Social Media for Social Change?

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Abstract

Although there are salient examples of social change in which social media technologies have been attributed a key role, we have little systematic information on how widely nor how reliably these effects are seen and there is currently no accepted theory of the mechanisms which could mediate these effects.

The position presented in this paper is that the literature on social media and social change needs to make a stronger connection with low-level theories of the dialogue processes that underpin discussion and perspective change, and with work currently led by performance practitioners on the construction of environments, formats and protocols for enhancing engagement in discussion and debate.

Author Keywords

Social media, social change, discussion, dialogue

ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.m [Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI)]: Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Human factors

Introduction

Social media technologies have been shown to aid mass communication and facilitate the organisation of engaged citizens in offline practices. While it is often claimed that these technologies also offer the opportunity for individuals to discuss topics and encounter a wide range of opinions, systematic evaluation of the extent of these effects and their connection to change is unclear.

Examining low-level theories of dialogue processes such as turn taking and repair, looking at methods used in deliberative processes and performance techniques that seek to effect social change may inform the configuration of environments that enhance discussion and debate.

The extent to which meaningful communication and discussion occurs online in unclear. One intuitive criterion for assessing the quality of discussion is whether it leads to opinion change. However, this is difficult to assess due to the complex interaction of environmental, social and individual factors. Responses to opinions appear to depend on the context in which they are encountered. They are also thought to depend on individual differences, for example, whether people tend to be 'challenge averse' or 'diversity-seeking' [14]. There is a growing body of research into the motivating factors behind technology mediated social participation [16] [19] [15]. However, while academics are examining the elements that encourage participation, such as empowerment, intra-individual processes and identifiability [19], enquiry tends to start from an examination of online environments.

The position of this paper is that this debate needs to connect more closely with offline contexts, by exploring low-level dialogue phenomena with a view to extracting design principles for constructed environments for social change.

Designing systems to effect change

Research into designing for change has shown that positive behaviour change can be encouraged through engagement with social technologies. Information feedback, personal information management, awareness raising, as well as ease of use and integration, have been identified as key factors which influence the uptake of new positive behaviours [10] [13] [11]. However, can social change be encouraged using the same techniques?

Research into persuasive technologies has shown the effectiveness of social cues in interactive system design [6]; the findings demonstrate that well designed systems can influence behaviour, but do not show whether they provoke shifts in perspective and opinion.

Deliberative democracy processes offer a framework to guide interactions with a view to effecting social change. Creating conditions for trust and reframing [9] and involved processes that enable individuals to critically engage with an issue, consult different perspectives, and formulate decisions through engagement in discussion are elements of a deliberative process for social change [7]. As such, it is perhaps necessary to think beyond persuasive technologies and consider instead the underpinning mechanisms that facilitate opinion change and mediation through dialogue. What configurations of environment could promote the modification or changing of opinions? How might systems better support consultation with diverse perspectives and support effective discussion?

Exploring dialogue

To effect social change, discussion between holders of differing viewpoints is often a necessary precursor. While it is argued that social technologies enable the quick diffusion of information and ideas and allow for dialogue,

there is little evidence of the extent and effectiveness of these functions. While commenting, discussion forums and social media technologies facilitate dialogue to an extent, their low level effects on the normal conversational mechanism that facilitate effective discussion are unknown. It is worth highlighting that mechanisms of discussion referred to here are distinct from rhetoric.

Effective communication is dependent on the establishing of common ground through a process of grounding [5] and has been identified as a key element of deliberative practices [8] [4]. Fine-grained mechanisms that sustain mutual-intelligibility and help conversations to move forward such as grounding, turn taking and repair can inform a fuller understanding of the particular phenomena associated with discursive practices [18]. However, a detailed examination of these low-level technical elements of deliberative discussion have not been fully explored, especially in studies orientated towards technology.

Although dialogue presents complex practical challenges as a field of experimental enquiry a number of useful paradigms have been developed. These approaches typically involve experimental interventions that manipulate dialogue by placing general constraints on when, how and with whom people can communicate. The most direct experimental control over word and turn-level dialogue phenomena is provided by the use of confederates who can make scripted or partially scripted contributions to interaction in order to test for specific effects. Experimental tests of theories about communicative signals of affiliation and empathy have made extensive use of confederate techniques [2] [1] [20]. There is limited application of these methodologies within a technology context. How might building on these approaches, and developing a fine-grained analysis of

dialogue phenomena advance our understanding?

Imagining alternate social realities

Many forms of contemporary art and performance have moved beyond traditional theatre or gallery settings and incorporate techniques that aim to promote social and political engagement. There is a body of practice-based approaches for configuring spaces that are conducive to discussion and debate. Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed developed a number of performance techniques to transform audience members into active participants and explore social issues. In forum theatre, for example, the 'spectator-actors' are invited to intervene in the action, impart their own ideas and actively participate in testing out various directions the dramatic action might take, to explore opposing arguments or responses to a situation [3].

Artist Lois Weaver's work experiments with public engagement; 'The Long Table' is a designed environment, governed by certain protocols for interaction. Once seated at the dinner table an individual becomes a guest performer at a performance of a dinner party. The dinner table becomes a public forum that facilitates discussion, partly live and partly self documenting as they are invited to make notes on the table cloth. Individuals are free to join or leave the table at any time. This experimental method encourages new forms of discussion and informal conversation on serious topics such as social justice and democracy [21].

Conclusion

There is currently a lack of attention paid to low-level theory of dialogue in relation to discussion and perspective change, elements which I see as integral to the process of effecting social change. Moreover, there is a body of

practice-based methods, such as established modes of deliberative dialogue [17] and more experimental techniques employed in contemporary performance practices, that warrant further attention. Can a systematic approach to evaluating deliberative processes and experimental discussion formats from a performance context inform the design of new technology mediated environments? How can a more fine-grained analysis of the underpinning dialogue mechanisms of discussion and debate be brought to bear upon how social change is achieved?

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