Social media, social justice? Consideration from a career development perspective

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Inside the overall context of careers development, this article will explore how social media relates to social justice through exploring two contrasting perspectives. Firstly we will consider the potential of social media to enhance social justice by democratising social life and so address inequalities related to career development. We will secondly consider if social media develops new forms of inequalities in the forms of the network it creates which harm the progression of social justice. It will be argued that these two perspectives coexist, presenting social media as both disrupting and intensifying inequality in society. This will be particularly highlighted through attaching these positions to different schools of thought related to social capital.

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Introduction

Is social media a friend or a foe to a version of career education and guidance that aims to address social injustice? This is the fundamental question this article will aim to engage with. Though I may not be able to provide a definitive statement I will introduce some of the key issues related to this question.

Watts (2005) stated that one of the main rationales for career guidance is to provide solutions to the fundamental structures that lead to inequality in society. Following on from the work of Watts, Hooley (2015) has recently discussed the potential of career education to provide a programme that is both radical and emancipatory in its outlook. This shows that engaging with social justice is an ongoing concern for careers development as a field.

My interest in social media in conjunction with this is the way that social media and the internet, in general, is changing the nature of the field of career development. As Hooley has elsewhere noted the internet has fundamentally changed career. Hooley (2013) has highlighted four main functions of the internet in relation to careers development: a resource library where individuals explore their career information needs, an opportunity market where individuals interact with employers, a space for the exchange of social capital where individuals maintain and build relationships and a democratic media channel where individuals can access the wider world. Hooley goes on to state that 'It is also important to recognise that all of these functions are underpinned by an individual's digital career literacy and their capacity to take advantage of the opportunities that the internet affords' (2012: 5). Hooley here describes digital networks as an instrument. Bimrose et al. (2015) and Bright (2015) similarly discuss ICT as an instrument for the delivery of career education and guidance, while Law (2012), Bender and Oryl (2013), Benson et al. (2014) and Longridge and Hooley (2012) discuss how social media can be used as an instrument by individuals engaged in career development.

This article will add to the body of literature on social media and career development by discussing how the changes that have been brought about to career development by the development of the internet and specifically social media helps or hinders the career sector's engagement with social justice. We will particularly look at social media as the focus of our study as a phenomenon due to its prevalence in discussions around how the internet is changing careers education and development (Longridge and Hooley, 2012, Longridge, Hooley et al., 2013).

This discussion must start by attempting to understand the nature of social justice. Ruff (2001) has described how career exists at the interface of the individual and society which makes wider social and political

concerns inherently related to career. Therefore, any careers professional must ask questions about the type of society the individual will inhabit. Sultana (2014), drawing on MacIntyre (1988), has identified four philosophical traditions of social justice which apply to the field of career development which we will refer to throughout our discussion:

1)   Harmony as categorised by the thought of Socrates and Plato which sees justice as individuals putting their skills at the disposal of the community.

2)   Equality, as represented by Kant among others, sees justice as a level playing field between individuals.

3)   Equity, as represented by John Rawls, sees justice as equal results which often require some to be given more support than others.

4)   Pluralism and difference as categorised by Derrida among other sees justice as ultimately tied to offering respect and value to an individual's humanity.

Beyond this, we will also be careful to bear enlightenment and postmodern views of society in mind when discussing social justice. Griffiths (1998) highlights the tension between the enlightenment view that progress is possible with the postmodern belief that progress may create new forms of injustice and oppression. An example of this in the career guidance field would be the Connexions services which, as Mignot (1999) points out focused on 'disaffected youth' which both brands the individual and runs the risk of excluding those not deemed as 'disaffected'.

This article will explore two differing perspectives on how social media could change the interrelation between career development and social justice. In the next section, we will explore connectivists such as Siemens (2005), Downes (2010) and Cormier (2008). We will consider the potential of social media and social learning to democratise learning and relationships. Secondly, focusing on the work of Mejias (2013), we will consider how social media may develop new forms of inequalities in the forms of the network it creates which harm the progression of social justice.

