

**POWER STRUCTURES  
AND PUBLIC OPINION  
IN A DEEP SEA OF  
FACEBOOK BLUE**

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IN A DEEP SEA OF FACEBOOK BLUE**

REGAINING THE IDEAL OF AN ENDLESS MEETING

MA-NEW MEDIA & DIGITAL CULTURE

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# ABSTRACT

Internet users in the online sphere arm themselves against politics, commerce and exploitation with a *retweet*, a *like* and a *share* representing their opinion. They voice their opinion publicly and—in contrast to mass media—this opinion can change the world because they share it with the world. However, a transformation in achieving participatory democracy with the use of public opinion implies a transformation in power structures as well. Social networking site Facebook offers the opportunity to reveal a complex power relationship between its users, Facebook, Inc. and businesses in generating revenue. This power relationship distinguishes two contrasting claims to power. The first is the attempt of Facebook users to achieve participatory democracy in a political, economic and social system of society with the use of public opinion. The second claim to power is the attempt of businesses positioning Facebook users as consumers. At the heart of this exploration is the research question; to what extent does the public opinion of Facebook users facilitate the realization of participatory democracy in an intricate web of consumerism?

In this thesis social networking site Facebook offers the opportunity to analyze two claims to power deriving from a complex power relationship—by differentiating and analyzing power structures and public opinion through a Marxist and Habermasian concept of the *public sphere*. This forms the basis for conceptualizing power structures and public opinion in the *online sphere* and consequently lays the groundwork for the Facebook analysis on three recent events. The Facebook case results in establishing and analyzing the status quo of the aim for participatory democracy versus consumerism deriving from this complex power relationship. This will provide the input for answering to what extent the public opinion of Facebook users facilitates the realization of participatory democracy in an intricate web of consumerism, and consequently to reflect on the ideology of participatory democracy in the online sphere.

Keywords: Public Sphere, Power Structures, Public Opinion, Social Media, Participatory Democracy.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	6
CHAPTER ONE: THE BOURGEOIS PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE SUM OF ITS PARTS .....	11
1 1 A BOURGEOIS FICTION.....	11
1 2 AN IDEALIZED SOCIETY .....	12
1 2 1 CONTEMPLATING THE WHOLE.....	14
1 3 MASS MEDIA AND BEYOND.....	14
CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUALIZING THE ONLINE SPHERE.....	17
2 1 THE PRIVATE-PUBLIC DISTINCTION.....	17
2 2 THE BLUEPRINT FOR A BETTER KIND OF BUSINESS.....	18
2 3 THE MEANINGFUL ACT OF SLACKTIVISM.....	20
CHAPTER THREE: A DEEP SEA OF FACEBOOK BLUE.....	23
3 1 THE “FACEBOOK FREEMIUM MODEL”.....	24
3 2 THE USER PROFILE “LOVE -HATE RELATIONSHIP” .....	26
3 3 GOING VIRAL: KONY 2012 .....	28
CHAPTER FOUR: ESTABLISHING THE STATUS QUO.....	31
4 1 THE INSTITUTION CALLED FACEBOOK, INC.....	31
4 2 PUBLIC OPINION AND THE WEALTH OF NETWORKS.....	32
CONCLUSIONS: THE IDEOLOGY OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY.....	35
REFERENCES .....	38
APPENDIX 1: SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES.....	43
APPENDIX 2: FACEBOOK, INC.: STRUCTURES AND AGENCY.....	44
APPENDIX 3: BLOGGERS VERSUS KONY 2012 .....	45

# INTRODUCTION

On the first of February 1960, four freshmen ordered a cup of coffee at the lunch counter of the North Carolina *Agricultural and Technical State University*. The waitress replied “we don’t serve Negroes here” (Gladwell). The students stayed there until the lunch counter closed. The next morning twenty-seven students sat at the lunch counter which increased to the number of three hundred protesters within the next two days. A month later these so called ‘sit-ins’ and the resulting phenomenon of ‘freedom rides’ had spread across state lines. Eventually seventy thousand students participated as a result of the message to protest that had “spread like a fever” (Gladwell). Sociologist Francesca Polletta portrays in *Freedom is an Endless Meeting* the essence of American activists in the sixties, stating that genuine commitment and the adoption of consensus were big factors in achieving participatory democracy (Polletta 8-9). While tracing the history of democracy, Polletta emphasizes what could be seen as the core of American activism by quoting the words of a member of the *Students for a Democratic Society* in 1965, “talk helps people consider the possibilities open for social change. One person said, “freedom is an endless meeting” (qtd. in Polletta 1).

In contrast to the sixties, the availability and widespread use of the Internet has transformed the way in which individuals unite as a front to change political, economic and social systems of society. For instance, on the eighteenth of October 2012, the *Uprising of Women* movement made its worldwide introduction by creating a Page called “the uprising of women in the Arab world” on social networking site *Facebook*. Pictures were posted by empowered Arab women without their religious head veil and by Arab women abused by men showing their injuries. Consequently, this movement raised awareness and Facebook users posted their pictures too, as a way of showing their support. The 66.000 followers as counted on the twenty-sixth of October, all supported the main attempt to unite against the oppression of women in the Arab world, to say no to violence against women and to their treatment as second class citizens. The mission of the initiators was to “spread the word and create a strong solidarity network, share our views, denounce the absurd laws of our respective countries and share updates about the progress and changes that we are working on” (Areen). A controversial matter, followed with a questionable reply.

After only a few days the first photos of Arab women without their veil were removed due to violation of the community's standards and the administrators were banned from the site with no explanation given by *Facebook, Inc.*<sup>1</sup> (Al Jazeera).

The *Uprising of Women* illustrates the change in the way "talk" in the sixties, in contrast to "spreading the word" in the online sphere, manifests itself. Both examples seem to align with the ideal of an endless meeting for the purpose of social change. In the context of Polletta's perspective, entrepreneur and blogger Seth Godin describes a new but inherent way of participatory democracy on the Internet in his book *Tribes: We Need You to Lead us*. In a *Ted Talk* in 2009 Godin elaborates on the concept of tribes, founded on shared ideas and values affording ordinary people the power to lead and make big change. He argues that the Internet was supposed to "homogenize everyone by connecting us all." Instead, what it has allowed is silos of interest. This implies that the Internet makes it possible for people on the fringes to connect and go somewhere. Neither money nor factories—can change politics and align large numbers of people; it is about finding the true believers who want to connect that can change our world (Godin).

Both Polletta and Godin's ideal representation of participatory democracy correspond to the aspects of 'spreading the word' and unite in achieving social change. However, these representations differ in the way achieving participatory democracy takes place as defined in the shift from mass media to the contemporary online sphere. The transformation to the online sphere shows contrasting characteristics. According to author of *Clicktivism, Slacktivism or 'Real' Activism*, Mary Butler, "likeminded individuals can easily connect without the need for organizations" and "the voice of ordinary people may carry more consequence than ever" (Butler 1). The shape of public discourse once privileged as "leader-centered" and "managed" (Ibid. 1), is now shaped by the everyday talk and actions of ordinary people. The "true believers" or more downgraded "likeminded people" connect from an intrinsic motivation to act on social media; joining Facebook groups about subjects of interest, share a political message on *Twitter* or commenting on a weblog because they want to contribute to the discussion. Internet users in the online sphere arm themselves against politics, commerce and exploitation with a *retweet*, a *like* and a *share* representing their opinion. They voice their opinion publicly and—in contrast to mass media—this opinion can change the world because they share it with the world.

As exemplified by the movement of the *Uprising of Women*, Facebook facilitates the public opinion of Arab women, though controls it as well. By removing photos and banning the Facebook Page administrators for approximately thirty days with no specific

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<sup>1</sup> American multinational Internet corporation which runs the social networking site Facebook

explanation given; the *Uprising of Women* movement not only faces the battle for social equality in the Arab world, but for their right to exist on Facebook as well. This uncovers capitalistic power structures which simultaneously have evolved from mass media to social media. While social media nowadays facilitates the opinion of its users in shaping public discourse and social change, one almost forgets the profit organization that is tied to the social networking site itself. How about a public opinion 'empowered' by a social networking site where its main source of income is the money businesses pay to advertise to its users? This reveals an intriguing manifestation of a complex power relationship between Internet users, their use of social networking sites and businesses tied to the sites in generating revenue. Detecting a ruling power in this power relationship seems to raise more questions than answers. From a societal perspective; to what extent can the ideology of participatory democracy<sup>2</sup> be defined in the online sphere? Are we fighting the system of society, or are we part of this system?

#### **FACILITATING THE ENDLESS MEETING**

In line with the raised questions, social networking site Facebook offers an interesting case study. Facebook can be acknowledged as the ruling social network in 127 of the 137 countries observed in the *World Map of Social Networks 2012* (Fox), which by October 2012 accomplished the number of one billion monthly active users<sup>3</sup> (Facebook "Key Facts"). On the one hand, Facebook resembles to Godin's tribes of people connecting into silos of interests by shared ideas and values. A study led by PHD in Network Science Emilio Ferrara, found that, "Facebook users are driven by the network's very structure to group themselves into a larger number of small communities all joined together into the monolith we call Facebook by their social connections" (Pan). On the other hand, the underlying profit organization Facebook, Inc. has all the merits transforming capitalism from mass media to the online sphere by subtle positioning its users as consumers of political, economic and social systems of society.

