

2018

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Recommended Citation

Wexler, Mark; Yu, Yunzhijun; and Bridson, Shannon (2018) "Putting Context Collapse in Context," *Journal of Ideology*. Vol. 40 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ji/vol40/iss1/3>

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Putting “Context Collapse” into Context

Abstract

In this paper, we examine and place “context collapse,” as employed in social media studies, into context. In the hands of social media researchers, context collapse demonstrates how users lose track of the context in which they are operating when they enter into exchanges on social networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. Examples that users lose their way include oversharing, failure to recognize privacy issues, and a belief that the imagined audience on these sites is much more trustworthy than further scrutiny warrants. In this paper, we praise context collapse researchers for drawing attention to users’ difficulty in early stage navigation on social networking sites. However, we argue that the focus on users’ early stage navigational difficulty can be limited in several aspects. It fails to examine social networking platforms as the basis for understanding context on social media sites; it restricts the idea of concept collapse to a narrow conception of the user; and finally, it does not distinguish variations among these platforms. Putting social networking into context requires considering how multiple users on social networking platforms—sponsors, entrepreneurs, information brokers, data analysts, platform owners, platform regulators—create a workable assemblage in which the interactions of participants create a discernible context. To derive this, we unpack three binaries used to establish the existence of context collapse: 1) leap/lag; 2) collusion/collision; and 3) publicity/privacy. First, aligned with the existent research on context collapse, we apply these binaries to social network sites with a narrow conception of the user. Then, we employ the same three binaries under two conditions: firstly, using a multi-stakeholder model of social networking platform participation; and secondly, using these binaries with three different variations on the social networking platform.

Key terms: Context Collapse; Social Networking; Social Networking Sites; Social Networking Platforms; Context Collapse Binaries; Leap/Lag; Collusion/Collision; Privacy/ Publicity.

Introduction

Within recent studies on social networking sites there has been an increased interest in the loosely formulated phenomena of “context collapse” (Marwick and boyd, 2011). This paper contributes to the literature concerning context collapse on enterprise social networking platforms (Holtzblatt, et al., 2013) by putting *context collapse into context*. We argue that social media users discover context is not in their hands, but it is determined by the ongoing relationship amongst the various players or participants on multi-sided networking platforms (Hagiu and Wright, 2015). These participants create a multi-sided enterprise platform because each becomes part of the platform for different reasons and with varying goals. From this platform perspective, social networking users include not only the social networking communicators as context collapse theorists suggest, but as well, social media platform owners, sponsors, information brokers, data miners, data aggregators, and platform regulators (Baldwin and Woodward, 2009).

Social media platforms invite and provide incentives to varying participants or social network platform stakeholders who both work out a context on these platforms and create a discernible form to transactions. Social networking participants remain committed to the platform despite initial costs such as the experience of context collapse, since they see the promise of future benefits. Social networking sites (Miller, 2012) as new or emergent platforms, are a dynamic assemblage generating a context in which different users as participants attempt to reap benefits and/or play havoc with the expectations of others on the platform (Cusumano and Gawer, 2002). Therein each social networking platform generates a discernable but changeable backdrop. This “context” provides differing platform users with navigational clues only when each attempt to make sense of the varying components and users participating on that platform (McIntyre and Srinivasan, 2017). This sense-making is tied less to one user or platform-side but more so to who on the platform is doing what, where, when, and how.

In this work, we place context collapse into “context” by placing it in what economists (Gawer, 2011), organization theorists (Ciborra, 1996), and public administration researchers (O’Reilly, 2011) call a technologically enhanced digital social networking platform (Clark, et al., 2015). For those who are interested in putting social networking platforms into context, and who remain puzzled about why and how they flourish, we address these issues in four sections. First, we review the use and development of context collapse in social media studies by highlighting the three binaries- leap/lag; collusion/collision; and publicity/privacy. We use these three binaries to establish, using a social network site perspective, how a narrowly conceived notion of the social platform user experiences context collapse. We assert that this argument, is strained when we subsequently examine social networking platforms and how multiple user groups with differing interests strategically employ the platform.

In the penultimate section, we discuss how to put context collapse into context. We employ the three binaries—leap/lag; collusion/collision; and publicity/privacy—and now filter these through the multiple user perspective attained by treating social media sites as platforms. We put context collapse into context by exploring how multiple participants (on competing and evolving platforms) establish a discernible context. Moreover, varying types of social networking

platforms push the idea of context in different, albeit discernible directions over time. We conclude this paper by framing it as an addition to the questions: 1) whether, as time goes on, will social network participants experience greater clarity regarding the initially dislocating effects of “game changing” disruption; and 2) how the initial and temporary experience of confusion experienced by users become replaced by a recognition of the institutional implications of the “new normal” (Etzioni, 2011).

Whose context collapses?

In the hands of context collapse theorists and researchers, “users” on social networking platform are like babes in the woods; they overshare (Wesch, 2009), make invalid assumptions regarding levels of privacy (Vitak, 2012), and overestimate their knowledge and grasp of issues upon learning that others (including the imagined audience) on the social networking platform share their views (Litt and Hargittai, 2016). In this paper we argue that social media theorists employ context collapse with far less agility and breadth than an earlier generation of communication theorists who insisted on studying the “institutionalized medium” (McLuhan and Powers, 1964; Meyrowitz, 1985, 1995; Qvortrup, 2006). Within the hands of these institutionally-focused media theorists, multiple users or institutional stakeholders of the social networking platform interact dynamically overtime. During their interactions, these users and institutional stakeholders create a context that needs to be understood as an ongoing interpretation of the institutional setting by the varied media participants.

