Ellie Farrier: The Experience of New Social Media

Review of the Supervisor, Radka Dudová

The thesis of Ellie Farrier presents a sociological reflection on an everyday phenomenon that has immeasurable and yet unexplored consequences for social ties: the use of new social media. She focuses on the case of the users who live far from their home country and whose social and family ties are disrupted by this distance, and social media may constitute a way how to maintain or reinvent these relationships.

The author uses journalist style and a very reflexive personal language and starts from her own experience, but connects it quite successfully to existing sociological theories. Although her original research questions were rather too ambitious and could not be answered with the available data, and the empirical sources are quite poor (4 in-depth interviews with American expats living in Prague), the findings of her research are surprisingly rich and full of sociological imagination. Especially the qualitative analysis of the interviews is very thick and compensates for the small number of the studied cases.

In the theoretical part, the author recapitulates some of the older theories of communication and media (Lazarsfeld, Merton, Bordieu), adds the more recent texts on new social media and provides a reflection on how the presented theses can be linked to the role of new social media in contemporary society, or more precisely to the concrete issue of the experiences of US expats with the social media. She mentions for ex. the economic capitalist logic behind of Facebook and similar media, and presents the social connections enhanced by these media as an eventual social capital. The author enters in dialogue with the theories of mass media and communication, sometimes with more and sometimes with less success. I miss here a clear definition of what is understood as “new social media”, as the “new” becomes rapidly “old” in this area, and the functions and possibilities of the programs and applications are expanding relentlessly. The political dimension of the influence of social media is not discussed sufficiently, even though it is strongly connected to its social impact. The fact that with the new social media the user becomes also the creator of the content could be more stressed out, together with the fact that this content is not identical for all the users (to the difference of the “old” media) and thus it has potential to divide the society instead of homogenising it. The discussion of the relationship between leisure and the use of social media could be more developed. While theories of mass media and new social media are presented correctly, it would be useful to add some theoretical anchoring of the intimate relationships (family, friendship) and their transformations due to migration and modern communication means.

In the empirical part, the author uses the phenomenological method described by T. Groenewald and R.H. Hycner. She argues why she finds this method appropriate for her research and explains how she applied it in her research project. She provides detailed information about the data collection, data handling and the analytical process. I find this approach interesting and well thought. A discussion of the generalizability of the findings and the status of the experience of the four respondents in the researched phenomenon could however be developed here.

The interviews are presented in large detail and are re-read and re-interpreted thoroughly. Each of the respondents opens and describes several issues or phenomena that are typical for contemporary use of social media: social media as a means to physical connection, creation of the self and
extension of the self in case of Don; the dichotomy of closeness (proximity / intimacy), the new rules of conduct, economic aspects and public knowledge in case of Chuck; new social etiquette, impression management, issues of safety and levels of intimacy in case of Carrie, and new communities and co-creation of the content in case of Dan. Altogether, even though these are individual experiences, the issues mentioned by the respondents open new questions and summarise very well the controversies that new social media bring about and the transformations of intimate lives that stem from it.

The collective interpretation however is not always persuasive – the author uses the concept of habitus, but without the economic and class dimension that is key in Bourdieu understanding of habitus. On the other hand, I like the idea that the social media are in fact reproducing the “old” forms of sociability, such as friendship, love, games or spirituality. The presented approach could be suitable for studying for ex. the processes of „doing family“ via new communication means.

Despite the objections, I would say that the work is quite well managed and meets the standards of a Master's thesis. I evaluate it with the grade 2.

Question for the discussion: the author argues that the early experiences with and exposure to internet and social media are crucial in determining the way people experience the social media in their adulthood. What does this mean for the current cohorts that grow up using smart phones and ever-accessible high speed internet connection since their early childhood? Should we expect still a more profound change in how these technologies will be experienced and used?