Authenticity   *Lina Dencik*

Introduction

Authenticity in the contemporary age is a powerful symbolic construct that is key to how we make decisions about how to live our lives. Whether it is the place we want to live, the food we eat, the relationships we have, or the people we trust to govern, authenticity continues to have significant cultural value, particularly in a cynical age (Banet-Weiser 2012). As a symbolic construct, we also search for authenticity in the media messages we consume which helps inform our moral frameworks and the credibility we attribute to different narratives and actors. Media, historically, has often been associated with a decided *lack* of authenticity, as mediated communication is perceived as pre-packaged, produced and contextualized by institutions, agendas and interests. At the same time, we continuously search for authenticity in media as a way to make sense of 'reality' and what is true. This 'paradox of mediated authenticity' refers to the fact that 'although we base nearly all our knowledge about the world and the society in which we live on mediated representations, we remain well aware that the media is constructed, manipulated, and even faked.' (Enli 2015: 1) The advent of digital technologies, and social media in particular, has significantly restructured and underscored the role of authenticity in relation to media. In some respects, social media platforms are a continuation of the 'authenticity industry' (Aslama and Pantti 2006) that found prominence with so-called 'reality TV', but they are also formatted with particular affordances that imbue them with 'illusions of authenticity' (Enli 2015) of special significance for citizen media. In this entry I focus specifically on social media platforms in the construction of authenticity, and the way these platforms are constructed as 'true' representations of citizen voices, before going on to illustrate how such perceptions are used strategically by different political actors. The entry then goes on to consider how these illusions of authenticity might now increasingly be unraveling as questions of institutional agendas and manipulation have (re)entered public perceptions of social media platforms.

Social media and authenticity

In her book *Authentic* (2012), Banet-Weiser makes the case that the question of authenticity is more important than ever as we are confronted with an age that hungers for anything that *feels* authentic, just as we lament more and more that it is a world of inauthenticity. The quest for authenticity, and its expressions of the 'genuine' and 'real', in contemporary culture is an outcome of the multiple ways in which manipulations of reality now occur, not least as a result of new technologies (Enli 2016). Authenticity acts as a counterweight to the ubiquitous scripted moments of mediated representations of reality that we know to be skeptical of and serves as a guarantee for an undistorted and credible representation. As such, it has become an important 'currency' (Enli 2016) in public life. In this context, Banet-Weiser (2012: 11) argues, the binary links between, for example, commercial and inauthentic, and noncommercial and authentic, are too simple. Rather, authenticity *itself* is a brand, and this brand culture shapes not only consumer habits but also political, cultural, and civic practices in the contemporary era.

There are many avenues through which we can look at constructions of authenticity, but social media is a significant and interesting entry-point because it, from the outset, appealed precisely as a format for communication and activity that bypasses institutional agendas and pre-packaged representations that we commonly associate with a lack of authenticity. Drawing some parallels with the appeal of television genres such as observational documentaries and reality TV that depend on the manufacturing of real feelings (Mestrovic 1997), social media is imbued with a prominent 'symbolic authenticity' (Enli 2015). User-generated content is perceived as more authentic than mainstream media content simply by being produced and posted by ordinary citizens rather than media companies. The amateur imagery and poorer quality holds its own cultural value that sits in contrast to the processed (and therefore potentially manipulated) images that we know to be constructed for us. Indeed, studies with audiences of news content found a high approval for the inclusion of user-generated content in news reports as it is perceived to be more 'real' and less 'packaged' than news produced solely by journalists (Williams et al. 2011). This perception of increased realism is closely linked to the idea that such content is considered more immediate and

adds drama and human emotion to a cultural form, which is often understood to be dry and distanced from 'ordinary people'. That is, it appeals to our need to believe that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine affect and emotions (Banet-Weiser 2012).

Whilst the perception of social media as an authentic representation of reality relates to our continued search for truthful representations, it is also one that has been actively advanced by both commentators and social media companies themselves. As Couldry (2015) has argued, the language we use to make wider sense of digital sites are not independent from, but heavily indebted to the larger framing of social and political change in which the institutions that host digital networks, among others, have a strong vested interest. In what he terms a 'myth of us', Couldry outlines how the emergence of new types of technology institutions that own and profit from the 'platforms' (Gillespie 2010) where we now access media and interact with each other have come to claim to, in some sense, speak for 'us'. That is, a language has emerged that suggests that these commercially owned 'spaces of appearances' *are* a new site of the social. They constitute the loci for contemporary sociality. In this, a 'myth of natural collectivity' (Couldry 2015: 260) emerges that suggests that social media platforms are where 'we' are gathered naturally.