Though a scrutinized phenomenon on matters of privacy and revenue: Facebook, Inc. offers the opportunity to analyze the power relationship between users, the Facebook network and businesses. Within this power relationship, two claims to power can be distinguished. The first is the attempt of Facebook users to achieve participatory democracy in a political, economic and social system of society with their use of public opinion. The second claim to power is the attempt of businesses positioning Facebook

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<sup>2</sup> In this context, participatory democracy entails more than the traditional definition of citizens and government. With participatory democracy is meant in this thesis the act of Internet users to change the political, economic and social systems of society.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of popular social networking sites, see appendix one



users as consumers of politics, commerce and other purposes. This reveals two contrasting interests which will be explored in this thesis. At the heart of this exploration lies the research question of this thesis; to what extent does the public opinion of Facebook users facilitate the realization of participatory democracy in an intricate web of consumerism?

The contrasting aims for participatory democracy and consumerism within the power relationship of users, the Facebook network and businesses, will be researched by differentiating and analyzing power structures and public opinion through a Marxist and Habermasian concept of the *bourgeois public sphere*. Political philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels claimed in 1848 that the relations of bourgeois society were based on the relations of production (Marx and Engels 16). They elaborated on the concept of the bourgeois public sphere and denounced public opinion as a mask of class interest, surplus labor and capital valorization. Stating that the “mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life” (Marx 3). This perspective offers the opportunity to define underlying power structures and the positioning of users as consumers on Facebook. The notion of the bourgeois public sphere conceptualized by sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas in 1962 consists of a public sphere in which private people come together as public, and engage the public authorities in a debate over general rules governing commodity exchange and social labor with the public use of their reason (Habermas 1989, 27). This perspective offers the approach to define both participation opportunities facilitated by Facebook and the public opinion of its users.

At first instance, the Marxist and Habermasian perspective of the bourgeois public sphere should exclude each other. However, in this thesis a revised formation of these concepts reinforce a better understanding of the complex power relationship facilitating the pursuit of participatory democracy by Facebook users and the integration of consumerism by businesses. With this understanding, Facebook will be analyzed on three recent events viewing power structures and public opinion from multiple perspectives. The first event that will be addressed is the possibility for advertisers and businesses with a Facebook Fan Page to reach the Facebook user. The second event covers the relation between users and Facebook, Inc. when it comes to the ongoing user profile changes. The third event portrays the use of public opinion in the *Kony 2012* campaign. The Facebook case will offer input to establish and analyse the status quo of the aim for participatory democracy versus consumerism within this complex power relationship. This will provide the input for answering the research question and reflect on the ideology of participatory democracy in the online sphere.

With this methodology I expect to find that the relationship of users, the Facebook network and businesses have established a balance in which one cannot exist without the other. This offers on the one hand a platform for empowered Facebook users to fight, change and control political, economic and social systems of society in the online sphere. On the other hand, businesses have more opportunities to position users as consumers by utilizing the Facebook network. Furthermore, I expect to find Facebook, Inc. in a facilitating and stimulating but yet controlling position of businesses and users via the Facebook network. I expect that Facebook has an almost untouchable nature because it has no direct competitors; until another social media platform reaches this status, users are bound to Facebook endlessly. Nevertheless, Facebook, Inc. cannot dominate the way people act from an intrinsic motivation, which offers a worthy opponent of consumerism.

The first chapter of this thesis is devoted to outlining the concept of the bourgeois public sphere from a Marxist and Habermasian perspective. This forms the basis for conceptualizing the online sphere. In the second part of chapter one the transformation from mass media to the Internet will be established. In the second chapter, by means of the focus points: power structures and public opinion the online sphere will be conceptualized to lay the groundwork for the case study analysis. In the third chapter, Facebook will be analyzed on three different events. The first event is the possibility for advertisers and businesses with a Facebook Fan Page to reach the Facebook user. The second event covers the relation between user and Facebook, Inc. when it comes to the ongoing user profile changes, and the third event portrays the use of public opinion in the *Kony 2012* campaign. In chapter four, the status quo of the findings will be established as well as interpreted. In the conclusions I will answer to what extent the public opinion of Facebook users facilitates the realization of participatory democracy in an intricate web of consumerism.

# THE BOURGEOIS PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

The idea of the public sphere has been analyzed and conceptualized by many philosophers from different philosophical schools and movements throughout the years. According to Jürgen Habermas, the idea of the bourgeois public sphere attained its theoretically fully development with the elaboration of the principle of publicity by German philosopher Immanuel Kant in his philosophy of right and of history (Habermas 1989, 102). Author of *Perpetual Peace* (1795), Kant conceived of the “public sphere” as the principle of the legal order and as the method of enlightenment. Kant felt that the public should enlighten itself; “thinking for oneself seemed to coincide with thinking aloud and the use of reason with its public use” (Ibid. 104). This would unite politics and morality, resulting in the public sphere as an element in the political realm depending on social relationships among commodity owners falling within the sphere that was the preserve of their private autonomy (Ibid. 109). Habermas saw similar ways of viewing public opinion in the perspective of German philosopher and author of the *Philosophy of Right* (1821), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. However, Hegel’s view of civil society emphasized its discontinuity and confusion. Civil society for Hegel, cannot provide the rational basis for private people to turn political domination into rational authority, “the public opinion of the private people assembled to form a public no longer retained a basis of unity and truth; it degenerated to the level of a subjective opinion of the many” (Ibid. 119), the public sphere served only to integrate subjective opinions “into the objectivity assumed by the spirit in the form of the state” (Ibid. 120).

## **1|1 A BOURGEOIS FICTION**

Karl Marx, in his turn, took the idea of the bourgeois public sphere seriously but ironically and used it to show its contradictions. Marx denounced public opinion as false consciousness and criticized the social conditions that allowed it to function (Ibid. 124).

Marx and Friedrich Engels analyzed the bourgeois society in *Manifesto of a Communist Party* (1848) from a materialist view of history. According to Marx and Engels, the economy formed the foundation upon which all other elements of society were based; the whole relations of society were based on the relations of production, which can only be realized when constantly revolutionising the instruments of

production (Marx and Engels 16). Marx and Engels argued that in bourgeois society, capital was independent and had individuality whilst the living person was dependent and had no individuality (Ibid. 23). Examining the system of bourgeois society resulted in the claim that the mode of production of material life conditioned the general process of social, political and intellectual life: “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx 3). Bourgeois society had established new classes and conditions of oppression (Marx and Engels 15).

The epoch of the bourgeoisie possessed the distinct feature of simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole split up in to two great classes of bourgeoisie—the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour—and proletariat—the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live—directly facing each other (Ibid. 15). “The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage labourers” (Ibid. 15-6). Consequently, in proportion as the bourgeoisie and capital developed, in the same proportion the proletariat developed; “a class of labourers who live only so long as they find work and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital.” These labourers are a commodity, and are “like every other article of commerce exposed to competition and fluctuations of the market” (Ibid. 18). Eventually, when class interests were revealed, this should have lead towards a revolution of the proletariat. Marx and Engels argued, “in all probability, the proletarian revolution will transform existing society gradually (...) it will establish a democratic constitution, and through this, the direct or indirect dominance of the proletariat (Ibid. 49).

## **1|2 AN IDEALIZED SOCIETY**

Habermas did appreciate some of Marx’s theory, as demonstrated by his earlier involvement with the Frankfurter Schule—a school of neo-Marxist social theory. However, Habermas thinks that Marx’s ideology on commodity is to preserve a certain kind of freedom. In Habermas’ view that partly derives from Kant’s perspective, all citizens need a place that is not fully dominated by capitalism; this place should be able to encourage the public to have a kind of critical reflection. Habermas clarifies this concept of the bourgeois public sphere in his habilitation work *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (1962). In which

Habermas introduced the concept of the bourgeois public sphere by reflecting on the medieval representative public sphere.

Traditionally, power was balanced and regulated between the estates and the prince. Or through a parliamentary system in the medieval representative public sphere; a public sphere directly linked to the concrete existence of a ruler. This was characterized by the prince and the estates of the realm 're-presenting' their power 'before' the people: instead of 'for' the people functioning as deputies for the land. By the end of the eighteenth century the feudal authorities disintegrated during a long process of polarization, and broke apart into private and public elements (Habermas 1974, 51). "Private individuals"—this entailed the role of owner of commodities and property with that of human being and head of the family—now made up the public body at whom public authority was directed. Consequently, society as private realm stood on the one hand in clear contrast to the state. On the other hand, "that society had become a concern of public interest to the degree that the reproduction of life in the wake of the developing market economy had grown beyond the bounds of private domestic authority" (Habermas 1989, 28-9).

Habermas conceptualized the bourgeois public sphere as the sphere of "private people come together as public." The public claimed with the "peculiar and without historical precedent" public use of their reason "the public sphere against the public authorities themselves, and engaged them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor" (Habermas 1989, 27). The ambiguous role of a private individual illustrates the intertwinedness of the private and the public at that time. The private was the public, and the public was the private. Nevertheless, the public sphere and state did not overlap but confronted each other as opponents. "In the first modern constitutions they guaranteed the society as a sphere of private autonomy and the restriction of public authority to a few functions, between these two spheres the public sphere came to existence where private individuals assembled into a public body" consequently transforming political into rational authority (Habermas 1974, 49, 50-3).