In social media studies, context collapse refers to the way users on a social networking site or platform encounter problems (Pike, et al., 2018) due to their failure to recognize the navigational clues imbedded in the new medium. One of the contributing factors to such failure is the surface similarities of these platforms to the users’ earlier experiences, which delay users’ recognition of the need for timely and crucial adjustments. (Gil-Lopez, et al., 2018). The logic giving rise to context collapse is a combination of a form of technological determinism tied to a “rider” or imbedded assumption that this new technology, a form of Internet exceptionalism (Goldman, 2010), requires the use of new navigational aids because the technology collapses or disintermediates an older, more familiar context (Luders and Brandtzaeg, 2017).

In driving an automobile—an everyday mundane activity for many people—the side mirrors bear the words “objects are closer than they appear”. Similarly, in context collapse, social media researchers point towards where, and to some degree, how users must recognize that the new technology requires one to learn and adapt. However, the context collapse claim is not simply one that suggests estimating distance using car mirrors requires a recognition of change or adaptation. More importantly, it claims that a set of disruptive technologies (i.e. networking done on social networking platforms) is having a revolutionary impact and, one means of substantiating this is to point towards users’ experience of context collapse. In other words, context collapse as experienced by users on social networking platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram prove problematic (Brandtzaeg and Luders, 2018).

Users employing navigational clues that were successful in earlier media settings encounter issues such as, instances of oversharing (Krasnova, et al., 2010), failure to recognize privacy

vulnerabilities (Dennen, 2017), and a tendency to imagine a much more trustworthy audience (Marvin, 2013) than scrutiny merits. If one thinks of social networking platforms as a game-changing assemblage of technologies accompanied by a set of creative and destructive forces (Schumpeter, 1942), one begins, at least at first glance, to see the merit of context collapse theory. Those pointing to the creative benefit of social networking platforms (Benkler, 2006) highlight the platforms' enablement of social capital (Ellison, et al., 2007), career advancement options (Podolny and Baron, 1997), and the reinforcement of grassroots participation (Lai and Turban, 2008). Those researching the dark or destructive forces on these platforms point toward cyberbullying (Whittaker and Kowalski, 2015), internet-related social isolation (McPherson, et al., 2006), and the way these platforms in the wrong hands intensify surveillance (Fuchs, 2010) and big brotherism (McGrath, 2004). Context collapse theorists open a discussion which focuses less upon the advantages versus the disadvantages of the game-changing medium but lean more towards explaining the magnitude—cultural, economic, and political consequences of the change—by pointing to the prevalence of context collapse.

In this manner, context collapse research points towards the navigational confusion that users', narrowly conceived, experience on social networking platforms. The context collapse literature calls attention to social networking particularly as vested in a strong form of Internet exceptionalism (Chenou, 2014), or the way the technologies introduced on social networking platforms are disintermediating older stable institutions. For instance, past research has argued that the disruptive aspects and ubiquity of these platforms are making it difficult to distinguish “fake news” or valid information from misinformation (Vargo, et al., 2017) and stable primary group relations are being replaced by instrumental, fleeting, virtual relationships (Amichai-Hambrger, et al., 2013). Others argue that that the disruptive potential of the new revolutionary assemblage of technologies on these social networking platforms enhances peer-to-peer (P2P) relationships (Steinmetz and Wherle, 2005) and ushers in the benefits of a less materialistic, more sustainable sharing society (Heinrichs, 2013).

To address the navigational confusion that users experience on social networking platforms, we point to three distinct but interrelated binaries that accomplish the heavy lifting in the context collapse literature: the leap/lag; collusion/collision; and publicity/privacy binaries (See Figure 1). Each binary establishes a zone of context collapse where users, narrowly conceived, on a social media platform begin to make decisions which split, confuse, and fragment their preferred navigational routines. The binaries fragment the map of the social networking platform such that those who use it experience context collapse. Each binary is employed by several different context collapse theorists to establish the meaning, extent, and manner of operation of context collapse on social networking platforms. In Figure 1, we highlight the binary, the choice or behavioral option created for social media users (narrowly conceived), and several contemporary research sources using this binary in the context collapse literature.

Figure 1 (about here; see end of the paper)
Context Collapse Binaries

The lag/leap binary focuses on the way Internet exceptionalism borne on social networking platforms not only disintermediates but in so doing, enables and empowers some to confidently leap forward and others to lag. Context collapse would be less evident if all leaped or all lagged; mixing the two on the same platform establishes the problem of providing context or guiding navigational rules to those with differing learning curves or capacity to speak a similar navigational language (Androutsopoulos, 2014). In this manner, early and younger users, typically called “digital natives” (Akçayir, et al., 2016), look at the social networking platform as their home court and in so doing feel confident navigating in this milieu (Palfrey and Gasser, 2011). Those born earlier, or who for varying reasons, came later to the new medium (digital immigrants), tend to be more tentative.

