

Digital Media and Identity

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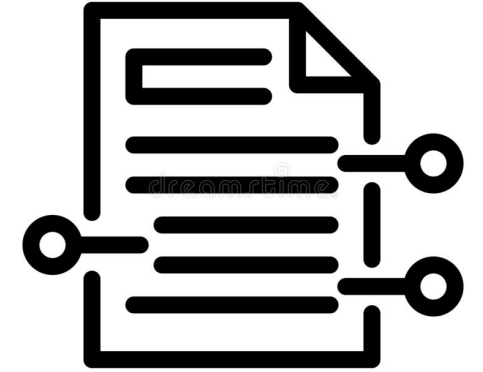
Lecture 6

DGM 711
Introduction to Digital Media



- **Digital media** foster **new forms of interaction** and enrich the **social life** of individuals.
- Therefore, **social relationships** seem to always be **mediated**.
- Yet the **social relations** these technologies mediate are **not neutral**, but rather depend on uneven power dynamics, as well as on cultural and identity factors.
- Social media are “**coding relationships** between people, things and ideas into **algorithms**.”
- This means that it **analyzes past interactions** in order to **predict future behavior**.
- These companies have developed **business models** that allow them to extract **profits** from the **information** they manage.
- The **information** collected by **social media** platforms can be **sold to third parties**.

- I. Digital Identity .
- II. Digital Cultures .
- III. Algorithmic Identity .
- VI. Critiques of Digital Sociality .
- V. Conclusion.



- **Digital media**, and **social media** platforms in particular, are important instruments through which individuals implement active strategies of **identity building**.



Chapter 06

I. Digital Identity :

- In the mid-twentieth century the sociologist **Erving Goffman** studied the rituals of **self-presentation** through which people present themselves in public and construct their **identity** through communicative practices (1959).
- This idea has been recalibrated to adapt to **digital media** and the possibilities offered by **social media** platforms.
- **Goffman** used the **theater** as a metaphor to describe the way in which people “perform” their **identity** in public.
- Following this metaphor, we can argue that **social media** are one of the “**stages**” from which individuals represent their own **identity** through a continuous work of construction.



Digital identity



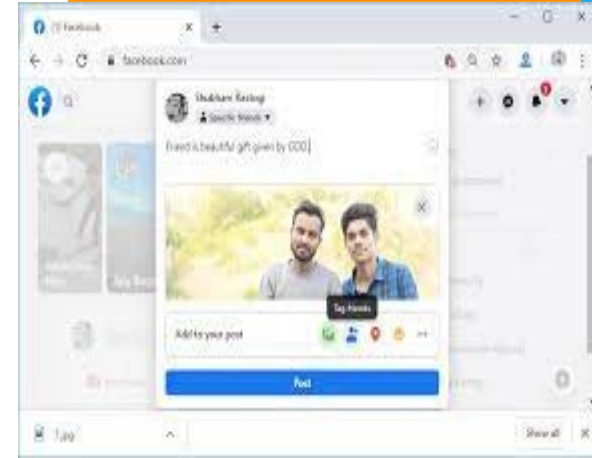
- **Social media** provide individuals with a high **control** over these processes, therefore allowing for a particularly flexible **construction of identity**.
- Opening an **account** of a particular social media, choosing the **photo** that characterizes your profile, choosing your **friends**, joining a particular discussion **group**, posting **politically** connoted images or **links** to music videos are all examples of the ways in which we **represent** in public some features that we want to be perceived as part of our **identity**.
- By revealing something about themselves, for example the way they **dress**, their **hobbies**, musical **preferences**, or political **views**, individuals perform the continuous work of **identity construction** discussed by **Goffman**.

- The type of **information** that we make **public** may vary within different **contexts**, i.e., on platforms that are meant to have specific **purposes** or **audiences**.
- For example, **professional identity construction** is explicit on **LinkedIn**, while on **Facebook** the boundary between professional identity and other forms of identity can fade or be difficult to maintain .
- Furthermore, **social media** are based on the ability to activate and make visible **social ties**.
- Therefore, the **content** of the information posted by a user may be less important than the **context** in which the communication takes place.

LinkedIn



- The **photo** of a beautiful sunset on a beach posted on the **Facebook** wall of a **friend** can be important not only for what it depicts, but especially because it highlights a **relationship**.
- In this case it may indicate that the **individual** who published it was on a vacation with that person.
- However, **social media** do not completely determine the **identity** of a person, but rather contribute to **framing** it.



