



Social Media as Heterotopia: Applying Foucault's Concept of Heterotopia to Analyze Interventions in Social Media as a Networked Public

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Abstract

Background The concept and principles of heterotopia, which were first introduced by Michel Foucault, analyze how public space functions in citizens' lives. In this article, we use the concept to explore cyberspace as a public space and suggest design implications for social media interventions.

Methods This study conducted online observation as well as exploratory analysis of social media interventions based on Foucault's principles of heterotopia and danah boyd's theory of networked publics.

Results This study analyzes six heterotopian interventions in social media: Hashtag, Share, Profile, Throwback, Live, and Privacy settings. The results suggest the following design implications: (1) design both opening and closing abilities for a balanced control over information and privacy; (2) adjust the character of service design for different types of imagined audiences; (3) provide room for imagination and creation; and (4) design effective navigation and curation of accumulated content.

Conclusions The concept of heterotopia provides a new perspective for understanding social media's functions and affordances, from which implications are derived with respect on how to design interventions to enhance the role of social media as an engaging public space, and how to encourage users' participation.

Keywords Social Media, Heterotopia, Networked Public, Design Intervention, Affordance

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1. Introduction

Heterotopia is a philosophical and architectural notion about public spaces in society that was originally elaborated on by Foucault in 1966 (Dehaene & Cauter, 2008). Since then, heterotopias and their characteristics have been adopted as important conceptual lenses to understand contemporary public spaces (Kern, 2008). Social media has become one of our most important social infrastructures, helping to build global communities for citizen's lives. Although social media is a virtual and online "space," it can resemble public spaces in the physical world when looked at from diverse perspectives (Papacharissi, 2002b, 2009). boyd (2010, name stylized by herself) analyzed social media as a networked public, which she described as "simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice."

Based on boyd's approach and using the philosophy and concept of heterotopia, this study identifies and analyzes the interventions that help social media function as a heterotopian public space, and derive design implications from the lens of the heterotopia theory.

2. Background

2. 1. Heterotopia

Heterotopia literally means "other places," and the concept was first introduced by Michel Foucault in his radio talk in 1966 (Dehaene & De Cauter, 2008). Foucault described heterotopia as a space "which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, of our time and our history occurs, the space that torments and consumes" (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986). Although it has been decades since the idea of heterotopia was first introduced, it is still often a controversial, slippery, and confusing concept when applied to public spaces in contemporary society (Heynen, 2008). Consequently, there have been many different attempts to define and interpret the term. Some scholars borrow Hippodamus' concept about "third space" to explain heterotopia (De Cauter & Dehaene, 2008). Heterotopia as a third space is neither a political nor economic space, but instead can be described as the "cultural sphere," the space for religion, arts, sports, and leisure activities (e.g., churches, exhibition halls, and parks). Foucault himself gave many examples of heterotopias: "schools, military service, the honeymoon, old people's homes, psychiatric institutions, prisons, cemeteries, theatres and cinemas, libraries and museums, fairs and carnivals, holiday camps, hammams, saunas, motels, brothels, the Jesuit colonies and the ship." Foucault's examples have the commonality of being places which "interrupt the apparent continuity and normality of ordinary everyday space (De Cauter & Dehaene, 2008)."

In addition, the concept of heterotopia has evolved as society has developed and transformed. Primitive heterotopias have been replaced by more modern and functional places. Some authors have declared that all parts of cities have become heterotopias (De Cauter & Dehaene,

2008). As cyberspace has emerged, some scholars include virtual space as a new example of heterotopia (Rymarczuk & Derksen, 2014; Wark, 1993; Young, 1998). Wark (1993) compared virtual space to one of Foucault's examples, a ship. Like a ship, virtual space is also a "placeless place," and Wark described cyberspace as "a unified environment," linking between different places and times.

Foucault articulated six principles of heterotopias. His list, along with our interpretations, is as follows:

- (1) Every culture in the world has its own heterotopias.
- (2) Heterotopias can vary depending on the context of the society.
- (3) Heterotopias can juxtapose several spaces into a single real place.

An example is a Persian carpet, which itself represents a small and imaginary world, as part of the larger world of the room in which it lies.