Without the confidence of digital natives, digital immigrants are much more aware that they require a manual or map to lend confidence to their platform navigational cuing and social networking decision making. The leap/lag binary explores not only those who, in a “learning curve” manner (Yelle, 1979) rapidly rise on the social network platform (digital natives) but also how they employ this skill set, and the confidence and connections which come with it to achieve benefits of enhanced reach, social capital, and network access. Those who experience the lag make up the other side of the “social media divide” (Bobkowski and Smith, 2013). They fail to rise as rapidly as natives on the social networking platform learning curve marking the social media skill set and in so doing, fail to gain the confidence and connections which accompany it.

Leapers and laggards operate not only on the same social networking platform, moving at different speeds, with varying degrees of confidence, but also employ different navigational clues (Cress, et al., 2013). Thus, leapers in their optimism, embrace the new medium and, being high on the learning curve, push towards greater experimentation and as they do, embed shortcuts and workarounds which increasingly customize their experience on the social network platform. Problematically, laggards unaware of leapers’ shortcuts or workarounds, find themselves even more imbedded in the experience of context collapse.

The collusion/collision binary (Figure 1) explains how and why on the dance floor of the social networking platform some users awkwardly collide resulting in, for instance, online flaming behavior (Hmielowski, et al., 2014) and other online disinhibition effects, (Suler, 2004) while at other times, they glide gracefully into a collusion or cluster of information collaborators (Van Noorden, 2014), online friends (Henderson and Gilding, 2004), and/or social network platform promotion opportunities (Culnan, et al., 2010). The more an individual user experiences collision, holding other things constant, the more likely they are to lag. Alternatively, the more users experience satisfying collusions, the more likely they are to leap.

Although the pattern is apparent, there is a hidden problem of whether a collusion/collision is going to be beneficial to the user, or costly (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014). A costly collusion is one which, relative to one’s ends, slows one down; an advantageous collision occurs when an initial experience of a mash up online (Kuikkaniemi, et al., 2011) is costly but both proves to extricate one from an impending trap and attends to previously hidden social network costs or lurking problems. Even confident digital natives get into decision-making loops in which they are unable to predict whether they will dance gracefully or collide because of any one of their

social networking platform decisions (Borkovich and Breese, 2016). In other words, some collusions unpredictably turn costly; others are framed as helpful learning experiences (Buglass, et al., 2016). As in the first binary (lag/leap), the second binary (collusion/collision) establishes that navigation is problematic due to context collapse.

The last binary (see Figure 1) publicity/privacy points towards the need for new maps when the same or similar social networking platform are used by users who are motivated by different goals due to the affordances (Bucher and Helmond, 2017) or lack of constraint permitted on the platform. The most frequent way to establish these new maps by context collapse researchers is to point towards the mash-up that occurs when some platform users seek publicity (Kaul and Chaudhri, 2018) and others on the same or similar networking platforms seek privacy (Beam et al., 2017). The incidence of context collapse becomes more intense when the two are joined by platform users who sometimes seek publicity and at other times, privacy. A consistent and rather persistent point made by context collapse researchers is that navigational confusion and uncertainty arise because of the ambiguous signals provided by varying types of users (Li, et al., 2010).

As the publicity/privacy binary unfolds, one discovers two sources of ambiguity behind the notion of context collapse. The first source of ambiguity speaks to the likelihood that the navigational clues for those seeking privacy are confused with those seeking publicity and vice versa (Papacharissi and Gibson, 2011). The second source of ambiguity speaks to the fact that on social networking platforms, the users (narrowly conceived) do not have direct or face-to-face contact with other users and consequently must conjure up an “imagined audience” (Litt, 2012). Imagined audiences are envisioned in two ways: 1) trustworthy and supportive, much as one might think about offline friends and neighbors, or 2) as predators either lurking with suspicious motives or attempting to engage in a scam (Schneider, et al., 2013). The more one relies on an imagined audience the less context is imbedded within or on the platform but rather rests in the projection of otherness (Baym and boyd, 2012). Given the imagined audience, the reality test of context collapse in the publicity/privacy binary turns increasingly towards subjective preference and as such self-presentation (Hogan, 2010) and the search for like-minded others becomes the primary preoccupation of social network users.

Taking the three binaries (as a whole), our theory suggests that social networking platform users experience context collapse when they over-share, employ the clues developed by their offline self to navigate online, and find it difficult to find a line between what is private and should be and what is public. Context collapses when users—conceived of as those who directly employ the platform as a social networking medium—fail to make sense of a myriad of ambiguous clues. The three binaries reviewed in Figure 1 play havoc with the user’s ability to confidently navigate in what is foremost, a relatively new medium.

Context Collapse in Context: Platforms

To put social networking into context we recommend thinking of it as occurring on a multi-participant, enterprise-based, social networking platform (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). In this

section, we attenuate and nuance the context collapse position by focusing on the elements of a platform as a distinct structure (Eisenmann, et al., 2009) and more particularly, the context-relevant aspects of its multiple participants. In the next section, we depart from context collapse reasoning by refusing to treat social networking users as a unified or homogenous group; instead we attend to the variability and consequently the differences in sense-making required on these competing social networking platforms.

Some of these social networking platforms at their core are commercial (Steinfeld, et al., 2008) and employ social networking as a means of establishing a significant return on one's investment. Others are political (Linders, 2012), with a version of e-government connecting the public via social networks to varying governmental agencies. Still others hybridize by employing political and commercial incentives in their operations (Chadwick, 2007). They employ social networking platforms to facilitate alliances or partnerships between business ventures, government agencies, and varying non-profit enterprise and NGOs (Bromley and Myer, 2017). We argue that the novel structure of social networking platforms is a precursor to putting context collapse into context.

