Contexts of Digital Socialization: Studying Adolescents' Interactions on Social Network Sites

Commentary on Zizek

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Given the increasing prevalence of social media in the everyday lives of teenagers [Common Sense Media, 2015; Lenhart, 2015], one of the most pressing issues facing educators, parents, and scholars is understanding how the Internet functions as a social space for adolescents. Boris Zizek's [2017, this issue] paper approaches this issue from a socialization perspective, examining how adolescents interact in these online spaces in light of what we know about adolescent development and socialization in traditional contexts. In his critical approach to digital socialization, Zizek offers a helpful counterpoint to discourses about adolescent participation in social media that tend to veer between romanticized accounts of the democratic potentials of these spaces on the one hand [e.g., Awan & Gauntlett, 2013] and warnings about the dangers of these spaces on the other [e.g., Hinduja & Patchin, 2013]. Zizek calls for a more critical approach to socialization studies that takes into account multiple factors regarding young people's positionality as they develop autonomy. To that end, he offers a systematic method for studying how these factors unfold in online contexts and impact youth socialization.

In developing his critical socialization perspective, Zizek does not draw on foundational tenets of critical theory that interrogate systems of power and privilege [e.g., Adorno, 1973; Freire, 1986]; rather, he locates his critical perspective alongside media theorists who examine the affordances and constraints of online sociality for youth [e.g., Gardner & Davis, 2013; Turkle, 2011, 2015]. In this vein of critical analysis, Zizek examines one online space, MTV's website *A Thin Line* (ATL), a social media site that invites youth to share experiences of digital abuse in order to receive feedback and support from others. He argues that interactive, online spaces for socialization like ATL fall short in meeting adolescents' developmental needs by encouraging young

people to rely less on their existing social relationships and environments – instead positioning technology (and the online space itself) as the solution to their problems.

This focus on relationships is a vitally important dimension in understanding teens' interactions in social media spaces. Extensive research has explored the relative benefits of different forms of interpersonal relationships in social networks, from strong ties between people that deepen relationships through frequent interaction to weaker links that connect people over shorter time frames and in less sustained fashion [Granovetter, 1973]. While Zizek prioritizes the importance of strong ties for adolescent socialization, he acknowledges the benefits of weak ties in spreading ideas and connecting people across new networks – though he finds that the “drive-through structure of communication” (p. 44) in online social networks like ATL constrain the deeper engagement and relationship building needed for meaningful adolescent socialization. In my work with colleagues, however, we have explored how fleeting forms of interaction do offer significant opportunities for adolescent socialization – specifically for engaging with diverse new ideas, seeing oneself in relationship with others and the world more broadly, and developing ethical capacities to communicate effectively with people from different geographic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds [e.g., Stornaiuolo, DiZio, Hellmich, & Hull, 2013; Stornaiuolo, Hull, & Sahni, 2011].

Whether adolescents engaged in more fleeting or sustained forms of interaction online, we found that it was adolescents' *efforts* to create and find the “proper distance” [Silverstone, 2007] in relationships with others that provided important learning opportunities for developing capacities as ethical online communicators [Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014]. Zizek acknowledges the potential benefits of exploring online relationships with different forms of social distance but also cautions, following Turkle [2011], that adolescents often place too much trust in these diffuse social relationships and mistake those connections for intimacy in ways that may bring them harm. The question of how adolescents develop trust and intimacy in online spaces highlights the role of context in online socialization – with each of these spaces having its own intersectional social, cultural, and political history and structure that shape, and are shaped by, adolescents' interactions and engagement.

Given the importance of understanding the broader context of online communities as spaces of socialization, one of the major contributions of Zizek's paper is its focus on the ATL website as the pragmatic frame for youth interaction. He examines the affordances of the space and its underlying discourses (in Zizek's terms, “latent messages,” p. 41), determining through close analysis that the viewer is addressed primarily as a consumer or client in this space. With this customer-client logic at play, the website promises the consumer direct help in solving problems, offering a (simplified) technological solution to users' problems [see also Gardner & Davis, 2013, on how this issue plays out more widely for the “app generation”]. Zizek's examination of the platform and its positioning of users recalls pivotal work by media scholar José van Dijck [2013], who offers a robust critical-analytical framework for examining the role these media platforms play in the ecosystem of connective media. Van Dijck's [2013] compelling sociotechnical analysis of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter could provide Zizek some helpful framing for how these latent messages develop across the user, technology, and content dimensions of ATL. Such a focus on the infrastructure of online spaces is often backgrounded or ignored completely in analyses of adolescents' interactions, but as Zizek and van Dijck's work shows, these online social spaces are constructed with particular ideologies and sociotechnical his-

tories that influence young people's interactions. Zizek's analysis of the ATL website as the foundation for later analysis raises further methodological considerations, an area to which I now turn.

