

This is a pre-print version of the Jenna Pack Sheffield webtext Review of *Understanding Social Media* by Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth published in *Kairos: Rhetoric, Technology, Pedagogy*, 19(3), available at <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/19.3/reviews/sheffield>

Descriptive Transcript:

Review of *Understanding Social Media* by Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth
Review written by Jenna Pack Sheffield, University of New Haven

Full citation of book:

Hinton, Sam, & Hjorth, Larissa. (2013). *Understanding social media*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

*This transcript describes what can be seen in the Prezi that accompanies my review of **Understanding Social Media**.*

Slide 1:

-Title page that provides book title, authors' names, and reviewer's name:

Understanding Social Media by Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth
Review written by Jenna Pack Sheffield, University of New Haven

Slide 2:

-Provides overview of the text:

In *Understanding Social Media*, Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth (2013) critically examined social media, presenting readers with many of the debates surrounding the definitions of social media and exploring how social media is both affecting and being affected by social and technological developments. Hjorth, a digital ethnographer and associate professor in RMIT University's Games Programs, and Hinton, senior lecturer in media and head of Media Arts and Graphic Design at the University of Canberra, skillfully weaved throughout the book four main themes:

- empowerment/control,
- online/offline,
- the role of the local/cultural, and
- the intimacy turn.

Hinton and Hjorth identified and explained key scholarship surrounding social media and traced their four themes through this scholarship and through their own case studies. Chapter 1 is a brief introduction to the book; as such, this review begins with Chapters 2 & 3.

Slide 3:

-Provides a list of the four themes mentioned in slide 2, with a definition of each theme:

Book's 4 Main Themes:

1. The theme of empowerment/control was concerned with whether users of social media use or are being used by social media.
2. The theme of offline/online served to remind readers that offline practices very often influence communicative practices online.
3. The theme of the local/cultural was explored as the authors both employed scholarship and case studies that were not solely Anglophonic and reminded readers that local relationships and cultural affinities influence online social activities.
4. The theme of the intimacy turn was explored as the authors argued that intimacy is a primary structural factor for social media.

Slide 4:

-Provides a breakdown of the book's chapters

Chapter 1: Introduction to Social Media

Chapter 2: What is Web 2.0?

Chapter 3: Social Network Sites

Chapter 4: Participation & User Created Content

Chapter 5: Art & Cultural Production

Chapter 6: Social Media Games

Chapter 7: Social, Locative, & Mobile Media

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Slide 5:

-zooms out to show entire Prezi, demonstrating how the review is organized

Slide 6:

-zooms to title: Chapters 2 & 3

Slides 7-10:

*-Titled **Social Network Sites**, this portion of the Prezi describes Chapters 2 & 3 of the book as follows:*

In Chapter 2, Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth (2013) explained the differences between Web 1.0 (a phantom term constructed after Web 2.0 became a popular term) and Web 2.0 with the goal of explaining how Web 2.0 gave rise to social networking sites. In this chapter, they clarified that the term Web 2.0 does not refer to actual changes in the Internet's architecture but is a term that refers to "the types of software employed and changes at the level of user practices" (p. 16). They posited that Web 2.0 is a philosophy of doing business online that developed after the dot-com collapse, and the changes to user

practice they referenced were the result of the realization that web users are not like TV audiences (passive viewers). This realization brought about changes to websites that would allow users to easily personalize and create content without coding skills. Hence, blogs, social networking sites, and wikis tend to be associated with the rise of Web 2.0. This short chapter offered a clear and easily comprehensible history of the web that may prove especially useful for undergraduate or graduate students beginning to study new media.

In this chapter, the authors also explored their first theme—empowerment/control—in relationship to the rise of user-generated and user-created content within Web 2.0. They reminded readers that, in some ways, the web in general, and social media in particular, is “democratising, empowering and emancipatory” for users, but we also have become dependent upon “the digital” and hence subject to privacy concerns (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013, p. 24). Any time users sign up for a social media site, for instance, they are creating online information about themselves. Instead of arguing that social media is wholly empowering or controlling, the authors have usefully posited that it can be both. Some exploitation, they argued, is the price users pay for a certain amount of empowerment.

Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth’s (2013) suggestion that the ability to share and create content was key to the rise of Web 2.0 led to Chapter 3, in which they defined social networking sites. At the simplest level, a Social Networking Site (SNS) is a site that allows users to establish a web presence and share that presence with others. Perhaps most productive in Chapter 3 was the authors’ reminders that, despite common beliefs, SNSs are most often used to maintain existing relationships as opposed to being used to construct new relationships and that SNS relationships are geographically and socially oriented towards the local (i.e., connections are people one knows through school, work, family). Hence, they argued that SNSs should be understood as “intimate publics” (p. 44), as a technology that mediates intimacy among already existing connections. These assertions can be useful for scholars researching social media, because they should consider the focus on local and personal relationships maintained through social media when pursuing their own research questions.

The authors concluded Chapter 3 by providing an overview of the major areas of current SNS research. They characterized current studies as follows. Researchers have:

- examined how SNSs are being used in non-Anglophic contexts;
- looked at SNSs as sites of political action (and inaction);
- determined how SNSs affect privacy concerns;
- used SNSs to analyze social data.

The chapters following serve to remind readers that SNSs are not synonymous with social media. Social media can include other technologies and phenomena. To make this point, the authors first theorized the one word they believe characterizes social media best: participation.

Slide 11:

-Zooms to title: Chapters 4 & 5.

Slides 12-14:

-Titled **Participation and Cultural Production**, this portion of the Prezi describes Chapters 4 & 5 of the book as follows:

In Chapter 4, the authors explored the concept of participation. According to Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth (2013), participation is the one word that “summarises the particular quality of new media” (p. 55), and this participation takes form as user-generated content or user-created content. User-generated content is when already created content is forwarded to others, and user-created content is content made by the user. They argued that Axel Bruns’ term *produser*, a portmanteau of producer and user, is a useful metaphor for understanding the ways users circulate and create content. They deployed the term produser as they explored the participatory power of the user in social media phenomena such as crowdsourcing, smart mobs, citizen journalism, and online activism. Most interesting in this chapter is their explanation of the criticisms of citizen journalism and online activism. They reminded their readers that although social media can be emancipatory and democratizing, there are limitations and problems that arise when the everyday user quickly reports news or organizes a protest—such as concerns with quality and transparency.

Hinton and Hjorth (2013) also carried through their theme of the offline/online in this chapter by arguing that the participatory dimensions of social media are “subject to local conditions” (p. 76) in that local and offline concerns typically are the driving force behind user participation in social media. I liked that the authors provided a balanced view of social media in this chapter that is in line with critical theories of technology that are often deployed in computers and composition. They did so by reminding their readers that social media is not inherently emancipatory and democratizing.

Because social media users are interested in participating by creating and sharing content, Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth (2013) argued that the role of social media and art is worthy of examination and has thus far been relatively overlooked in scholarship. Chapter 5, therefore, looked at how social media has impacted art, with the greater goal of answering questions as to how social media has affected cultural production. The authors suggested that:

- Social media offers new modes of cultural production because the user can actually produce cultural objects instead of just interpreting them.
 - An example is social media art—art in which the web plays a key role in expression and involves the audience.
- Institutions such as museums are having to adapt to the changes brought about by social media, and these institutions best adapt by focusing on engaging with audiences.
 - Some museums have responded, for example, by allowing users to curate art in virtual exhibits.

This chapter succeeded in placing social media into the landscape of art (and cultural production more generally). The authors were convincing in their argument that this relationship deserves more scholarly attention. The authors themselves, however, seemed more focused on providing examples of social media art movements rather than theorizing or making a particular argument about these phenomena. The possibility of such theorizing or argument perhaps points to an interesting space of inquiry for further research.

Slide 15:

-Zooms to a definition of vernacular creativity, an important concept in Chapters 4 & 5:

The authors also employed the term *vernacular creativity* to describe creativity that happens in everyday practices. They suggested that sites like deviantART (a website that allows artists to share their art and talk about it with others on the site) engage users in vernacular creativity, making cultural production the domain of more individuals than would typically be considered artists by art establishments.

Slide 16:

-Zooms to title: Chapters 6 & 7.