The realization of the public sphere had certain requirements. The public sphere had norms and modes of behaviour to result in rational-critical debates about general interests. It had to fulfil general accessibility to all citizens, elimination of all privileges and discovery of general norms and rational legitimations. With the guarantee of freedom of assembly of association and the freedom to express and publish opinions about matters of general interests, a portion of the public sphere should ideally be realized in every conversation. This would lead toward a reasoning public that refers to

the task of “criticism and control informally practices vis-à-vis the ruling structure organized in the form of a state” (Ibid. 49-50). This would ultimately put the state in touch with the needs of society through the vehicle of public opinion (Habermas 1989, 31).

### **1|2|1 CONTEMPLATING THE WHOLE**

The concepts of the public sphere by Marx and Habermas are contrasting in almost every aspect. As Marx describes public opinion as false consciousness masking class interest, Habermas describes it as empowering and through rational-critical debates as a vehicle putting the state in touch with the needs of private individuals. Habermas therefore sees the public sphere and state as opponents, though Marx would rather see this as false consciousness in which only relations of production formed the relations of society; dominated by the bourgeoisie, treating the proletariat merely as convenient commodities. As Marx sees surplus value, Habermas defines private individuals, both human being and head of the family and property owner and commodity owner at the same time, empowered by public opinion transforming political into rational authority.

These contradictions offer clear characteristics of power structures as dominating society or formed by society. And perspectives on public opinion as false consciousness or as an empowered means to change society to ones needs. This forms the basis for chapter two, in which power structures and public opinion are conceptualized in the online sphere. Nevertheless, the Habermasian concept of the public sphere changes once more with the rise of mass media.

### **1|3 MASS MEDIA AND BEYOND**

When private persons formed a public body on general interests, this sometimes required specific means for distributing information like newspapers, magazines, radios and televisions (Habermas 1989, 49-50). These means became a tool to engage in debates about the general rules governing relations in their own essentially privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and labor (Ibid. 94-5). This also formed a risk which eventually changed the public sphere. The diffusion of press and propaganda expanded the public body beyond the bounds of the bourgeoisie and lost besides its social exclusivity also the coherence created by bourgeois social institutions and high standard of education. Conflicts restricted to the private sphere intruded the public sphere and became a field for the competition of interests which the public sphere must mediate (Habermas 1974, 54). “The idea of the public sphere—an idea which calls

for a rationalization of power through the medium of public discussion among private individuals—threatens to disintegrate with the structural transformation of the public sphere itself” (Ibid. 55). Although mass media disrupted social exclusivity and created coherence while the diffusion of press and propaganda and the competition of interests consequently increased; the transformation from mass media to the Internet has amplified these characteristics even more.

Instead of the static relationship between mass media and individuals, the internet offers a more dynamic relationship (Lister et al. 220). The Internet emphasizes a participatory culture that sharpens the contrast of the participation possibilities of the Internet versus the commodification of participation (Ibid. 218). As a public communicative space, the Internet offers highly specific and limited engagements. The Internet as postmodern communication space has no grand narratives; micro fragments encountered through an aleatory hypertext reading “critical reasoning” here replaced by opinion and subjective comment (Ibid. 219). The Habermasian perspective on freedom of assembly of association and the freedom to express and publish opinions about matters of general interest, seems to be more in place in contemporary online sphere. In which the Internet and in particular social media offer every person with Internet access, the freedom to do so. This also has a great impact in the way people communicate, distribute information and connect to their network in the online sphere.

Mass media in the bourgeois public sphere served as the means to distribute ideas about general interests; nowadays, technology affords a shift from linking people in places, to linking people wherever they are. A transition has taken place from place-to-place to person-to-person connectivity; the person has become the portal (Wellman 5). In contrast to individuals in the past with small tight social networks, the change to broader personal networks has been powerfully advanced by the widespread use of the Internet and mobile phones. Authors Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman emphasize in *Networked: The New Social Operating System* how networks among people have profoundly transformed in how they connect, personally and electronically. In the world of *networked individualism*, “it is the person who is the focus” (Rainie and Wellman 6) oriented around looser, more fragmented networks (Ibid. 8). The way people connect, communicate and exchange information in this social operating system is personal, multi-user and multi-threaded; the individual is the autonomous centre interacting with numerous different others and doing it mostly simultaneously (Ibid. 7). However, Rainie and Wellman argue that it is not a world of autonomous and increasingly isolated individualists, it revolves around the connected individual extending its network far beyond what was possible in the past (Ibid. 19).

## **THE BOURGEOIS PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE SUM OF ITS PARTS**

When it comes to power structures and public opinion; the surplus labor, false consciousness and a class society are opposite to the social exclusivity, rational-critical debates transforming political into rational authority and private individuals combining their public role in harmony. With the transformation from mass media to the Internet a more dynamic relationship between individual and media has been established. Social exclusivity and the ideal of a public body have been transformed into a looser and fragmented network surrounding the connected individual. In chapter two the transformation from public sphere to online sphere will be established by conceptualizing two main characteristics abstracted from a Habermasian and Marxist perspective of the public sphere: power structures and public opinion. This will be accomplished by addressing the private-public distinction, businesses and new ways of generating revenue, and by conceptualizing the form of participation and public opinion from Facebook users.



# CONCEPTUALIZING THE ONLINE SPHERE

## 2|1 THE PRIVATE-PUBLIC DISTINCTION

According to Marx private individuals could not be human being and head of the family as well as property owner and commodity owner at the same time. Habermas, on the other hand saw the ambiguous role of a private individual as essential for the realization of the public sphere. The rise of the Internet has had its consequences for the meaning of a 'private' individual in a private or public realm. The Internet offers the opportunity to address and position individuals as Internet user, citizen and consumer. Bluntly put: the Internet user does not have a choice but to be an individual, consumer and citizen at once. Authors Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang quoted author and lecturer on media and consumer culture Stuart Ewen on this matter in 1992, "We are witnessing the swift debasement of the concept of citizen—the person who actively participates in shaping society's destiny—to that of consumer, whose franchise has become his or her purchasing decisions" (qtd. in Gabriel and Lang 172). Gabriel and Lang continue this argument in *The Unmanageable Consumer* and argue that the increasing universality of consumerism has eroded an older tradition that approached people as citizen with rights and responsibilities. Political culture is now "poised between giving primacy to voting or shopping" (Ibid. 172). Their solution, "Money gives choice. Choices give freedom. Whatever the area of consumption (...) money is the final arbiter" (Ibid. 30).

In analyzing the participation opportunities for Facebook users, this perspective seems ironic at first, when signing up for a Facebook account is free of charge. However, the overall positioning of users as consumers is exactly that. What forty-six percent—of approximately two thousand American Facebook users —does not know is that they are the means for Facebook to generate revenue (Prakash). The free Facebook account is the ticket for businesses to address and reach users via social advertisements or Fan Pages, political campaigns and webcare activities aiming to connect, interact and engage users with their purpose. When taking this into account, it cannot be denied that commerce and politics as well as the private of Facebook users have become the public. Power structures have redefined within the online sphere, and Facebook offers all actors the possibility to connect and engage. This aligns with the argument of communication manager and consultant Pieter Boeder in "Habermas' Heritage."

Boeder addresses Professor of Media and Communication Studies Peter Dahlgren to point out that the Internet has the risk of consumerism and commodification of the public sphere. Dahlgren states that “modern democracy is no longer seen as a system expressing the will of the people, but rather offers consumers a series of choices; the rational discourse at the base of civil society is what dies in this process” (qtd. in Boeder). According to sociologist Manuel Castells in “Communication, Power Counter-power in the Network Society” this new way of connecting has implications for the space where power is decided. Castells states that media have become the social space where power is decided and identifies a complex multidimensional social evolution, where power relations form the decisive process shaping society (Castells 241). In addition, Castells observes a shift from mass media to horizontal networks of interactive communication that connects local and global in chosen time (Ibid. 246), and points out that “media are not the holders of power, but they constitute by and large the space where power is decided” (Ibid. 242). This perspective reflects on the transformation of the private-public distinction for the role of ‘private’ individuals as well as the public space in which power nowadays is decided. There can be stated that the private and public in the online sphere are as intertwined as the private and public differed in the bourgeois public sphere.

## **2|2 THE BLUEPRINT FOR A BETTER KIND OF BUSINESS**

Eliminating the strict private-public distinction with the rise of the Internet consequently means that new opportunities are seized by businesses in generating revenue by targeting and engaging prospects in the online sphere. In context of Facebook this means that businesses have focused on utilizing the Facebook network in clever ways. The fact that over four million businesses have Facebook Fan Pages to reach users and engage them with their brand is therefore hardly surprising (Facebook, Inc. 68). One of these four million businesses is international coffee house chain *Starbucks*, the first consumer brand who achieved ten million fans on Facebook. One of the secrets of being “the most engaged brand” and “number one brand on Facebook” was the successful objective to build strong customer relationships via social media and foremost, to adjust its business model from mass media to social media (Beuker).

This objective aligns with economist Umair Haque, arguing in *The New Capitalist Manifesto* that capitalism is an aging paradigm that has hit the point of maturity (Haque 4). According to Haque, capitalism is built in an industrial age for a big, empty and stable world, though “at the dawn of the twenty-first century the world is more like an ark; tiny, fragile and crowded” (Ibid. 6). Escaping this capitalism requires a paradigm shift (Ibid.

