Utilitarianism in Social Media Sharing: Philosophy in Technology Design

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The relevance of social media sharing and the growing presence of online interactions hardly need emphasizing in 2018. The ubiquitous nature of online sharing does not carry a stamp of legitimacy in regards to being helpful in a tangible way to its users. Regardless of how omnipresent a technology might be, it is helpful to take a step back and evaluate its influence over our lives. Movements like "Time well Spent"[1] clearly advise that the cost of time spent in our online lives might already be too expensive when compared to the benefits received.

The fascination emanating from technology is not only the result of the current movie-like artefacts that allow continuous global virtual interactions, but also from the ideas constantly evolving and allowing new advancements and perspectives. In this sense, technology can be considered akin to philosophy and other fields where discussion of ideas takes center stage.

This paper will explore the intersection of both fields in a direct and, hopefully, practical way by applying a classical theory from philosophy to analyse a particular feature of technology and its consequences on society.

Utilitarianism is one of the most pragmatic 19th century theories, and in spite of decades of criticisms (many of them possibly valid but that is outside of the scope of this paper, as the objective here is the application of an original "raw" theory), Western societies continue to rely on a good deal of utilitarian values. The utilitarian concepts discussed in this paper are extracted from John Stuart Mill's essay "Utilitarianism"[2]

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[1] "Center for Humane Technology." Center for Humane Technology. Accessed June 15, 2018. http://humanetech.com/

[2] Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001.

While philosophy of technology usually is concerned with the relationship between technology and society or the ethos of technology itself[3], the goal of this paper is to create a meaningful conversation serving as an example of the contribution of philosophy to discussions on technology design.

Social media sharing and utilitarianism

Social media encompasses different platforms with a variety of interactions including various features, media formats, and sharing frequencies. In this section, I will define some basic concepts to allow a demarcation of cases that will be further explored later on through the lenses of utilitarianism.

There are multiple users interacting simultaneously as producers and receivers of content in social media, each of these users hold one-to-many relationships with the rest when sharing content. This is a unique aspect of social media that we will revisit later in conjunction with utilitarianism.

Considering the relationships between users, there are broadly speaking, five different types of sharing from the perspective of the producer depending on the content:

1. Personal – Positive: content carries information related only to the producer and has a positive connotation.
2. Personal – Negative: content carries information related only to the producer and has a negative connotation.
3. Social – Positive: content provides information related to the group or society where producer participates and carries a positive connotation.
4. Social – Negative: content provides information related to the group or society where producer participates and carries a negative connotation.
5. Trolling: when the sharing specifically aims at provoking the receiving audience and generating shocking reactions—for example, anger, outrage, indignation.

The above types of sharing can take one of the following two forms, depending on how content was generated: a) original posting, when the

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[3] Feenberg, Andrew. *Questioning Technology*. (London: Routledge, 1999), 1.

content is created by the producer, and b) re-posting, when content is not created originally but passed along towards receivers.

From a social media sharing perspective, this analysis will focus on two combinations of types and forms: i) Personal – Positive / Original posting, and ii) Social – Positive / Re-posting. Both combinations are not only possibly the most common types and forms of interactions in various online social platforms,[4] but were possibly at the inception of current social media design: the ability to communicate either with my own ideas or by sharing somebody else's content.

With regards to utilitarianism, this analysis will focus on the evaluation of human actions, relying on John Stuart Mill's 'Greatest Happiness Principle' as a guideline. In Mill's words, "the "greatest happiness principle" holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure."[5]

Mill also warns us that humans would not lean naturally towards the happiness of the group, but instead this would require a concerted effort:

> "as the means of making the nearest approach to this ideal, utility would enjoin, first, that laws and social arrangements should place the happiness or […] the interest of every individual as nearly as possible in harmony with the interest of the whole; and, secondly, that education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole."[6]

Interestingly enough, the concerted effort required for utilitarianism potentially could benefit greatly from the social networks of the 21st century,

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[4] Weinberger, Avrumi. "Why do people share things online?" Precision Brands NY.

[5] Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 7.