Slides 17 & 18:

*-Titled **Games & Mobile Media**, this portion of the Prezi describes Chapters 6 & 7 of the book as follows:*

Chapters 6 & 7 explored social media games, and social, locative, and mobile media, respectively. The authors began Chapter 6 by arguing that games, in general, despite having a reputation as solitary activities, are actually social activities. Social media games, which they defined as games that are played within SNSs, have opened up both gaming and social media to audiences that previously had not engaged with them. They argued that games can bring new subscribers to SNSs and that SNSs attract users to becoming game players. They suggested that social media games are typically casual or interruptible and can be played without the high level of attention necessary in games such as *World of Warcraft*, for example (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013, p. 104).

Weaving through their themes of the online/offline, the non-Anglophonic and empowerment/control, they presented a case study of social game use in China and argued that social media games, in the study, were often used as a way to maintain contact with family and friends. More broadly, they concluded by claiming that social media games are beginning to play a significant role in how people socialize within SNSs, but they were careful to remind readers that behind these games are companies that rely on social games for a significant portion of their revenue. Though this claim is not particularly novel, it is an important concept that computers and composition scholars can discuss with their students.

Perhaps the common sight of someone playing a game like *Candy Crush Saga* on their cell phone inspired the authors to write Chapter 7 about mobile media. They claimed that

mobile media has progressively become the central portal for social and locative media. This chapter essentially served as a brief overview of the development of mobile technology, including Location Based Services (LBSs), and how they became integrated into mobile technologies.

The authors noted that as technologies such as camera phones and LBSs converge in smartphones, we are being provided with new ways to map meaning to spaces and places (Hinton & Hjorth, 2013, p. 134). Here, I found it useful that they called for more research in the area of locative media that reflects upon privacy and how it is understood across social and cultural contexts.

Slides 19-22:

-Titled *Conclusions & Usefulness*, this portion of the Prezi describes the usefulness of Hinton and Hjorth's book for readers and a general overview of the book's purposes.

In concluding their text, Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjorth (2013) suggested that social media is certainly changing society, but is at the same time reflecting and responding to changes in society. To better understand the world in which we live, they argued, we should pay attention to the ways that social media is "affecting and reflecting social developments" (p. 139). This notion, not unfamiliar or particularly novel to the computers and writing community, pervaded their book, as they looked at social media from a variety of angles.

Overall, *Understanding Social Media* seems best suited as a textbook for undergraduate and perhaps graduate students in media studies, rhetoric and composition (particularly those focusing on computers and composition), and cultural studies. The authors provided an excellent, interdisciplinary review of extant scholarship on social media and perhaps found their niche by discussing many non-Anglophonic research studies. The text was theoretical, discussing useful key concepts such as produsage, vernacular creativity, and intimate publics, and the authors made such concepts accessible through descriptions of case studies. The text would also be useful to researchers looking for a concise overview of the research that has been conducted around social media, particularly with regard to social media games, mobile media, and art.

Part of the reason I locate my positive assessment of this work in its use of key terms is because these terms can be seen as helpful and relevant to the discipline of computers and composition. Vernacular creativity is a term that could be used to help understand how our students engage in creativity in their everyday practices. Looking at social networking sites as intimate publics furthers our research on social media in the sense that we can understand these technologies as mediating intimacies among already existing communities—whereas earlier social networking research often saw social networks as existing for users to make new connections. This understanding can transform how we research social media and even how we choose to implement it in classroom practices. Produsage, a term that already is used in computers and composition scholarship, resonates with ongoing scholarly conversations as our field recognizes and researches the blurring boundaries between passive consumption and active production that happens via digital media.

My major critique would be that much of the text reads like a literature review. In other words, as opposed including a balance of their own arguments and case studies with a review of relevant literature, the authors tended to spend most of their time summarizing other literature covering social media. If the book were to serve as a class text, this would not likely be a problem, but for those researchers looking for new arguments, there are not many. The most original chapter was the chapter on cultural production, since research on the relationship between social media and art is indeed lacking. The authors did an excellent job in this chapter discussing cultural production and explaining how key social media concepts they identified in other chapters (participation, personalization, content creation) have been played out in the sphere of cultural production, although I was left looking for a more concrete argument at the end of the chapter. Generally, though, *Understanding Social Media* is a welcome addition to the burgeoning scholarship covering social media practices, providing a succinct overview of the history of Web 2.0, expanding traditional conceptions of SNSs, and offering new areas for future inquiry.

Slide 23:
-References

Text:

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