Social networking platforms depart from earlier contexts in which media were imbedded. Platforms are part organization (Gawer and Cumano, 2010), part social network (Benkler, 2006), and part market based (Langley and Leyshorn, 2017). These platforms are increasingly enhanced by various technologies which often disintermediate or require different sets of navigational skills and types of learning curves that were taken as precursors of success in tried and tested behavioral routines. They are experienced as disruptive. Despite the experience of disruption, they are organized. These platforms are "organizations" in the sense that they are not only socially but also legally constructed with fiduciary obligations and some form of platform governance.

Rather than possessing solid boundaries maintained by gatekeepers (Morrill, et al., 1999), platform structures are fuzzy or blurred, and are curated (Davis, 2017) by platform participants. This fuzziness exists not only at the boundaries but also with regards to governance and therein creates what platform analysts call a great deal of affordance on platforms (Bucher and Helmond, 2017). Both the relative newness of many platforms and these affordances lend themselves to a need by platform users to question context. Hence, the solidity of the once clearly demarcated organization—the recognition of who was responsible for its operation—and where and when the platform begins and ends all are set adrift in the transition to platforms.

The solidity of the spatial and temporal nature of the platform organization—one which like the more material platform organization is synonymous with its snail mail address, opens and closes at set times, and is tied to a roster of organizational members—is pushed aside as platforms take on a network structure. The network structure co-exists with evolving networks that are competing with other social networking platforms. Platforms as networks, generate a constellation of exchanges so that the platforms distribute a recurrent flow of ideas, capital, images, information, and promotional material as a means of accessing, purchasing, creating, sharing, and distributing goods and services. Platforms as webs of recurrent exchange spill out

into varying platform networks and increasingly take on the function of mediating, often for a price, exchanges of varying sort.

It is in this sense that these platforms are emerging as varying types of markets in which ongoing exchanges tied to buying, selling, and sharing of goods and services, allows information to proliferate. Platform logic takes networking, including social networking, in an increasingly instrumental direction. These social networking platform markets, typified in the neo-classical market, not only bring together buyers and sellers but extend markets into new areas of exchange. For example, befriending others or seeking a mate, underwritten by both advertisers and those seeking data about the parties in the exchange, are increasingly understood as platform market transactions. In platform markets the distinction between those who produce and those who consume takes on the very fuzziness that context collapse theorists associate with social networking sites.

We argue that this fuzziness exists. It is embedded in the emergence and evolution of social networking platforms. However, it exists for all participants on the social networking platform and not just for users narrowly conceived. More germane, the context is discernible as participants recognize how platforms operate and in this their need to account for the dynamic and changing behavior of others on the platform. When we compare Figure 1, focusing on the how the three binaries are used in the existent context collapse research, with Figure 2, highlighting the implications of filtering the three binaries through the multi-party platform one recognizes that all those making the transition to varying social networking platforms experience a sense of disorientation as they search for new and useful navigational cues.

As users participate on platforms whether as owners, sponsors or sharers of photos with one another, they need to understand the context of the social networking platform before they become comfortable and begin to feel confident and “at home” with the navigational clues they use. Context collapse theorists are right about context collapse with user’s narrowly conceived, but they are, we believe, wrong in two nontrivial matters. First, users are not only understood as those using the social networking platform to gain access with others through online exchange. They also include social networking platform sponsors, investors, data brokers, and others who also use the medium and require new navigational tools. For example, those seeking an ownership or investment stake must alter their understanding of context and the navigational clues therein as they transition from brick and mortar to commercial variants of the multi-party social networking platform.

The second miscue, in our view, arises when one recognizes that while the technology on the social media platform may be revolutionary, it requires cognitive and behavioral adaptation by its users. As the context collapse theorists suggest, this adaptation is done by first recognizing context collapse and with it the need to adapt new navigational clues; then by recognizing how context is discovered. To illustrate this argument, we employ the same three binaries used by those making the case for context collapse. However, in this depiction we enlarge the “user” discussion on the social networking site by including not only individuals who share and create information on the social networking platforms but also platform participants such as social networking owners, sponsors, data analysts, and platform regulators.

Figure 2 (about here; see end of the paper)
Platform Logic: Reframing the Binaries

In the first version of context collapse, the three binaries are mobilized in the shift to social networking platforms or social networking sites. Users, narrowly conceived, experience difficulties in employing sense-making devices, particularly navigational skills they employed in face-to-face interactions, telephone and teleconference exchanges. In this version of context change, users on social networking platforms go off in different directions due to variations embedded in the leap/lag; collusion/collision; and publicity/privacy binaries. Thus, in the leap/lag binary, while laggards diligently employ social networking platform standard manuals to learn about imbedding shortcuts and normative rules, leapers actively participate in innovating and pushing the platform in new directions at a rate that leaves confusing navigational clues. These sense-making uncertainties are experienced in a cumulative manner: lapses in judgment; moments of embarrassment; fears of imposters; lurkers; bullies; flammers; blackmailers and a host of other potential potholes. Moreover, these uncertainties are more dangerous as they are interspersed with intermittent benefits—friendships, entertainment, personalized information—that suits individual needs in a virtual community, and a sense of membership to others who also share one's interest.

