

Social Media: Platforms, Networks and Influences

Theatre makers have always been eager to embrace new media technologies. These include technologies that help them provoke emotion, entertain, educate or proselytise in the auditorium, as well as those that help them share their message beyond the auditorium, in posters, flyers, programmes, previews, reviews and other records. Even in the pre-modern era, when direct communication between actors and a local audience co-present in the same space was the defining feature of the theatrical experience, theatre was already a multimedia artform with image and movement being integral to its aesthetic. In the modern era, advances in light, sound and imaging technology have led theatre makers to develop new modes of communication with their audiences, including the darkened auditorium, which has become central to the Western public's perception of what theatre is. The concurrent rise of print media has seen the connection between actor, audience and community increasingly influenced by programmes, previews, reviews and other records of theatrical events. Throughout the twentieth century, as Gabriella Giannachi (2004) observes, theatre makers in forms as diverse as biomechanics, Dada, Bauhaus, Fluxus, other sorts of live art, performance art, body art, bioart, intermedia art and installation have all taken an interest in new technology, incorporating sound, light, image, music and, eventually, video and digital media to extend theatre's capacity to convey meaning in and around the auditorium.

The uptake of social media in theatre is in this respect the latest in a long line of uptakes of new technology in the theatre, and

as the work of Giannachi (2004) and other new media theatre theorists shows it certainly is not the only uptake of new technology in the theatre today. As a new addition to the arsenal of technologies available to theatre makers to communicate and make meaning with their many and varied audiences—fellow artists, spectators, critics, sponsors and the government, which in some economies subsidises the work—social media is the latest in a long line of technologies that have the potential to produce an evolution, if not a revolution, in theatre’s ephemeral form, ecology and mechanisms for making meaning.

The best starting point for an investigation of how social media is impacting on theatre practices is to look at the communication processes or “models” that underpin social media platforms (Fiske 1990). That is the aim of this chapter. It identifies factors typically associated with the uptake of social media, the types of social media available, and the types of communications taking place on social media platforms, to establish themes and terms of reference for the discussion to come. It sheds light on the technology’s affordances, and the changes in style, scope and interactivity these affordances allow, as an addition to the many technologies already deployed in theatre’s communication with its audiences. It notes how these changes are starting to effect the ecosystem of theatre production, distribution and reception now and, thus, potentially in the future.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, APPLICATIONS AND AFFORDANCES

As noted in the Introduction, the term “social media” can be applied to any Web 2.0 platform or application that has affordances that allow two-way communication, which is at once widely available to all but also niche and narrowcast in the sense that it can be filtered to a user’s preferences. This includes but, as Ruth Page (2012, 5) notes, is “not limited to” blogs such as WordPress, microblogs such as Twitter, social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, media sharing sites such as YouTube, rating and review sites, crowdsourcing sites, and comments applications at the bottom of webpages. It includes branded platforms, as well as bespoke applications and platforms. The distinctive feature of these technologies is that they allow artists, audiences and the public at large to engage with, debate and determine the meaning of a show, a season of shows or the theatre industry as a whole. They are often called “participatory media” (Cann et al. 2011, 7) because they allow artists,

audiences and the general public to participate in the creation of content, and the distribution of content, not just the reception of content. They allow participants to do this collaboratively, with all the tensions and conflicts that this can entail. This collaboration occurs in the public context of a network of friends, followers or fellow users (Page 2012, 6). As Clay Shirky contends, these collaborating “[p]articipants are different” from passive readers, viewers or spectators. “To participate is to act as if your presence matters, as if, when you see or hear something, your response is part of the event” (2008), he says.

Artists, audiences and the public at large can all use social media sites to tell their own stories about their life, work, leisure, relationships or their own reading of important social issues. “Social media platforms thus provide a space in which individuals and institutions offer performances of themselves for public consumption,” as Lonergan puts it (2016, 32). But, he clarifies, “[o]ur social media identities are not just a representation of *who we think we are*, but a performance of *how we wish to be seen* by others” (30, original emphasis). Social media users deploy text, sound, images, video and a range of other formats to tell specific stories in specific ways and so, as Ruth Page (2012) says, construct a specific identity and claim to status within a social network. They tell the truth, half-truths or lies that suit what theatrically oriented social theorist Erving Goffman (1963, 1973) would call their “impression management” prerogatives. Users do this in private, semi-private or public domains. They produce and perform their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours for specialist networks of people or for more generalised networks of people. They do this well, do this poorly, or make mistakes that cause unexpected hurts, harms, controversies or crises within the networks of fellow users they connect with. They thus wittingly or unwittingly expose themselves, others or society. Their self-performances have the potential to disrupt social roles, relationships and ideas—for better or for worse.

These characteristics of social media are often defined in terms of their difference from the mass media that preceded them—“Traditional media, such as television, newspapers, radio and magazines, are one-way, static, broadcast technologies,” as Dan Zarella puts it. So “[i]f you disagree with something you read in the newspaper [or see on television or on stage], you can’t just send the editorial staff instant feedback” (2010, 1–2). Your role, and your response, is not immediately visible to the producer, fellow spectators or the public at large, so your presence does not really matter. With social media, by contrast, you can share

your feedback with producers, fellow spectators and society, and you can also create, present and promote your own alternative content. Your role and your response is much more immediately visible. As Zarella puts it, “New web technologies have made it easy for anyone to create—and, most importantly—distribute their own content. A blog post, tweet, or YouTube video can be produced and viewed by millions virtually for free” (2).

In theory, Francisco Pérez-Latre argues, social media allows almost anyone to have “a global audience” (2013, 50). It enables almost anyone to develop an online community, which may or may not have links to offline communities, for entertainment, education, political action or whatever other purpose. “Its tools to support collaboration have existed for decades,” as David Goff notes. “But social media technologies, such as social networking [sites], wikis and blogs, enable collaboration on a much grander scale and support tapping the power of the collective in ways previously unachievable” (2013, 17). It continues the trend that, according to Daniel Schackman (2013, 106), started when technologies such as video recorders began to take control of who views what, when, where, why and how away from radio, television and film distribution networks. But it takes that trend further, allowing media industries, media makers and private individuals to post content, feedback, ratings and reviews, crowdsource ideas or sponsors, pick and choose what they want to engage with when, where, why and how, and, in doing so, feel like their presence, and the part they play, matters. The power that these applications, platforms and their affordances offer is for Paige Miller and other commentators why the uptake of social media is “staggering in comparison to [that of] users of other communication media” (2013, 86). It is why the increased uptake of social media seems, as Goff (2013, 16–17) puts it, to herald the “beginning of the end” for mass media communication, and the communication, industrial and regulatory practices that characterised it.