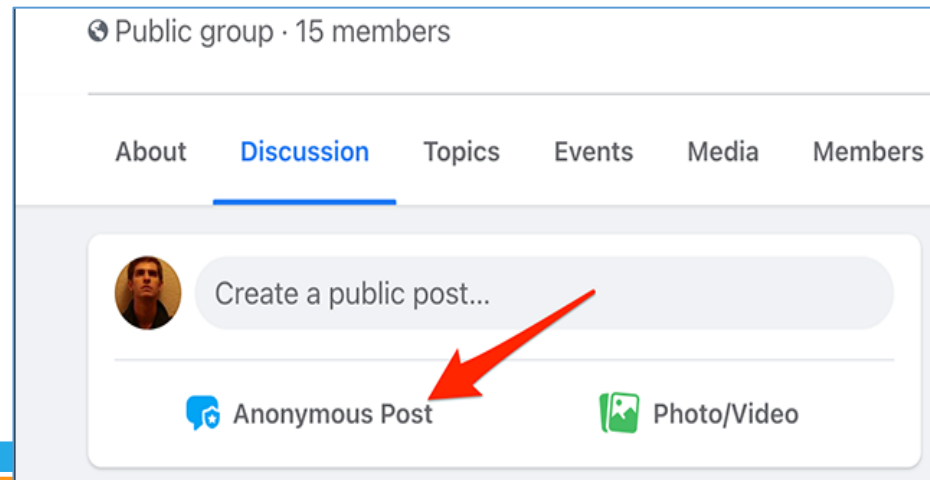
- Many **mediated behaviors** that have to do with **identity** performance **mirror** those that take place **offline**.
- For example, researchers have found the prevalence of phenomena of **conformism** among **adolescents** who used **MySpace** in the mid-2000s and strove to be **accepted by peers** (Boyd 2008).



Chapter 06

I. Digital Identity :

- On today's **social media**, most individuals use their **real name**.
- Platform **policies** had an impact on this change: for example, **Facebook** prohibits the use of **pseudonyms**.
- In other cases, **social media** do provide a **space** in which individuals can **anonymously** express sides of their **identity** that are deemed socially **unacceptable**.



- The importance of **social media** for people's **identity** is also highlighted by phenomena such as the so-called "**digital afterlife**": it has become common to use a **dead person's** social media profile, especially on **Facebook**, to announce their passing and collect messages and memories from friends and relatives.
- This process can create a kind of "**immortality**" in which the **digital identity** of the deceased **survives** his **death** .
- These examples do not mean that there is discontinuity between **offline and online identities**.
- Efforts to distinguish them can indeed sound **unrealistic**.



Chapter 06

I. Digital Identity :

- Most **relationships** mediated by **social media** are rooted in **face-to-face** ones.
- On platforms such as **Facebook**, people tend to become **friends** mainly with people with whom they have interactions **offline**.
- However, **social media** are also used to form new **relationships**, or to enable so-called “**latent ties**” .
- An example is **friends of friends** on **Facebook**: even if two individuals do not know each other in person, they may realize that they are already part of the same **circles** and therefore create a connection via the **social network**.



- 



I. Digital Identity :

- The formula was used to distinguish them from “**digital immigrants**,” that is from people who were born before the advent of the internet and came of age in a world dominated by **print and television**.
- Furthermore, the **natives** would also be bearers of new forms of **sociability** and **identity** strongly marked by the characteristics of these **technologies**.



Chapter 06

I. Digital Identity :

- The concept resonates with common sense ideas of how so-called “**millennials**” interact with **digital media**.
- However, the concept of “**digital natives**” has been largely abandoned, since it tends to hide the differences in how people use the internet and social media, even among those who are **born** into a world dominated by these **technologies**.
- Furthermore, it focuses narrowly on **generational differences** while ignoring those based on **social class, gender, and ethnicity**.



BABY BOOMERS
1946 - 1964



GEN X
1965 - 1980



MILLENNIALS
1981 - 1995



GEN Z
1996 - 2010

- Indeed, **digital technologies** are far from being “**blind**” to **gender or race**, and can reproduce gender- or race-based rather than **generational** divisions.
- First, different services can be populated by different **demographics** or respond to specific **gender-based** logics.
- For example, **4chan**, a famous anonymous **forum** where many memes that subsequently spread on social media are created, has a strong **male** component.