On the whole, context collapse theorists find themselves in a paradox. Namely, if the use of social networking platforms results in the experience of context collapse, why do more and more individuals increasingly involve themselves on varying social networking platforms? We respond to this by suggesting that the experience of context collapse is real, yet it is also largely expected and short-lived. It is expected by a population increasingly accustomed to a shorter time span in the introduction of disintermediating or game-changing technologies whether this be the self-driving automobile or virtual personal assistants such as Siri. Despite the immense social, political, and economic consequences of these game changers, platform participants soon begin to learn the emergent and dynamic nature of the sense-making and navigational skills that are needed to become a competent decision maker in these new contexts.

In our version of context collapse—a relatively short-term experience by varying platform users on different and evolving platform types—we suggest that learning in a constantly updating context requires one to appreciate who else is participating, and at the same time, the evolution of the social networking platform at the enterprise or institutional level. Our version points to the social networking platform with its multiple participant/users conceived broadly as creating a context. At any point in time, the context is set not simply by narrowly conceived users but by other participants including platform owners, sponsors, data analysts, and over time, platform regulators. The process involved in learning and feeling at home in a new game-changing context is slow. First, one begins by mimicking others. As time progresses, one recognizes that context is best formulated by discovering who is participating and to question whether such participation makes sense. In this way, one begins to probe context in a broader sense. Thus, when things go amiss or wrong on one's own experience of the platform, one no longer casts about with a vague notion of context collapse but begins to think about who or what on the platform is responsible. Pertinent to game-changing technologies, there is as what might be

called in metaphorical terms, the experience of a paradigm change, and in this, the experience of context collapse (Perez, 2004).

While we suggest that the experience of context collapse is short lived, we recognize that it can be devastating for those who are caught in the transition and heavily invested in, as for instance, the taxi business when Uber, Lyft and Didi Chuxing (China) are introduced. Thus, the notion of game-changing, as it adheres to “creative destruction” suggests that there can be real losers who are pushed to aside in this process and must struggle to find a new adaptive set of navigational tools. However, context collapse theory and research in social media studies does not focus on users who fail to adapt and stick with an earlier set of sense-making or navigational clues but on those interested in and beginning to make the shift. The shift to and within a game-changing technology requires attention and care. This is unlike learning a game for the first time. Learning a new game in the early stages of institutionalization are learned, set and constantly updated by the participants themselves. Thus, on social networking platforms, owners of the platform must take their cues from varying platform participants. The owners will also need to take into consideration the satisfaction and size of those networking on the platform compared to those networking on alternative social media platforms, the rate sponsors are willing to pay, and how various governments in which the platform operates regard it and its operations.

Evolution of Varying Platform Types

In keeping with our position, context collapse is short-lived. Platform participants learn to mimic those they see as successful and to appreciate how to discern context by considering multiple players or stakeholders tied to the evolving social networking platform. For example, platform owners who make the shift from brick and mortar platforms to commercial social networking platforms find themselves dealing with context collapse. It is difficult and takes time for these owners to translate and apply their entrepreneurial skill sets to understand how to navigate networking platforms and what, at first, to focus on. However, it is our argument (see Figure 2) that platform owners are like other platform participants including sponsors, data analysts, temporary users and others who are making the transition. They all experience context collapse. The escalation in confidence will occur as they gain experience on the various social networking platforms and recognize that context changes as the dynamic relationship between and among multiple users evolves.

We outline two examples to clarify our position. First, when social networking platforms like Facebook provide an outlet for discussion—such as providing a niche for hate groups (Yang, et al., 2011)—participants expect a serious set of calls bolstering platform owners’ responsibility thereby increasingly bringing the platform under greater regulatory monitoring. As a second example, we consider GitHub (Blincoe, et al., 2016) which is an open source networking platform recently acquired by Microsoft. GitHub not only builds social relationships but also rewards participants for their contributions to software development. The emergence of GitHub and its competitors (Bitbucket, Gitlab, and Assembla) signal that the standard manner of commercializing social networking platforms—that is, selling sponsorships and then data on platform uses and users to third parties—will both evolve in new directions and breed new types of platforms using the social networking function differently. As new technologies are used

competitively to augment social networking platforms (Simcoe, et al., 2009) the participants on the various social networking platforms experience yet another round of temporary context collapse marked by the previously discussed binaries: leap/lag; collusion/collision; and publicity/privacy.

Pitched at the institutional level, one learns that not only do users, narrowly conceived, experience context collapse but so too do platform owners, sponsors, data analysts, regulators, and other “users” on the social networking platform. For illustrative purposes we chose to focus the following discussion on platform sponsors. Sponsors seek context by continually adapting to the evolving array of varying social networking platforms and the way different platforms draw a crowd. Sponsors are on the lookout for platforms which, in a cost-effective manner, draw a crowd that aligns with the sponsors’ needs. Sponsors learn context as they become both more familiar with the array of competing social networking platforms—the type and size of crowd that will see or hear their promotional message—and the way to adapt their message to changes in the platform and its operation. Pertinent to platform sponsors, it is interesting to note that they focus not only on identifying potential consumers but also keep a sharp eye on their competitors use of social networking platforms to locate other options or means of signaling their brand. Hence, users on social networking platforms discover context neither by their actions alone nor by attending solely to another user. They must, we argue, look for context in the dynamic interplay between and among social networking platform users.