17) in which making profit exists without doing economic harm. Haque introduces *constructive capitalism* and sees constructive capitalists in a shift from incumbents to insurgents, “Today, a new generation of renegades (...) are thriving not in spite of but by rebelling against the tired, toxic orthodoxies of industrial age capitalism. (...) they are learning to become twenty-first-century capitalists” (Ibid. 3). “Constructive capitalists aren’t just building better products, services, strategies, or business models: they are building better institutions first” (Ibid. 27). Minimize harm and maximize authentic, sustainable and meaningful value results in constructive advantage. Which is the consequence of real-world mastery of a new cornerstone; “learning to employ a new institution with power, poise and precision” (Ibid. 35).

Facebook corresponds to the concept of constructive capitalism more than it seems to appear at first. In contrast to social networking site *Myspace* (founded in 2003) Facebook (founded in 2004) has always invested in improving user experience and upgrading the network. While *Myspace* started out earlier and had a great advantage in user numbers than Facebook when the network started, it stopped innovating and listening to the users in 2005 when global media company *News Corp.* acquired it. From that point on, *News Corp.* did not see growth and improving the platform as a primary objective, it mainly focused on cashing in via advertisements. While Facebook’s primary income is also by advertisements, this profit is mainly used for innovating and improving the network and user experience (IS). With one billion users versus the twenty five million users *Myspace* has, Facebook shows that constructive advantage has to be built first, before it can turn into a business.

The concept of constructive capitalism is not entirely shared by political theorist Jodi Dean. Dean argues in *Communicative Capitalism* that “the proliferation, distribution, acceleration and intensification of communicative access and opportunity results in precisely the opposite: the post-political formation of communicative capitalism” (Dean 53). Communicative capitalism designates that form of late capitalism in which values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communications technologies. The deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world’s people, with ideals of access, inclusion, discussion and participation (Ibid. 55). Dean calls it the commodification of communication leading to “more and more domains of life reformatted in terms of market and spectacle.” Bluntly put, the standards of a “finance- and consumption-driven entertainment culture set the very terms of democratic governance today. Changing the system—organizing against and challenging communicative capitalism—seems to require strengthening the system: how else can one organize and get the message across?” (Ibid. 55).

The commodification of communication hidden behind the ideal of access, inclusion, discussion and participation seems not so unfamiliar with Facebook as well. This makes the concept of a 'free of charge' Facebook account much more interesting. While users connect with Facebook friends via the offered participation options, this participation and connecting automatically creates company value and leverage for advertisements. Both Haque and Dean address different perspectives on new ways of revenue for businesses and social networking sites, they complement each other as well in the conclusion that the Internet offers new opportunities to position individuals as consumers with a false sense of access, inclusion and participation.

### **2|3 THE MEANINGFUL ACT OF SLACKTIVISM**

Whilst the public sphere had a clear private-public distinction defining opposites and creating a modest sphere for rational-critical debates distributed via mass media. The online sphere could be seen as the opposite: worldwide, unilateral and individual though connected. A global public discourse does not seem to fit this ideal. *California University* researcher Mark Poster states about new relationships of power in contrast to the Habermasian notion of the public sphere; "the Habermasian concept of the public sphere is no longer a homogeneous space of embodied subjects in symmetrical relations, pursuing consensus through the critique of arguments and the presentation of validity claims" (Poster). Nowadays, voicing an opinion in the online sphere takes a different form than the ideal rational-critical debates in the bourgeois public sphere. For instance, "I like it on the floor" and "I like it in the kitchen" were common phrases in status updates on Facebook in 2010. It raised eyebrows due to the sexual connotations and the "don't tell the boys" element, but foremost because only the ones posting the updates knew what the actual message was. The purpose of the status updates—referring to the place women put their purse—was to raise awareness about breast cancer in creating a buzz (Parr). This campaign shows a clever way of using public opinion to raise awareness and shape public discourse.

However "I like it on the floor" does not immediately seem to reveal the strength of contemporary public opinion. This raises the question 'how' contemporary individuals socially participate on the Internet and 'if' this means the ideal of pursuing consensus through the critique of arguments no longer holds in contemporary society. Author of "Looking for the Sweet Spot between Low Threshold Participation and Expressiveness in Social Media" Bernhard Krüpl, argues that user participation is the essence of social media, though participation is a malleable concept. In his study, Krüpl argues that the

“complexity of the required interaction” is an indicator of the level of participation by users (Krüpl 1). Social networks consist of people connected by “shared objects” like photos and videos. Krüpl states that “in general those objects that offer simpler interaction possibilities have a much higher participant rate than those that require more complex interaction” (Ibid. 2). Researcher and author on user interfaces Jakob Nielsen, strengthens this outcome in a report about participation inequality that shows that “in most online communities, ninety percent of users are lurkers who never contribute, nine percent of users contribute a little, and one percent of users account for almost all the action” (Nielsen). Establishing the inequality of user participation does not inherently say anything about the actual contribution of this form of social participation. One way of defining the level of social participation in the online sphere is by analyzing the two levels of participation slacktivism and activism.

One perspective on the difference of slacktivism and activism is offered by Mary Butler in *Clicktivism, Slacktivism or 'Real' Activism* in which Butler researches the online disruption of the traditional communication processes of activism. Butler addresses a definition of a basic concept of public participation which includes “efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy” (Butler 5). Butler concludes in this research that the category of activism was made larger in her research, by “encouraging individuals to enter the civic engagement continuum via their keyboards, perhaps first by engaging in political discussions, clicking for causes, and texting donations” (Ibid. 90). “Thanks to social networks—instead of convincing people who care a little to do more—you can convince people who care a little to do a little” (qtd. in Butler 13). In contrast to Butler, slacktivism in general has negative connotations. These connotations are perfectly exemplified and defined by the *Urban Dictionary*: “The act of participating in obviously pointless activities as an expedient alternative to actually expending effort to fix a problem. Signing an email petition to stop rampant crime is slacktivism. Want to really make your community safer? Get off your ass and start a neighbourhood watch!”

Distinguished Professor of Computer Science Henrik Christensen researched the phenomenon of slacktivism and its negative connotations in “Political Activities on the Internet” and came to two conclusions. On the one hand the term is used in a more negative sense to “belittle activities that do not express a full-blown political commitment.” The concept generally refers to activities that are easily performed, but they are considered more effective in making the participants feel good about themselves than to achieve the stated political goals (Christensen 3). However none of the studies questioning the existence of a positive effect of Internet activity, suggest a negative effect

from using the Internet for political purposes on participation in real life (Ibid. 6). Concluding that “online and off-line participation are not necessarily mutually exclusive forms of citizen engagement” (Ibid. 7).

Taking this in consideration, there could be argued that the distinction between slacktivism and activism has narrowed throughout the years as well as private and public, mass media and social media and offline and online. As Christensen argues on this matter, “being involved in effortless political activities online does not replace traditional forms of participation, if anything; they reinforce offline engagement” (Ibid. 7). This can be exemplified by Facebook, Inc. attempting to raise online awareness to reinforce offline engagement in getting American Facebook users to vote for the presidential elections in 2012. This attempt strengthens the conclusion Christensen addresses. Numbers say that the reminder to vote in the form of a button installed by Facebook with “I’m a voter” has been clicked on by nine million users. The button served as a reminder to vote and showed the profile pictures of Facebook friends who already clicked on it. On top of that, these numbers did not include the users who saw the button and also were reminded to vote. The offline result from Facebook’s decision to implement the feature directly boosted president Obama’s vote tally (Simonite).

### **CONCEPTUALIZING THE ONLINE SPHERE**

From a Marxist and Habermasian starting point, the online sphere has been conceptualized by identifying power structures and forms of public opinion to lay the groundwork for the case study analysis in chapter three. What can be established is that the ideal of the public sphere foremost coming out of the private-public distinction is mostly vanished in the online sphere. Consequently, new relationships of power have occurred, in which the Internet user is approached as a consumer of politics and commerce rather than a private individual per se. Businesses have found new ways to generate revenue and use social networks to benefit from a false sense of access, inclusion and participation. Furthermore, a transformation is visible from rational-critical debates distributed via mass media, to new levels of voicing an opinion often characterized by low-threshold participation in the online sphere. In the next chapter the Facebook case study consisting of three recent events will indicate how power structures and public opinion in a complex power relationship of users, the Facebook network and businesses realize their purpose of consumerism versus the purpose of participatory democracy.

## CHAPTER THREE

# A DEEP SEA OF FACEBOOK BLUE

Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook, Inc. stated in an *ABC* interview in 2012, “when you give everyone a voice and give people power, the system usually ends up in a really good place. So, what we view our role as, is giving people that power” (Gillis). In making the world more open and connected, Facebook, Inc. has defined three main objectives. First of all, to strengthen how people relate to each other by building tools extending people’s capacity to build and maintain relationships. Second, to improve how people connect to businesses and the economy: in which a more open and connected world will help create a stronger economy with more authentic businesses that build better products and services. And third, to change how people relate to their government and social institutions: Facebook, Inc. expects that governments will become more responsive to issues and concerns raised directly by all their people rather than through intermediaries controlled by a select few (Facebook, Inc. “Registration Statement” 67-8). Facebook believes to accomplish this mission by focusing on creating value for its users by building useful and engaging products that enable users to connect, represent, discover, learn and experience. By focusing on the evolution of a ‘social and personalized Web’ results in more rewarding experiences that are centered on people, their connections and their interests. Facebook, Inc. achieves this by the aim for authentic identities of Facebook users; improving the *Social Graph* which represents all ties and connections of Facebook users and it focuses on social distribution; the consumption and creation of information at a faster pace across a broader range of devices (Ibid. 2).

