

Building a digital edition from archived social media content

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Building a digital edition from archived social media content presents specific technical challenges. Such an edition requires input from colleagues experienced in web archiving, data ethics and rights as well as a novel set of encoding elements. Additionally, building such an edition also requires editors to engage with the platform politics of their respective sources. This short presentation will present the current state and design process of such an edition of archived social media content. The presentation will cover both technical and platform-specific challenges encountered.

To facilitate an edition that is, in the sense of Patrick Sahle, “a critical representation of historic documents” (2016), specific adjustments to the digital medium are necessary. First, as digital media is in constant flux, archiving needs to provide a stabilizing function in order to preserve the content as it appeared at one or multiple points in time. Second, as digital methods have great influence on the amount and format of extracted data, these methods must also be well documented in the encoding process. The presentation will outline the process of developing such an encoding schema which allows for detailed descriptions of multiple data sources and data acquisition methods. Through the extended documentation of the source, social media content is transformed from a live data stream to a static, annotatable object in an edition. By providing multiple versions of the same object, changes in network interactions such as likes and quotes, but also changes in the object, such as edits, can be represented.

Digital editions are positioned between drawing from archived material, and being an archive themselves (Dillen 2019, 266). A

digital edition of archived social media data operates within the economic and ideological tensions that characterize information capitalism. These tensions are evident in platform politics, such as Twitter prohibiting the use of deleted Tweets, a practice which presents significant challenges to a critical edition of archived social media content. Furthermore, social media platforms in general are “unarchivable by design”, pursuing a “monopolization of the public record” (Ben-David 2020). These practices have far-reaching effects, including amongst others a loss of significance of traditional archives to a constant state of uncertainty on the side of researchers. These described characteristics are present on a technical as well as conceptual level. Engagement with these described problems in the context of creating a social media edition serves to illustrate the challenges posed by a platformized Internet and the current state of attempts to negotiate them. These challenges offer ample opportunity for collaboration, including disciplines such as web archiving and platform studies.

In conclusion, this short presentation offers insight into the development process of a digital edition of archived social media. The presentation will outline general design choices and provide insight into the schema development. Further, the presentation will position such an edition in the larger context of platformized social media and illustrate the challenges presented by platform politics and poor data access.

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