Connectivism

Connectivism is a learning theory which aims to provide an account of learning in light of the development of digital technologies and especially digital networks such as social media. Siemens (2005) argues that there is a disruptive effect from technology on knowledge, learning and the world of work. Siemens sees this as underpinned by the changing nature of information. While learning used to be institutionalised and long-lasting it is now held outside of institutions in informal online networks and is in a constant state of flux and change. Theorists such as Siemens (2005), Downes (2010) and Cormier (2008) argue that this move challenges the validity of a view of learning as a process that is internal to the individual. Instead, the network has become the dominant way to understand learning; what is important to focus on is not so much how learning happens but where it happens. Siemens (2005) claims that 'know-where' has replaced 'know-what' as the most important aspect of learning. This leads to Siemens claiming that 'the pipe is more important than the content of the pipe.' (Siemens, 2005: 6) and that 'the ability to plug into sources to meet the requirements becomes a vital skill' (2005: 7). This is where connectivism gets its name, from the belief that the ability to connect to the vast informal learning networks online is the vital skill. Cormier puts this as 'the community is the curriculum', (2010) meaning that the aim of education is to help people develop a personal learning network, not just to acquire content. Connectivism therefore claims that the task of education is to help people connect to these networks and to enable them to engage in meaningful lifelong learning rather than just achieving their learning during a limited period of their life cycle which is formal education.

When applied to careers guidance and careers education connectivism's implications are that the internet allows the individual to significantly build career-related social capital. While career-related programmes may traditionally focus on making and implementing decisions as the primary aims, a connectivist programme would enable students to use the internet to build and maintain useful connections. Building social capital has been discussed in the field of career development before by theorists such as Law (1981), Hodgkinson (1999) and Inkson (2004). What

connectivism particularly emphasises is the primacy of connections over other activities, such as information gathering or decision making, and the way the internet allows individuals to develop these connections.

Connectivism as an idea is echoed by many who do not directly use the name. Surowiecki (2005) discusses how crowds have the power to generate surprisingly accurate information when they work together. Not all crowds are inherently wise but under the right conditions can solve certain problems more effectively than individual experts. Surowiecki describes four necessary conditions for a wise crowd: having a diverse range of opinions, having independent opinions not affected by the majority view, being decentralised so individuals can draw on local knowledge and finally a mechanism to aggregate opinions and bring them together into collective view. Clay Shirky (2009) has discussed how the new tools afforded society by social media allow groups to create new ways of social functioning which may challenge existing power structures.

The above ideas point to the potential of the internet and social media to create new ways of organising social life and to enable new means of learning and social participation. Surowiecki and Shirky describe the potential for the internet to create new forms of social life but caution that this will not happen automatically. The implication of this is that if career education and guidance were to pursue social justice through digital networks it should aim to help people develop a particular type of network. This might involve making use of pre-existing groups on specific sites such as LinkedIn or Twitter but also building more widespread relationship networks across multiple platforms. It would be a particular type of these connections that would be encouraged to support individuals in building the capital to access information, relationships and the support to navigate between opportunities in the real world.

But what does this have to do with careers work and social justice? In many ways, network participation and exclusion are one of the chief ways that inequality is perpetuated in society. For example, when Marx (1867) described the class system in the mid-nineteenth century he was in effect observing how individuals lived in differing networks and these

networks held differing degrees of capital often leaving those in inferior networks (subordinate classes) alienated from both capital and fulfilling work. Marx was describing how networks created social injustice. More recently Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) have described how students from a higher class background gain more from college and do better in the workplace afterwards. Importantly this is because those who have better networks (from family, friends etc.) before college are able to form more advantageous social ties in college. Both of these examples show the ability to form networks as a vital part of an individual's livelihood and their career progression.

Connectivism both makes observations about the changes digital networks are having on how networks are formed in society and on the pedagogical approach educators should take in light of this. While both Marx (1867) and Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) observe highly structured social systems, connectivism postulates that digital networks are making networks more dispersed or what Cormier (2010) would describe as rhizomatic. This creates, in McLuhan's words, a global village (1994) where anyone can connect and learn from anyone. Because knowledge is no longer locked away inside institutions anyone can now access the information and support they need to progress. Similarly, Castells argues that the internet creates the potential for a new form of 'networked society' which, based on the value of free sharing, is now 'geared towards collective action and shared ideals, such as…creating community' (Castells 2012: 230). Considering career development, through social media it is now possible to connect directly with individuals and learn from expert voices inside a sector, something that used to only be made possible to the privileged few. Secondly, as relationships are no longer locked away this creates the increased possibility that anyone can connect with the powerful nodes inside a network. While twenty years ago it was possible for someone from a working class background to move through life never meeting an accountant or a lawyer in a personal capacity now if they choose to join LinkedIn they have the potential to do just this. As social media enables connection with any information and anyone the chance for the individual to learn and build significant relationships related to their career becomes apparently only limited by their capacity to

connect. This may seem over optimistic, it is important to remember that social media does not necessarily enable high-quality connections. Boyd (2014) points out that most of the time social media replicates users existing social worlds and does not broaden the diversity of people they connect with. Similarly, Surowiecki (2005) points out that not all crowds are inherently wise, they only gain this property under certain conditions.