[6] Ibid, 16.

since these became the digital center of global opinion and virtual social arrangements. If there is a way to align these systems to support the association of individual interest to those of the whole, a case could be made that the greatest happiness principle would be the basis for a utopian society.

Online sharing in 2018: an experience

In order to add an experiential component to the paper, I opened accounts on the prominent social media platforms *Instagram* and *Twitter* and experimented with the applications for few weeks after installing them on a mobile device.

With the objective of attaining naturalistic data, I attempted a "laissez-faire" approach without accessing the applications right after installation, but instead tried to mimic the spontaneous and intuitive usage of the layperson. After sharing on these platforms, the events, circumstances, motivations, and intentions were analysed with as much objectivity as possible.

For the purposes of this paper, I will consider the producer and all directly connected contacts to a group. The challenge comes down to the question if whether online sharing increases the happiness or decreases the pain for the group involved. If we could find convincing arguments that group happiness increases, then sharing would be considered a correct action within the frame of utilitarianism.

After social media sharing took place on each of the newly opened accounts, there were three problems encountered when trying to answer this question. They are included below.

What do we receive from social media sharing?

One of the most common arguments for sharing on social media is the perception that when the producer shares material displaying positive content, the recipients will respond not only positively but will be happier

after virtually witnessing the proof of well-being from the producer. Even though there are cases where receivers are happier when reviewing shared content (mothers accessing joyful moments shared by their children), when looking at the entire online sharing universe, it is difficult not to label these cases as exceptions.

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America already finds a direct correlation between the voyeuristic element of social media and an increasing of anxiety and depression.[7] Additionally, there is a problem with the limitations of technology when capturing and "transporting" moments of happiness.

This is not a new social media problem; it is an issue that has already affected photography, TV, and video:[8] the loss of substance between the moment of capture and the final product experienced by the receiver. Whether we are looking at a picture (without sound), or watching a video (usually only a few seconds in social media), there is much that is irreversibly lost from the muscularity of reality.

It is not only what affects the senses that is lost (e.g.: sounds, fragrances, etc.), but also context. While we watch multiple 30 seconds extractions from a great party for example, how can we fully grasp the infinite number and types of nuances that affect any social gathering? The laughter, the surprises, the awkward moments, and the intricacies about the way we relate to each other are only a few of the elements that are absent from these digital echoes of reality.

The difficulty to clearly lay out positive effects on receivers as a result of digital sharing is the first element causing problems on the potential finding of utilitarianism value in social media.

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[7] Fader, Sarah. "Social Media Obsession and Anxiety". *Anxiety and Depression Association of America*.

[8] Randle, Matt. "Warning: The Objects in the Photograph are not as Real as they Appear". *Philosophy Now a magazine of ideas*.

Do we share because applications are easy and available?

During my wife's birthday weekend, we went out for early dinner with our baby boy. While chatting, our son started playing with his bottle water and "toasting" with us, which I found charming and fun. Minutes before I was figuring out how the Instagram application worked and how easy it was to post a video. The scene of us dining and playing with our son was a happy moment I found worthy of sharing, and so I did.

Right after sending the 7-second video, two tentative responses explaining why I decided to share this moment came to mind: first, it was the result of an impulse, and secondly, it happened because of the availability and easy access of the application. The fact that the application was easy to use is not a criticism (as a matter of fact it is a victory for the designers), but in regards to the utilitarianism analysis, it casts doubts over the possibility that producers are creating social media content with the happiness of the group in mind.

The lack of intention in the producers does not necessarily create an impediment for increasing social happiness; but, if sharing occurs because of personal impulses and the ease of producing content, it is likely that users will "over-share" sending more content through social media than what would be sent if the intention was only to contribute to the group betterment.

The possibility that sharing on social media is the result of an impulse also deserves attention. Before installing the Instagram application on a mobile device, sharing a family moment via social media was available as well but through a slightly different process: a picture would be taken via phone or a digital camera, then downloaded to the laptop and finally shared on social media. By simply requiring more steps, this process allows for more self-editing and censorship that might allow sharing of more relevant

content. Possibly one would approach online sharing in a different way if the process took longer or required more effort.

Again, this problem complicates the possibility of finding utilitarianism value in social media sharing. The "over-sharing" resulting from impulses and design availability could in fact potentially decrease the group happiness.

