

# The Topsy-Turvy World of Social Media

## Ten Paradoxes of Social Media

A view from Social Interaction Design  
by Adrian Chan

[www.gravity7.com](http://www.gravity7.com)



# Overview

- All is not what it might seem: in life online there is less than what we think and feel, and more than what we see.
- Social media are a unique form of media, collapsing the distance between production and consumption, and wedding the means of production to means of consumption.
- As software, social media can succeed while being dysfunctional, and in fact “bad” software design can engender conversation and participation.
- Social media dissimulate, dissociate, defer, dislocate, disconnect, and disrupt “real world” social interactions.
- Social media blur distinctions between real and imaginary, true and false, and engage users by getting them psychologically involved in a constructed social reality.
- Users each have their own experience, creating a diversity of perspectives irreducible to a single user experience.



# The Self is always reflected

- Social media start with a representation of the Self, a representation through which we see ourselves reflected.
- We take an interest in our own reflection, and form beliefs around how we appear to ourselves and the impressions we make.
- In this reflected Self, the presence of others is constant, as is a sense of what we think others may think of us.
- Through this reflected Self we become involved in ourselves as much as we become involved in simply being ourselves.
- The self-reflected Self establishes the first relationship, and a psychological one, on which other social relationships form.
- All social relationships on social media are thus constructed out of a mediation of the Self: a splitting of the Self, one self-reflected and one reflected in others' apparent impression of us.



# Self is a projected Self

- We are not literally online, we re-present ourselves online. We use online profiles, pages, posts, and videos to craft how we look to others, and more importantly, how we look to ourselves.
- Our online self is our second self: it's how we appear to constructed from a two-sided face: a self-image and a public face.
- We relate to our self-image online “self-reflexively.” Reflection occurs in how we think about ourselves, the impressions we make, what interests others in us, and of course how we look.
- Social media are in many ways a personal ME-dium, a mini “me”-dia to the mass media. They are powerful because they allow each of us to project ourselves into the medium.
- Social media engage us because we see ourselves in them. They are especially compelling if we like how we appear *to ourselves*. Online self is an “appearancy.”



# Social is anti-social

- When communication is not face to face we have to interpret other users' activity, and suggest and signal our own, using recordings and documents (pictures, text, video, etc.) in place of facework.
- Online relationships lack much of the texture and presence, affectivity, and dynamics that sustain them in the ordinary world.
- Online social interactions are not a substitute for being together, and struggle to create a sense of “shared time.” Users are “next to each other” but not “with one another.”
- The social of social media is more accurately anti-social, and in some ways social media are failed and failing social systems.
- The shortcomings of social media interaction, including, ambiguities, failures, misconnections, and misunderstandings are nonetheless precisely what engages and motivates much of our activity.



# Real fantasy and fantastic realities

- Social media have no place in space or time, but are a construction of representations. We project onto others, internalize them, interpret them, and transfer our hopes, anticipation, and expectations in a blend of fantasy and fact.
- Social media provide enough reality and context to inform us of what they are, what they're about, and what others are doing there. But each of us brings to it our own ideas and notions, as each of us participates on the basis of how we view the world and social relations in particular.
- This collective conspiracy of fantasy, or consensual hallucination, can be incredibly compelling when we and others engage online. We can even miss it when we're offline. But at the end of the day, it does fade away. We do not form many memories from experiences we have had online.



# Friends, for real?

- Relationships on social media are famously ambiguous and in some ways, cheap.
- In the “real world,” we have relationships with *particular people*, and these are unique and non-transferable. Online, relationships can appear to be *generic*.
- Social media thrive on relational ambivalence and ambiguity, because as social beings we respond to both with interest.
- Relational ambiguity wants to be resolved, but as social beings we prefer to leave openings than close off possibilities.
- The ambiguity of a relationship (who likes whom, why, for what, in the past or in anticipation of a future, etc.) gets us psychologically invested.
- What online relationships mean to us is not how they appear to others — the blurring between personal and social, private and public, informs how we choose and engage with online connections.



# Communication misunderstood

- Online communication is often a matter of interpretation and guesswork: we do our best to get a sense of others, and to provide a sense of ourselves, and this may constitute a great deal of the “personal” investment we make in social media.
- When our intentions appear ambiguous, and our claims unclear, online communication social media becomes less a matter of reaching understanding with a person *with* what is said, but of simply understanding *what* is said.
- Social media disable the facework we use in real world interaction to handle our emotional care for other people. This only amplifies the ambiguity that already underlies many interactions.
- A great deal of online communication solicits the acknowledgment and response that is readily available in face to face interaction.
- Online communication contains both its intended expression or claim (when created) and a residual implication (residue that the author understands as how it will likely be interpreted).



# Connections are disconnected

- Connectivity doesn't mean connection, at least not on a personal level. Connectivity today promises a technical solution to a social problem: the disconnectedness of everyday relationships.
- Disconnectedness, isolation, and anomie have long been themes of modern society. Social media promise to restore connectedness to connections, presence to absence, and communication to silence. The idea, opportunity, and promise of social compel many of us to participate.
- Online connections are thin but durable. The medium gives us the sense of being connected, being there, and of being available and accessible — this is sufficient to sustain participation.
- The discontinuity of connectedness online can create ambiguities in the ties that bind and bond through “normal” social relations.



# Neither here nor there

- There is power in absence, a power completed by our own activity, through which we fill in what's missing online.
- The medium, by bracketing out the face and body, engages us in ways of supplying personal meanings to the activity and communication of others.
- By engaging us in what we believe is happening online, what is in fact absent becomes compelling for what matters to us, interests us, and resonates personally.
- The presence of online media is constructed around the individual psychological act of building anticipations and expectations.
- These expectations take the shape of personal habits and practices: “objective” online realities emerge around internalized and “subjective” realities.
- By with-holding reality, online media give us reason to want more.



# Discontinuous continuity

- Time we spend online is stitched together from discontinuous fragments, and each of us is on our own time.
- These separate timelines may intersect online but cannot produce a real sense of spending or sharing time together.
- The discontinuous temporality of online time prevents us from using the rhythms and pacing of the time we have when together with others.
- The episodic nature of time periods and stretches of time are likewise unavailable in social media.
- Social media “time” is an open time, missing a clear frame or beginning, middle, and end. It’s open-ness is one of its strengths, and becomes a reason that we return to it.
- Being “out of time,” social media can more easily accompany our activities where we are, but also distract us from what are doing.



# What's dysfunctional functions

- Dysfunctional design, architecture, and features may increase participation. Design ambiguity can produce talk and social activity among users:
  - when our systems fail, we talk, and this talk is the stuff of online communication
  - in talking, we create activity
  - when site navigation, design, or features are unclear, we can invest time in figuring them out
  - which creates traffic, and again, communication and activity
- The design goals of functional functionality and efficiency common to conventional software matter less in social media design than the use of dysfunctionality for the purpose of compelling user engagement.

