

Reading the stranger in the age of social media

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to locate the Subject articulated by and through social media technologies. Drawing on the speculative phenomenology of Georg Simmel, I argue that the mediated Subject is best understood as a resurrection of Simmel's 'stranger' (1908) – a figure characterised by paradox and existential crisis. Herein, the mediated stranger is defined through ambivalence, objectivity, the dialectic of mobility, and the coexistence of belonging and exclusion. On one hand, this framework challenges conventional understandings of strangeness as a purely menacing quality. On the other hand, it suggests that the mediated stranger – codified in digital templates and driven by database logic – is the basic unit of online sociality.

KEY WORDS

Georg Simmel, social media, stranger, belonging

INTRODUCTION

This paper interpolates the ‘new’ through the ‘old’ as a way of engaging with the social media paradigm and delineating the Subject to which it gives life. I argue that via their mobilities, structures, and ontological efficacies, social media produce a figure defined by existential contradiction, as an entity positioned between exclusion and belonging. Social media – to be approached strictly as the hyphenation of media technology and social relations – actively engender a Subject who ‘is an element of the group itself... [but] an element whose membership in the group involves both being outside it and confronting it’ (Simmel 1971a[1908]: 144). This is to say, the mediated Subject is a core constituent of a community to which she can never fully belong.

Social media articulate ways in which the mediated Subject manifests within the contemporary ecosystem of techno-social being. While destabilising conventional binaries of belonging, the mediated Subject remains marked by the demands of presence and absence, of rejection and inclusion, of nearness and distance. This paradoxical framework is herein explored through the mechanisms and operations of social media. Through these, I develop a meditation on the interdependencies and disjunctures between media, technology, and being. It is thus suggested that the mediated Subject can best be understood as a resurrection of Georg Simmel’s ‘stranger’ (1908).

Along with delineating the mediated Subject, this article also challenges conventional perceptions of the stranger as a purely threatening or foreboding figure. Instead, I propose that a more useful and adroit definition ought to acknowledge the stranger as a figure of ambivalence, objectivity, and mobility.

En route to a richer understanding of the mediated stranger, this discussion begins with a critical analysis of Simmel’s original conceptualisation, outlining the stranger’s formal characteristics and subsequent implications for his position within the territorial

community. From there it becomes possible to sketch links between Simmel's early twentieth century figure and today's mediated Subject. To close, trajectories for future research are proposed.

SIMMEL'S STRANGER

Simmel's impression of the stranger endures. In this section, I explore themes through which Simmel's stranger is articulated in order to establish the concept's contemporary salience. I also distinguish the stranger from other wanderer archetypes, including the traveler, nomad, and flâneur. Ultimately, this analysis suggests the stranger's unique utility for parsing the social media discourse.

Writing at the start of the twentieth century, Simmel frames the stranger in territorially embedded terms, with the prototype represented by the trader. This is a figure – and per Simmel, an explicitly male figure – living in a particular community but always attendant to an elsewhere (1971a: 144). The trader succinctly captures the stranger's relationship to spatial polygamy and social belonging, circumscribed by 'factors of repulsion and distance [that] work to create a form of being together, a form of union based on interaction' (*ibid.*). The trader is the mediator of spatialities and socialities, bridging the territorial source of his goods with the market for them. He occupies a plurality of spaces at once, yet he belongs firmly in none. What emerges here is the irreconcilable cohabitation of distance and closeness, of being together while being apart (see Turkle 2011). Herein lies the stranger's essence.

Simmel writes that '[i]f wandering, considered as a state of detachment from every given point in space, is the conceptual opposite of attachment to any point, then the sociological form of "the stranger" presents the synthesis, as it were, of both of these properties' (1971a: 143). The stranger is thereby positioned as paradox, tied to a theoretical spatiality navigated by distance-as-belonging. The stranger's movement through space functions as a metric by which social engagement can be

measured, and the dialectic of mobility thus frames his relationship with others. As Simmel explains, 'spatial relations not only are determining conditions of relationships among men, but are also symbolic of those relationships' (*ibid.*). Mobility can thereby be viewed as an influential logic driving social relations, negotiating the stranger's corporeal and symbolic spaces of belonging.