(4) Heterotopias are related to time, so called "heterochronisms," which accumulate time indefinitely. For example, heterotopian places such as libraries and museums maintain collections which allow us to look at the past.

(5) Heterotopias have openings and closings which isolate them or make them penetrable. That is, heterotopias can separate space and time from ordinary spaces, e.g., a gated community or vacation resort.

(6) Each heterotopia has a relationship with other ordinary places. That is, heterotopian spaces can serve the public's collective and special needs in a way which cannot be accomplished by ordinary spaces, e.g., a cemetery.

In addition to Foucault's six principles, we shall also be mindful of a critical role of heterotopia:

(7) A heterotopian space can serve as a third place which compensates for and challenges ordinary spaces by suggesting illusory and imaginary images, e.g., a mirror.

This role helps us not only identify social media sectors as certain heterotopias, but explain the function or the nature of those sectors in our analysis.

2. 2. Social media as networked public

The concept of "public" is defined in many ways. Livingstone (2005) defined public as a community with a shared understanding, values, and identity. Anderson (2006) suggested that public is an imagined community with a common religious belief or nationalism. A number of researchers have proposed that cyberspace can be a new type of public space which encourages user discussion and participation (Johannessen, 2012). Many of these researchers were inspired by Habermas' concept of public sphere, which argues that public space needs to be a place for encouraging people's debate and participation (Habermas, 1991). Papacharissi (2002b) remarked that the internet has created a new public space by enabling easier access to information, connecting people from diverse background and providing a place for discussion.

boyd (2012) proposed the concept of "networked public" to describe social media as public space. In her conceptualization, networked public is the space constructed through networked technologies, an "imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of

people, technology, and practice.” The implication is that social media has as many functions and characteristics as physical public spaces have, in addition to being able to trigger people’s collective actions promptly and effectively.

boyd named four affordances, i.e., the characteristics of social media which amplify, record, and spread information and social acts. Her list of affordances, along with our interpretations, is as follows:

- (1) Persistence: Content uploaded once in social media lasts permanently.
- (2) Replicability: Content on social media is easily duplicated, and it is hard to distinguish original content from replicated content.
- (3) Scalability: Social media gives users the ability to make their opinions public and amplified.
- (4) Searchability: Social media enables its uploaded content to be searched, browsed, and explored.

boyd’s four affordances can be seen across most social media services, and play significant roles in shaping the characteristics of any networked public.

This paper contributes to the existing perspective which regards social media as a public space, by looking at social media through the lens of Foucault’s heterotopia principles. Applying this combined analytical lens, we are able to draw important design implications for social media which can encourage user participation, making social media into an even more engaging public space.

3. Method

This paper looks at four world-wide popular social media services which can function as global communities: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. We chose these four services because they are among the 20 most used services in 2020 (Clement, 2020) and popular across different demographics.

Through online observation, we conducted an exploratory case study using Foucault’s principles of heterotopia and boyd’s affordances as two conceptual lenses to discover and investigate the specific interventions which help social media function as a heterotopian public space. Online observation is a common data collection method used in online ethnography (Skågeby, 2011). During our online observation, we engaged ourselves in communities of the aforementioned four social media services, behaving and interacting with other users, from which we built our understanding of users’ behavior and their diverse usages.

We looked for design interventions, or features, that distinctively set social media apart from our ordinary, physical reality. Specifically, our selection met the following criteria: (1) The intervention should be commonly used, i.e. it is found in more than one of the four

social media services in this study; (2) The intervention should be related to at least one of Foucault’s heterotopia principles; (3) The intervention should benefit from one or more affordances proposed by boyd, so to be characterized as a *social media intervention*.

4. Analysis

Following the above selection criteria, we found that the following interventions are particularly meaningful in allowing us to view social media services as heterotopias and draw insights: Hashtag, Share, Profile, Throwback, Live, and Privacy settings.

4. 1. Hashtag

Hashtag is an intervention which transforms individuals’ discrete content into public assets. Illustrating the fifth principle of heterotopia, a hashtag penetrates the space and time in the content, creating a new unique public space, a search result page. Hashtag also strongly illustrates boyd’s “searchability” affordance.