What is important to remember is that connectivism is not just an observation about the nature of the internet and social media but is also an educational approach to enable this. Connectivism asks the educator to consider what they can do to broaden their social capital and engage in high-quality communities online. Connectivism would aim therefore to re-focus the task of careers education to facilitate the connections an individual needs to progress and exist inside the various networks that map out their potential future careers. Traditional career activities such as decision making, opportunity awareness, transition skills and self-awareness (as in Law and Watts (1977) DOTS model) would be underpinned by building connections online to enable these activities. Similarly, when considering theories with more focus on uncertainty, such as chaos (Pryor and Bright 2011) or happenstance (Krumboltz and Levin 2004), connections would be seen as providing the underpinning resilience needed to navigate the changing world of work.

So how do the observations that connectivism make measure up to the ideas of justice we looked at before? From the perspective of equality, the key question for justice is whether the playing field is level or not, do people have the same chances or do some people have an unfair advantage. As we have seen, connectivists would argue that the internet creates a situation where institutions and elites no longer have a monopoly on the means an individual needs to develop their career. Under the right circumstances, the internet allows an individual to develop the capital they need to develop their career and would previously have struggled to access. The internet and social networks, in particular, create the potential to re-distribute resources, information and relationships making the playing field more level. Connectivism would point to social media making career

development more equal. What is more difficult to understand though is does the promise bare relation to reality or not?

Off the network

This is where the work of Mejias (2013) comes into its own. Similarly to connectivist theory, Mejias focuses on the implications of social media as a form of network. In his book Off The Network Mejias argues that social networks inherently produce and maintain social inequality. Mejias describes this in two ways; inequality between the network and the participant and inequality between network participants themselves.

Firstly Mejias discusses the relationship between the social media participant and the organisation that runs the network. Mejias points out that participants are expected to give up their privacy to the networks they participate in while networks are increasingly opaque in how they deal with their users' data. This makes users powerless to a certain extent. Examining power structures in this way is in contrast to connectivism's focus on social networks being democratic. If the power structures between social media networks and users are so uneven then participants have little say in how their social interactions are structured and the nature of the networks they participate in. This demonstrates the continued existence of a powerful elite who most individuals have little ability to negotiate with.

Secondly, Mejias argues that inequality between participants is at the heart of a social media network. According to Mejias a network is a particular metaphor of the organisation of social relationships (family, team, body being other examples) but in social media, this metaphor becomes the very architecture of the set of relationships. Networks are based on connected nodes which aim to build and grow connections. Mejias argues that as a node grows connections it becomes able to grow at a faster rate in the future as it becomes more attractive to connect with and more apparent to other users. This means that 'rich' nodes continue to grow and become richer and gain more status, resources and social capital from a network. This makes social media a competition for status and resources between nodes. This is not to say that 'poor' nodes do not

gain any benefit from participating in social media or that they can never become 'rich'. Rather it means than inequality and competitiveness is hardwired into how social media platforms are set up and operate. Importantly this ability to grow and maintain status in a network, according to Mejias, is a product of how the network itself operates. While Mejias' first point about ownership may be countered by arguing that more informal connections should be formed online away from the control of corporations his second point highlights a fundamental flaw in the nature of social life on networks.

So what are the implications of this sort of analysis for social justice and careers work? While connectivism focuses on how social media disrupts existing power structures Mejias highlights how social media creates new ones. If we take, for example, LinkedIn's claim that more than 39 million university students and recent graduates are on LinkedIn Mejias would argue that they are set up to compete against each other for success on the network and that some will achieve radically different results than others. This is not to say that collaboration and generosity do not exist on social media but the structure of the network moves people towards competing for resources in a way that benefits some significantly more than others. As we pointed out above this is because a network creates a form of relationship that embeds competition. News feeds are a good example of this as people's ability to gain popularity on a network and their ability to put out eye-catching content appears to determine how they are interacted with. Similarly, most people experience being approached by people they feel dubious about on social media, not necessarily as part of a deliberate con but in order to grow their network and appear more popular. Both of these examples demonstrate how social media can develop what Mejias (2103) sees as game-like characteristics. The need to grow connections and status to survive on social media encourages behaviour that is based on competition which a minority are significantly more successful at than others because once you have gained status on a social media site, Mejias argues, you can continue to gain it at an exponential rate. This means by extension that the career-related resources that some people receive from social networks are significantly higher than others which would generally point to these 'richer' individuals are more likely to

achieve career outcomes that those without them do not. This correlates with recent research conducted by Robinson et al. (2015), Boyd (2014) and Wessels (2013) who argue that social media replicates existing inequalities in society. Wessels has argued that factors such as class, status and power significantly affect an individual's ability to make use of digital networks due to the impact that educational background, living conditions and health can have on how well individuals can make use of digital resources. Boyd has described how discrimination is a frequent part of online life and often falls along racial and gender lines. This analysis points to the digital world creating discrimination through whether individuals have the ability to make use of the online world and how they are treated by others when inside it. This all points to phenomena such as gender, class, ethnicity etc. affecting how individuals perform well in the competitive environment Mejias describes.