- Furthermore, research on **internet cultures** has indeed shown how **digital media** tend to represent both **gender** and **race** according to stereotypes, thus contributing to reinforcing them.
- Recent **feminist scholarship** has highlighted several facets of such phenomena and how they intersect with the functioning of **social media** platforms.
- For example, a platform such as **YouTube** relies on human **moderators**, often working in **developing countries**, to filter and remove **violent, racist** content after it has been flagged by users.

DIGITAL CULTURES

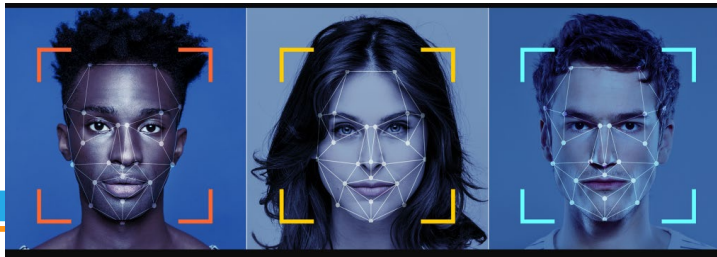
- The representation of **identities** is not the only lens through which to look at **gender and race** in **digital media** and intersects with other dynamics.
- **Feminist** theorists of technology have long argued that studying **design** is key to understanding **gender relations** in contemporary societies (**Wajcman** 2000).
- Following this call, scholarship on **digital media** has started focusing on how **cultural and political values** are not simply **represented**, but rather inscribed in or **reproduced** by “**the machine.**”





ALGORITHMS
OF
OPPRESSION

- **Black feminists** such as **Safiya Noble** have called for a politically infused analysis of the “**algorithms of oppression**” that reinforce **inequalities** while presenting themselves as neutral.
- There are many other instances of **algorithms** that reinforce **inequalities**.
- For example, companies producing **face recognition software** have been criticized for producing technologies which work better with **light skin**.



III. Algorithmic Identity:



- The algorithms that underpin the functioning of **digital media** produce what scholars have called “**algorithmic identity**” not directly related to our **racial or gender** identity but rather inferred based on algorithmic evaluations of our **online behavior**.
- This has to do with **economic** rationales.
- Indeed, **algorithms** used to profile users “**calculate**” **gender and race**, so to speak, by producing **statistical models** used for **marketing** or other purposes.
- In these processes, **gender and race** become **marketing** categories rather than negotiations about gender roles or socially constructed racial groups.

- Therefore, a **user** who visits a **website** that is classified as “**manly**” would be considered by **marketing algorithms** as more likely to be **male**.
- **Facebook** does not ask users their **race** but, depending on what they **do** on the platform, it may assign them something it calls “**ethnic affinity**.”



- If you live in **Texas** and occasionally write messages in **Spanish**, it might assign you to the “**Hispanic**” category.
- Interestingly, **Facebook** has “**ethnic affinity**” categories for **African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics** among others, but none for **Caucasians**.
- Regardless of behavior, social relations, and geographical location, **Facebook** won't put them in the “**white**” category, because that category does not exist.





- Scholars studying such phenomena have come up with definitions such as “**platformed racism**” to describe how seemingly **technical decisions** amplify **racist** discourses and reproduce **social inequalities** .
- Indeed, these calculations have **material** effects, as the **identities** assigned by **algorithms** are used to predict **consumer behavior** and select which **content** will be shown to a certain user.
- **Facebook’s** choices reinforce the idea that **white** is “**normal**” and shapes its **ads** accordingly.
- On some **job-seeking** platforms, users who are considered **women** are less likely than **men** to be shown job ads for **managerial** positions.

- Finally, some of the most important differences in the use of **digital media** result from different levels of **access** to what sociologists call “**cultural capital.**”
- **Individuals** with a high level of **education** who are used to searching and using **information** in a thoughtful and **creative** way tend to exhibit these characteristics in all spheres of life, including those mediated by **digital technologies**.



- On the contrary, people who are accustomed to a more **passive use of information** tend to be less critical and **less reflective** in the use of **digital media** too.
- People who have a **life full of activities** and **social relations**, perhaps because they are **members of associations**, **volunteer for a non-profit**, or are **politically active**, tend to make a **richer** and more **varied use of digital media** compared to those characterized by a **lower richness of social relations**.