Significant in this myth is not only the disguise of the mode of economic necessity upon which social media platforms depend; that we do not act out a role, but are forced to be 'ourselves', in a form no less artificial (Lovink 2012). A seamless alignment between audience (citizen) and commercial discourses are created on these platforms (Gillespie 2010) as the 'social' platform is a 'socially constructed term that enables the continuous and seemingly unremarkable *interface* between everyday social interaction and commercially oriented tracking.' (Couldry 2015: 620) What is more, in this 'myth of us', media (and other) institutions seem to drop out altogether from the picture and the story is focused entirely on what 'we' do naturally. The platforms let you 'broadcast yourself' (YouTube), seemingly free from the manipulations of institutional agendas and interests, committed to 'give

people the power to build community and bring the world closer together'
(Facebook mission statement).

Practices of mediated authenticity

The mediated construction of authenticity across more and more of public life
draws from the 'branding of authenticity' (Banet-Weiser 2012) that we are
familiar with from consumer culture. In her book *No Logo,* Naomi Klein (2000)
famously argued that we now engage simultaneously in the production of culture
through the very processes of consumption, as products have attained meaning in
the form of brands as lifestyle. Social media has furthered this shift away from the
product or service itself towards the (communicative) *relationship* between
producer and consumer that engulf the product or service (Terranova 2000). In
this age of the 'social brand' (Jones 2012), what matters is that these relationships
come to *feel* authentic in a way that can allow for consumers to reimagine and
further – and therefore validate – the brand (Banet-Weiser 2012). Nothing is more
emblematic of this shift than the growth of 'native advertising', mostly online, that
is deliberately created to match the form and function of the platform and, often,
seeks to remove the sale of the product entirely from the equation.

As authenticity has become a central currency for attributions of credibility and
'truth', social media's role in the branding of authenticity has unsurprisingly been
a prominent focus for a range of social and political actors. As alluded to above, in
news reporting, for example, social media platforms can afford a 'new
authenticity' of journalism towards its public that allow for the construct of new
solidarities and cosmopolitanist identities (Chouliaraki and Blaagaard 2013). That
is, these digital technologies play a part in our ability to empathise and engage
with others who are reported to be suffering around us, precisely through the
immediacy and horizontality of citizen voice. At the same time, Williams et al.
(2011) found in their interviews with reporters that the 'perceived authenticity'
of user-generated content is highly valued and strategically used by journalists to
enliven conventional news reports and construct the *impression* of authenticity. In
other words, journalists consciously integrate the affordances of social media into

their news reporting in order to imbue their representations with greater cultural value garnered from the authenticity associated with social media content.

The unique position of social media as a perceived space for natural collectivity and 'authentic' social life makes it equally pertinent for political communication, amongst social movements and governments alike. As Birks (2014) has highlighted, with civil society groups and protests in particular, audiences are continuously invited to assess the legitimacy of actors on the basis of the authenticity of their argumentation. Drawing on Habermas' distinction in ascertaining legitimacy in the public sphere, Birks argues that the role of the media audience is to distinguish between established organisations that appear 'before the public' (representing sectional interests and identities) and less formally organized actors who 'emerge from the public' (more authentic because they are less distorted by vested interests). Historically, such assessments are often based on different legitimacy claims to do with questions of violence and the ability for protesters to present themselves as victims with emotional responses (Birks 2014). However, narratives surrounding protest movements of recent years (e.g. the Arab Spring, Occupy, 15M, Fight for 15) have also often explicitly highlighted social media as a way to legitimate these movements. Not only seen as integral to the mobilization and amplification of citizen-led movements, the 'myth of us' associated with social media has been central for disassociating protests from organized political forms and institutional agendas (Dencik 2015). Instead, they have been celebrated precisely for the spontaneity and ordinariness that Enli (2015) identifies as key types of 'authenticity illusions' in mediated authenticity. The centrality of social media as a mechanism for constructing 'protest authenticity' (Dencik 2015) has been a significant strategic tool amongst civil society groups in this regard, to elevate status and in some instances shift focus away from movement architectures and historic power relations. Forms of political organization that have sometimes struggled to make themselves relevant and credible in media, such as trade unions or large NGOs for example, have been able to turn to social media as a way to allow for emphasis to be placed on 'socially organised' citizen voice, seemingly spontaneous and leaderless (Dencik and Wilkin 2015).

As a tool for effective political communication, the authenticity illusions of social media inevitably make it equally appealing for established powerful political actors. Whilst initially treated by some politicians as a source of risk (Anstead and Chadwick 2010), the symbolic capital gained from mediated authenticity through social media, has made social media platforms central to political campaigning. US President Barack Obama famously integrated social media at an early stage of his 2008 campaign to facilitate a different kind of mobilization that was widely perceived as being citizen-led and disassociated from the corporate and institutional funding traditionally linked to candidates of the 'establishment' (Gibson 2015). As a direct counterweight to the scripted performances associated with professionalized political communication, social media also lends itself to 'humanising' politicians that otherwise struggle to appear genuine and sincere. In particular, social media has proven integral as an arena for the 'authentic outsider' (Enli 2017) in the political sphere. That is, politicians use social media as a way to explicitly step outside the conventions of 'the establishment' through 'authenticity markers' (Enli 2017) such as informal speech, personal pictures, and in the case of US President Donald Trump, expressed impoliteness, political incorrectness and grammatical inconsistency like use of capital letters. This ability to employ social media to construct the appearance of authentic talk provides a pathway to secure trust and characterize communication as a 'guarantee of truth' (Montgomery 2001). For politicians, it is this trust and appearance of sincerity that underpins their mandate. Yet, as Enli (2016: 133) points out, 'the rhetoric of authenticity might be a disguise for highly staged, pre-planned and expensive productions, and a way to make politicians seem like harmless and likeable everyday people "like you and me"'.