Many important societal events have spread and become global movements because of the existence of specifically created Hashtags, e.g., #metoo (see Figure 1) and #occupy. Such Hashtags have successfully aided users in forming alliances between victims and supporters and across boundaries such as age, gender and nationality. Hashtag therefore also epitomizes boyd’s “scalability.”

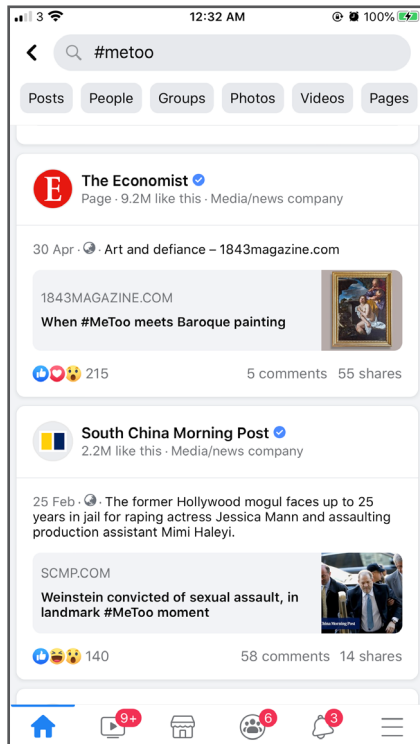


Figure 1 #metoo Hashtag search result page in Facebook

4. 2. Share

Along with Hashtag, Share helps bring users together into one global community by allowing easy spread of content. Illustrating the third principle of heterotopia, Share juxtaposes several spaces into a single place by putting content from different sources into one timeline or Profile page. In addition, Share embodies replicability and scalability affordances in that it helps content be duplicated and dramatically disseminated.

4. 3. Profile

Profile in social media (see Figure 3) shows images of the account owner via selfies and postings. As a basic feature and staple piece of content of social media, Profile is supported by all four affordances, which can be amplified, recorded, and spread. In social media, unlike the real world, people can carefully curate their images (Donath & boyd, 2004; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2002a), creating different personas and changing them to be aligned with context (Zhao et al., 2013). This curating behavior resembles that of actors performing on stage in a theatre (Goffman, 1978).

We can use Foucault's interpretation of the famous work of Velazquez, *Las Meninas* (see Figure 2), to gain more insight into the role that Profile plays. This painting does impressive tricks with real and virtual space. A painter is painting a pair of subjects and we see them only as a reflection in a mirror, a third space that is not a physical reality. Like the image in the mirror, the images on Profile are not real, but are created by the Profile owner.

In addition, none of the characters can see the audience outside the painting. But the painter in the painting seems conscious of someone outside of the frame and he is painting them; analogously, social media users are not aware of every audience to their content. Instead, users only have an imagined audience, which influences them when creating their self-presentations. Since imagined audiences can differ on the various social media services, users often change their tone and manner of posting depending on the character of each service (Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Livingstone, 2005).



Figure 2 *Las Meninas* by Velazquez

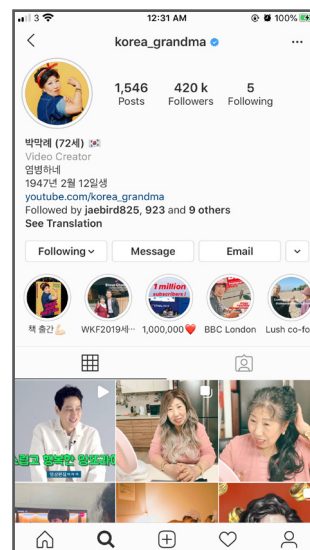


Figure 3 a Profile page in Instagram

The mirror and the stage are thus useful heterotopia related metaphors, showing how users selectively present the desirable aspects of their personas to their imagined audience.

4. 4. Throwback

Many social media services have adopted Throwback, which randomly displays nostalgic moments from the past content. This intervention reminds users of content they have accumulated inside the service, and lets them appreciate forgotten memories from different times and places. Like coming across an unexpected treat in a library, users can feel enjoyment at an unexpected social media suggestion.

Throwback reminds us of Foucault's concept of "heterochronism," since heterotopia is not simply a space, but rather a time-space which accumulates time (De Cauter & Dehaene, 2008). Since new content ultimately becomes personal archive and historic data (Hogan, 2010; Zhao et al., 2013), the accumulative nature of social media looks like that of museums or exhibition spaces.