Guided by the stranger's appropriation of movement, stasis, and socio-spatial belonging, we can distinguish Simmel's figure from that of the nomad, traveler, and flâneur. In anthropological orthodoxy, the nomad is defined through what James Clifford (1997) calls 'dwelling-in-traveling'. The nomad's home is movement. The traveler, meanwhile, is typically approached as a seeker of leisure, excitement, or 'authenticity' whose temporally limited quests are pursued outside his community of residence (see Rojek 1995; MacCannell 1999, 1973; Urry 2001). For the traveler, the necessity of return implies the idea of home, while for the nomad, home is the journey. But the stranger-as-trader sits awkwardly between home and away, not belonging fully to either. For him, there is neither a right of return nor a demand for constant movement. Meanwhile, Baudelaire's flâneur is a bourgeois poet who walks the streets in order to understand the city's essence (see Tester 1994: 2-3). Simmel's stranger is involved in no such artistic project of deliberate exploration.

Despite these provisional distinctions, a common thematic for the nomad, traveler, flâneur, and stranger revolves around the notion of home. For the stranger, it is precisely the dwelling that contributes to his existential crisis. 'Man's relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling' (Heidegger 1971: 157). But dwelling is itself configured through social systems, so that man's (and woman's) relation to space must be conceived as a consequence of relations between selves (and others). The stranger's link to the social can here be approached through the framework Jacques Rancière (2009)

proposes for the collective experience of looking at art. For Rancière, this is a project of 'being together apart' (*ibid.*: 53) where the viewer is bound to her fellow viewers through contemplative separation. In a similar configuration of communality and metaphysical remoteness, the stranger is spatially proximate to his neighbors but cognitively apart, and it is through this paradoxical togetherness that the shared dwelling of the community is constituted.

This axis of distance endows Simmel's stranger with certain advantages. Perhaps most interestingly, Simmel posits that through his bifurcated identity as foreigner-local, the stranger acquires indefatigable objectivity. 'Because he is not bound by roots to his particular constituents and partisan dispositions of the group, he confronts all of these with a distinctly "objective" attitude' (Simmel 1971a: 145). Put another way, the stranger's lack of rooted belonging endows him with an uncompromised, and seemingly uncompromisable, impartiality. For Simmel, such impartiality is a largely positive (and achievable) relation that develops by virtue of the stranger's crisis of belonging. The stranger's outsider-insider role relieves him of all communal normativities, and trust is thus generated: he 'often receives the most surprising revelations and confidences, at times reminiscent of a confessional, about matters which are kept carefully hidden from everybody with whom [the local] is close' (*ibid.*: 145). It is as if the symbolically unbridgeable distance from those nearby imbues the stranger with an infallible rationality, and through rationality and observation comes truth.

Through the irreconcilable merger of nearness and distance, the stranger is rendered objective. But rather than reifying this preternatural association with impartiality, we can suggest that his alleged objectivity positions the stranger as a mere consumer of signs. He emerges impervious to affect, a sort of sterile *übermensch*. His agency becomes intrinsically tied to observation, and both place and social relations are thereby reduced to series of snapshots. Therein, the stranger becomes

enclosed in what Susan Sontag calls a 'chronic voyeuristic relation to the world' (1977: 11). The stranger is objective because all he can do is look.

In closing, the core of Simmel's stranger is defined along the dialectic of social belonging and distance. For Simmel, the stranger is an objective figure whose essential Otherness generates trust. He is also a mediator of spatialities, though significantly, he remains firmly rooted in his community of residence. In the next section, I explore how the stranger's territorial fixity is complicated in the global 'mediascape' (Appadurai 1990) and focus on modalities of being through the so-called 'social media'.

THE MEDIATED STRANGER

Social media are constellations of technology, sociality, and spatiality driven by internet infrastructure, network logic, and the fusion of production and consumption. These vectors flow into and from each other, and the resulting intersections and fissures help configure notions of the mediated self and the Other. For Simmel, the stranger is understood primarily through the intersections of spatial and social relations but as technology thoroughly penetrates the conventions of living (as well as the academic study thereof), it becomes intellectually profitable to consider how social media challenge, reinforce, or otherwise affect the stranger archetype.

Indeed, social media represent the socio-spatial dimensions that concern Simmel but they also invoke theoretical consideration of the increasingly techno-oriented dimensions of human practice. Social media, in their structural interpolation of the social and spatial through the technological, therefore offer ideal mechanisms through which to make out and reassert the contemporary relevance of Simmel's stranger.

At their most abstract, social media represent a circulation of signs, a wasteland of transient code. They herald a bringing together of geographies, technologies, and subjectivities through a process of de-

differentiation whereby the user's virtual self is constantly on the move through and as packets of data. In this configuration, social media are structures concerned principally with mobility and flow, and such a vortex of data effectively precludes the user's complete belonging in any one place. Simmel stipulates that '[t]he appearance of...mobility within a bounded group occasions that synthesis of nearness and remoteness which constitutes the formal position of the stranger' (1971a: 145). Mobility – both corporeal and imaginary – thus bridges the psycho-temporal space between home and away, and furnishes a dialectical economy of distance that articulates and produces the stranger.