Methodological Implications

One of the innovations Zizek offers in this paper is his application of objective hermeneutics [Oevermann, Allert, Konau, & Krambeck, 1987] to studying digital socialization, a sociological approach to qualitative inquiry prevalent in German scholarly communities. The purpose of objective hermeneutics is to reconstruct the structure of a case so that the latent meaning structures of social action become visible to the analyst, apart from the perceptions of the actors involved. In terms of digital socialization, Zizek is interested in uncovering the deeper structure implicated in an online interaction, and to that end he follows objective hermeneutics in transforming social action into text that can then be interpreted for latent meaning structures. This effort to see deeper meaning structures at play in social interaction draws on a number of assumptions about human behavior, such as the assumption that participants leave an "authentic trace" in their actions and words that allows analysts to infer meanings from activity. According to Zizek, these traces can be discovered through the method of sequence analysis, in which researchers proceed through methodical steps that are themselves intersubjectively comprehensible. One of the hallmarks of this approach is its purported objectivity, in which the structure of social action can be made visible through a sequence of steps that the analyst follows to reconstruct the case, putting aside participants' (subjective) interpretations and focusing on the traces left in the text.

While I found insights from Zizek's analysis compelling, my own research more directly foregrounds issues of context in studying youth's online interactions, primarily by taking into account the cultural and historical dimensions of mediated activity [e.g., Cole & Engeström, 1993] and tracing how social activity is iteratively and dynamically constructed across networks [e.g., Latour, 2005]. While the analyst is recognized as playing a central interpretive role in following traces in cultural historical and actor network theories, these frameworks position the analyst within the frame, as an integral part of ongoing, dynamic, joint construction of meaning that requires researchers take into account their own positionality, interpretive assumptions, and prior histories and experiences in making sense of social action. Zizek's approach to objective hermeneutics, on the other hand, privileges the analyst's perspective as the expert one, more capable of providing an objective analysis of the deeper structure waiting to be discovered.

Two issues seem important to raise in terms of researcher positionality and the research context. The first, and in my opinion most significant, is how Zizek positions adolescents in this research. Zizek objects to ethnographic accounts like those by danah boyd [2014] that characterize adolescents "not just as witnesses but expert witnesses" – he finds that consulting individuals about their experiences is not only "a methodologically dubious approach," but one "especially questionable" when applied to teenagers (p. 18). By calling into question the capacity of teens to be witnesses, expert or otherwise, to their own experiences, Zizek recalls deficit-oriented characterizations of adolescents that position them as unformed and uninformed [see Lesko, 2012]. Much of my scholarship has been aimed at directly challenging such percep-

tions in educational research, arguing that such a stance serves to replicate educational inequalities [see Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017]. While objective hermeneutics certainly positions the analyst as the primary arbiter of meaning through textual interpretation, Zizek's dismissal of more contextual, ethnographic methodologies that take seriously participants' perspectives seems short sighted at best. He suggests that ethnographic work like boyd's [2014] uses data "for the illustration of a point" and not "to generate theses from the material" (p. 18). Such a characterization of digital ethnography [Pink et al., 2016] fundamentally misconstrues how ethnography generates theoretical understandings through detailed and sustained participant observation.