We can thus use heterotopias like library and museum as metaphors to analyze and suggest interventions for the accumulated content on social media. Like a library, content should be easy to retrieve, well organized, and easy to search. Like a museum, content should be exhibited from time to time under different exhibition themes, just like how Throwback works. These aspects are related to "persistence" and "searchability".

4. 5. Live

With Live, users broadcast in real-time, communicating and interacting with other users, thus creating and sharing their own unique time and space zone – a new heterotopia. In this heterotopia, an ordinary user is the controller and owner of the space, and can become its center. This kind of experience is extraordinary and hard to replicate in the physical world. Indeed, the space that Live creates is an escape from reality. This feeling of escape might be one of the most unique experiences which social media as a heterotopia should deliver to users.

Through creating a new heterotopia, Live creates "possibility of tremendous visibility," though "not the guarantee of it" (boyd, 2010), and draws attention by creating a virtual event, illustrating the "scalability" in a way alternative to how regular posting does.

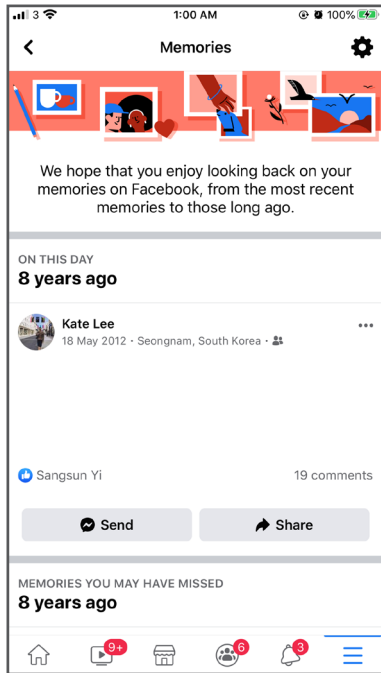


Figure 4 Throwback in Facebook

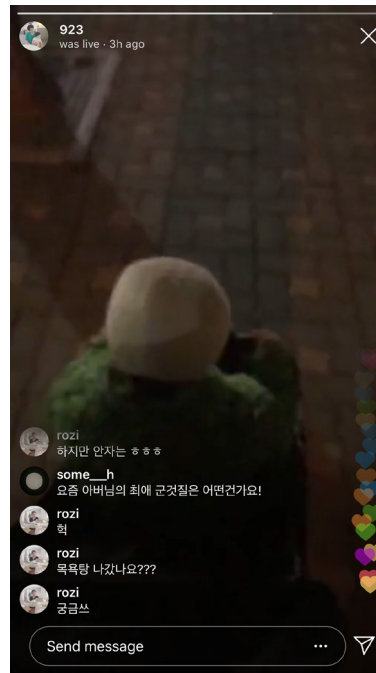


Figure 5 Live in Instagram

4. 6. Privacy settings

The blurring boundaries between private and public in social media have caused critical social issues. Because of the accessibility and searchability of social media, anyone can potentially gain access to a person's Profile and private information. Such private information can be highly sensitive and vulnerable to abuse.

Several scholars believe that the boundaries between public and private places are also blurry in many heterotopias (Dehaene & De Caeter, 2008; Low, 2008). They propose “the privatization of public space,” which means space that excludes others, such as a gated community or private social club. Like heterotopias with their special openings and closings, social media services need to provide proper openings and closings to ensure privacy.

Although users regard private information as important and sensitive, they also upload much of their private information with a public audience setting. There is an important tension behind this conflicting behavior. People know the possible risks from revealing their private life, but they also feel a powerful natural instinct to connect and have discourse with others. This phenomenon crucially exposes the vulnerability introduced by the affordances of “persistence” and “searchability” of social media. In response, Privacy settings should allow users to navigate and control the tension between revealing and hiding themselves.