This emphasis on community, collaboration and participation relations means that social media is, as I noted in Chap. 1, fundamentally co-creative. People work together to produce identities, social statuses, relationships and content, and, in the process, they play a part in determining the ideas, ideologies and discourses that will come to be dominant in the public sphere.

For this reason, John Dowling (2001, 202) argues, many commentators have cast social media platforms as a sort of contemporary “agora”

or public sphere. As Asa Briggs and Peter Burke (2009) have noted, all new media contribute to the construction of the public sphere, and have done since the earliest emergence of new media technology, which tends, in media studies history, to be tied to the emergence of the printing press more than 500 years ago. All types of media contribute to the construction of a space—conceptual, as much as concrete—where, as Christopher Balme puts it, “private citizens [can] engage in debate on issues of public interest” (2014, ix). In Jürgen Habermas’s initial and still influential theorisation (1962/1989), the public sphere is an open, participatory, public domain in which all people can contribute to the construction of the dominant ideas that come to be taken up by state institutions. Habermas (1989, 221) argued that after a shift from a feudal public sphere, where familial relations provided a few people with the right to participate in debate, to a more critical public sphere, where the capacity to make rational comment on an issue provided more people with the right to participate in debate, twentieth-century citizens were witnessing a dumbing down of that rational debate as a result of modern mass media. He sought to reclaim the public sphere for rational, critical, consensus-building debate. His formulation was, though, too utopian and too reluctant to recognise the inequities in access to public debate for most contemporary theorists (Briggs and Burke 2009, 6). Today, commentators tend to talk of the public sphere in terms of plural public spheres, plural counter-public spheres, developed and maintained among groups that share affinities based on gender, sexuality, race or ability. For commentators who are interested in access to public debate for all, in counter-public spheres, or more complex networks of public spheres, social media is important. It is seen as part of the paradigm of alternative or radical media that, as Dowling puts it, “express[es] an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives” (2001, v). It allows a wider range of contributors to access communication channels, and, more importantly, circumvent the blocks and barriers that elite, establishment and mass media puts in place to maintain control of traditional communication channels. It thus allows more and more diverse people to become active players in public debate, not mere passive recipients of what Antonio Gramsci (1982) calls the hegemony, undermining the hegemony’s ability to control the circulation of ideas (Dowling 2001, 8–9).

As I noted in Chap. 1, although understandable, this enthusiasm for social media as an alternative, radical or anti-authoritarian media does have to be tempered with a realisation of its realities. As Dowling warns,

“although some Internet enthusiasts have hyped its democratic essence, we need to retain caution, thinking of its potential in this regard as partially realized but also as constantly in danger of being foreclosed” (2001, 202). Online media, including online social media, are like any alternative media. They are always interwoven with elite and mass media in the policy, industrial and production environment. They are always susceptible to power plays from individuals, institutions or groups looking to claim control over the ideas that dominate in a given culture at a given time. In this sense, although social media may be more open, active and anonymous than other media, this does not mean that it is more reliable, or more resistant to power plays, perspectivalty, partiality, decay and conflict. These issues are highlighted by the increasing presence of corporate interests, vocal minorities, thieves, mischief makers and trolls online. Although the initial development of the internet may, as Tim Jordan (1999, 45) notes, have been driven by grassroots communities as much as by the military industrial complex, the forces of capitalism, commercialism and consumerism have played a major part in its development since that time, including in the development of social media as a new defining feature of the internet’s functionings. As Stephen O’Neill suggests, though a social media site such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter present itself “as a community-based network that encourages self-expression, the site’s function as a user-generated technology is enabled by its political economy (as evidenced by its dependence on advertising, promotion of industry content and commercial partnerships)” (2014, 13). There are, as a result, many who critique any tendency to fall prey to claims about social media’s democratic potential without considering the issues of access, authority, power, status, gatekeeping, privacy, intellectual property and so forth that put social media’s potential democratic promise in danger of being foreclosed as swiftly as that of any other media (Carr 2010; Keen 2007). As Pérez-Latre (2013, 50) observes, many of the issues “already existed in analogue media”, but they are amplified in these new digital media platforms, and thus also need to be part of any modelling of communication practices that take place through them.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND NETWORKING

The potentials and potential challenges of social media come out of the “networking” at the core of its technological and social characteristics. Though different social media platforms function differently, they are all

defined by a network structure of one sort or another. They are set up to help facilitate the personal, social or professional networks—in this study, theatre community networks—that are, as theorists such as Manuel Castells (2001) argue, so critical to success in life today.

In studies of social media networks, the relationships between individuals, organisations and institutions that a social actor can leverage to their advantage on a platform are usually mapped on a hub-and-spoke model which shows the centres, clusters and outskirts of power in a network. In social media, social actors are represented in profiles and posts, and the links, likes, friends or follows that they use to connect with others. The purpose of social media networks—like other human networks—is to inform, communicate, empower, encourage collaborations between or, in some cases, challenge the opinions of other players in the network (Rainie and Wellman 2012). In social media theory, the social actor, or the user, is seen as a “node” that has “ties” with other users, which may be “weak ties” or “strong ties”. When many users form ties, they create a “cluster”, “hub” or community, which can be “centralised” (if it involves a limited set of people, who share a limited set of characteristics, who come together, but have few ties or “bridges” out to other types of users and communities) or “decentralised” (if there are a lot of ties or “bridges” out to other communities). Though the nature of online networks differs, they are, as Bell (2001, 94) argues, often thought to be more akin to what Ferdinand Tönnies (1955) would call *Gesellschaft*, the temporary communities of association that come about in cities that people have to work hard to turn into true communities of affinity, than to what he would call *Gemeinschaft*, the traditional communities in small towns where family, feudal or other longstanding relationships establish connections and mutual obligations from the start. Though family, friends and direct coworkers might form the basis of a user’s earliest connections on a social media platform, these tend to expand quickly, to incorporate a much wider set of connections that a user can call on to acquire social, cultural or financial capital.