### **QUICK AND DIRTY: TALENT ACQUISITIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS**

Besides these rather formal objectives, Facebook, Inc. has its tactics for the ongoing innovation and improvement of the network and its services. One way of fulfilling this desire is by talent acquisitions.<sup>4</sup> Over the past six years, Facebook, Inc. has acquired thirty-three companies in order to generate the employees with certain expertise to keep the Facebook network at its full potential. According to Zuckerberg “We have not once bought a company for the company. We buy companies to get excellent people. In order to have a really entrepreneurial culture one of the key things is to make sure we're recruiting the best people. One of the ways to do this is to focus on acquiring great companies with great founders” (Weber). Starting out carefully with one acquisition per

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of talent acquisitions and partnerships, see appendix two

year in 2007, 2008 and 2009; from 2010, Facebook has acquired an average of nine companies a year. The extraordinary thing that has been happening in 2012 are subsidiaries *Instagram* and *Glancee*, which are acquired for the usual aim of expertise and extending the Facebook network as well. Whilst Facebook, Inc. integrates talent and expertise by acquisitions it also expands its network via partnerships with other social networks.<sup>5</sup> As shown in appendix one, Facebook has multi-level partnerships with more than half of the popular social networking sites worldwide. There are just a few who do not collaborate with Facebook, Inc., although they have a Facebook Fan Page to engage and connect with their fans on the Facebook network. Facebook organically forms itself to the needs of its users by talent acquisitions and partnerships. It extends itself beyond its main product; it has evolved into a social hub connecting all users with all products and services needed.

Organically forming itself to the needs of users also has its costs. Zuckerberg states that “these days I think more and more people want to use services from companies that believe in something beyond simply maximizing profits. We don’t wake up in the morning with the primary goal of making money, but we understand that the best way to achieve our mission is to build a strong and valuable company” (Facebook, Inc. 68-9). Zuckerberg elaborates on the stock market debut in 2012, when Facebook, Inc. held its initial public offering (IPO) on May 18, 2012. “We’re going public for our employees and our investors. We made a commitment to them when we gave them equity that we’d work hard to make it worth a lot and make it liquid, and this IPO is fulfilling our commitment. As we become a public company, we’re making a similar commitment to our new investors and we will work just as hard to fulfill it” (Ibid. 69). Zuckerberg emphasizes on building social value; “once again, Facebook exists to make the world more open and connected, and not just to build a company. We expect everyone at Facebook to focus every day on how to build real value for the world in everything they do” (Ibid. 70).

### **3|1 THE “FACEBOOK FREEMIUM MODEL”**

Improving “how people connect to businesses and the economy” (Ibid. 68), is one interpretation to “focus every day on how to build real value for the world in everything they do” (Ibid. 70). As of this year, Facebook has made no secret about focusing on new revenue streams. Sending Mark Zuckerberg a message on Facebook for instance, may cost the user hundred dollars. Another example is the one dollar “pay-to-message” plan

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of social networking sites connected to Facebook, see appendix one



that the network has been experimenting with (Fiegerman). Both ways for Facebook, Inc. to create revenue streams, although this time, building real value is not aimed at advertisers or the users: it is aimed at those four million businesses with a Fan Page on Facebook (Ibid. 68).

That advertising is a way for Facebook to make money should be common knowledge. The value for advertisers and marketers is according to Facebook, Inc. “a unique combination of reach, relevance, social context and engagement” (Ibid. 1). Facebook offers the ability to reach a vast consumer audience of over eight hundred million monthly active users in which advertisers can specify and select relevant audiences. Herein plays the social context of information a significant factor which results in user engagement on a whole new level of interaction (Ibid. 57-77). This formula has been rewarded as successful by a recent Nielsen study; seventy-nine advertising campaigns on Facebook demonstrated a greater than fifty percent increase in ad recall for Facebook ads with social context (Ibid. 67). It seems that advertisers fairly pay for their gain in the form of reach, relevance, social context and engagement. However, this apparently does not count for those four million businesses with a Facebook Fan Page, who used it until recently, for free.

As of January 2012, Facebook has gradually started to show *Sponsored Stories*—social advertising (ads)—in the main news feed of the website version of the site. The ads marked as “Sponsored” will show one Sponsored Story in the news feed of the user each day, with content about friends or Pages that users already like (Constine 2011). The purpose of Sponsored Stories given in the *Registration Statement* by Facebook, Inc. portrays this change more like a benefit for businesses than a disadvantage: “Purchase Sponsored Stories to significantly increase the reach, frequency of distribution and prominence of this story to the user’s friends. And to promote the stories they publish from their Facebook Page to users who have connected with the Page” (Ibid. 77).

### **BROKEN ON PURPOSE**

The tricky part about these Sponsored Stories is that businesses who have a Facebook Page used to reach almost eighty percent of its fans. But since recently, businesses can only reach fifteen percent of their fans. This results in posts seen by only a fraction of the total fans. The only solution to this problem is to pay Facebook for better access with Sponsored Stories (Holiday). Facebook’s Ad Architect Gokul Rajaram explains in an interview with *AdExchanger* that “Facebook Pages work really well to reach people at all parts of the funnel. The Page should be the hub of all your marketing, we believe, because Pages allow you to reach people in the news feed. Pages allow you to publish content.

That initially starts out as organic content, and then you can sponsor or boost the content. (...) You get anywhere from fifteen percent to twenty percent of your fans, that you reach organically. In order to reach the remaining eighty to eighty-five percent, sponsoring posts is important” (Rodgers).

What can be established is that improving “how people connect to businesses and the economy” by focusing “every day on how to build real value for the world in everything they do” means that Facebook on purpose broke the exact reason for businesses to have a Facebook Page at all. In their first earnings call, CEO Mark Zuckerberg, COO Sheryl Sandberg and CFO David Ebersman spoke about the company’s advertising products, which accounted for eighty-six percent of its revenue in the second quarter. Zuckerberg noted that Sponsored Stories—now Facebook’s primary ‘social’ ad product—now generate one million dollar revenue a day (Indvik).

### **3|2 THE USER PROFILE “LOVE -HATE RELATIONSHIP”**

A lot of user profile changes have been made in the past few years. For instance, the sudden change of email addresses which overnight were changed in Facebook email addresses. The purpose was according to Facebook spokesperson Meredith Chin “to make everybody’s personal email addresses private until each user unhides each one manually, since the site now allows more granular email visibility settings” (Hamburger). If this is Facebook’s way of unifying and homogenizing users, or the friendlier motive; “consistent across our site” (Hamburger), will probably never be revealed. Another contested feature of the user profile is the absence of a *dislike* button. Since 2009, users can express their enjoyment on Facebook through a *like* button, though, users have asked for a *dislike* button for years. However, Facebook does not seem willingly to integrate this feature. Nevertheless, Facebook has announced new options, the *like* button will in the future be accompanied by a *collect* button and *want* button on Facebook Fan Pages (Stern)—which should be rather convenient for the four million businesses present.

The cry for a *dislike* button and the sudden appearance of a Facebook e-mail address is only a fraction of the change in the user profile that Facebook has forcefully carried out; the Timeline Profile redesign Facebook has integrated in 2012. In January 2012 users had the choice to adopt the redesign of the timeline, though not everyone did, critiquing it represented the user as the “exact sum of their past” (Constine 2012)—which does not always match with the representation people seem to fit them. Unfortunately months later, those users still refusing to switch to the Timeline Profile

would be automatically migrated. This was accomplished half a year later; in the fall of 2012 Facebook completed the Timeline roll-out (Constine 2012).

### **THE NEXT STEP IN OPENING THE SITE GOVERNANCE**

As a response to the critique of users, Facebook came up with elections. For the past three and a half years users could vote on new terms of use or matters revolving the governance of Facebook. But to actually have a say, at least thirty percent of all active Facebook users had to vote in order to make it count. Author and writer Ryan Tate shows in a *Wired* article how the past few years have 'not' been dominated by these elections. For instance, in 2009, Facebook released new terms saying it can do what it wants with user content, and in response to the ensuing backlash, Zuckerberg announced a vote on the new terms of service. But only 665,654 voters participated in the first election. Facebook was forced to admit, via its general counsel that "we are hopeful that there will be greater participation in future votes." That did not happen. In fact, for a three-year period, no policy changes even got the several thousand comments needed to trigger a vote. In June 2012, a group called *our-policy.org* finally triggered a vote by rallying Facebook users to oppose a new data use policy that, according to the group, did not fully address European privacy concerns. A sad 342,632 people cast votes, with eighty-seven percent opposing Facebook's proposal. The proposal moved forward (Tate).

For three years Facebook failed repeatedly to inform and trigger an election. On the one hand, if Facebook would have sent every user a notification to vote, they might not have this problem. They have neglected to properly inform the users. On the other hand, there was an opportunity for users to vote, to voice their opinion on a matter that is of concern to them, and they did not do anything. Facebook eventually came up with a solution and proposed to end the voting component and replace it with a system that leads to "more meaningful feedback and engagement" (Kiss). Whether or not this new system actually leads to quality over quantity with one billion users is hard to say. It is also not certain what the exact reason for the lack of engagement is. One option offered Zuckerberg by stating that the rise of social media reflected changing attitudes among ordinary people, adding that this radical change has happened in just a few years. "People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people" and states "that social norm is just something that has evolved over time" (Johnson).