The unraveling of social media authenticity?
Whilst narratives and myths surrounding social media often position social media platforms outside the institutional agendas and manipulations that otherwise mark our 'world of inauthenticity' (Banet-Weiser 2012), the central position that these platforms now occupy in public life has inevitably led to deeper scrutiny. In this final section, I briefly turn to what we might consider a kind of 'unraveling' of

social media myths in current times and a deeper questioning of the way in which collectivity and communication is structured on these platforms. Recently, we have seen increased public debate and focus on both the institutional architectures and commercial logics of these platforms that were so seamlessly made away with in the above-mentioned 'myth of us'. The rapid escalation of concerns with 'fake news', for example, said to spread predominantly via social media platforms, has directly challenged the 'truthfulness' of communication in these spaces and we are directly invited to question the sincerity of content that is shared between citizens (Connolly et al. 2016). 'Fake news' as a term became particularly prominent in public discourse during the 2016 US Presidential election when it was suggested that a number of fake news sites had been created by different people (e.g. Macedonian teenagers looking to make money), producing false stories on candidates. These stories were able to garner widespread readership (and potentially influence) because of the way they were unwittingly shared on social media networks (Wardle 2017). More serious attention has subsequently shifted to 'fake news' in relation to systematic disinformation campaigns, in which social media allows for 'atoms' of information to be directly targeted at users who are more likely to accept and share a particular message; a debate on the prominence of groups who have become sophisticated in exploiting the contemporary information ecosystem (boyd 2017, Wardle 2017). These concerns undermine the narrative of social media as a counterweight to manipulated information and media representations, and highlight platforms as easy targets for vested interests and agendas. As such, they have (re)introduced a prominent skepticism towards the 'authenticity' of the communication that circulates on social media.

This skepticism has been furthered by the broader concern with 'computational propaganda', which situates social media platforms at the centre of a new form of informational manipulation. Computational propaganda is defined as 'the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks' (Woolley & Howard 2016). Key features of this propaganda are decidedly *inauthentic* artifacts unique to social media, such as 'bots' and 'click-farms'. These are automated accounts and

processes that involve learning from and mimicking real people so as to manipulate public opinion across a diverse range of platforms (Woolley & Howard 2017: 6). Kollanyi et al. (2016) estimate that around 20 to 25 percent of traffic on Twitter about the US 2016 Presidential election leading up to the vote came from highly automated accounts ('bots'). 'Click-farms' on the other hand, or 'fake accounts' designed to enhance the appearance of popularity and influence of certain people or ideas on social media, are part of a booming 'global marketplace for social media fraud' (Confessore et al. 2018). Facebook recently admitted to investors it might be host to at least 60 million fake accounts (Confessore et al. 2018).

Overarching these recent debates is a growing awareness of both the power and prevalence of the algorithmic design of these platforms, steeped in corporate logics and institutional interests, that significantly undermines their ability to be an authentic representation of 'us'. These platforms lend themselves to distortions and manipulation through search and recommendation algorithms, sponsored content, dark advertising and other kinds of socio-technical developments that all highlight the politics of mediated authenticity on social media (cf. Lewis 2018). As more and more of these features come under the spotlight, the arbiters of authenticity in the contemporary media landscape will continue to be up for grabs.

Conclusion
Authenticity is a key marker for how we make sense of the world and how we make decisions about our lives. In a world that can often feel decidedly inauthentic, steeped in profit-logics and vested interests, the hunger for a space of sincerity and genuine emotion is more prevalent than ever. As a symbolic construct, therefore, authenticity has become a central currency, a cultural value that is both desirable and subject to exploitation. This entry has focused particularly on authenticity in relation to social media. Both social media companies and commentators have jointly advanced a 'myth of us'; the generating of the idea that platforms like Facebook underpin a kind of natural collectivity. That is, the institutional architectures and political agendas that usually accompany mediated activity are made away with, and instead, a new authenticity

towards the public can emerge. This has been a strategic tool to claim legitimacy used by a range of social and political actors, across corporations, journalists, activists and politicians. At the same time, the myths of depoliticized and deinstitutionalized social media are increasingly unraveling in an age of bots, fake news, and algorithmic filters, that significantly put perceptions of authenticity into question. The key issue will be the extent to which social media platforms can hold on to their illusions of authenticity and claim to be an arena for 'us'.

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