Functioning in this way, social media networks are subject to the same powerplays seen in any human network. In any analysis of social media networks, it is immediately clear that different users develop a different status, and thus develop a different level of ability to succeed in achieving their aims via the network. In general networking theory, the different roles or statuses that a social actor can hold in a network are already well recognised. Toby Stuart and Olav Sorenson (2007, 212), for example,

suggest that status in a network is influenced by an actor's reliability in terms of the information they share, their position as a regular sharer at the centre of the network rather than someone out at the outskirts, their willingness to reciprocate with fellow users who want to give or get help within the network, their trustworthiness, their credibility, their reputation and whether or not they have been subject to sanctions for failing to uphold the relationships within the networks. This means that some actors in a network are seen as authoritative, credible, likeable and ready to reciprocate with others—without giving away all their valuable insights, information and connections for no return—and have high status. Others are not—and, indeed, may even “burn bridges” as a result of bad behaviour—and have low status. Each of these permutations results in a change to the level of what Robert Putnam (1995) calls social capital—the trusting, reciprocal relationships that can be leveraged to advantage—that a social actor holds in a network. In social media theory, these phenomena are typically talked about in terms of influence, influencers and the idea that some successful social media actors become “influencers” (Wong 2014)—that is, the idea that some successful users act as hubs around which clusters or communities come to exist in the network, and hold sway over others in the network. This is a status that can be achieved in a range of ways—for example, by broadcasting information, communicating information, commenting on it, or advocating for or against it, amongst other strategies (Klout 2012).

In marketing-oriented social media theory, discussion of influencers is particularly prevalent. Influencers are cast as respected players within a network, be it personal, professional, social or interest-based, without much reflection on how they come to have that status or power. These influencers are seen to have the power to circulate their opinion widely, create opinions and convince others in the network to adopt those opinions, in politics, relationships or purchasing decisions. The presumed capacity of influencers to drive opinion and purchasing decisions is co-opted as part of social media marketing strategy, in the performing arts as in other industries (Wong 2014). It is seen, for example, in the use of “ambassador” programmes in which mainstream theatre companies give students free tickets if they will comment on the show to try to “influence” their peers to attend. The power attributed to influencer-based social media marketing is the focus of most industry-based guides on the use of social media to attract audiences (e.g. Albarran 2013; Anderson 2010; Berger 2012; Brogan 2010; Handley and Chapman 2012; Kerpen 2011;

Zarella 2010), and, as a result, central to the approaches to audience development that I discuss in Chap. 5. Although the dollar value of what is given in the theatre industry is low—it rarely goes beyond the dollar value of the free ticket—in other industries the value of celebrities or customers becoming brand ambassadors is recognised in larger payments or sponsorship. The hope for the companies is that their recommendations will “go viral” (Nahon and Hemsley 2013) and thus give their opinion (in a political, social or aesthetic context) or their product (in a commercial context) a boost in and across markets. The importance of this aspect of social media networks and networking has seen open-source software such as Wolfram (which visualises Facebook networks), Socilab (which visualises LinkedIn networks), Mentionmapp (which visualises Twitter networks) and Gephi (which visualises a range of more complex networks across social media) emerge to allow even casual users, artists, arts workers and arts organisations to map influence within their networks.

Critical social media theorists such as Henry Jenkins (2009), Jenkins et al. (2013) are more suspicious of the power of influencers. As Eytan Bakshy et al. (2011) have noted in a study of Twitter, the hype about the strategies that influencers use to become superconnected, high status and high value is not necessarily backed up by concrete evidence of their capacity to change minds. Indeed, they suggest that content that goes viral via social media is in fact more often started by a regular user, and then a critical mass of regular users, so such individuals often have more impact than celebrities. These critical theorists acknowledge the powerplays and manipulations that come into play in these processes, including how easy it is for people to jump on the bandwagon of an opinion or a product they do not completely understand. It is a phenomenon I discuss further in Chap. 4, on the uptake of social media platforms for critical response to performances, including in some cases by spectators who have not seen those performances live.

With these issues in mind, social media theorists regularly return to networking theory to show the ways in which complex, fast-changing relationships on social media can fall prey to fluctuations, manipulations, powerplays, flows and blockages. They note issues that can create what David Holmes (1997a, b) has called “anomalies of digital reciprocity”, where behaviours that bring results in offline networks do not bring the same results in online networks. On the one hand, social media does promote both direct and non-direct reciprocity. As Martin Nowak (2011, 51–67), Alex Bentley and collaborators (2011) and others note, whereas,

historically, human beings have been more likely to help those they have a direct relation or tie to, on social media sites, helping strangers is a norm. This happens in gaming, mummy blogger and, of course, certain professional communities. For example, in Australia there is the “Drama Peeps” (i.e. “Drama Peoples”) group on Facebook, which regularly sees help afforded to fellow drama teachers whether they have ties or not. On the other hand, social media does involve a lot of non-reciprocation too. In a professional context, users can put a lot of effort into leveraging weak ties through social media, sharing valuable information to show authority, amiability and value as a collaborator, with no guarantee that this will be seen, or reciprocated, or produce the same results as in an offline network (Granovetter 1973). In online networks there is a larger range of people, issues and ideas competing for attention. These flow by in a feed so fast that there is less than 10s to get the attention of the audience (Crunch.net 2014). Contributions can be missed, particularly if they come from those who, as a result of their social background or ability, or other factors, cannot convey their message according the rules of such a fast-moving format (they do not have the bandwidth to present very visual posts, they do not have the visual ability to create or receive text embedded in visuals, etc.). There is scope for mistakes, misreadings, controversies and conflicts, as well as consensus building, as I discuss in the chapters to come. There is also often a suspicion that people are taking advantage of the pseudonymity, anonymity or opportunities for overtly constructed self-performance, which online as opposed to offline communications make possible, to present themselves as something they are not, or as doing something they are not.

In the theatre industry the archetypal example of an “anomaly of digital reciprocity” is the “Yes, I will attend” button on Facebook event pages, an RSVP function that fails to align with actual attendance at a theatre event at all. Clearly there are others, which will emerge in the chapters to come. In this context it is easy to see how a theatre maker could share their time, expertise and ideas with fellow users, only to find that these users forget where the ideas that sparked a conversation came from, forget which friend shared content to create a buzz around it, or take advantage of friends’ ideas without disclosing when, where and how they will be used. In other words, that these users never reward or reciprocate the value that has been given. Indeed, if networking theorists such as Breda McCarthy (2006) are correct, theatre makers can be particularly susceptible to this problem. In the performing arts the project-by-project

nature of the work means that people quickly start behaving as if they trust each other, a swiftness that may or may not benefit them in the longer term. The increasing importance of social media as a tool for artist-to-artist, artist-to-audience and audience-to-audience communication in and around the theatre industry, as in other industries, can make the process of judging one's place in a network—what one is giving, what one is getting and whether it is worth it—more difficult. Accordingly, though McCarthy (2006) does not write about social media networks, her research suggests that theatre makers should consider their place in such networks with a more critical eye to avoid personal, social or professional disappointments. Failure to take account of the anomalies and challenges that characterise social media communications can lead to confusion, frustration and a sense of failure.