- **Facebook**, in sum, differences in **social class, gender, cultural traditions, or geographical area** may be more important than **age** in influencing the different ways in which people use **digital media** (Van Dijck and Hacker 2011).
- For example, **online services** used by diasporic communities that are united by the experience of **migration** are used to maintain and strengthen ties based on **ethnicity and nationality**.



- At the same time, individuals belonging to different **social classes** can use **digital services** and technologies in completely different ways even within the same territory.
- In order to capture the flexible nature of **online identities**, media studies have focused on how they are organized as **publics of media content**.

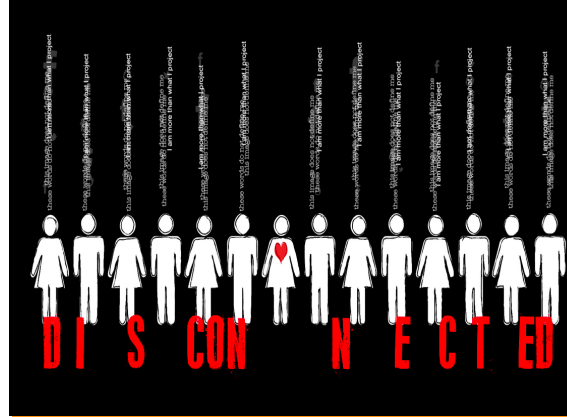


SOCIAL CLASS

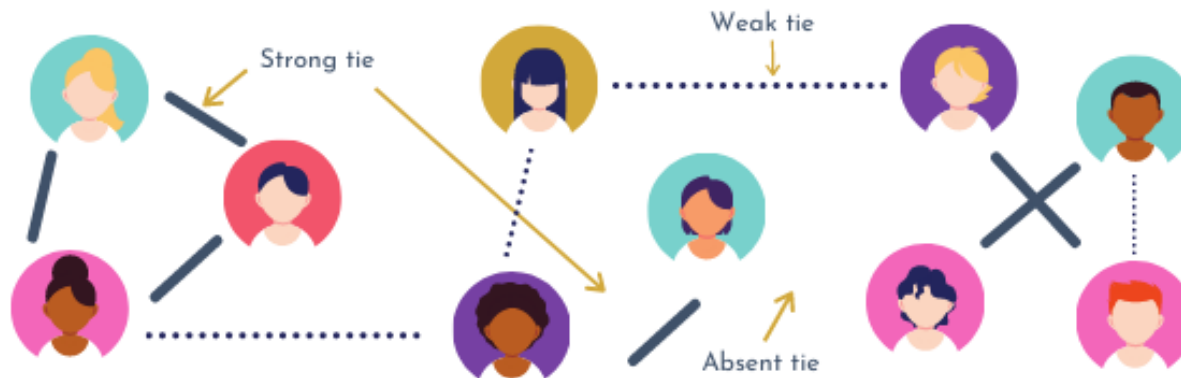
- Forms of **sociality** mediated by **digital technologies** have been faced with many **critiques**.
- Among the most common points of contention is the claim that **networked relationships** tend to be **colder and less engaging** than **face-to-face** interactions.



- For some, the result of an increasingly mediated world would be a set of individuals who are **emotionally disconnected** from each other, and thus united by **weak bonds** and superficial forms of **solidarity** that are likely to fall apart when facing challenges.
- This criticism is **partly** founded.
- Compared with traditional communities, the **ties** that characterize contemporary **online publics** are **less strong** and generate **less** stringent forms of **solidarity**.

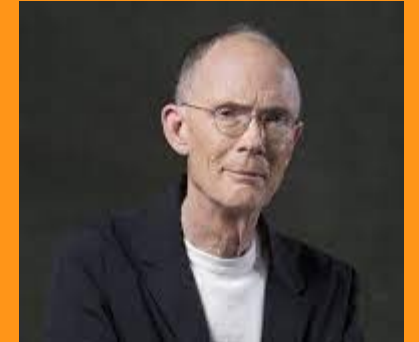


- However, **not having strong social ties** with the people with whom one shares some interests or discussions does not prevent them from satisfying their need for affectivity in different **spaces** or with different **people**.
- Moreover, the weight of different forms of **sociality** depends on **individuals**, who may choose to be **more or less bound** to a certain **public**.



