Comparing to Prepare: Suggesting Ways to Study Social Media Today—and Tomorrow

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Abstract
While the two currently most popular social media services—Twitter and Facebook—are different in terms of technical and end-user details, this paper suggests that a series of similarities can also be found regarding different modes of communication offered by both services. These modes are labeled as Broadcasting, Redistributing, Interacting and Acknowledging. The argument is put forward that such synthesis of communication modes across platform could prove useful for longitudinal and comparative research efforts.

Keywords
Twitter, Facebook, comparative research

Media formats come and go, and while the current online situation suggests two services—Twitter and Facebook—to be particularly popular, we can rest assured that they too will eventually fade in popularity, making way for some new hyped variety. For someone interested in longitudinal aspects of online research, the fickle nature of these types of services can be difficult to integrate into future research efforts—how to make sure that the conceptual and methodological designs employed today will be valid also for the research needs of tomorrow? With these issues in mind, the following details some initial thoughts on how to secure solid longitudinal perspectives—even at the time when the platforms so highly studied today are gone. This can be done, I suggest, by focusing on the modes of communication offered by each platform, rather than on the unique characteristics of each platform by itself.

While the aforementioned two platforms are often seen as similar in terms of usage, they are different with regard to technical infrastructures, terminology, and appearance. For our current purposes, the argument is made here that the user of either service is faced with options for usage that are fairly similar—in that they offer comparable modes of communication. The four suggested modes—Broadcasting, Redistributing, Interacting, and Acknowledging—are depicted in Figure 1.

First, the basic notion of Broadcasting entails simply sending a message to a network of followers on either service. As the suggested label implies, this is largely to be seen as one-way communication.

Second, much like Twitter users can use retweets to Redistribute a tweet sent by another user, so can a Facebook user choose to share posts made by others. Indeed, the potential spread of such a redistributed message is dependent on a series of factors—individual user settings, platform characteristics, and so on (Bucher, 2012). Nevertheless, from the perspective of those actors whose messages are being redistributed in retweets or shares, this type of feedback can be very attractive. It allows for their messages to spread beyond their own networks, potentially “going viral.”

Third, as Interaction has sometimes been pointed to as the defining character of the Internet, functionalities for contacting and commenting are by now a commonplace feature on each platform. For Twitter, for example, mentioning another user by including their user name somewhere in the text of a tweet signals interaction—perhaps especially so when that mention comes in the form of an @reply, where the user addressed is mentioned at the beginning of the tweet (Twitter, 2014). Furthermore, both platforms offer more private settings for interaction in the form of Twitter’s Direct Messages and the Chat functionality available on Facebook. These are shown in parentheses in the figure so as to indicate their less-than-public nature—a nature which, for both ethical and methodological reasons, places them out of

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reach for researches. While most users might not choose to engage in discussion in these ways, leaving room instead for the established “Twitterati,” gaining comments and @ replies can be seen as indicative of having an interesting (or controversial, or both) message to convey—a message yielding reactions in terms of attempted interaction initiated by social media users.

Finally, while Acknowledging features like favorite marking a tweet or liking a Facebook post are perhaps best described along the lines of “clicktivism” or “slacktivism,” the exact role of these measurements in deciding the influence of a specific user or post on either studied platform remains somewhat unclear. While the sharing or retweeting of posts and tweets are arguably more important for the coveted viral effects to occur (Socialbakers, 2013), the tracking of likes and favorites can nevertheless be of interest for researchers, as such measures allow us to track the different ways that Twitter and Facebook are employed to provide feedback. The four modes of communication presented should not be seen as a definite solution to preparations for the study of future online platforms. Rather, the suggestions dealt with above are meant to serve as a conversation starter—how are we performing multi-modal research today? How can we adapt our current approaches to data collection in order to secure future, comparative work? Hopefully, the four modes outlined above can be helpful in this regard.

In closing, while the procedural definitions of the terms associated with each service might be clear, the current model cannot make any inroads with regard to what these practices entail to each specific user. For example, a retweet might indicate an expression of support for one user, while others may have ascribed different or even a fluctuating meaning to this or any of the other practices discussed above (Lomborg & Bechmann, 2014). As such, the aggregated view championed here might not be able to delve into these intricacies. Arguably, the approach employed is nevertheless useful, as it provides an overview of actions taken and attention given—whatever form or connotation that attention might take among those giving it.

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| **Broadcast** | **Tweet** | **Post** |
|--------------|-----------|---------|
| **Redistribute** | **Retweet** | **Share** |
| **Interact** | **Mentions, @reply (Direct Message)** | **Comment (Chat)** |
| **Acknowledge** | **Favorite** | **Like** |

**Figure 1.** Four suggested modes of communication on Twitter and Facebook.