Mapping out how social media platforms work, and how success and failure on such platforms typically plays out, is thus necessary to contextualise the discussion of theatre practice to come—to set up the themes and terms of reference before proceeding to an analysis of shows, attempts to engage new audiences, successes and failures in specific uptakes of social media in theatre.

TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

There are dozens of different social media platforms, applications and technologies. Indeed, there are dozens of platforms that have already come and gone as the field has evolved in just the first decade since its emergence. There are generalist platforms for mixed communities. There are specialist platforms for specific communities, such as professionals, or daters or gamers. There are platforms that incorporate a lot of features. For example, Facebook includes blogging, chat and media sharing functions. There are platforms that are oriented to a single specific feature. For example, Instagram is primarily for pictures, while YouTube is primarily for videos. There are also platforms that allow users to download applications that in themselves meet the definition of social media in their ability to support user connections (Henderson et al. 2013, 54–57). For instance, although Facebook does not pitch itself primarily as a games platform, there are games that users can download, usually made by outside developers rather than the Facebook developers.

A summary of the main sorts of social media that have emerged since the late 1990s would include at least a dozen distinct types of

Table 2.1 Types of social media platforms

| <i>Type/orientation of site</i> | <i>Examples</i> |
|---|--|
| Personal communication and networking | Microblogs, blogs, social networking sites (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, WordPress, Blogger, Mashable, Weibo) |
| Professional communication and networking | Social networking sites (e.g. LinkedIn, Google+) |
| Real-time communication and conferencing | Text, visual, video conversation sites (e.g. Skype, Snapchat) |
| Content collaboration | Document and project-management sites (e.g. GoogleDocs, Dropbox, Basecamp) |
| Content curation | Tagging, bookmarking, pinboarding and Wiki sites (e.g. Wikipedia, Instagram, Pinterest, Delicious, Tumblr) |
| Content presentation and sharing | Live or delayed sharing/streaming sites and apps in sites (e.g. YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr) |
| Publishing | Text-sharing sites (e.g. Scribd) |
| Location tracking | Geomapping sites and apps in sites (e.g. Foursquare) |
| News, reviews and ratings | Reviewing sites [e.g. Reddit, Digg, Buzzfeed, Yelp, TripAdvisor, Zomato (formerly Urbanspoon)] |
| Virtual worlds | Games, simulations (e.g. Second Life, Sims, World of Warcraft) |
| Crowdsourcing | Pledging sites (e.g. Pozzible, Kickstarter) |
| Petitioning | Petition sites (e.g. Change.org) |
| Dating and relationships | Dating sites (e.g. Tinder, Grindr, MeetUp) |

platform—for blogging, microblogging, social networking, content sharing, content curation, reviewing, rating, gaming and a range of other purposes within their respective communities (see Table 2.1).

In general, use of social media sites is on the rise. In a 2015 survey, Duggan and collaborators found that the use of such sites by American adults is rising. Facebook is still most popular, with some 70% of adults using it, along with nearly 30% of adults on LinkedIn, Pinterest or Instagram, and just a little over 20% on Twitter. More than half of these users were using more than one social media site too (2015). For many, usage is daily, or near daily—for instance, 70% of the overall 70% of adults using Facebook log in daily (2015), while for more specialist sites, such as LinkedIn, logins tend to be less frequent.

Clearly Table 2.1 does not offer a complete list of social media sites, their functions and their usage statistics. Social media site availability is changing constantly—in the branded sites, in the more bespoke sites that some organisations create for themselves, and in the way they allow integration between them. What the list does show, though, is that although Facebook has been the star performer (Trottier 2012, 15), there are many different social media sites doing many different things—from communication and networking to content creation, curation and sharing—for many different communities. While it is not possible to consider all of these in detail, it is possible to say that they are evolving as a result of technological factors, and as a result of human factors, all the time. These evolutions in uptake and practice are, Geoffrey Way explains, “shaped by two separate yet intertwined aspects: a site’s technological constraints and active members practices and culture” (2011). Some have become so prominent that they have been the subject of whole books—for instance those by Parmalee and Bickard (2012) on Twitter, Trottier (2012) on Facebook and O’Neill (2014) on YouTube. Some are based on synchronous communication and some on asynchronous communication. Some are based on short form, fast communication and some on longer forms. Some are widely adopted and some are exclusive. Some are tied to offline communities and some are online only. The practices and relationships that users pursue on these sites are diverse, dependent on lifestyle, life stage and other factors. There are some users who are on one site, and others who are on many, as suits their purpose and their attempts to communicate with personal, social or professional networks. For instance, while up to 70% of adult users mainly network through Facebook, there are also up to 30% of users who network through Facebook and through Twitter, Pinterest, Quora or other sites too. There are users who have one main site and replicate content across their more peripheral sites. There are users who link all their sites and others who keep them separate. There are users who post regularly and prolifically and those who post only rarely. There are users who follow a lot of fellow posters and some who follow only a few. For instance, a famous actor on Twitter may post updates to a lot of followers but may not follow them back. There are users who post mainly personal content and users who post mainly advertisements, endorsements or entreaties to try a product, along with others who post a combination of the two. There are users who use one name or handle only, and some who use multiple names or handles for various personal, social and professional communications on various sites

for various communities. There are users who engage with social media platforms mainly on their personal computer, or mainly on their work computer, or mainly on their mobile devices, or on a combination of the three. There are users who move from platform to platform as their life-style and life stage changes, or as the status of the platform changes. For instance, a theatre maker on maternity leave may start engaging more people across more platforms more frequently, or in more different ways, to maintain networks while having or minding the children at home. The media platforms themselves also constantly evolve, based on the platform creators' preferences, the app creators' preferences, the advertisers' preferences, the users' preferences, adoption and abandonment patterns, as well as technological, social, political and economic changes. This is what Nancy Baym calls the "shared behaviours" by which "norms of practice are displayed, reinforced, negotiated and taught" (2010, 80). Platforms also change as a result of less predictable controversies, concerns over privacy, mistaken performances of personal, social or professional identity, or other incidents. Or as a result of activists, rights groups, political groups, criminal groups, or terrorist groups—from citizen journalists to jihadists—using the platforms in unpredictable ways. Or as a result of a policy maker, parent, teacher or other advocacy group pressure to open up or shut down particular usage options and patterns. In this sense the technologies and the users exist in mutually productive relationships. "The successful new applications are" therefore, at least according to Way, "those that provide enough structure to render the ritual intelligible while allowing enough flexibility to be appropriate by the users" (2010).