VI. Critiques of Digital Sociality :

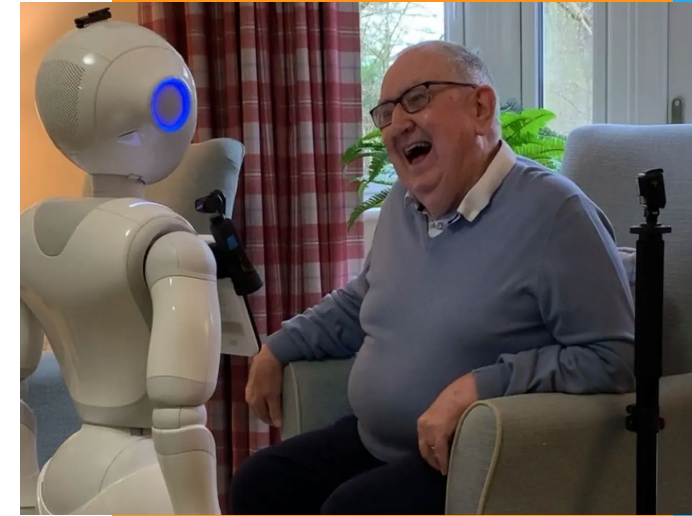
- Other **critics of digital sociality** argue that the immersive experience provided by **digital media** tends to absorb people into **a parallel world**, and therefore **isolate** them.
- This idea was already present in science fiction written at the **dawn of digital networks**.
- In the **cyberpunk world** described in the 1980s by US novelist **William Gibson**, people immersed themselves in a **virtual world**, a cyberspace directly connected to their cerebral cortex in which they lived a **parallel life** without having to interact with other human beings.





- According to **Turkle** (2011), the spread of the internet, and particularly of ubiquitous social media accessible via mobile technologies, creates a situation in which individuals no longer interact with their neighbors but are rather absorbed in a **parallel world** made of **Snapchat** messages and **Instagram** posts.
- According to this view, **social media** would project us in a world in which we are “**alone together**.”

- **Turkle** includes in this framework many technologies, such as **robots** used to foster social interactions in **patients** suffering from senile dementia.
- **Human interactions** would become **scarce** and replaced by interactions with **machines** that try to simulate, with varying degrees of success, the **warmth** and **authenticity** of human affectivity.



- The picture painted by **Turkle** is recognizable in situations like a **subway car** in which individuals sitting side by side are immersed in their **smartphones**, or a **classroom** where students interact on **Facebook** or **Instagram** instead of listening to the lecture.
- They are **physically present together**, but **mentally** absorbed in their **private worlds**.
- **Alone together**, indeed.



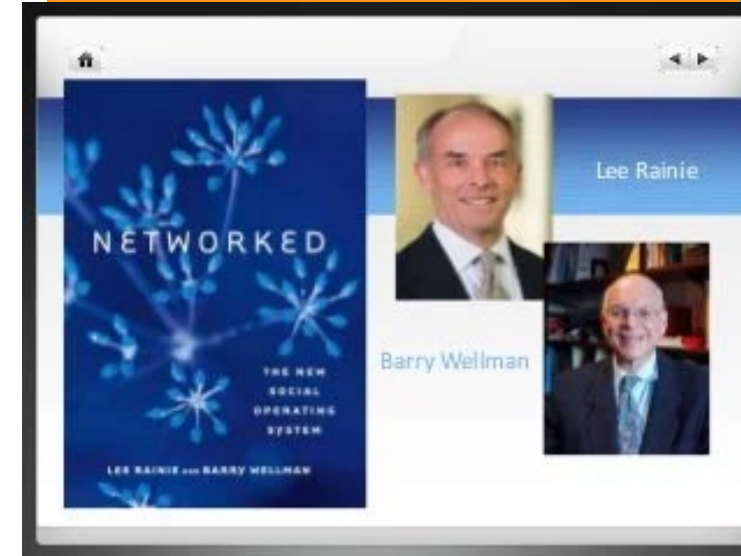
- This and other similar views are part of a long narrative about the **loss** of sense of community and “**warm**” **social relations** that, since the late nineteenth century, accompanies **modernization** processes and the emergence of **new communication technologies**.