Unlike Simmel's figure, the mediated stranger is intimately linked to hardware. As a technological subject and object, her being is (re) constructed by the apparatuses of digital movement (and vice versa), and it thus becomes possible to position her alongside the cyborg. As Donna Haraway (1991: 152) posits:

Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and art)ificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.

Agency is therein transferred, at least in part, from human to machine. While I do not mean to suggest that the technological necessarily overpowers the human, I do want to highlight the techno-social interactivity by which the mediated stranger is constituted as both insider and outsider. Her relations to space, to self, and to others are constantly subject to redefinition through her links to the machinery of mediation. Indeed, as Deleuze and Guattari (1983) suggest, '[t]here is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples machines together' (in Fuery 2009: 65).

Social media thus situate the Subject within a circular logic of production while simultaneously articulating the growing interdependence between human and machine. Bruns (2006) proposes the term ‘produser’ to describe this mediated constituent (cf. Toffler’s (1980) ‘prosumer’). By merging production and consumption, the agency with which one helps create the media one consumes boomerangs and enables those very media to constitute the user within various micropublics. The maker is thereby made and remade by that which she creates, without end. Forever on the move, the mediated Subject is perched on the pendulum between belonging and estrangement, swinging to and fro.

Social media platforms – from Facebook to Twitter to Digg – position users as dwelling interlopers. The user is the intruder who can never permanently belong, yet she helps constitute the very community that produces her existential ambivalence. This is digital replication of the host communities Simmel describes, spaces in which the stranger is a formal element of the group but ‘by his very nature no owner of land – land not only in the physical sense but also metaphorically as a vital substance which is fixed, if not in space, then at least in an ideal position with the social environment’ (1971a: 144). There is no land to own in cyberspace, only the vestige of place constituted by profile pages, URLs, and inboxes. Significantly, this transient form of residence exists only in so far as it is visited. Recognition begets existence, as it were.

The demands of recognition thus underwrite online sociality. The mediated Subject evaluates others based on displays of information: collections of online friends, photo uploads, listings of favorite books, movies, music, and so on. Through this referential yet decontextualised scaffolding, social media foster relations between *information*, between de-differentiated signifiers. The web browser renders affect code, and communication through social media assumes a veneer of Simmel’s objectivity in as much as the user engages with information rather than with a more organic community, with its normative claims and

obligations. This is not to ignore ‘netiquette’ in online communication. But in a space defined by flows of decontextualised data exchange, normativities are easily eschewed and redefined.

For both Simmel and social media, it is through distance that ‘[o]bjectivity can also be defined as freedom....[a] freedom, which permits the stranger to experience and treat even his close relationships as though from a bird’s-eye view’ (1971a: 146). Closeness helps constitute remoteness, and this highlights a particular dimension of the stranger’s ambivalence: he is neither pure menace, nor entirely a non-threat. Operating along the axis of distance, social media perpetuate similar relations of and between ambiguity. By virtue of her being both close and remote, the Subject lurking in our mediated midst is somewhere between friend and foe, defined by an irresolvable existential paradox.

As Simmel makes clear, the dialectic of distance becomes a pathway toward de-differentiation and ambivalence. De-differentiation online produces relations based on information-as-objectivity. With relations in cyberspace reduced to exchanges of data between simulacra of selves – between semi-formed templates of digital being – social media perpetuate a sort of social and symbolic leveling, rendering everything (and everyone) more or less the same (i.e. reducible to data), and therefore *interchangeable*. Through the language and mechanics of data, social media engender difference through sameness.

In relation to this leveling property, we should consider Simmel’s observation about singularity vis-à-vis similarity:

A similarity so widely shared could just as easily unite each person with every possible other. This, too, is evidently a way in which a relationship includes both nearness and remoteness simultaneously. To the extent to which the similarities assume a universal nature, the warmth of the connection based on them will acquire an element of coolness, a sense of the contingent nature of precisely *this* relationship – the connecting forces have lost their specific, centripetal character. (Simmel 1971a: 147, emphasis original)

When being is reduced to a template, as in social media, it is easy to establish bonds based on shared preferences. Yet because of the general nature of these bonds, they cannot garner the warmth of singular ties. Instead these bonds are based on a database of commonality, an indexical logic of sameness. This is the essence of the database, and as driver of social media practice, the database must be understood as a manufacturer of weak (and therefore cool) ties based on the structural negation of individuality. What is most general and most common is valued, and therein the stranger achieves recognition as the basic unit of online sociality.