SUCCEEDING AND FAILING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Together, identification of the issues typically associated with uptake of social media, the social media available today and the behaviours that users participate in on social media allows mapping of some of its common traits—from immediacy, brevity, simultaneity and sociability to the ability to circulate content into new contexts, or to the ability to create memes that seem to take on their own life—onto a communication model. As Brent Ruben and Lea Stewart (1998) have shown, communication modelling began with efforts such as Shannon and Weaver's simple "INFORMATION SOURCE—TRANSMITTER—(Signal)—CHANNEL—(Signal)—DESTINATION model", with "NOISE SOURCE" added below to indicate factors that might stop a message from moving smoothly from

source to destination, or from sender to receiver (Shannon and Weaver 1949/1989). Others subsequently added additional concepts to indicate factors that might help or hinder transmission of a message, including audience, context, field, redundancy and entropy. They created what John Fiske (1990) characterises as increasingly complex models to try to capture the complexity of human communication. Based on the analysis of social media

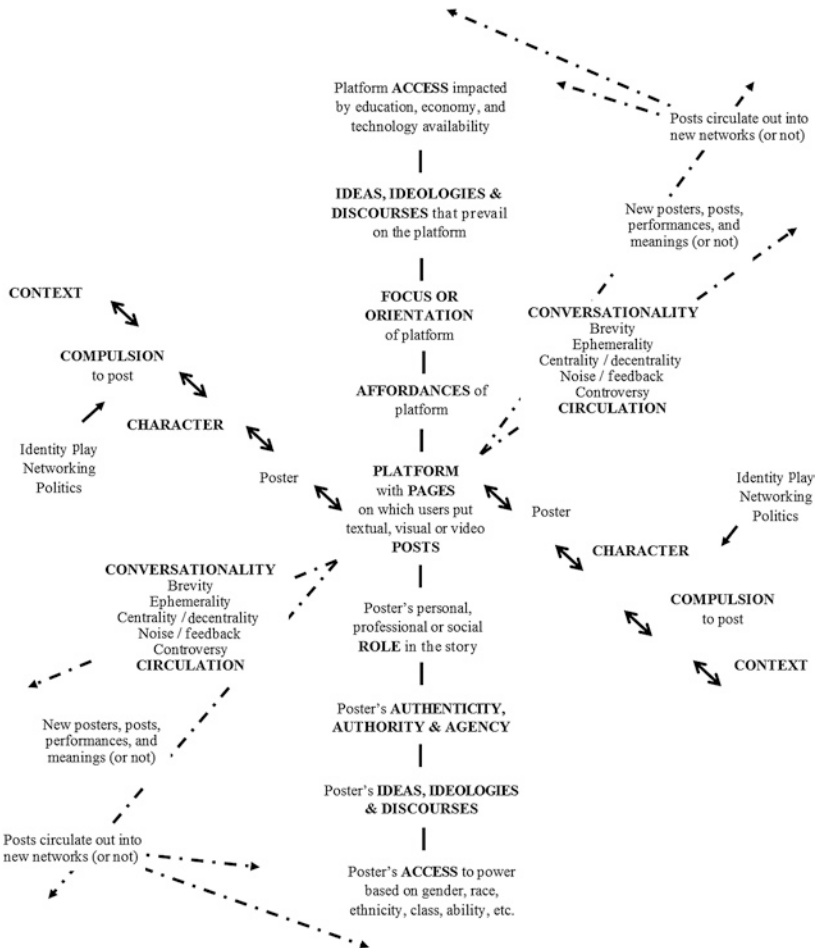


Fig. 2.1 Communication on social media platforms

platforms' features, and using the format and features common to these historical communication models, a basic model of communication via social media might include the features in Fig. 2.1 above.

Although basic, this model already shows a host of factors that can influence communication on social media, success and failures.

CONTEXT

The first factor that influences communication success on social media is context—or, more accurately, as Alice Marwick and dana boyd (2011) articulate it, the audience that users imagine they are speaking to via a social media platform. One of the distinctive features of social media platforms is their capacity to cross boundaries between online and offline contexts, and between personal, social and professional contexts, so that communications that might once have been shared only with one group of acquaintances in one context become visible to a lot of acquaintances in a lot of contexts. This “context collapse” (2011) phenomenon occurs because, for most users, there will be a combination of family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances in their “friend” or “follower” network. They forget who is in this network. They also forget what sort of privacy settings have been set up to filter the flow of information to whoever is in this network. Moreover, there is no way to control who is in a friend’s “friend” network, or a friend’s friend’s “friend” network, and so on. This can cause problems as users’ performance of personal or social identity becomes visible to professional networks, or vice versa.

In the theatre industry, this can happen via posts about companies that produce poor quality shows, are slow to pay, are nepotistic or otherwise problematic. These comments might be fine at a backyard barbeque among family and friends but not in a foyer in front of the general and marketing managers of that theatre company. Even in cases where a user believes they have limited their network to social friends, it only takes one to circulate a comment to professional contexts and cause problems. For instance, at the Matilda Awards for Theatre in Brisbane, Australia, in 2010, a theatre maker took offence at a portion of one year’s show—a physical theatre company, the Brides of Frank, performed a masturbatory action with giant cardboard scissors in a scene commenting on concepts of female domesticity—only to see a “friend” copy it across to the public and then popular Our Brisbane Theatre Blog run by local playwright

Katherine Lyall Watson. For a day or two it was a talking point, after which other news pushed it from people's minds. Though the incident passed quickly, it had the potential to have a lasting impact on the reputation and relations of those involved. This blurring of personal, social and professional identity and context happens on social media in ways that were not possible on previous media platforms. It thus influences when, where, why, how and what users will post on social media, particularly in a small industry such as the theatre industry, because prompts to post coming from one context may not align with prohibitions to posting in other contexts, and social media can make it challenging to separate and balance the two.