It is possible to read Mejias as deterministic and bleak. The idea that social media forces people to compete and that competition and inequality are hard wired into social media does not always fit our experiences. But, Mejias does not argue that social media never contains generosity and collaboration nor that there is not benefit in some form for every participant. What Mejias argues for is that most social media users are caught between 'super rich' who dominate networks and the corporations who run social media platforms in a way that asks users to compromise themselves in a manner that users have little say in.

This is vital analysis for the field of career development. Practitioners and researchers need to ask if the general move to encourage individuals to engage in social media sites as part of the career research or job hunting may be exposing them to forms of injustice. The prominence of sites such as LinkedIn and Twitter may be benefiting the sites at the expense of the individuals that are trying to be supported.

So how does Mejias' analysis compare to the observations that connectivism make measure up to the ideas of justice we looked at before? Sultana points to John Rawls' (1999) description of justice as equity as one of the key traditions around what constitutes justice. If, as Mejias suggests, competition and inequality

are hard wired into social media then they do not offer justice under this definition, some people will win and others lose. Rather than increasingly basing career development around social media should we not be moving the future focus of career development from platforms that disproportionately benefit some members over others? Especially if those who gain substantial benefit are a significant minority. Mejias ultimately argues we need better forms of social organisation away from the competition and inequality of networks. This creates a potential new avenue for careers development, to take the enthusiasm for community-based career development that is informal and lifelong in its outlook and to see how this could be created and organised away from, or at least not entirely reliant on, social media.

Social Capital

As we noted above connectivists argue that social media can disrupt traditional power networks and equip people for new, more democratic, forms of network. Mejias highlights how social media networks have inequality built into them, and so we must find and develop alternatives to social media. This returns to the tension that Griffiths (1998) describes between the modern and the postmodern, we see the potential for progress while being aware that progress may create new forms of oppression. This tension could also be seen born out in a friction between two different approaches to social capital. Siisiäinen (2003) has drawn attention to different schools of thought about social capital contained in the works of Putnam and Bourdieu respectively. Siisiäinen highlights how Putnam sees social capital as building trust and unity among people. This very much echoes the connectivist approach to social media which focuses on the ability of social media to bring people together and create new communities. This is contrasted with Bourdieu who Siisiäinen sees as having very little to say about trust but is instead concerned with how power is distributed between different groups or 'fields' in society and the advantages this gives to some groups over others. This is similar to Mejias' analysis that social media has inequality hardwired into it due to the power that social media corporations and a minority of 'rich' social media nodes possess. As noted before the status of these rich nodes may be because of the

social capital they gained outside of the network in the form of class, gender or racial advantage. Interestingly this contrast could also be formulated in terms of a harmony-based or an equity-based approach to justice as described by Sultana (2014).

The analysis above highlights a number of points of friction where the contrast between these two positions becomes most clear. Does social media disrupt the power structures which create inequality or simply create new ones? Do they increase democracy and move power from the few to the many or do they heighten competition between people? Do they create a new basis for career development based purely on merit or are they an elite few who have significant advantage over everyone else? Central to this is the question of if social media builds new ways for people to come together into a new form of unity with new potentials for organising and learning or if it preserves or amplifies inequalities in society where the few benefit at the expense of the many.

Conclusion

As we have seen careers professionals can ill afford to dismiss social media as an irrelevance when we consider how to engage with social justice. This engagement will involve recognising the potential that networks offer whilst being mindful of the risks they bring. The difficulty lies in seeing the potential while being cautious of the fact that it may be a dangerous mirage. If social media allows individuals to build social capital, access information, gain support and organise to genuinely support each other then much can be said of the way social media may equip people to overcome barriers and for careers guidance to engage with social inequality. That said we must ask if this can happen equitably across a network or if we are simply allowing some to benefit while the majority do not. This tension is not easily resolved and resists either the enthusiast or the sceptic declaring victory. We cannot simply dismiss social media as wrong because of its potential but we cannot wholly jump on board once we become aware of the potential for inequality.

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