- However, **empirical studies** carried out since the **1990s** seem to provide a very different picture.
- **Users** of **digital media** tend to have **larger** and more diverse **social networks** than those who do not use them.
- **Internet users** are not inherently less prone to visit their neighbors and tend to have a **richer community life** than people who do not use digital media.



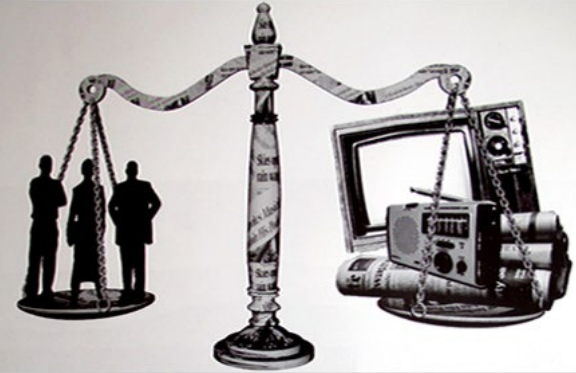
- **Digital media** do not keep people away from the public space, but rather can be considered a factor that nurtures their **rich social life** (**Rainie and Wellman** 2012).
- **Social media** are an integral part of our **social life** and are not a means to leave it.
- They do not impoverish **social relationships**.
- Rather, the way in which people **interact** with each other can **change** with the **use** of these technologies.



- [illegible]



- In the **1930s** some argued that **movie, theaters** and **jazz music** diffused via **radio** would **destroy the moral** fiber of younger generations.
- In the **1960s television** was accused of **destroying communities** and traditional cultures;
- in the **1980s videotapes** were blamed for generating **violence** in youth; this accusation was then turned against **video games** in the 1990s.



- **Privacy** is another area of emerging concern.
- Indeed, the proliferation and extension of the **mediated environments** that organize our social and individual lives has important effects on **privacy**.
- **Social media** platforms have undermined old concepts of **privacy** as based on the ability to live a private life not visible in public.
- In a sense this idea of **privacy** had already been undermined with the advent of **television** and the subsequent exposure of the private lives of **celebrities and politicians**.



VI. Critiques of Digital Sociality :

- Yet **social media** push all individuals to share, in public, personal details of their **private lives**, from holiday photos on Instagram to the results of medical tests on patient forums.
- Google's CEO, **Eric Schmidt**, once argued that "if you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place", reiterating that **individuals** are to be considered **responsible for their own privacy**.
- Yet it would be difficult to ignore the need for stringent rules that protect **privacy** or for technologies that allow the **removal** of unwanted **information** from the public view.



- Furthermore, issues around individual **privacy** intersect with the pervasive forms of surveillance and **social control** that both **governments** and **corporations** put in place through **digital media** .
- Clashes regarding **access to information** held by **internet services** by, for example, **the police**, or the use of **personal social media data** for **marketing** purposes emerge cyclically.
- And yet several studies show that the explosive growth of **social media** goes hand in hand with a change in the perception of these problems.



- The idea of having two completely separate spheres, i.e. a **public and a private life**, cannot be considered an accurate description of digitally mediated sociality.
- On the one hand, **individuals** have **partially given up** a conception of **privacy** as a right to a **non-accessible private sphere**.
- Indeed, such an arrangement would undermine one's chances to fully participate in **digital sociality**.



- On the other hand, people tend to actively negotiate **privacy** by **controlling** available **information** about them or the **social interactions** they have in different mediated spaces.
- Individuals are able to choose what kinds of **communication** relating to their **private life** they carry on through which media.
- Also, they know the **cultural and informal communication** codes that characterize different platforms and contexts.





- **Digital media**, and **social media** platforms in particular, are important instruments through which individuals implement active strategies of **identity building**.
- **social media** are one of the “**stages**” from which individuals represent their own **identity**. individuals perform the continuous work of **identity construction**
- The so-called “**digital afterlife**” can create a kind of “**immortality**” in which the **digital identity** of the deceased **survives** his **death** .
- The use of digital media as **social spaces** is **not neutral**, but rather influenced by **social factors** such as **age, gender, ethnicity, or class**, Like “**digital natives**” and “**digital immigrants**”.
- **Algorithms** reinforce **inequalities**.
- The “**algorithmic identity**” based on algorithmic evaluations of our **online behavior**.
- Forms of **sociality** mediated by **digital technologies** have been faced with many **critiques**.

Thank you for listening

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