COMPULSION TO POST

The next factor that influences communication success on social media is compulsion to post. This can come from ideas, issues, incidents or things to share from a user's personal, social, professional or political life. Users will post to perform their identity, socialise, gossip, play, gain status in a social group, share or seek information about personal, social, professional, political or other issues, or to sell products. In the example above, the theatre maker took offence at a provocative image, which prompted him to post, and his motivation came mainly from a personal desire to share concern, frustration and something of his own values with his friends. The perceived motivation for the post changed when a "friend" circulated the post more widely, and social and professional reputation became the prompts to post rejoinders to a wider network. For some theatre artists, the personal compulsion to post is clearly strong, and they can post five, ten or more times in a day. For others, the personal compulsion to post is not strong, and they may post weekly, monthly or even less frequently as professional responsibilities for staging, promoting or assessing a work demand. Regularity, visibility and contribution to a network's shared conversations are considered to be factors in success. For those posting mainly as a result of professional motivators, the likelihood of accidentally sparking controversy by sharing too much personal opinion in a "collapsed" personal, social and professional context is typically less, though more sporadic posting can cause other problems.

CHARACTER WHILE POSTING

The next factor that influences communication success on social media is to do with character while posting. The character or identity that a user performs while posting can be personal, social or professional, depending on what prompts them to post. The user can take on the role of a new member in the network, or an outsider asking a question, asking for information or looking to form a relationship. The user can take on the role of an experienced member in the network, an insider providing information, or a hub for the flow of information. They can be a protagonist, antagonist, or bystander in the story that the post tells—for instance, the protagonist of a story in which they tell of a job they are auditioning for, the antagonist of a story in which they tell of a show they did not like or a bystander to a story in which they recount something they overheard in a foyer. Complex relations between *Is*, *yous*, *wes* and *theys* can evolve. For theorists of identity performance on social media, Toni Sant notes (2014, 49), Erving Goffman's (1963, 1973) use of theatrical terminology to investigate social self-performance, impression management and backstage preparation for performance are useful in understanding some of the complexities of communicating online. Indeed, investigating social self-performance online has become among the more popular areas of research into social media (Baym 2010; Page 2012; Pearson 2009). "In picking a username on social media sites," Sant argues, "most people don't think they are creating a fictional character but a version of themselves that is close to their true self, or at least an image of themselves they have for themselves and/or want others to see" (Sant 2014, 49). In theatre there is a greater tendency to fictionalise, for professional purposes, even before theatre makers start embodying characters on social media in the online performances that I consider in Chap. 3. Many theatre makers cultivate characters in their online communications. For instance, comedians cultivate cynical, silly or "stupid me" characters, burlesque artists strong, sexy, sex-positive characters, disability and transgender performance artists strong, resilient and politicised characters and so forth. Many also give more or less constructed insights into what Goffman (1973) would call the backstage components of their professional identity (training, rehearsals, auditions and other behind-the-show aspects of the theatre industry) online. For example, some artists use social media sites as a sort of creative journal, documenting their work in progress, and their twists, turns, discoveries and

disappointments. Less frequently, theatre makers will perform a character from a show, as well as their own constructed character as comedian or artist or critic, on their social media profiles.

As Sant notes, “to create a fictional character online, especially one intended to deceive others that this is not a role-play, is an exercise in what performance theorist Richard Schechner (2002) calls ‘dark play’” (Sant 2014, 49; cf. Schechner 2002). It raises the stakes, complexity and uncertainty of self-performance online. Whatever the motivation—whether it is for impression management, networking or what in much social media theory today is talked about in terms of personal or professional branding Kelly (2010)—self-performance seen online is not always stably aligned with the self-performances seen offline. This means that maintaining even the thinnest of fictions in an online context can be challenging, and become more so when it comes to the sorts of fictions the artists I consider in Chap. 3 attempt to create in their social media performances.

Many social media guides encourage theatre makers to build a strong personal and professional brand—via their profile, their posts, the fellow users they link to—to better their chances of becoming an “influencer” online (Kerpen 2011). Like any brand, it should be clear, consistent and appealing but at the same time differentiated from others users so there are clear reasons to connect and co-create with this over other superficially similar brands (Ries and Ries 2002, 7). In practical terms, this means a consistent name and a complete profile on the platforms that best suit a theatre maker’s purpose, as well as sending out “catchy” snippets of information (cf. Kawasaki and Fitzpatrick 2014). In reputational terms, this means demonstrating credibility, engagingness, enthusiasm and other socially valued traits (Nowak 2011). In the theatre industry, where “portfolio careers” that see a person working in multiple and at times conflicting career roles are the norm (Bridgstock 2011), and creating fictional characters online may be necessary at some points too, this can be challenging. Performance problems—portraying an identity, brand or image other than intended, particularly when messages to one imagined audience get mixed up with messages to another—can become an issue (Marwick 2010; Marwick and Boyd 2011). As I have argued elsewhere (Hadley 2014), when it comes to the performative construction of identity—online or offline—the characteristics audiences project onto theatre makers are as important, if not more important, as the characteristic the theatre makers themselves attempt to project out to the audience. Users need to understand their

audiences, and, while open-source visualisation tools such as Gephi might tell them the basics about who and how many these are, they can never capture their full detail and diversity.

CONVERSATIONAL APPEAL OF POSTS

The next factor that influences communication success on social media is the conversational appeal of the content that a user-become-producer posts. As noted, a user needs to share short, sharp, appealing content to become an “influencer” in a context where the time available to attract attention is limited (Crunch.net 2014; Handley and Chapman 2014; Kawasaki and Fitzpatrick 2014). The optimal length of posts can range from less than 50 words on Twitter to more than 100 on Facebook, then less than 1500 words on WordPress, less than 2 min on YouTube and less than 20 min on Ted Talks or other podcasts. Increasingly, having visual content is seen as being critical to one’s success as an “influencer” on social media (Moritz 2013).