The second issue I raise involves Zizek's positionality as it plays into his methodological decision-making and the resulting sequential analysis and interpretation. When Zizek turns to his analysis of the posting of one young woman (P) and the first three comments on that posting, one of my immediate questions revolved around why he focuses on P's case in particular and why only the first three comments (out of a potential 153, which would seem to me to constitute the complete "case"). P's post is on the first page of the site, amid five other posts that all deal with some kind of romantic or sexual relationship issue, with a subsequent 1,213 pages of postings (each with six entries). While Zizek's efforts to situate P's post in the larger pragmatic frame of the website is a vital contribution, I was not sure how Zizek came to choose this posting from the other 7,278 potential postings and how well P's case represents common patterns in the context of the site. For example, one of the major points of analysis Zizek raises is the significance of leaving off a greeting or any kind of contextual opening to P's account. He argues that the absence of a greeting, a prototypical feature of communication with others, is meaningful, and this insight forms a central premise in his analysis about how teens mark boundaries between self-others. Yet a cursory examination of other posts on the site, as well as social media posting conventions more broadly across other sites, reveals that greetings are not actually prototypical *in this social media context*. I raise this issue to suggest that while Zizek may be right in his analysis that the lack of a greeting indicates a supposition of intimacy on P's part, there are a number of assumptions that place his own perspectives (e.g., about what is prototypical for online greetings in a social media posting) as the default, rather than through empirical analysis of youth practices either in the site or more generally on social media. A more thorough accounting for how Zizek grounds his analytic decision-making would address some of these questions and be fruitful in guiding other researchers to adopt his interpretive method.

One thing that becomes clear in considering methodological implications of Zizek's analysis is that we need a range of disciplinary approaches for studying online phenomena, ones that parse and understand context in multiple ways. Certainly Zizek's application of objective hermeneutics to studying adolescent socialization online represents an important contribution to digital media scholarship, offering a methodology for studying online interactions that allows analysts to reconstruct latent messages embedded in these platforms. Like all methodologies, however, objective hermeneutics draws on particular assumptions and beliefs about the world, such as the assumptions that social action is primarily rule-driven, that social activity can be rendered visible as a text to be interpreted, and that the analyst's interpretive lens is the central one. Other methodological approaches to studying adolescent interactions online operate with different assumptions that will lead to different kinds of

insights: some approaches might be concerned with more emergent dimensions of activity [e.g., Latour, 2004], others with sustained activity that develops over time and across political, cultural, historical, and ideological dimensions [e.g., Hine, 2000], and still others with abandoning given categories and ontologies altogether in “post-qualitative” inquiry [Lather & St. Pierre, 2013]. These areas of emphasis all offer different ways of interpreting the world – and as feminist, postcolonial, and critical race scholars have demonstrated so powerfully, analysts’ interpretive lenses are always rooted in systems of power and privilege with long histories, with profound implications for how knowledge is produced and valued.

Future Directions

In addition to raising important methodological questions about how to study online digital socialization, Zizek’s paper highlights the necessity of a critical approach to how online contexts position young people. Such a critical stance offers an important lens for understanding adolescents’ online interactions, taking into account both potential benefits and drawbacks of these socially networked online spaces as contexts for socialization. One of the most significant findings from Zizek’s critical analysis involves his examination of how the ATL website positions users as customers, revealing latent messages that the individual’s existing relationships and networks are not adequate to solve problems. Zizek argues that these messages are ultimately isolating, encouraging adolescents to doubt their own capacities to solve problems, to turn away from more traditional social contexts for help, and to seek simplified solutions that reduce the complexity of the issues at hand. The critical socialization approach suggested by Zizek takes into account multiple factors influencing adolescents online, including the intimate and distant relationships possible in these social spaces, and examines how these both benefit and limit individuals.

One future direction implied by Zizek’s work concerns digital intimacy, and how adolescents navigate these digitally intimate contexts that are both public and private. In a website about digital abuse, young people are encouraged to make themselves vulnerable and turn to the online community for support. Zizek justifiably questions whether the anonymity of the interactions on the site, the site’s limitations in terms of interaction possibilities (e.g., through character limits on posts and comments), and its positioning of participants as clients and customers actually serves the adolescents who are seeking help with problems of digital abuse. As young people seek to find others online with whom to share their stories, problems, and thoughts, they will need to find (or create) the “proper distance” that not only allows them to develop friendships and intimacy but also to recognize the limitations of such connections. One of the complicating factors in developing digital intimacy involves the public nature of most of the interactions online, which people do not always take into account when sharing private or personal information with others. As Soep [2012] has explored in terms of youth media, the “digital afterlife” of adolescents’ online participation can take unintended and unanticipated directions as others repurpose the original material for different communities and in unforeseen ways. For researchers interested in how young people learn to communicate and interact with others in these social spaces, these questions of how they navigate digital intimacy will become a central issue.

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