Table 1 Social media interventions and their heterotopian principles

Social media intervention	Related heterotopian principle
Hashtag	(5) Penetrates with openings and closings in ordinary spaces
Share	(3) Juxtaposes several spaces in a single place
Profile	(7) Functions as a third place, to suggest illusory or imaginary images, in relation to ordinary spaces
Throwback	(4) Accumulates time indefinitely, acting like a heterochronism
Live	(3) Juxtaposes several spaces in a single place
Privacy settings	(5) Penetrates with openings and closings in ordinary spaces

5. Design Implications

From the observation and analysis of the selected six interventions, we identified four principles of heterotopia that are relevant to the context of social media (see Table 1). From these principles and related phenomena we observed, the following four design implications are derived.

Design both opening and closing abilities for a balanced control over information and privacy

Following heterotopian principle (5), designers need to provide users enough controllability to enable them to either make public by creating openings like in Hashtag, or hide their private content by creating closings like in Privacy settings, as appropriate. It is critical to give users the authority of privacy control for all of their uploaded content. Recent years have seen more ephemeral content, such as Stories, becoming popular in many social media services such as Instagram and Facebook. Stories lets users control their privacy by posting content that remains available only for a short period, but users often strongly want to retain those memories in some private place as well. Therefore, designers need to let users save the content in a personal repository after the designated time allowance on Stories is over, as an act to preserve the “persistence” affordance.

Adjust the character of service design for different types of imagined audiences

Corresponding to heterotopian principle (7), designers should adjust the tone and manner of social media to make it an ideal environment for presenting a selective presentation of the self (Donath & boyd, 2004; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2002a). Further, designers need to consider the role and purpose of each type of social media and how it acts as a mirror or stage for users to selectively present the relevant aspects of their personas to their imagined audience. For example, the design of LinkedIn and Twitter should be very different because each aims to show off a different side of the user. This implication also explains the phenomenon and the need of people creating two Facebook accounts separately for life and work contents.

Provide room for imagination and creation

Under heterotopian principle (7), social media functions as special spaces serving people’s need and desire to escape from their reality. These spaces are imaginary, reminiscent of

Foucault's example of children's tents set up on the covers of their parents' beds (Boyer, 2008). This perspective gives us a different approach to social media. In Stories, Instagram provides several decoration features such as animated stickers and background colors. Using these features, users can play with and decode their memories in a virtual and imaginary space. What is more, "escaping" is realized not just through imagination itself but also through creative acts. Drawing from heterotopian principle (3), designers can enable users to frame a new, imaginary space by creatively juxtaposing their various experience spaces. Users can have a different life and hand-picked surroundings in social media, and can take on a whole new persona than their real one. Social media interventions should help users reframe their reality to make it fit into their own created world, and help them experience a new, third place which does not exist in reality.

Design effective navigation and curation of accumulated content

This implication addresses heterotopian principle (4) and calls for a deeper understanding of social media's "searchability." Content accumulates in social media repositories as time goes by. The timelines of many social media services thus have the heterotopian character of heterochronism, the blending of time and space. Designers should provide retrieving and search features which can help users reach their accumulated memories using such criteria as date and place. For instance, "Activity log" in Facebook enables users to browse not only their accumulated content but also past interactions with others in a chronological way. The previously studied Throwback, on the other hand, is an effort to traverse space-time and curate memory content for users as pleasant surprises.

6. Conclusions

Through the lens of heterotopia, social media designers have a new perspective to use in their work to make social media into a more engaging public space which encourages users' active participation. Through online observation, we focused on Hashtag, Share, Profile, Throwback, Live, and Privacy settings, which are a set of social media interventions particularly relevant in helping social media function as a collection of heterotopian places. From the exploratory analysis of the six interventions, we derived four design implications that can help enhance the role of social media as a public space. Complementing to existing social media design strategies, these four implications provide fresh angles to address, respectively, the boundaries within social media, the relationship between the virtual space and the physical reality, the empowerment of users by helping them create their own heterotopia, and the entangled relation between time and space.

Moreover, this study contributes by introducing a way to borrow philosophical concept to interpret the dynamic nature of social media. Social media has evolved rapidly by actively adopting people's behavior and societal trends. To understand this complicated nature of social media, we, researchers need to understand basic humanities which is based on people and society's evolution process. Future study would extend the current findings by testing various design features built along the directions of the suggested design implications and eventually lead to structured and practical guidelines for future design of social media.

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