Social Media and Its Impact on Intercultural Communication: The Challenges for a Discourse Approach

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Abstract

*T*he wider field of discourse studies is still only beginning to turn its attention to social media, despite a number of notable scholarly works. This paper looks at some of the challenges for a discourse approach to multicultural communication on social media. It sees the global communication landscape as fundamentally transformed and shifted in the ways in which identities and communities play out. The paper concludes by thinking about what the consequence of these are, specifically the way identity is negotiated online, how cross-cultural debate pans out, how the status of knowledge is changing, and the relationship between the online and offline world. The challenge for discourse studies is to create more robust research and studies that provide concrete examples of these changes.

Keywords: social media, discourse, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, discourse studies

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Introduction

The growing popularity of social media has created a debate: Do these Internet services contribute to society by allowing people to become informed, find common cause, and participate in public life more often? In this sense, is there a place for greater cross-cultural sharing? Or do they foster shallower relationships, distract people from public affairs and deepen their political and civic disengagement? Do social media lead to increasingly disengaged and insular ideas, values, concepts, worldviews, and means of realizing these? After all, social media are social, but only in an immediate sense.

This paper looks at these issues from the perspective of discourse studies. Discourse studies focus on how people communicate their own identities, how they tell about who they are and what they do. It is also interested in how they communicate the identities of others and how, in turn, these identities are represented by others.

The key issues here are how differences are constructed and negotiated. Social media bring both the possibility of sharing, interaction, and dialogue, or for very new kinds of insularity. This paper shows this brings some new and specific challenges to researching intercultural communication - demanding that we rethink theories and produce new methodological tools.

Changes: intercultural communication, social media and discourse studies

The following changes bring new challenges not only for discourse studies but, more widely, for intercultural communication. This paper considers: i.) social media and self-presentation; ii.) the nature of cross-cultural debate online; iii.) issues regarding the changing status of knowledge; and iv.) the relationship between online and offline worlds.

Self-presentation

Social media have greatly shifted what people present about themselves for public knowledge. Indeed, many online social networking platforms seem to revolve around showing, sharing and performing the self. It has been suggested that identity representation on social media, (i.e. showing yourself in a specific place, dating, etc.), is always, to an extent, self-promotional (Hancock & Toma, 2009: 367; Lyu, 2016: 185). Consequently, these virtual places provide a new site for scholarly work that seeks to investigate issues of identity. It also brings new challenges, requiring new theories and new methods, which take on board the different ways social media allow identity to be realized.

Several recent studies about Facebook have focused on how narcissism, self-presentation and self-esteem are manifested by students (Mehdizadeh, 2010; Bouvier, 2012; Liu et al, 2016; Walters & Horton, 2015). More often than not, such studies have employed uses and gratifications as a theoretical framework (e.g. Baraket-Bojmel et al, 2016; Blanchnio et al, 2016; Marshall et al, 2015). Attention has also been paid to the cross-cultural aspects of how Facebook serves as a site of self-presentation, self-esteem, and interaction across countries and cultures see [See Barry and Bouvier (2011), Brailovskaia and Bierhoff (2016), and Taniguchi and Lee (2015)].

As some scholars have argued, this has accompanied massive shifts in what people present about themselves for public knowledge (Liu et al, 2016; Nussbaum, 2007). What is clear from studies of social media is that it is used for a combination of identity construction and the maintenance of social relationships (Bevan et al, 2015).

The 'selfie' can be considered the epitome of self-promotional content. This relatively recent term was coined in 2013 and included in The Oxford Dictionaries for the first time that same year. Since then, studies have tried to understand more about its appeal. Sorokowska et al (2016) found that selfie-sharing is positively related to self-esteem and solidifying social ties. From a gender perspective, more women than men post selfies on Facebook, but they do not have the same degree of motivation in doing this (Sorokowski et al, 2015). Studies found men are driven by entitlement, exploitativeness, and narcissism; whereas women share these motivations to a lesser degree

(Sorokowski et al, 2015; Weiser, 2015). Overall, self-presentation is found to be a key motivator for social networking on Facebook. To some extent these studies do not point to substantial differences in identity work done by social media users. As I move through the following points, I suggest there are, indeed, important differences related to online-offline, the immediacy, and click-and-go nature of social media and to what kinds of identities tend to be fostered and what kinds of political or commercial interests these may serve.