Keeping with this analysis, we now turn to data analysts and their quest as users of the platform. We note that data analysts track the web metrics of the multiple users on the social networking platforms and do so in preparation for the use of “big data” in real time (Singh and Reddy, 2015). For example, social networking platform data analysts work for either the platform owner or subcontract to those interested in using data/information from the social networking platform for various instrumental ends. These ends are evolving, and platform data analysts adapt to new contexts. Governments, police departments, and the courts join big business and criminal organizations in recognizing the way platform data in differing hands can be used to enhance control, bolster prediction or forecasting, and to employ the data in a dark web manner to extract rents illegally, deceive, and steal both information and identities. Data analysts are discovering that the value-neutral, objective and by-the-book methods they use in their development of the information does not provide them with an adequate defense when their reputation is tied to the use of this data by those with questionable motives.

As suggested in Figure 2, platform owners, must discover context on the multiple party social networking platform and in the recognition that social networking platforms vary and evolve at a rapid speed, given the relative newness of the medium. Platform owners, particularly the successful ones who draw a large crowd, must remain vigilant. Not only does competition enter their domain as new platform technologies continue to develop but platform owners are also held responsible when regulatory failure occur, and it is perceived that they have permitted aspects of the dark web to creep unto the platform. Platform owners differ from the concept of the entrepreneur in a neo-classical notion of the market not only for their failure to appreciate profit but also because of their recognition that the extraction of rents comes mostly from third parties’

interests (sponsors, governments, consulting firms) in the platform's ability to draw a crowd. The wisdom of the crowd in a platform-based attention economy arises from the ability to instrumentally gather, use and create information which has the power to influence all platform participants and how, over time, this establishes a discernible context.

Hence, for platform owners who wish to successfully capitalize on the wisdom of crowds, they must recognize the variability in the sense-making needed to assemble context for varying versions of the platform. In addition, they need to understand that the context on one type of platform may not function equally well on other types of platforms. Putting context collapse into context at the institutional level requires a recognition of the multiple players on the social networking platform and how each impact and creates the need for adaptation in others, and furthermore, the understanding that social networking platforms vary a great deal from one another. In Figure 3 we highlight three variations on the institutionalization of the social media networking platform: open community platforms; civil society platforms; and commercial platforms. Each of these three platform variations is evolving in a different direction resulting in distinct trajectories for the evolution of social networking context discovery.

Figure 3 about here (see end of the paper)

Three Variations on Social Network Platforms

Open community social networking platforms stress that they are governed by participants in a grassroots manner such that leaders or those with authority are loyal agents to the community platform. Thus, open community social networking platforms often focus upon a task or topic-related means of signaling such as, "CouchSurfing" (Rosen 2011), "LibraryThing" (Voorbij, 2012), or BlackPlanet (Byrne, 2007). The LibraryThing platform speaks to those interested in organizing and discussing matters pertinent to library catalogues (books, music, podcasts); CouchSurfing draws travelers interested in developing relationships as a means of providing, then finding, a place to stay while both travelling on a restricted budget and meeting interesting locals in their neighborhood. BlackPlanet, on the other hand, is an African-American social network platform for matchmaking, job-posting, and discussions of race related political, economic, and social issues. Frequently, open community platforms are managed and each signal that their platform is an integral part of the "sharing economy". As a result, it is the social networking community working unit that governs the platform.

A good deal of optimism and talk of social revolution, particularly emphasizing the emancipating grassroots potential of the community displaced by entrenched expertise and elitism which accompanies discussions of the open community platforms. The "open" or apparently transparent nature of these platforms accomplishes a good deal of work claiming the virtues of these platforms. Ecologically minded theorists link the use and growth of open community and citizen scientist platforms to greater environmental awareness (Johnson, et al., 2014). Advocates of counter-public positions and lifestyles frame the open community platform as one giving voice to the suppressed or marginalized (Downey and Fenton, 2003). Those interested in innovation, speak to these open community platforms with committed, largely voluntary participants, as a means of crowdsourcing and developing creative, original ideas (Von Krogh, et al., 2003).

As suggested in Figure 3 the open community, using the “collusion/collision” binary as an illustration, must locate and motivate participants willing to remain accountable to the platform and enact these growing and time-consuming responsibilities for little personal gain or power all the while remaining a loyal agent of the open platform community. As the track record reveals, this has been difficult to sustain. Despite the lingering claim of transparency wrapped in a community-centric format, all three of the open community platforms discussed above have been purchased and now operate under the auspices of a set of platform owners. Indeed, the optimism tied to an early focus upon the transparency and egalitarianism of sharing on the open community social networking platform has recently been pushed in two directions, each more pragmatic and controlled than the open community.

The two directions as noted in Figure 3 are firstly, a set of civil society social networking platforms, and secondly, commercial social networking platforms which are the most numerous. Commercial platforms like Facebook (Carter, 2014), Instagram (Abidin, 2014), and Twitter (Jansen, et al., 2009) as publicly traded corporations, seek to satisfy the return on investment to shareholders by drawing large numbers of varied users to the platform. They are constantly alert to the new “next big thing”. Commercial social networking platforms employ social networking as a means of “harvesting” a crowd drawn to the site. This harvesting entails employing the wisdom of the crowd for innovative ideas, drawing information from the crowd to personalize commercial transactions or engaging portions of a pay-for- service clientele in using the commercial platform to find dates, investment opportunities and low-cost goods and services.