The Facebook mission to make the world more open and connected seems to offer more benefits than discontent. In 2013 this hypothesis will be tested because Facebook has announced a new feature on January 15, 2013. *Graph Search*, that according to

journalist Steven Levy “promises to transform its user experience, threaten its competitors, and torment privacy activists” (Levy). Bluntly put; Graph Search will facilitate and allow users to access stored information about users and networks of friends. All information that once has been made public by the user will be out and in the open for others to see. This is an initiative to make better use of Facebook’s *Social Graph*, the network of one’s relationship with friends, acquaintances, celebrities and preferred brands (Levy). While this illustrates the attempt to improve and innovate the Facebook network, it also takes the matter of privacy to a whole new level. Blogger Tom Scott had the privilege of already testing Graph Search and came up with search results that are on the one hand to a certain level fun and interesting, though on the other provocative and an easy target for abuse. The search results varied from “ex-criminals with a fondness for guns” or “single women who live nearby and who are interested in men and love “getting drunk!” and for the sake of controversy: “Islamic men interested in men who live in Iran” (Scott).

What we have seen is that Facebook has changed a lot of features which were not always well received by users. This discontent could have been shown via elections, but users did not seize this opportunity to change the situation. Facebook, Inc. may have found a shaky but stable balance in on the one hand the discontent of its users and on the other, the ambition to develop new features based on the—public, yet personal—information of its users.

### **3|3 GOING VIRAL: KONY 2012**

Raising awareness by voicing an opinion on the Internet, on Facebook, takes place in many forms; one of them is the phenomenon of viral videos. Though scrutinized, the phenomenon of viral videos is not easily to explain. As Professor of Political Science Bob Boynton states in *Going Viral* “Going viral is a story about the dynamics of attention (...) “Going viral” is vernacular. Exactly what would count as going viral and what would not count has not been carefully specified” (Boynton 11-2). Boynton addresses the definition of going viral by stating that an “obvious” use of the vernacular “going viral” describes videos that are viewed many times (Ibid. 13). Going viral could be compared with what used to be ‘word of mouth’ or according to Steve Jurvetson as “network-enhanced word of mouth” because it conveys an implied endorsement from a friend (Jurvetson 111). Remember? A revolutionary political campaign was that of Barack Obama in 2008, in which videos created by celebrities in order to get everyone to vote, went viral (Stirland).

Though much seen videos have gone viral without the intent of raising awareness, like the popular viral video “Charlie Bit My Finger—Again!” viewed over 355 million times (Lehrer), or the music video “Gangnam Style” a Korean music hit that has also been referred to as a “visceral assault on the ears and eyes” which has been viewed over ten million times on *YouTube* (Laird). Though the number one viral video of 2012 according to *YouTube* has been the *Kony 2012* video published with the attempt to make *Lord’s Resistance Army* (LRA) leader Joseph Kony famous in order to arrest him and stop the violence in Uganda (Haberman).

Non-profit organization *Invisible Children*(IC) began its work in Uganda in 2004 to fulfil their mission to bring a permanent end to LRA atrocities (*Invisible Children*). To stop this longest-running armed conflict in Africa, IC created a video of thirty minutes capturing—from their perspective—the main problem IC is fighting. The video is called *Kony 2012* and shows a rather dramatic perspective of the harm that is done by the LRA in Africa. IC’s one goal was to make Kony famous, and this succeeded with the eleventh version—in nine years—of the *Kony 2012* video on March four, 2012 that went viral (*Visible Measures*). With more than a hundred million views in just six days the *Kony 2012* video became the most viral video in history (*Wasserman*). The message towards viewers was clear: share the video on Facebook to create the awareness Joseph Kony deserves (*Invisible Children*). What followed in the days after the video went viral, not all the reactions were as hoped for, and more and more people became critical of the initiative.

## **VISIBLE CHILDREN**

Dubious finances, exaggerated claims, support for military intervention and marketing tactics were motives to criticize *Invisible Children*. IC soon found itself under as much scrutiny as Joseph Kony.<sup>6</sup> Bloggers addressed their problem with the *Kony 2012* campaign; “The problem? From the beginning to now, the goal was premised on a White desire to save downtrodden Africa regardless of facts” (*Wanderings*), “These campaigns don’t just lack scholarship or nuance. They are not bothered to seek it” (*Izama*), “the point is to “literally cry your eyes out” (...) having been moved into a frenzy of moral clarity by the quite revolting mixture of generalized disgust at black Africa” (*Ross*), “It’s awesome to hear my Facebook friends say they feel “empowered” by sharing the video—but remember that charity isn’t really about you feeling empowered” (*Baker*). A few days after *Kony 2012* went viral, African people who saw the *Kony 2012* video voiced their critique via weblogs as well: “From Sachs to Kristof to *Invisible Children* to TED, the

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<sup>6</sup> For an indication of bloggers voicing their opinion about the *Kony 2012* campaign, see appendix three

fastest growth industry in the US is the White Saviour Industrial Complex," (Jardin), "In doing this IC is preventing us from moving on and appears keen on holding Northern Uganda back even though the people of Northern Uganda are working hard to rebuild their lives" (Horner), "The white saviour supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening" (AfriPop!). This critique was gradually adopted by traditional media and Internet users. In reply, *Invisible Children* released a second video a month after the first video went viral; *Kony 2012 Part II: Beyond Famous*. In this video IC explained their motives, and foremost refuted critique spread worldwide about the *Kony 2012* video and IC.

What we can establish from the *Kony 2012* campaign and the social participation from Facebook users and bloggers worldwide is that Facebook offers the opportunity for a viral distribution phenomenon with the potential of reaching one billion users. Raising awareness with this video was easy and effective by stimulating users to share the video with their network. *Invisible Children*, regardless the critique, has shown a way of making the voice of users count. People could send messages to culture makers and politicians to let them know that they were waiting for them to act; they could share the video online to raise awareness and could engage via Invisible Children's Fan Page and videos. This event also shows that while supported by millions of people in the first days, unleashing activists armed with so few facts are easy targets for a more critical perspective. Bloggers throughout the world contributed to this discourse and changed it by voicing their opinion about the message and motives of the movement. This critique was adopted by traditional media, other bloggers and millions of Facebook users throughout the days after the viral video. Facebook users listened to the critique, and were able to adjust their opinion based on given perspectives from different sides.

## ESTABLISHING THE STATUS QUO

In analyzing the Facebook network, on Facebook, Inc., advertisement options, the structure and agency of the user profile and the strength of public opinion in the *Kony 2012* campaign, a few conclusions can be made about power structures and public opinion on Facebook.

### **4|1 THE INSTITUTION CALLED FACEBOOK, INC.**

When it comes to power structures, three main actors appear in what it seems an entangled structure of powers: Facebook, Inc., Facebook users and businesses. As a twenty-first capitalist, Facebook, Inc. has built a strong institution, better strategies, products and business models than before. It constantly innovates and improves this institution, by talent acquisitions and partnerships. Facebook, Inc., constantly searches for new products and phenomena in the online sphere. It organically forms itself to the needs of its users, and analyses new products by the social participation of its users. Unlike *Myspace*, Facebook seems to balance new ways for generating revenue with the innovation and improvement of the network. With this strategy, Facebook has grown into a dominant social hub that forms the centre for its users in the online sphere.

This consequently seems to have its advantages in terms of user tolerance in context of the forced user profile changes. A next step in the opening of the governance of Facebook was according to Zuckerberg the introduction of elections. In contrast to the level of critique on privacy settings, the elections never made it past the thirty-three percent rule in which the vote counts. This outcome on the one hand could be countered by the argument that Facebook did not inform its users about the actual elections by sending a simple notification—which they were capable of during the presidential elections in 2012 in the form of a reminder button. However, users had a chance to vote and voice their opinion, but they did not participate. This could be partly justified by the explanation Zuckerberg gave about the changing social norm that has evolved over time; people have got comfortable sharing more information openly with other. The Graph Search feature that has been announced on January 2013, will eventually determine how much users have adjusted to this social norm when the fine line between private and public is once more put to the test.

A third power structure has been identified in the advertisers and businesses on Facebook with a Fan Page. In contrast to advertisers that can target their audience, stimulate engagement and have proven success from that strategy; businesses with Fan

Pages forced to use Sponsored Stories now have to pay for the exact reason they initially started a Facebook Fan Page. Besides a social hub, Facebook has also transformed into a market place; for Facebook to collect data and for advertisers to use the data targeting users as consumers. What can be established is that Facebook, Inc. in focusing “every day on how to build real value for the world in everything they do” partly means breaking the system on purpose to create value for, Facebook, Inc.

In analyzing the power structures between Facebook, Inc., users, businesses and advertisers; Facebook, Inc. seems to have found a shaky but stable balance that mostly holds by the tolerance of its users regarding user profile changes, privacy issues and the use of their data. Facebook has managed to transform itself into a social hub; fulfilling the needs of its users, a market place; fulfilling the need of advertisers and businesses, but foremost as an institution in the form of a networked communication technology. By commodifying characteristics that should illustrate participatory democracy; access, inclusion, discussion and participation for its users.

