

Reconceptualizing Mass Communication as Engagement: The Influence of Social Media

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“For the legions of critics who had previously dismissed platforms like Facebook and Twitter as vapid troughs of celebrity gossip and self-aggrandizement, the toppling of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt suggested that these tools were as effective for organizing protests and revolutions as they were for organizing keg parties. The movements throughout the Arab world appeared to have imbued social media with an irrevocable sense of legitimacy as a tool for fomenting change.” Raymond Schillinger, Web Producer, Documentary Filmmaker, September 20, 2011 [1].

In a summit at the U.S. Institute of Peace in September, 2011 policymakers and social media experts identified several issues surrounding the evolving role of social media in political contexts including: the challenge of understanding social media because there is simply too much data; the difficulty of effectively interpreting information communicated in social media platforms; the reality that social media is reshaping human language; the struggle with balancing the veracity of social media as a vehicle of public opinion with the anonymity and risk of false information communicated; the potential corporate influence in the dominant social media platforms; and the application of social media in both peace and conflict situations [1]. While analyses of social media’s influence in politics have been emerging since the 2008 election of Barack Obama in the United States [2] and underscored by the Arab Spring in 2010 where collective action was not only enabled by social media, but the world was able to watch citizens of some of the most restrictive regimes demand their voices be heard; we have not yet adequately addressed social media’s influence on mass communication and journalism research and analysis. For the last decade there has been a growing community of ‘new communication technology’ researchers and analysts; however, I would argue that we can no longer treat analyses of new communication technology – no matter their form – as a separate line of research. Instead researchers, scholars, and practitioners should adopt an engagement approach to understanding mass communication and journalism. Much like the emergence of the printing press revolutionized literacy and how people could experience their world in the past; we are again at a crossroads of technology and changing the human communication experience.

The need for an integrated approach – that is, one that considers both traditional and new media – to mass communication and journalism is readily apparent across the diverse sub-fields within our discipline. Bennett and Segerberg [3] argue that we are increasingly separated from traditional socio-cultural structures like churches, local communities, and other mass organizations; however, we increasingly follow issues that we believe affect us. To this end, they argue that social media not only provides a platform for organizing people around issues of concern, but it also fosters the personalization of activism fostering sustained high levels of engagement, agenda focus, and network strength. The growing body of evidence indicates these social changes are not only taking root in politics [4] and youth cultures [5], but are increasingly useful tools for building communities of interest

around health issues [6], advertising and marketing [7], and certainly journalism [8]. The preponderance of evidence indicates that if we are not considering the influence of social media on mass communication, then we are likely missing a very important piece of the puzzle.

However, it is not enough to merely consider social media or the platform *de jour*, we may very well need to refocus our paradigm in mass communication to emphasize engagement. In fact, our research and criticism will profit by focusing on the dominant public relations model of two-way symmetrical communication characterized by collaboration, compromise, and listening [9]. This means that as we consider the impact of social media, we should be analyzing and measuring the way that individuals and organizations effectively use social media as a form of engagement instead of a more traditional dissemination approach to measuring and analyzing mass communication. Thus, the measure of impact and influence is likely to favor messages that go viral [2] or effectively synchronize their messaging between traditional and new media [10] because these seem to more accurately reflect the ways that people are actually using mass campaigns and articles [7]. Simply, if our lexicon and the ways that we view the world and our place in it is changing, our approaches to researching and critiquing mass communication and journalism must also change.

This may have profound implications on the traditional theories and even research methods that we use, or it may have very little impact; however, the larger point is that without investigation to determine if our modern assumptions of behavior, power, and action hold true in the technology age. From politics to public relations and from routine to crisis communication, we must reconceptualize mass communication in an engagement paradigm.

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