Drawn into the vortex of competition with other commercial social networking platforms, as illustrated in Figure 3, these platforms reinforce the leap/lag binary. Commercial networks employ data about the platform, which in turn will attract more sponsors. Added to this, commercial platforms use the “big data” they have amassed from the growing population it competes for and attempts to enhance the value of the data through strategies like information personalization (Park, 2014). Because of these continuous pressures to keep on top of the competition, commercial social networking sites attenuate the leap/lag binary. They try out new options to experiment with the commercial social networking platform and they attempt to either grow the existing one or spin off and/or sell niche market variations. The faster the pace of this experimentation, the greater the mini-cycles of context collapse experienced by platform participants. However, commercial social networking platforms are reluctant to take on problems which are unprofitable and/or mired in controversy. These are turned over, or one might say, left to civil society social networking platforms.

Unlike commercial variants, civil society social networking platforms tend to arise in those parts of the global economy where extracting a profit is unlikely. In the examination of social networking platforms, these civil society social networking platforms have increasingly become the domain of civil society and give rise to the hybridization of platforms often called social enterprises (Battilana and Lee, 2014). This hybridization spreads the costs of investing in unprofitable and controversial issues around. These hybrid social networking platforms combine governmental, charitable, religious, and commercial users in their advocacy of social, cultural, and political causes. Seen from the commercial platform perspective these hybridized civil

society platforms are framed as a set of legitimizing social signals intended to bolster and primacy of the profitably-minded (Mangold and Faulds, 2009).

Commercial social networking platforms often indirectly support civil society platforms in demonstrating their corporate social responsibility (CSR) but rarely take on unprofitable ventures like world hunger, illiteracy or the refugee diaspora. Civil society platforms, like CaringBridge (2011), GovLoop (Sadeghi et al, 2012), and ReliefWeb (Naidoo, 2007) motivate social networking participants to raise funds, mobilize resources and focus attention on a cause that is not handled well by either open community or commercial platforms. ReliefWeb raises money, awareness, political support, and useful shared information as a response to disasters, and manages encampments for the poor, dislocated, and powerless; the CareBridge not-for-profit social networking platform brings together families and friends during a serious health event or trauma in order to establish a supportive network for those caught in the crisis; the GovLoop platform brings together those interested in innovation or “pushing the envelope” in the design, delivery, and improvement of government services. These civil society platforms draw participants interested in using their talents as volunteers to further or work upon issues that they see as “good causes”.

In the view of civil society platform advocates, both the open community and commercial social networking platforms cast too wide a net, focusing more on social exchanges rather than upon specific causes like refugee relief, a disease such as prostate cancer or, within a neighborhood, efforts to ward off a new real estate development. These civil society ventures or “partnerships” call upon all three binaries with an emphasis on publicity/privacy. This is due to two features: the first feature is that involvement in civil society platforms—particularly those dedicated to controversial causes (for example, pro- and anti-abortion)—become part of the public record and is attached to the identity of individuals, firms, and groups. This becomes problematic as costs could be incurred by this publicity. On the other hand, those seeking privacy in the midst of controversy and advocacy due to participation on civil society platforms often find others, mostly those who oppose their position, aggressively seeking information that may potentially violate their privacy. The second feature rests in keeping information on these hybrid platforms from being used by the partners in ways which depart from the social cause espoused by the platform. For example, those who feel free in giving information and resources to a religious charity may find themselves compromised when and if they perceive these resources being misused over time.

Like those in the open community and commercial social networking platforms, context recognition on the civil society platforms is achieved when participants begin to make distinctions between the benefits and costs of social networking platform involvement at the institutional level. However, we believe that the existing position on context collapse in social media studies fails to recognize the centrality of the social networking platform as vital to context recognition. In so doing, two critical insights are lost. First, social networkers on the platform are far greater in number, type, and motive than they are currently discussed by context collapse theorists. As such, users discover context by knowing not only what they would like to do on the platform but also how this meets the evolving needs of others on the platform. Second,

as participants vary regarding their relation to the social networking platform, so do the types of platforms (see Figure 3).

Conclusion

The treatment of context collapse in social media studies calls attention to the recurrent feeling of disorientation, particularly as discussed in the leap/lag; collusion/collision; and publicity/privacy binaries. While we applaud the call to examine context collapse by social media researchers given the “revolutionary” social, political, and economic disruptions at the institutional level being ushered in by the growing centrality of social networking platforms, we find it necessary to expand on the level and type employed in the context collapse argument. To put context collapse into context, we attempt to amend both the level of analysis in this discussion by treating social networking as an emergent institutional form borne by the operation of multi-party social networking platforms of various sorts. Context collapse at the institutional level is short-lived if participants believe that the initial costly experience of context collapse will return more benefits in the long run, rather than choosing to turn away from participating in social networking platforms. While we insist that social networking platforms have a context at the institutional level, we believe this context, in line with the three binaries discussed, is best understood by recognizing that platforms vary in the manner in which they put together the assemblage of participants on the platform. Lastly, we argue that it is important to recognize how varying social networking platforms—open communities, civil societies, and commercial groups—are evolving in different directions and manage to correct for context collapse in various ways.