Work on Twitter has also placed identity and self-presentation at its heart. Murthy (2012), for example, has drawn on the likes of Goffman (1981) and Bourdieu (1984) to look at the way that tweeting about the banal, even about what you had for breakfast, is about self-affirmation and signals being an engaged user. This was a time when Twitter had high cultural capital, was able to signify 'debate,' and was popular with professional middle classes. Page (2012) has also looked at Twitter in terms of it being a 'linguistic marketplace,' where people carry out a process of self-branding – although she views this 'synthetic personalization' (Fairclough, 1989) as very much the same thing found in mainstream media talk.

Chiluwa (2015) has discussed the way that extremist groups use social media for a kind of self-branding, where part of the process involves the re-formulation of ethnic divisions and creating imagined opposing interests. As a product is branded by loading it with ideas and values, so an ethnic group can be given new kinds of meanings and significance.

From the standpoint of intercultural communication, such identity construction and self-presentation are important, not only in themselves, but rather as these serve to position people against others, as part of processes of evaluation and legitimization of wider identities and social processes. Facebook and other social media, with their technology of 'likes' and 'trending,' could be thought of as providing ways to do such kinds of evaluations. Celebrities and extremist groups alike would be attentive to such things.

Cross-cultural debate

The theoretical notion of the public sphere is based on the idea that societies communicate, share, and debate ideas across a range of public sites, which can include news, political debates, and entertainment media (Habermas, 1962; Bennett, 2008). However, cross-cultural debate on some social platforms, which are international by default, appears to have a very specific nature, which tends not to be highly reflective. Therefore, De Zuniga et al (2012) argue the increased activity on social media forces us to ask a pertinent question: Do these Internet platforms contribute to society, in the sense of providing a place for greater cross-cultural sharing? Or, do they distract and entertain (e.g. by fostering shallower relationships), diverting people away from public affairs, and deepening their political and civic disengagement (e.g. Hodgkinson, 2008)?

This suggests that, rather than enlarging and diversifying the public sphere, social media lead to increasingly disengaged and insular forms of ideas, values, concepts, worldviews, and means of realizing these. In other words, social media may indeed be social, but only in an immediate, superficial sense. Research into discussions of sociopolitical issues conducted online by Lindgren (2010) found the nature of the debate was not to deal with actual details but rather to seek to frame events into pre-existing personal interests and alignments. Georgakopoulou (2014) found discourses about a pressing political event, like the economic crisis in Greece, became a site for expressing xenophobic ideas about Germans. Similarly, Lindgren's (2012) study about the discourses in forum posts focusing on shootings in schools, an important civic issue, found it became a launch pad for existing views on gun control. There was little evidence of receptivity.

Other research has returned a more optimistic view. In line with studies focused on self-presentation (see above), Hilbert (2009) found that, though people use social media for personal identity construction mainly, they, nevertheless, also access, contribute, and share information that has civic relevance. In his study of YouTube posts about political protests in Turkey, Way (2015) reached a less optimistic conclusion - finding

that, in spite of the vast amounts of posted comments, people didn't engage each other's ideas. Rather, comments were framed in terms of categorizing people on the basis of his or her 'true' national identity, and contributions were homogenised and reduced forms of history. Similarly, Al-Tahmazi (2015) suggested political views expressed in Facebook posts in Iraq recontextualised political actions and actors in order to de/legitimize views, ruling some people in and some out as valid contributors to the discussion.

Taking a wider perspective on this, some theorists have pointed out broader shifts online interactions may both be a part and a symptomof Žižek (1997) expressed concern about online behavior being non-committal. He noted language in forums and blogs ceases to be 'subjectivized.' Participants in a discussion do not have to stand by what they say, but can literally leave the conversation after making their contribution. They can post their comment and then disappear, or they can simply unhook if they do not like a response or want to escape the consequences of what they have said. This can be as simple as clicking away or closing the page. Conversely, this links to the phenomenon of trolling, whereby users can leave a harsh comment and then come back several days later to see its effects. Hardaker and McGlashan (2016) considered misogynist comments on Twitter. They described the nature of this forum as a "highly fluid, fast-moving environment [...] populated by users who may coalesce around a topic or user and engage in transient interactions for a mere matter of seconds before moving on" (Hardaker & McGlashan, 2016: 90). Dean (2010) points to the way that these kinds of interactions can lead to discussion threads quickly disintegrating. Members may disengage, unsubscribe, or feel isolated.