Technical factors, together with human factors such as contemporaneousness, clarity, length and the types of interaction that users on a platform favour, all influence the appeal of a post. On the technical side, the availability of the platform to users from different educational, economic or geographic backgrounds, the affordances and features of the platform, and the discourses, ideologies and moralities that prevail on the platform can all influence whether a post will or will not be appealing enough to start a conversation. For instance, for users in countries where the autoplay function that Facebook currently puts on video posts does not work well as a result of limited bandwidth, for instance, it can be frustrating rather than fun to see a snippet of a show. On the human side, the character telling the story, the part they play in the story, their proximity to the core of the story, their claims to the agency, authority and authenticity to tell the story, their status, and their familiarity with the discourses, registers and genres typically used to tell such a story can all influence whether a post will or will not be appealing. This is influenced by gender, race, class, ability and other identity markers. As Page argues in her analysis of social media and storytelling, “although social media is collaborative, this does not mean that all discursive contributions are equal, and that the burden of story is evenly distributed between multiple participants” (2012, 12). If a user cannot participate fully because of personal factors such as disability, economic factors such as lack of access

to bandwidth, or political factors such as suspicion that posting specific content will have consequences, this will impact on their agency on social media.

In one recent episode, for example, the media reported that a main-stage theatre company, the Queensland Theatre Company, was cutting a joke out of *Australia Day*, the play opening its 2013 season, for political reasons. Many users commented on the media reports, but the appeal of their comments differed depending on whether or not they were posting as an actor in the rehearsal room. Those at the core of the incident, with greater claims to authority to tell about it, became the hubs of the conversation, with their posts having more appeal than those of people on the peripheries of the incident. This appeal was, of course, influenced by the content of their posts. If they had been posting about more mundane matters, such as the quality of the coffee in the rehearsal room, the fact that they had a strong claim to authority to tell still would not be enough to make their posts appealing. Here, the slightly scandalous content was appealing, but, at the same time, some of the social actors with the greatest authority to post also clearly felt constrained in what they could say while in the employment of the company in question. As this example shows, on the content side, mundanity, importance, controversy and scandal all impact on a post's appeal. Page (2012, 11) talks about these factors in terms of tellership, tellability and the moral stance of a post, and cites these as features that can raise or reduce appeal. Certain combinations of tellers, stories told, from specific character positions, or contextual positions, in more or less open, exciting or scandalous ways can lead to more or less success in creating a post with conversational and, as a consequence, circulatory appeal—a factor that impacts on critical response to performances online of the sort that I consider in Chap. 4.

CIRCULATORY APPEAL OF POSTS

The next factor that influences communication success on social media is the circulatory appeal of posts—that is, the degree to which liking them, sharing them and sending them on to others to create an ongoing conversations appeals to users. Social media sites may be spaces in which people perform their own identities but, as Patrick Lonergan argues, successful self-performance online depends not just on what a user posts but on “the connections that [they] have forged with others”

(Lonergan 2016, 3). On social media platforms, a content-based broadcast approach alone does not work—users expect that multiple voices, including their own, will be an integral part of the communication. As Jonathan Gray puts it, “Users in *Web 2.0* expect interaction,” and look for “information exchange rather than purely linear information dissemination” (2012). Content that does not create opportunities for conversation is not likely to get the circulation from user to user, network to network, platform to platform—the going viral—that typically characterises success on these platforms.

This means social media—unlike past computer-mediated communication platforms—is characterised by ephemeral, open-ended and at times uncertain circulation of posts. This is what makes modelling the communication that takes place on them so complex. “Using these parameters,” Page explains,

we might judge the structural narrativity of social media stories to contrast with canonical examples of literary narrative or spoken narrative elicited in interview situations. For example, the episodic, ongoing nature of a sequence of blog entries or an archive of Facebook updates in [*sic*] not organized around a predetermined, single end point. (Page 2012, 10)

Some posts circulate in current contexts, to current communities of users, and so continue to be the subject of communication/conversation among that set of users. Other posts circulate out into new contexts, and new communities, and so become the subject of communication/conversation among those new sets of users too. Such posts can circulate again and again without a fixed end point to the narrative or the dramaturgy that drives the narrative. In this sense, Tom Abba argues, “digital media offer the potential for content to be transported from their original form and be reconstituted to new ends in a networked ecology” (2009). A post with high circulatory appeal can build new networks, with new participants, new performances and new meanings, and it can even become disconnected from its initial context, and then develop a new purpose, performance structure or meaning in a new context. In 2009, for instance, a group of Australian theatre makers used social media to protest the lack of opportunities for women in the “boys club” Australian theatre industry. The issue that sparked anger on this occasion was the launch of the 2010 season at Company B at Belvoir

Street Theatre in Sydney, along with the ongoing practice of other mainstage theatres, such as the Melbourne Theatre Company, to employ few or no women directors in their mainstage programmes. Discussions on the Australian Women's Directors alliance blog (www.australian-womendirectorsalliance.blogspot.com.au/) and on other blogs, such as *Theatre Notes* (theatrenotes.blogspot.com) and *7-On Playwrights* (sevenon.blogspot.com.au), together with a roundtable at the annual Philip Parsons Memorial Lecture on the topic (*Australian Stage* 2009; *Australian Plays* 2009), culminated in mainstream press coverage (Abela et al. 2009; Bailey 2009; Collins 2009; Usher 2009a, b), including international coverage (Wilkinson 2009), that went on for some years (*The Australian* 2012; Borland 2010; Elkin and Harper-Cross 2012; Hobson 2014; Neutze 2014c; Supple 2011). The complaints, which began with one group of women in one network, circulated out to new users in new parts of the country, and even in new contexts, as this theatre industry issue met with other similar issues in legal, political and academic industries. The all-in participation in the social and news media debate made them impactful enough to prompt the Australia Council for the Arts to commission Elaine Lally and Sarah Miller to report and recommend new policy on the topic (Frew 2012; Lally and Miller 2012). This in turn encouraged mainstage theatre companies—despite their initial instinct to cite as defence issues in training, development and independent practice before directors develop the profile to be part of mainstage programming as defences—to look at their programming. These phenomena can also happen offline as gossip circulates through the theatre industry. With social media, though, the technology, affordances and interactivities are set up to privilege this sort of circulation from the start, and are in fact a definition of the success of a post.

Great circulation—going viral—is considered to be a good thing in social media communication precisely because it can bring these outcomes. However, it is both easy and difficult to achieve: easy in the sense that the platforms are based on network structures, with hubs and spokes that connect to other hubs, other spokes and so on; difficult in the sense that posts are brief and ephemeral, swiftly heading to the bottom of the feed where they will not be visited again in a crowded, noisy, communication context. If posts do not have high conversational or circulatory appeal, are one-offs or lack feedback from other users, the chances of them being seen, shared and circulated are minimal. The nature of the platforms means that users

look only at what is being posted, liked or shared largely synchronously. This means that less successful posts can disappear before they start to circulate because they have been overtaken by more appealing posts. In a social media context, a post needs the right combination of the factors outlined here to capture attention, cultivate circulatory appeal and radiate out into networks. Though old material is archived, and can come back to bite a user if it is controversial in nature, it is not a normal feature of a user's engagement with social media, and in most cases day old content has already lost its currency and will not be considered again.