#### **4|2 PUBLIC OPINION AND THE WEALTH OF NETWORKS**

In analysing the participation opportunities used, and public opinion voiced by Facebook users in their attempt for democracy on the levels of economic, political and social systems of society, a few conclusions can be made. For instance, the public opinion of users is not only facilitated but shaped as well by Facebook. A *dislike* button—frequently asked for by its users—does not fit in this picture. And the *like* button integrated in 2009, will in the future be accompanied by a *want* and a *collect* button on Facebook Fan Pages. This enables users to ‘collect’ the products they ‘want’ offered by the consumer brand Fan Page. However, the *like* button and *share* button seems to facilitate a certain form of participation that represents more than stimulating consumerism. As Christensen and Butler stated; “thanks to social networks—instead of convincing people who care a little to do more—you can convince people who care a little to do a little” (Butler 13).

This has also been the case with the *Kony 2012* campaign. First and foremost, the success of the first *Kony 2012* video has been made possible by the global network Facebook has become. It has the capacity to reach a total amount of one billion users. Nonetheless, people from an intrinsic motivation have wanted to share the video with their network; it is easy, and thereby effective. Via a simple *share* or *like* users can show their network the borrowed norms and values, branded sense of right and wrong portrayed in the video. Particularly interesting was the way *Invisible Children* facilitated



Facebook users to voice their opinion. They could send messages to culture makers and politicians to let them know that they wanted change; they were stimulated to share the video in order to raise awareness. This aligns for example with the “I like it on the floor campaign” to raise awareness about breast cancer. Both easy ways to show that users care and demand change, in which the quality of an opinion is measured in numbers.

Questionable is this form of participation compared to a rational-critical debate. A rational-critical debate has changed in a global public discourse fuelled by public statements from public sphere to online sphere. In *The Wealth of Networks* Law Professor at Harvard University Yochai Benkler states that “we are in the midst of a quite basic transformation in how we perceive the world around us, and how we act, alone and in concert with others, to shape our own understanding of the world we occupy” (Benkler 472). The shift in how societies receive, exchange and create information provides an opportunity for greater individual freedom and autonomy (Ibid. 473). Benkler states that the Internet democratizes and liberates users from propaganda distributed by mass media. “Peer production is providing some of the most important functionalities of the media. These efforts provide a watchdog, a source of salient observations regarding matters of public concern, and a platform for discussing the alternatives open to a polity” (Ibid. 272). This aligns with what happened just a day after the Kony video went viral; bloggers all over the world voiced their critique on exaggerated claims, dubious finances and marketing tactics. This forced organization *Invisible Children* to release a second video to respond and refute the critique. Benkler’s concept aligns with this and states “what became salient for the public agenda and shaped public discussion was what intensely engaged active participants, rather than what kept the moderate attention of large groups of passive viewers (...) users do not longer need to be consumers and passive spectators. The network allows them to change their relationship to the public sphere in which they can become creators and primary subjects (Ibid. 272).

What exactly triggers users and people to make a video go viral is not proven yet. But an interesting aspect of this phenomenon is that only certain videos have the mysterious formula to go viral. In which not all Internet users participate in the same amount like Benkler, Krüpl and Nielsen stated. In “Net-work is Format Work” political philosopher Noortje Marres draws attention from the social and information networks to issue networks, because it enriches the understanding of the networked politics of civil society, and the role of ICTs in facilitating it. It especially draws the focus on the framing of issues (Marres 15). Issue networks represent networks in which participants are connected to one another by the particular issue with which it is concerned. By framing them in innovative ways and by seeking hospitable venues, network actors seek ways to

bring issues to the public agenda (Ibid. 6-7). Thus, “formatting issues” which happens in the circulation of information takes on the aspect of a collective, technologically mediated, distributed practice (Ibid. 6-7). In adopting the perspective of the issue network, then, the larger political project of civil society is to generate issue definitions with a critical edge, which may cut into institutional processes of opinion-, decision-, and policy-making, so as to open up a space in which action upon issues becomes possible (Ibid. 7). Actively framing and formatting the issues of concerns of participants in the context and definition of an issue network in the *Kony 2012* campaign is a matter of conveniently sharing the *Kony 2012* video on the Facebook Page of a user, or the active decision from users to participate in the issue by blogging, or voicing critique. The value of the issue network to *Kony 2012* is the concept of the Internet as a way to bring issues to the public. And that was not only relevant for Invisible Children, but also for bloggers voicing their critique. A rational and critical discourse emerged in an open space where action upon issues becomes possible.

Analyzing the participation options to connect and the way users voice their opinion shows the Facebook network on the one hand as a facilitating platform, on which users can act upon their intrinsic motivation and share it with their network via participation opportunities. On the other hand, the Facebook network steers and controls this form of participation by choosing particular participation options and by controlling these actions by removing photos or banning users from the site with no particular explanation given. However, the rise of the Internet and social media has shown a shift in how information is created, exchanged and received which provides users a greater individual freedom and autonomy, in which peer production provides a watchdog regarding matters of public concern and a platform for discussing the alternatives. In contrast to the public sphere, the level of participation has decreased, but has not been proven ineffective. Instead of a rational-critical debate, one could say issues and the connected participants concerned with the issue can form rational and critical opinions contributing to public discourse.

## CONCLUSIONS

# THE IDEOLOGY OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Facebook has manifested itself as a global network with over one billion users all participating to connect and engage. To connect and engage has been revealed in different ways; raising awareness for presidential elections, breast cancer and making Kony famous. Users can voice their opinion with a *like* and a *share* which occasionally results—in contrast to raising awareness—in less meaningful viral videos such as the Korean music hit “Gangnam Style” and “Charlie Bit My Finger—Again!” Though users do not always have the possibility to change a situation by social participation; Facebook has made decisions based on a thin line of privacy violation and user profile changes. This has shown a different way of user participation; one with the illusion of a free Facebook account in order for Facebook, Inc. to generate new ways of revenue and leverage for advertisements and Sponsored Stories. With one billion users as of October 2012, Facebook has managed to build a constructive institution that occasionally tests the shaky but stable balance of morality at the expense of its users.

This thesis has portrayed a complex power relationship between users, Facebook and businesses, in which two claims to power have been identified. On the one hand the attempt of Facebook users to achieve participatory democracy with the use of public opinion in political, economic and social systems of society. On the other hand, the formed power structures by businesses, politics and other initiatives in the attempt to position Facebook users as consumers. At the heart of this exploration is the research question “to what extent does the public opinion of Facebook users facilitate the realization of participatory democracy in an intricate web of consumerism?”

In order to define the strength of public opinion in an intricate web of power structures, the concept of the public sphere has been viewed from a Marxist and Habermasian perspective. This has resulted in contrasting characteristics on power structures as dominant or as democratic; and public opinion as false consciousness or as an empowered means to change society to ones needs. These perspectives have formed a basis in conceptualizing the online sphere on the private-public distinction, new ways of generating revenue and social participation of Internet users. This results in establishing the intertwinedness of the private-public distinction; all Internet users can connect and engage for numerous possibilities and reasons. This has also affected business strategies

in building institutions before focusing on profit. In which making profit mostly depends on the commodification of communication offering consumers a false sense of access, inclusion and participation. Social participation has besides the illusion of a free Facebook account, also transformed from rational-critical debates to low-threshold participation; people who care a little can be convinced to do a little. Conceptualizing the online sphere has laid the groundwork for the analysis of Facebook on three recent events in which power structures are defined by analyzing Facebook, Inc., advertisement options and user profile changes. Public opinion is defined by analyzing the tolerance of Facebook users in context of user profile changes and the *Kony 2012* campaign. This has lead to establishing a status quo.

In analyzing the power structures between Facebook, Inc., businesses and users; Facebook, Inc. has found a balance that mostly holds by the tolerance of its users regarding user profile changes, and by the tolerance of businesses regarding clever ways of Facebook, Inc. to exploit businesses in their attempt to position users as consumers. Facebook has managed to transform itself into a social hub and market place by building a constructive institution, commodifying characteristics that should illustrate democracy; access, inclusion, discussion and participation for both users as businesses. When consequently analyzing the participation opportunities and public opinion, there can be stated that the agency of the user profile and participation opportunities throughout the network stimulates on the one hand for users to connect and engage. This stimulates on the other hand an ongoing development of consumerism. However, it also shows a form of engagement and voicing an opinion which cannot be controlled by Facebook, Inc. The global network of Facebook has shown to be an excellent platform to gather a large amount of opinions among issues. These issues enable users to shape their understanding of the world they occupy. The rapid distribution of information via users, results in critical views of the distributed information. This results in matters of public concern discussed by the public and shared with each other. The Internet and in particular Facebook, allows users to be active spectators instead of passive consumers of information. What can be established is that the global network of Facebook enables a critical and rational discourse reaching users because of the open space in which action upon issues becomes possible.

Answering to what extent the public opinion of Facebook users facilitates the realization of participatory democracy in an intricate web of consumerism, shows a complex relationship in which Facebook, Inc. uses the Facebook network to control advertisers and businesses to engage and position Facebook users as consumers. Advertisers and

businesses as well as Facebook users are steered in their participation opportunities. Not a single aspect of the Facebook network is left to coincident by Facebook, Inc. and all forms of the participation of its users—advertisers, businesses and individuals—has a purpose in the social hub and market place called Facebook. Though Facebook has the means to control the actual form of participation, it cannot regulate and control the substance of the distributed information. Facebook offers a platform for critical discourse when issues occur that are of value for its users. From that point on, Facebook can only facilitate this discourse, and enable users to be active spectators. The power of Facebook extends only so far as to be a facilitator of participation opportunities. The actual engagement has to come from the intrinsic motivation of its users in which power structures can merely trigger it than control it. Consequently, the ideology of democracy emerges on the one hand in Facebook users depending on the Facebook network as a means to facilitate their attempt to achieve participatory democracy in political, economic and social systems of society. On the other hand, while Facebook, Inc. facilitates users in participating on the network and uses this information as leverage; it cannot control the intrinsic motivation of its users. Therefore, in answering to what extent the public opinion of Facebook users facilitates the realization of participatory democracy in an intricate web of consumerism, there can be concluded that participatory democracy and consumerism cannot be achieved, without the other. They are equal powers with only one difference; no power structure can ever compete with an intrinsic motivation to change the world.