With systemic privileging of the universal over the singular – codified in templates and the database – social media become aggregators of sameness. Here, the bounded terrestrial community offers an instructive conceptual parallel. As a group whose constitution is linked to a set of shared values, practices, and histories, the bounded community produces a particular collective Self that is counterposed to the general Other. But in social media, there is only the loose notion of self which is forced into relation with a collectivity of Others. What is shared is Otherness. Lucas Introna and Martin Brigham propose that it is '[v]irtual interaction...[which] reconstitutes proximity such that Others – strangers – are simultaneously those far away and near us' (2007: 168). But this rearticulates the us/them binary, and the point I am trying to make here is that the 'us' in social media is not in opposition to any particular or generalised 'them' because in social media there is only Otherness. It is sameness through irreconcilable difference, as much as it is sameness through interchangeable data. 'Them' equals 'us' and the Other becomes indistinguishable from the self.

What is shared in the online community is both sameness and strangeness. In this respect, social media users are able to experience the full spectrum of belonging: to constitute themselves as part of an ideologically homogenous group while performing the role of the outsider. This schizophrenic ontology of belonging is:

caused by the fact that similarity, harmony, and closeness are accompanied by the feeling that they are actually not the exclusive property of this particular relation, but stem from a more general one – a relation that potentially includes us and an indeterminate number of others, and therefore prevents the relation from having an inner and exclusive necessity. (Simmel 1971a: 148)

Herein social media emerge clearly as producing relations engendering both nearness and remoteness, creating a sociality built on paradox.

Such an existential and operative crisis of belonging allows us to underscore that Simmel's work leads toward an understanding of social media not merely as technological mechanisms but as socio-spatial practices with wide-ranging implications for issues of identity, politics, historiography, and beyond. Social media are fundamentally linked to a multi-sited ontology. They are about the place one visits as much as the place from which one departs; they are about the here and there, the home and away, belonging and interrupting. Online, such dualisms are complicated by the paradox of virtuality. The mediated stranger is connected to myriad machines and cyborgs through a single machine, and therefore to myriad places through a single place. But place itself is never single. As in offline ontology, place cannot be considered in the singular for it always constitutes and is derivative of a series of spatial vectors. These can be approached in the language of the local, national, regional, and global. What virtuality does is perform a duplication of materiality's inherent polyspatiality.

The mediated stranger, therefore, exists not only at her kitchen table but also in the 'living room' of a particular web page. She exists in her country and also in the nation of the social network site. She lives in the world and also in the whole of cyberspace. We can thus say that in the online context, the stranger's existence and spatialities are doubled. Abdemalek Sayad described the migrant as 'double absent' (1999), and the mediated stranger is indeed twice absent but she is also twice *present*.

She is twice absent because her essence, like the migrant, is that of mobility – of movement between belonging, between recognition. She is twice present, meanwhile, because he is a subject of both the virtual and material worlds, though not identical in them. And she belongs to both through her very not belonging fully in either, as ‘a foreign body in our existence which is yet somehow connected with the center; the outside, if only by a long and unfamiliar detour, is formally an aspect of the inside’ (Simmel 1971b: 188).

CONCLUSION

Research in the humanities and social sciences is increasingly concerned with social media development (e.g. Turkle 2011, Lister *et al.* 2009, Yoo 2009, Ito *et al.* 2010). One reason for this uptake may be recognition that social media represent an accelerated conglomeration of technologies of the past with subsequently complicated reverberation for present-day social relations, spatial practices, and cultural productions.

Simmel’s work on the stranger offers a rich conceptual framework from which to engage with this discourse. I have attempted to outline several theoretical modalities through which the contemporary stranger is articulated, and to highlight how media technologies help extend the relevance of Simmel’s important construction. Future research could examine interplays between the mediated stranger, online surveillance, and self-disclosure; it could also investigate connections between inclusion, exclusion, and mediated politics.

Throughout this discussion, technologies of mobility have been presented as mechanisms by which human forms, subjectivities, and socio-cultural practices move between cartographic and imaginary spaces of belonging. In this context, the stranger is caught in the paradox of mediated homeland, trapped within a spatial plurality defined by pure flow: velocity and movement.

Social media's theoretical and structural entanglement with the dialectics of distance and mobility underscores the crisis of mediated belonging. To understand the mediated stranger as the embodiment of paradox is to acknowledge that exclusion from the group brings with it a particular kind of belonging. In the terrestrial sphere, 'the consciousness of having only the absolutely general in common [with others] has exactly the effect of putting a special emphasis on that which is not in common' (Simmel 1971a: 148). But online, database logic gives rise only to commonality. In the digital community, the stranger represents a conflation of 'us' and 'them' and a triumph of code over affect.

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