The imbalance between participants and lurkers, who may appear suddenly in threaded discussions, can also add to this problem. In fact, Johnson (2001: 143) argues that when you consider the proportions of lurkers to discussants in a particular forum, it is in fact less interactive than a face-to-face lecture and much less so than a conversation around a dinner table. In the light

of Blommaert's (2010) comments about the need for discourse studies to adapt, we can ask whether new approaches and tools are needed to deal with these changes.

The status of knowledge

The lack of a genuine culture of engagement and participation in discussions online may have another consequence, suggests Dean (2010). The Internet's potential for scan-and-go has generated skepticism of the intrinsic value of knowledge and facts that we find and share online.

Žižek (1997) links this to the collapse of a sense of the 'big other' – a waning of the influence exerted by a central, forceful, and institutional body of knowledge hat sports commonly agreed upon, or at least enforced, ideas, values and identities. According to Hardt and Negri (2000) this decline resulted in a shift from a culture defined by the role of the citizen subject with more determined identifications, to a culture that continually offers new ways to imagine ourselves. Dean (2010: 5) has coined this new situation as the culture of 'communicative capitalism.' In sum, a decline of 'the symbolic' or 'the decline of symbolic efficiency,' to use Žižek's exact words, leaves a gap into which the images and effects of social media can be poured (Dean, 2010: 5). This leads to a shift of more specialist kinds of forums and online spaces, often with their own more specialist language and terms that can easily exclude, annoy, and confuse the outsider. In contrast, Myers (2010) shows that successful blogs should have such specialist language as part of signaling a community of shared interest. Downey and Fenton (2003) point to a trend whereby political activist sites on social media can easily become radical, inhospitable ghettos. In this sense, much is to be established in a discursive sense as regards social media groupings, where more localised identities, ideas, and values are celebrated by how esoteric there are. I will consider the research implications for such issues shortly. Arguably then, this shift requires new kinds of approaches and tools, as suggested by Blommaert (2010), as we move away from either highly personalised or mass media-based texts.

It also raises the question as to whether such shifts apply cross-culturally.

Beck (1992) argued the shift to neoliberalism and the gradual privatization of institutions has led to their diminishing status. Constant attacks on the professions in the news media has further helped to weaken public trust in them. Jessop (2007) also points to the way neoliberalism has led to a shift away from government to 'governance.' Formerly, a centralised government controlled everything in a stable society with fixed, powerful, large institutions that carried the authoritative knowledge of the professions. This stability went along with the more stable and regulated kinds of identity required by the priority of creating wealth through production. People benefited, in turn, from protection by the state in terms of welfare. After the 1990s there was, what has been called, a hollowing out of government (Jessop, 2007). Government starts to give away much of its power to corporations and semi-private organizations. All parts of society are run on market principles. The new neoliberal system does not want fixed identities but mobility, where the economic driver is no longer productivity and full employment, but competition. The large institutions begin to break down and lose their relevance. The older fixed forms of knowledge no longer fit where the emphasis is on the ability to adapt and change.

Whereas the state wanted relatively fixed identities (as seen in HR monitoring forms, where even third generation Asian people remain 'Asian British' for example), corporations require something very different. They want flexible identities that can best be aligned with lifestyles and consumer choices. We can see these shifts in social media, where identities can tie closely to consumer preferences, and where there are massive amounts of fragmentation and specialization.

Technology, too, has been harnessed in this process. Fairclough (1992) argued culture is now going through a process of 'technologisation.' By this he refers not specifically to actual technology per se, although this can be included. What he refers to, specifically, is the increasing codification of language and semiotic resources.

