Polymedia and Ethnography: Understanding the Social in Social Media

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Abstract

In this essay I argue that social media need to be understood as part of complex environments of communicative opportunities which I conceptualize as polymedia. This approach shifts our attention from social media as discrete platforms to the ways users navigate environments of affordances in order to manage their social relationships. Ethnography emerges as the most appropriate method to capture the relational dynamics that underpin social media practices within polymedia.

Keywords

affordances, social media, media environments, ethnography, personal relationships, social media and disasters

When Typhoon Haiyan struck the town of Tacloban in the Philippines in November 2013, Gilbert lost all members of his family. Engulfed by enormous waves, his family home was washed away together with all material possessions. The only thing that remained of his father and sister were their Facebook profiles and photographs uploaded on social media. The permanence of digital photography and the retrievability of digital content on this occasion became central to Gilbert's grieving and dealing with loss. Originally an infrequent Facebook user, after the Typhoon, Gilbert became a prolific contributor, expressing his emotions and recounting his memories on his own wall and those of his late relatives.

Defining social media and assessing their social uses can be challenging given they become so many things to different people. While for Gilbert Facebook is a way of dealing with loss, for Aira, a Filipina teenager, it is a way of finding the ideal distance in the relationship with her mother who works abroad. The different temporal structure and visuality of Facebook and WhatsApp compared to Skype explain why Aira prefers them for keeping in touch with her migrant mum as they spare her the embarrassment of having to find excuses not to turn on the webcam and reveal her untidy room. The asynchronous temporality of social networking sites (Baym, 2010) afford Aira more control over how she presents herself and handles the relationship with her mother.

As social media proliferate, each acquires its own niche in people's communicative repertoires. What emerges then is a complex environment of multiple, evolving social media that combine with other platforms, older and newer. The term "polymedia," which I developed together with D. Miller (Madianou & Miller, 2012, 2013), shifts our attention from social media as discrete platforms to an understanding of media environments which users navigate to suit their communicative needs. If the term "social media" is too generic while "Facebook," "Viber," or "Twitter" are too specific and ephemeral (given the perpetual evolution of platforms), polymedia puts forward a dynamic model of media as a composite structure of converging communicative opportunities within which social media can be understood. According to this approach, the emphasis is on the relational definition of all media from a users' point of view within this composite structure. To return to Aira's earlier example, each platform acquires its own niche depending on its affordances while all media together form the environment within which this particular mother–daughter relationship is negotiated. For instance, Facebook has a specific set of features and affordances (boyd, 2014; Hutchby, 2001; Papacharissi, 2009) that distinguish it from other social media and online platforms. What Aira cannot do through Facebook, she can almost certainly achieve through an alternative social networking site that combines a different set of affordances. Users rarely use just one platform, but an assemblage of media while increased convergence intensifies the

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switching between platforms as is evident in research with smartphone users (Madianou, 2014).

Polymedia highlights the ways in which users exploit the differences among media in order to manage their relationships. Assuming users have unconstrained access to and can skillfully use at least half a dozen media—and I recognize this is a big if—choosing one social networking site (say Facebook) over another platform (say Skype) acquires communicative significance. In Aira's example, the choice of Facebook signals her desire to keep her mother at some distance—a choice that is not lost on the mum who prefers the immediacy of webcam. The choice of platform or medium can become as meaningful as the actual content of a particular exchange. The analysis of media as an environment and the emphasis on the ways in which users navigate this environment can open a window to the inner micro-workings of mediated communication and their consequences for people's relationships.

In this short piece, I can only very briefly sketch the contours of polymedia which is one of parallel intellectual efforts that acknowledge media as a process and as part of interlocking social, political, and economic environments (Couldry, 2012; Deuze, 2012; Kember & Zylinska, 2012; Latour, 2005). A more detailed analysis and comparison to other related concepts (such as multimedia and transmedia; see Jenkins, 2006) and theories (media ecology [Ito et al., 2009; Slater, 2013], media multiplexity [Haythornthwaite, 2005], mediation and mediatization [Couldry, 2012; Hepp, 2012; Livingstone, 2009]) can be found elsewhere (Madianou, 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2013). Even the shortest essay on polymedia, however, would be incomplete without a discussion of ethnography.

The theory of polymedia emerged out of a comparative ethnography of new communication technologies among transnational families (Madianou & Miller, 2012). The ethnographic approach was crucial for capturing media as environments and the relational dynamics therein. I argue that ethnography is the best if not the only way to study polymedia. While data-driven approaches have acquired enormous popularity and contribute to the generalized understanding of social media practices, only ethnography can unearth the nuanced ways in which people navigate the environment of social and other media and how this is shaped by relational dynamics. Because ethnography uniquely combines a wide lens and a microscopic attention to detail, it is perfect for capturing environments and their contexts but also the micro-dynamics that produce them. Ethnography does not assume what is social media, but rather highlights their social uses according to context. This is essential for capturing cultural and social differences in the context of the rising popularity of social media in what is called the "global south." Beyond the cultural relativism argument, ethnographers can assess popular assumptions about social media. Gilbert's earlier example emerged from a study of social media in disaster recovery. Rather than confirming the utopian, techno-determinist visions about the so-called "humanitarian technologies" (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA], 2013; World Disasters Report [WDR], 2013) to empower affected people and transform the power asymmetries of humanitarianism, our ethnography revealed rather more ordinary uses of social media such as dating and gaming in the aftermath of disaster. In Gilbert's case, social media did not reverse the power structure of humanitarianism, but they did facilitate grieving and coping with loss. The ethnographic surprise (Strathern, 1996) can enrich our understanding of social media.

Polymedia and ethnography converge in that they take as a starting point the relational dynamics that underpin social media practices. Polymedia involves three types of relationships: those among media within a communicative environment, the relationships between humans and technology, and the relationships among people through and "in" media. In other words, polymedia is about the convergence of the technological and the social and in so doing about unpacking the "social" in social media.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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