“Meaning” in Social Media

Stine Lomborg

Abstract
Researchers of social media struggle to stay up to speed: empirical findings are most often very context- and time-specific and quickly become outdated because the object of study changes. By extension, previously solid and well-tested methods and tools may be rendered obsolete, for instance, as social media services change their application programming interfaces (APIs). The stabilizing component in social media research is arguably good theory—about the communicative patterns and bit trails of use, the actions that social media channel and mobilize, the interplay between social and other media, and, of course, the implications of social media for sociality, privacy, and society at large. In this essay, the concept and study of meaning is proposed as a key concern for social media research. “Meaning” highlights the generative process by which users negotiate the communicative potentials and constraints of a text or a medium vis-a-vis the individuals’ preexisting mental models, expectations, and intentions in context.

Keywords
social media, meaning, communication theory, user studies

The ecology of social media is ever changing. New social media platforms, services, and applications are introduced at a fast pace. Many generate media attention, some gain a firm foothold, but most fade and disappear even before they hit the mainstream of users. The remaining ones change their interface and terms of service, integrate new services and features continuously. Social media do not stay the same. In this constant flux, researchers struggle to stay up to speed: empirical findings are most often very context- and time-specific and quickly become outdated because the object of study changes. By extension, previously solid and well-tested methods and tools may be rendered obsolete, for instance, as social media services change their application programming interfaces (APIs) (Lomborg & Bechmann, 2014). The stabilizing component in social media research is arguably good theory—about the communicative patterns and bit trails of use, the actions that social media channel and mobilize, the interplay between social and other media, and, of course, the implications of social media for sociality, privacy, and society at large. Theory helps us explore empirical patterns and disruptions in social media use in context, but it also provides the key to explaining continuity and change in social media over time.

For media and communication studies, one core theoretical concept is that of “meaning.” What happens when texts and media meet users? Historically, the concept of meaning is contested, in part owing to the interdisciplinary roots of media and communication studies (Jensen, 2010, pp. 48-49). Meaning has been treated as predetermined and immanent in texts (e.g. Eco, 1979; Iser, 1978), as a product of cognition and inherent in mental models (e.g. Hagen, 1998; Höijer, 2007), and as culturally conditioned and shaped by the circumstances of everyday life (e.g. Hall, 1980/1996; Williams, 1981/1986).

Perhaps most helpful is a pragmatist perspective which assumes that meaning is communicatively grounded, situated, and intersubjectively negotiated and shared (e.g. Carey, 1989/1992; Goffman, 1967; Miller, 1984). That is to say, meaning-making is generative and evolves in the meeting between the communicative potentials and constraints of a text or a medium and individuals’ preexisting mental models, expectations, and intentions in context. Over time, meaning crystallizes in specific interpretations and recurrent patterns of communication, in what Miller (1984) has labeled “social motifs,” or purposes that come to define diverse contexts—private, professional, and institutional—of social media use. Accordingly, social media are, at their basics, networked communicative practices, the meanings of which are negotiated by various actors, including service providers, developers, public

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figures, and users, while in the making (Lomborg, 2014). To study meaning in social media, we may ask the various stakeholders about their understandings, practices, and preferences concerning social media, or examine the technical infrastructure and societal discourses on social media. But first and foremost, the concept of meaning invites us to analyze the implied conventions, relevance structures, and individual and mutual orientations displayed in users’ actual engagement with social media: their communicative practices on the screen as well as searching, selecting, and reading in front of the screen.

Since meaning-making is a foundational part not only of communicative acts but also practices not immediately visible to others online (i.e. reading a specific post or thread on social media, or choosing to immerse oneself in one social media service over another), a focus on meaning does not privilege so-called active users over lurkers. These active users, who contribute most of the content and have more expanded networks, are often over-emphasized in social media scholarship, simply because their uses are manifest and configured as readily available data for researchers. Yet, as has been noted (Crawford, 2009; van Dijck, 2009), most social media users may complete a profile and read along only sporadically or several times a day, but hardly ever post anything. The concept of meaning allows for a refocusing and broadening of attention to different kinds of usage patterns and engagement with social media, rather than a narrow focus on the most visible and readily accessible modes of use.

Systematic analysis of social media use in terms of meaning-making presents a key trajectory for scholarship to further develop our understanding of how social media have become a communicative condition in and out of the private, working, and institutional lives of ordinary people.

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