon bombings.

Numerous invisible eyes that may be watching us on social media have by now become the best reporting mechanism for detecting the above-mentioned cases. Furthermore, members of the invisible audience have proved to be the best for finding the cheating husbands, students playing truant, and employees pretending to be ill as well as for hunting down various criminals, offenders, and terrorists. Although in many cases these self-appointed detectives and activists of
the participatory society have proved to be invaluable in helping to ensure state security and stability by pointing out the ills and vices of other users, they have often also been responsible for starting and spreading moral panics.

In fact, never before has it been so easy for mankind to spread hatred, lies, and fear than during the social media era. Furthermore, ignorant or ill-wishing hands may turn social media easily into a weapon that at one point could not only lead to self-harm but also ruin the lives of innocent others. Thus, critical thinking and digital literacy skills are desperately needed in case we want to keep our hopes about maintaining social media as a place for “pacifists.”

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References

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