Are we consumers of social media reactions?
If we consider the reactions generated in social media (comments, likes, followers, etc.) as something desirable by the producer, they acquire economical characteristics that can become problematic for an argument of utilitarian value in sharing.

There are two main similarities worth noting: first, the producer receives reactions only in exchange for the shared content; and second, they are scarce –they do not exist before the sharing occurs.

After sharing happens, reactions are generated, and consumed (and presumably enjoyed) by the producer. Then sharing occurs again (to generate more reactions) for further consumption. This loop would continue indefinitely fuelled by the human tendency to over-consume.[9] The producer ends up in the rare position of being able to "print the currency" that allows access to their own addiction.

The experiment of sharing on Twitter serves as an example of the above. In this case again, the situation was the result of an impulse as well, I found a smart and funny bit and thought about sharing it. Before sharing, the one and only thing I considered was "is this clever enough for me to *re-tweet*?" The preoccupation of the self-image this would present to "my followers" (powerful phrase if there is any) was closer and more important than the actual effect on them.

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[9] Sterling, Peter. "Why We Consume: Neural Design and Sustainability". *Great Transition Initiative.*

Again, the intention of the producer would not obstruct the group happiness increasing in case it happens; however, it plays a fundamental role in the quality of sharing if the real intention is only to generate precious reactions. Also, we could consider the type of reactions, where someone for example needs an exclusive type such as a positive response, or maybe just indiscriminate reactions where the approach would be drastically different, but we will leave that for a different paper.

The above problems pose difficulties for the argument that social media sharing carries utilitarian value. The fragility of what reaches the recipients, the question whether it occurs because of true intention or simply due to accessibility of the interface, and the possibility of responding to a consumption craving, all contribute to reject the idea that online sharing contributes to increased happiness of the group involved.

In addition to the issues mentioned above, there is one key element worth bringing back from the beginning of this paper: the one-to-many relationships characteristic of social media. If the argument of sharing due to the possibility of increasing happiness in the recipients were accepted, then the same logic would apply to the multiple times when producers are recipients of content. Human empathy is possible and certainly exists; however, to accept that all users on social media platforms are happier by reviewing content shared by their contacts is more than a stretch to any human altruism concept and difficult to support.

Stuart Mill made an exception with virtue,[10] for him there was an intrinsic value in virtue that removed the need to allocate any specific contribution to it. Virtue was desirable in itself, not because of what it helped to obtain. If we collectively agree that social media is the new means of communication in the 21st century, perhaps online sharing would not require a utilitarian analysis. In such a case, sharing would be a tool of intrinsic value

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[10] Mill, Utilitarianism, 36

to society that would not require any justification for usefulness or identifying if or what it helps to achieve. The act of sharing online would then be desirable in itself, not for whatever (happiness) it helps to achieve.

Conclusion

There are problems that make it difficult to accept the argument for utilitarian value in social media sharing. At the same time, there is a possibility that there is no need to even examine what is the utilitarian value achieved through online sharing. As often occurs with complicated issues, there is no final answer to this question. The progress, the value added here is in the conversation, in the analysis.

It could be argued that this paper is about fifteen years too late for the discussion on social media design, since online sharing is all around us and it seems impossible to stop it. The ubiquity of social media does not validate it; we can and must discuss, review, and challenge it through intelligent and constructive conversations. This paper serves as a simple and direct example for this type of analysis, where philosophy provides a tool to dissect technology.

One relatively straightforward philosophical theory was applied in combination with direct experimentation to evaluate an aspect of our current digital environment. The question might be open-ended, and that is acceptable, as long as we contribute to continuing the discussion. The technology of the future being built today is awaiting and needs similar analysis. We must start that conversation now.

In order to effect real change, discussions should take place at the earliest point of idea conception and again at the design stage to provide engineers with different perspectives with regards to the multiple and real consequences their new technologies will have on users. Considering that philosophy and other potential contributing fields may be out of the technologies developers' expertise, a more realistic course of action could

be for the liberal studies to ignite the conversation, reaching out to generate interdisciplinary approaches to technology design.

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