This paper calls for those interested in context collapse to do more than point to the phenomenology (i.e. the “felt”) dislocation of those attempting to become a participant on varying social networking platforms. At the institutional level, with varying degrees of delight and recrimination, contexts collapse and are replaced by a relearning and reimagining of navigational maps needed to make sense of the changed territory. This position does not ask one to push aside one’s sympathies for those who find the new territory less friendly than the old. Clearly, there is a double-edged sword to groundbreaking change like that being ushered in by the ubiquity and growing prominence of social networking platforms. One edge of the sword results in far more than a rise in nostalgia; it leaves some with a taste of suspicion and a desire to attribute responsibility to those who are threatening the “good” and familiar. The other edge speaks to the recognition that breaking new ground requires a period of learning and adjustment, in which some feel disoriented while others anticipate the new, beckoning benefits. While re-introducing discussion of context collapse at the both the institutional level with an eye to varying types of social networking platforms, one needs to recognize how and why groundbreaking change operates in its classical form as a manifestation of creative destruction. It steers clear of over-representing the search portion of the transition, yet it does not suggest that the ground-breaking change at the institutional level of analysis results in a return to the old social order.

In popular culture, the recurrent reference to the “new normal” captures both the temporary nature of context collapse at the institutional level and an expectation that learning must be

followed for ground-breaking change to occur. Context collapse understood at the institutional level is an important stage or phase in the study of the ambivalence that many individuals experience when they find themselves adapting to the new normal. As time progresses, the new normal becomes the old, only to be met in time by another which as we formulate, triggers a new experience of context collapse. It was not all that long ago that Toffler (1971) viewed efforts to keep pace with ground-breaking technological and communicative changes as resulting in “future shock”. Employing the notion of context collapse, we suggest that as expectations of recurrent global groundbreaking changes have escalated so too has the recognition that the experience of context collapse is fleeting. What is not fleeting and rises in significance is the growing number of institutions, and the people clinging to them, who are dislocated, disrupted and left unhinged because of the escalating pace of significant change. Context collapse is an important part of the institutional change narrative. It is tied to the phenomenology of users who are lost and unable to pick up new navigational clues, and it stresses the “discontinuity” segment of that narrative, leaving the “continuity” portion untold.

Figure 1.

Content Collapse Binaries

Binary	Behavioral Options	Sources
Lag/Leap	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * As in the digital divide, much is made on the difference between early adopters, digital natives and late adopters/digital laggards. * The two users move at different speeds. * Leapers establish shortcuts and write codes. * Laggards find the shortcuts complicate their navigations. 	Hogan (2010); Lüders and Brandtzæg (2017); Van Boven et al. (2000); DeFleur and Lucinda (1993)
Collide/Collude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * As navigational clues are problematic, it is not clear when a decision to act on a social networking platform will react in a collision or collusion. * Complicating matters it is not clear when a collision will result in online benefit or a collusion in online cost. 	Buglass et al. (2016); Davis and Jurgenson (2014); Borkovich and Breese (2016)
Privacy/Publicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * As users, narrowly conceived, vary in the degree to which some use the social networking platform for publicity. Others, seek privacy they set very different navigational clues for an another. * Publicity seekers want to decrease the use of privacy. * Shields and filters; Privacy seekers want a viable choice. 	Vitak (2012); Marvin (2013); Marwick (2015); Marwick and boyd (2011); Pedroni (2016)

Figure 2**Platform Logic: Reframing the Binaries**

Binary	
Leap/Lag Binary Multi-User Platforms	The leap/lag binary takes on context when one shifts the analysis to the institutional level and treats networking sites as multi-user enterprise platforms. In platform logic, it is not the user, narrowly conceived, that creates context but the emergence of platform deficiencies with multiple users leaping and lagging to suit their differing purpose or ends in using the platform.
Collison/Collusion Binary Multi-User Platforms	The collision/collusion binary loses its problematic dimension on context collapse theory when multiple platforms users adapt/learn that others on the platform have different ends. Platform owners seeking primarily commercial benefit from their platform involvement may collide/collude with community groups in pursuit of social causes but in time each expects this possibility and is prepared for it.
Publicity/Privacy Binary Multi-User Platforms	The publicity/privacy binary is amendable to contextualization when not only multiple-users on the platform begin to appreciate who wants publicity, who wants privacy, and when, but also as it becomes apparent (see Figure 3), that varying social networking platforms (open community, commercial, civil society) offer different publicity/privacy option and give users different options.

Figure 3**Three Variations on Social Network Platforms**

Platform Type	
Open Community Social Networking Platforms	The three binaries in the open community platforms are giving context by the overall mission of these platforms to operate as a grassroots community run enterprise. The context is to challenge by the ongoing desires of some to make the key decisions and other on the open community platform to remains passive but enjoy the benefits.
Commercial Social Networking Platforms	The three binaries in the commercial platform are giving context by the predominant logic of the platform which is to return capital to those investing in the enterprise. The knowledge is challenged by competing platforms and the ongoing contest to draw a larger and a more lucrative crowd to the commercial platform.
Publicity/Privacy Binary Multi-User Platforms	The three binaries in the civil society are giving context by the “dominant coalitions” of the hybrid platform. When the commercial component of the platform dominates the context, the pull is toward dealing with strategic competitors, when the dominant coalition is communitarian, the pull is toward inclusion, transparency, and community values.

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