So, for example, a professional teacher would formerly teach according to what her professional training indicated, she will now draw on dense classifications of learning outcomes and will have to present these as a list of learning objectives. Quite intangible things, like learning, have become codified and measured. Later, each student will have learning targets measured and the teachers, themselves, will have their own performance evaluated by a coded system. All of this will be accompanied by software packages used for inputting the data, which will then be used by a manager operating in the system of governance, who may have no knowledge of teaching, to create rankings and allocate performance related rewards. Professional trust is replaced by data and, to an extent, is all structured by the software packages and the templates they provide. WordArt, for example, is used to produce flow charts to show work performance. These come with certain shapes and direction indicators already packaged into the templates. The result is the classifications and the databases and the software become formats that govern actions.

One of the things that hasn't been academically addressed yet, is that all this software leads us to interact through its templates like Facebook or Instagram – we can only act and interact in the ways that it allows us to do. The technologisation, or, in other words, templatization of culture through the classification systems of language and software, exert huge semiotic control over us. We tend to think about what we can do with software, rather than what we cannot. In a way we are now so used to technologies that templatise what we do, we no longer see them.

We should also stay mindful of the fact that these templates are built on top of algorithms, where the software platforms have as priority, the aim of gathering data and linking behaviour, knowledge, and identities to consumer practices. We began with a state that had rigid fixed categories, and represented authoritative and centralized bodies of knowledge. Now knowledge becomes completely fragmented but is always realized through templates and through a technologized semiotics, aligned to the algorithms built into system of interlocking software.

But do the arguments of Žižek (1997) and others apply so well in cultures with very different histories, ideas and values? Are these 'symbolic gaps' of the same order? For Dean (2010), the decline of the symbolic has a further consequence that may have great relevance for intercultural communication through social media. She suggests that, along with the demise of central authoritative ideas and identities, the Internet, with its culture of engagement, of participation, and of scan-and-go, has generated skepticism. This skepticism means users tend to regard comments always as opinion and not as information, which, in turn, means we tend not to engage in receptive discussion, but fall back on what is comfortable. All else is just opinion. This resonates with the kinds of wider changes observed by sociologists that have pointed to a shift taking place from placing emphasis on the personal-as-political and where this is realized in a world where everything is supposed to be rewarding.

What this means for discourse studies is we may have to ask what the new sites are where issues are being communicated, besides older media like newspapers and television. In addition, to asking who is providing 'the dominant ideology' that discourse studies tended to focus on, now that large institutions are in decline? Maybe this ideology is to be found in templates used by software?

Online/offline

At the start of this paper I asked whether indeed social media could enhance intercultural communication, where cultural communities can present themselves and the beliefs they share online.But one crucial issue here is the relationship between the online and the offline worlds. In the first section, I looked at the way researchers had considered identity as it is presented online. In the case of social media, this is made more complex, since people often do different things with different platforms and social media, as we saw trends towards promotional types of behavior given the rule of trending and of likes. In the part of the Middle East where I live, there is also the issue that people commonly have multiple accounts. This relates to issues of anonymity

and personal freedom. But it is common to find people engaged in discussions through multiple guises. At a different level, each can allow these people to align with different kinds of interests and communities, some of which claim to exist offline. The truth is we know little about how offline and online relate.

Of course this very online/offline distinction is problematic, since social media are so much a part of much of what we do (Bakardjieva, 2005). We book a restaurant online, looking first at the reviews. We look at blogs on medical sites to check out the rash on our foot. But what we should, in fact, be asking is exactly where and how these social media shift things in our lives. As regards multicultural communication, in what new ways do people engage within their own communities and in what new ways have these come to be defined? Indeed, research has shown that politically motivated groups spend much time manufacturing and defining the interests (e.g. threats to ethnic groups) (Chiluwa, 2015).

One theme in scholarly research relates to the role of anonymity and how this influences behavior, (Ellison et al, 2006: 416) allowing them to make comments on the discrepancy between 'actual selves' and 'ideal selves' in people's online self-presentation, where people tend to be rather creative with the truth (Hancock & Toma, 2009; Yurchisin et al, 2005: 742). What seemed clear in interactions was the nature of the lag in responses gave users time to carefully craft an attractive persona (Gibbs et al, 2006).