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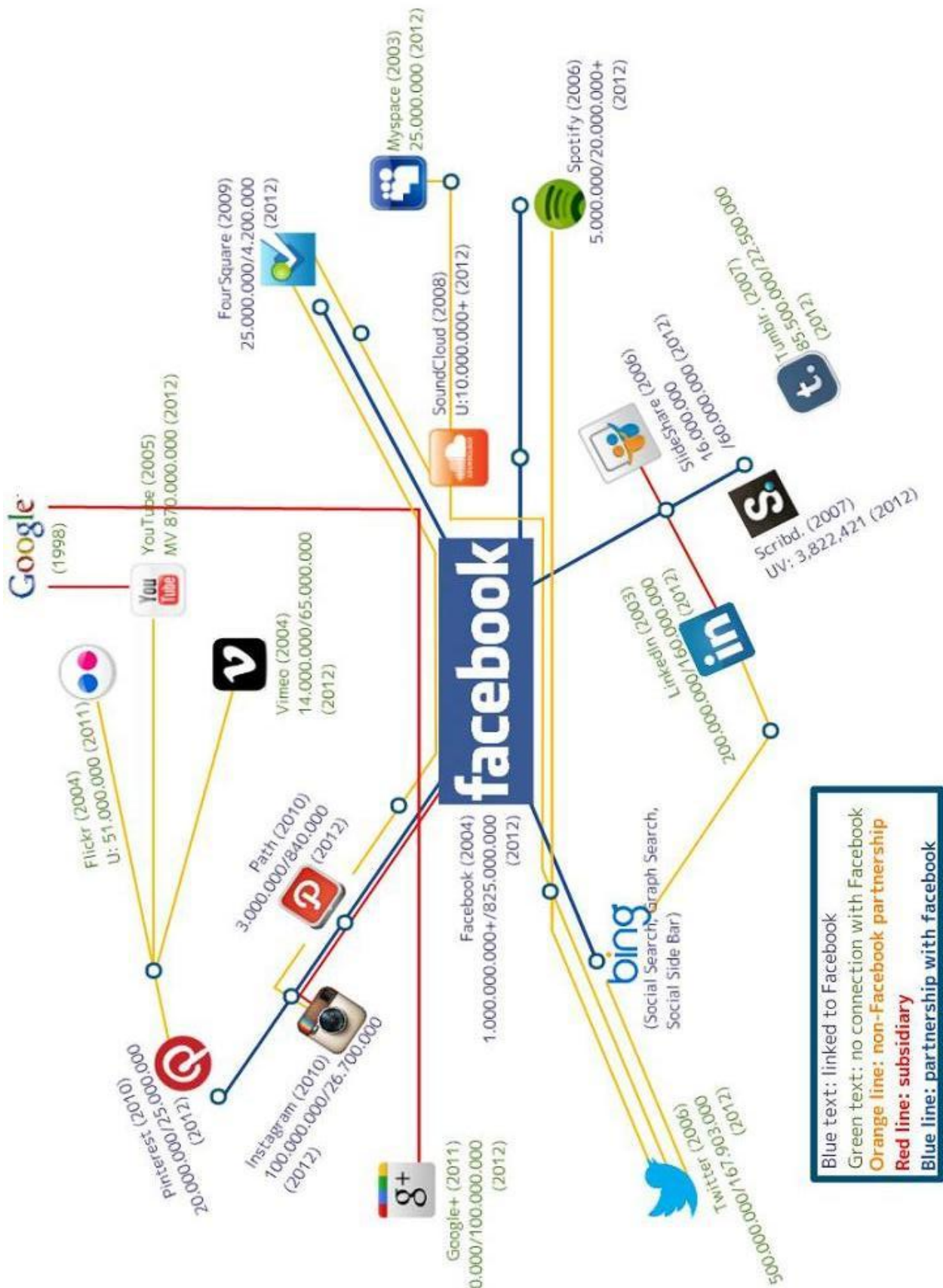
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# APPENDIX 1: SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES



APPENDIX 2: FACEBOOK, INC.: STRUCTURES AND AGENCY

→ SOCIAL GRAPH ←

2004: Facebook Wall, 2005: Facebook Photos, 2006: Facebook for Mobile, Facebook API, News Feed & Mini Feed, 2007: Facebook Market Place, Facebook Video, Facebook Platform for Mobile, 2008: Facebook Chat, 2009: Facebook 'Like' Button, Facebook Usernames, 2010: Facebook Questions, Facebook Stories Applications, Facebook Places, 2011: Video Calling, Timeline, 2012: Facebook Camera, Facebook Gifts

Advertisement: Facebook Ads, Sponsored Stories. Products: Graph Search, News Feed, Timeline, Messages, Photos, Videos, Groups, Events, Pages. Platforms: Platform, Apps, Social Plugins, Payments

One billion monthly active users as of October 2012

It is of the utmost importance that all Facebook personnel treat **user data** with extreme sensitivity and caution. Facebook's brand, the **trust users put in us**, and, quite bluntly, your employment at Facebook, all depend on your exercise of **good judgment** and **discretion** when using tools that allow you to see user information that would otherwise not be **visible** to you on the site (code of conduct).

**MAKE THE WORLD  
MORE OPEN  
AND CONNECTED**

**acquired companies**

2005: Facebook.com 2007: Parakey, 2008: ConnectU, 2009: FriendFeed, 2010: FB.COM, Octazen, Divvyshot, Friendster patents, Sharegrove, Nextstop, Chai Labs, Hot Potato, Drop.io, 2011: Rel8tion, Beluga, Snaptu, RecRec, DayTum, Sofa, MailRank, Push Pop Press, Friend.ly, Strobe, Gowalla, 2012: Instagram, Tagtile, Glancee, Lightbox.com, Karma, Face.com, Spool, Acrylic Software, Threadsy.

# SNS FACEBOOK FACEBOOK, INC.

**PARTNERSHIPS** 8tracks, 9GAG, Amazon, Badoo, Bandsintown, ESPN, FourSquare, Groupon, IMDb, Instagram, Lookbook.nu, MapMyRun, Mixcloud, Muzy.com, MyVideo, Netflix, NFL Mobile, Nike+Running, ooVoo, PicMonkey, Pinterest, Prezi, RunKeeper, Scribd, Shazam, Skype, Slideshare, SoundCloud, Sports Tracker, Spotify, Tinchat, TripAdvisor, We Heart It, Webcam Toy, Yahoo Social, Bar, Yelp, Zynga

**NASDAQ: FB  
LAST PRICE  
31.54**

**Subsidiaries: Instagram & Glancee (2012)**

Mark Zuckerberg as founder, chairman and CEO | Eight Board Members (one woman, seven men) | 4,331 employees (2012) | Headquarters California | Offices in the US and International: Amsterdam, Brussels, London Madrid and nineteen more |

"Do not tell my story"

"Making Kony famous? No thanks says Uganda"

## African Voices

"The war is not just about Joseph Kony"

April 4, 2012



"The women who survived Kony's war" Ethnic Supplies, March 9

"One girl's guide to Kony 2012" Wait...What?, March 8

"Uganda: Can a Viral Video Really #StopKony?" Global Voices, March 8

"Kony 2012' Is Not a Revolution."

## Exaggerated Claims

"It is not about war, it is about recovery"

Visible Children (March 2012-now) responds to criticism about 'Stop Kony' campaign" Washington Post (March 7)

"Selling Old Newspapers Shouldn't Be Profitable" Travelling While Black, March 7

"Opinion: Why Kony 2012 created the wrong buzz" CNN, March 12

"7 Africa stories you missed while Facebooking KONY2012" CS Monitor, March 11

"KONY2012 – Why their success is bad for Uganda" Mike Clay, March 8

"Unpacking Kony 2012" My heart's in Accra, March 8

"5 questions for a post-Kony 2012 debate" AIdnography, March 8

"The #Kony2012 show" Africa is a Country, March 7

"#Kony2012 and its critics" Aljazeera, March 7

"Invisible Children and Joseph Kony" Wanderings, March 6

"The problem with Kony 2012" Hands Wide Open, March 7

"You don't have my vote" Unmuted, March 7

"New Photos Show a Reality the 'Kony 2012 Video Misses"

Wired, April 19

"Kony Part II: Accountability, not awareness"

Aljazeera, April 7

"No Longer Invisible" Foreign Policy, March 23

"African Reactions to the Kony 2012 Campaign" AfriPOP!, March 9

"The White Savior Industrial Complex" The Atlantic, March 21

"The Soft Bigotry of Kony 2012" The Atlantic, March 8

"The #StopKony Backlash: Complexity and the Challenges of Slacktivism" Forbes, March 8

CNN World (March 2012)

"Show me the money"

## White Savior Complex

"the power does not lie in America"



March 5, 2012

Main Subjects  
Weblogs  
Mainstream Media