With these factors in mind, the barriers to successful communication via social media platforms become clear, particularly if success is defined—by a person, a community or a company trying to promote its shows or seasons—in terms of massive numbers of likes, shares and circulations. Each time a user posts, they are dealing with a range of different adoption patterns among other users, filters, format issues, as well as appeal factors within an overcrowded economy of supply and demand, reliability issues, relatability issues, and netiquette dilemmas. They are dealing with the risk of making mistakes as they try to communicate in a crowded, multimedia, multichannel and multicomunity context. In some communities and contexts they are also dealing with the risk of coming into contact or conflict with trolls, mischief makers or anonymous players with agendas to push. Together, these factors all impact on the success of uptake of social media in theatre's aesthetic, management, marketing, audience development or critical activities.

UPTAKE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THEATRE

As the anecdotes shared here suggest, understanding the factors that influence theatre makers' choices on social media only becomes more challenging when the many different aesthetic, critical, audience development, marketing, management or assessment aims that a theatre maker might be trying to achieve—together or separately—via social media platforms are taken into account.

As noted in the Introduction, in this book I focus on the three domains in which theatre makers are making the most use of social media platforms, starting with the use of social media in the aesthetic, production and distribution domain in Chap. 3, followed by the use of social media in the critical domain in Chap. 4, and then the use of social media in the audience development domain in Chap. 5.

The possibilities that social media provides in the aesthetic domain of theatre practice are very varied. They range from the uptake of social media as a topic, or impetus for textual, dramaturgical or design features of a performance, or a tool for workshopping, devising and developing new work, to use of social media to document, disseminate or archive plays and performances, and to use of social media to create what I will describe in Chap. 3 as remote, immersive, telematic, virtual, networked and participatory performances in online or offline public spaces and places. Though each of these uses slightly different two-way interactive technology, in slightly different ways, the emphasis tends to be on the potential that these technologies have to engage spectators in different stagings and restagings of reality in different ways. To engage spectators in plays being performed on the other side of the world—for instance, via programmes such as the National Theatre’s well-known NT Live programme in the UK, as a sort of modern scaling-up of the salon-based “theatre phones” of a century ago (Curtin 2013). To engage spectators in modern remakings of traditional performance forms, as, for instance, when the London Royal Opera House presented *Twitterdemerung: The Twitter Opera* as a people’s lyric opera in 2009 (Blake 2010). To engage spectators in communities on the other side of the world—for instance, via Rimini Protokoll’s well-known *Call Cutta in a Box* in 2008 where players at the Willy-Brand Haus (Berlin) and the Schauspielhaus (Zurich) were invited into a 60-min smartphone conversation with a call centre worker in Kolkata, India, walking through to the city to eventually meet with a digital projection of the worker on screen, in a reflection on identity, relationships and digitised realities in a networked work (Balme 2014). To engage spectators in activation of public space, as in *The Attendants* (2011), by Chance Muehleck and US company Nerve Tank, where spectators were asked to text or tweet to ask seven performers in a storefront cube at the World Financial Center to carry out specific actions over a six-hour period (Mandell 2013). Or to engage spectators in consideration of the way digital technologies are changing life, love and relationships, as, for instance, UK artist, academic and author Dani Ploeger does in his *Ascending Performance* (2013) for smartphone porn app MiKandi, where swiping fingers over the touchscreen allows the spectator to progress through pictures of the artist’s growing erection, in what Ploeger describes as a comment on use of this technology “as a masturbatory act” (2013). Or, indeed, to engage spectators in artists’ politicised performances of self—for instance, via Ju Gosling’s

performative staging of a debate about access to a gallery exhibit on her website for all the world to see (Hadley 2015).

The possibilities that social media provides in the critical domain of theatre practice turn on the technologies' potential to engage anyone and everyone in networks of commentary, review and critique about a show or a season or the industry as a whole historically reserved for paid professionals. To allow them to share their view on content, casting decisions, staging decisions, or any other aspect of theatre practice, as, for instance, when La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego in the USA cast its production of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Nightingale* with mainly white actors, resulting in scathing commentary on its social media cites, and forcing the company to post an update on its site, defining and defending its policies, to try to defuse the furore (Zara 2012).

The possibilities that social media provides in the audience development domain of theatre practice build on the aesthetic and critical possibilities to try to engage spectators and society at large in the life of a theatre maker company beyond a specific moment, show or season. The hope, in this domain, is that a theatre company or maker's social media networks can become a co-creative community that stretches out across decentralised networks to include not just fellow artists, audiences, critics, media, sponsors and other stakeholders but a much broader community—a community that, because it has had an increased opportunity to engage with the work, becomes interested, invested and involved in the industry, and the impact it has on society, advocating, advising and, where necessary, challenging to continually improve the work, and the ecology around the work.

The hope in each of these domains is that social media technologies and networks will allow theatre makers to collapse barriers between historically separate roles, contexts, media and communities, and, as a result, reactivate the relations between producers, spectators and society at large. The reality, of course, is the degree to which uptake of social media in theatre moves from familiar forms, to reconfiguration of familiar forms, to new forms, is dependent on a whole range of factors—from theatre makers' ability to understand how the technologies and networks function, to their ability to keep up with the pace of them, to their anxiety about the risks of trying new things, to their financial resources. As media theorists caution, the uptake of social media in theatre, as in

politics or any other part of society, can exert new forms of control over practices as readily as it can liberate them. The creative citizen-journalists, community makers and influencers finding new forms of expression and social engagement online can easily sit together with groups who continue to feel excluded and invisible. This summary of how communication via social media networks works is as a result useful as a starting point for analysis but it has to be considered in light of how practices are actually playing out on overcrowded, contested social media platforms where new forms of engagement can fade as fast as they flicker into life. In the chapters to come I offer this more detailed consideration of examples where theatre makers are using social media to innovate in, blur the boundaries of and blend aesthetic, critical and audience development practices in interesting ways. Equally, I offer more detailed consideration of examples where theatre makers fail to do this, which can become just as educative about the way they are working with these new technologies to try to extend the impact of their work.

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