Other researchers suggest social media identities should be better thought of as hoped-for selves (Zhao et al, 2008). More research is needed to begin to understand how identities play out in face-to-face and online contexts (Ellison et al, 2011). Conversely, from the viewpoint of intercultural communication, we would want to know more about what resources and what kinds of identity characteristics were legitimised or delegitimised, for example.

So far the most compelling research into online/offline relationships deals with protest movements, where social media is used to mobilize people in

anti-capitalist movements and environmental rallies, for example (Howard & Hussain; 2011, Bennett & Segeberg, 2012). Social media have been credited with the rise against authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North African, though others have put this in perspective (Cohen, 2011; Cottle, 2011). Twitter in particular has been thought to have been a highly powerful way to recruit and radicalize protesters and militants (see González-Bailón et al, 2012). However, other researchers have been less certain about the direct role of social media. In regard to the uprisings in Egypt and Iran, Lim (2012) argued there were previous waves of attempts on social media to mobilize the population. But what had shifted was that society had become less stable, with high unemployment and where fewer young people had been able to settle down and have families.

The point is that social media, in this sense, operate within specific contexts. Put simply, it may be that, on the one hand, in order to understand discourses found in social media we must place them in the everyday lives of users (Thurlow, 2004). On the other hand, it is such social circumstances that can be used on social media to mobilize a population to a specific kind of interest. As we saw earlier, social media are a kind of 'linguistic marketplace' (Page, 2012) comprised of a kind of 'synthetic person-alization,' to use Fairclough's (1989) term. As Chiluwa (2015) describes, extremist groups can self-promote in a way that can be highly engaging. We know that social media can be highly exclusive where those who orbit around a site can become highly insulated from alternative points of view.

As to discourse studies, perhaps research should not solely focus on the question of how identity is expressed online. There should be research looking into understanding how the way we are expressing ourselves online is starting to change how we are living offline.

Conclusion

To summarise the consequences of these areas for a discourse approach to multicultural communication I see four key challenges. Since postructuralism, the idea of fixed, monolithic identities has been challenged. Social media, although these vary, appear to favour the promotional and the shifting and idealization. In a globalised world, where semiotic resources fly across older boundaries, becoming remade and being used constantly to remake and re-imagine identities, social media facilitate this perfectly.

The idea of community, either ethnic or political (among others), is also challenged. It may not be so much that actual physical communities have visibility in social media, but those versions that have visibility are those that are trending and get likes. As we know, to some extent, social media are a world of self-promotion, dependent on how skilled you are at developing a presence and getting content promoted.

The idea of fixed knowledge about histories, geographies, and identities is crumbling. On the one hand, there is a retreat into opinion. Much social media, it has been observed, is ghettoised. Those that are more open, like Facebook, tend to lack actual dialogue, as people look out at the world from their ghettoes and hit out.

As well as the decline of Big Knowledge, as the reach of the central government wanes, there is the technolo-gization of culture – the checks and measures required by government, which are also linked into software. So do we become used to acting though the templates of software. This can be recording our teaching objectives, but it can also be how we react to others, e.g. through 'liking' or through accepting the value of trending and then becoming part of the world of algorithms that successfully connect everything about us to consumer patterns. Whereas the former state and big institutions wanted fixed identities, the new neoliberal world gives us what looks like choice, but choice that is always tracked algorithmically and always part of consumer lifestyle patterns. Corporations will foster difference and, even, identities that had no place in the former fixed world of the state, but these will be technologized in way that is useful to them.

Put simply, social media are different than the old top down media, where we may study the discourses used to represent different cultures, represented as monolithic. People and their interests can be voiced from the

bottom-up. We must understand more about the ways in which the templates of the platforms and software format this. Just as the old system controlled and shaped in its interests, what is currently the case? In part, these media offer new freedoms of identity expression. But to what extent do these align with new patterns in the global semiotic flow? And to what extent are the dominant images and representations governed by trending and likes? And what, then, will the relationship of the voices of communities and identities that we find trending on social media be to the people they claim to represent. As research has shown, in social media, community and identity is very much up for interpretation.

The challenge for discourse studies is to create more robust research and studies that provide concrete examples of these - to show, in each case, what kinds of ideas, values, attitudes, and identities are part of this flow and point to how much these are subject to some of the forces I have considered in this paper.

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