Effects of media on public discourse

- MICHAEL GANIDEKAM

DO SOCIAL MEDIA ENCOURAGE OR DETRACT FROM MEANINGFUL PUBLIC DISCOURSE?

When one is asked a question on " What is the greatest power evident in this 21 st Century?" answers and thoughts will cut across recent powerful countries like the US or China, or other great transnational businesses. But that really depends on the person's perception on how he/she defines power. Anything that has the ability to bring about change and status is how I define power that is why I consider the internet as the greatest power in the 21 st Century. The impact and contributions this technological invention has brought on human life and the world cannot be denied or silenced about. Mangold and Faulds (2009) points how Social Media has influenced and contributed in many aspects of stakeholder behaviours in relation to how information is received and consumer attitudes towards a product or service.

Social media as defined by Lindsey (2011) refers to internet-based applications which allow communication and sharing of information and resources between people. It also provides a means by which people can connect to each other through the internet. Social media can also be identified as a group of internet-based applications intended to build on ideological and technological foundations that allow the establishment and exchange of content generated by users (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social Media can also be considered as technology-facilitated dialogue driven through platforms like social networking, social bookmarking, wikis etc. to connect with the public. (Reilly and Hynan, 2014). Social media comprises of

a wide range of online channels. They include word-of-mouth forums which include blogs, discussion boards sponsored by companies and chat rooms, consumer-to-consumer email, internet discussion platforms and forums, social networking websites and more. Examples include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, wikis, blogs, LinkedIn, MySpace etc.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) observed how social media use has evolved in wonder through the past decade from frequent changes affecting communication through new technologies to help interact and share information. According to McLuhan's medium theory for new media, it states that, " any advanced modern society is shaped by the various media technologies that are available to it" (Laughey, 2007).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) identified two key elements of Social Media, related to the theory of media research which is Social Presence and Media Richness. The social presence theory states that, media vary in the degree of social existence and allow the merging of two communication partners. The higher the social existence, the larger of influence that communication partners have on each other. And other key element, media richness theory bases its assumption that the goal of any communication is the resolution of ambiguity and the lessening of uncertainty. Because media vary in the level of richness, some media are more effective in resolving ambiguity and uncertainty than others. Connecting the theories to Social Media, we assume that, a classification can be made based on the richness of the medium of communication and the level of social existence it allows.

Van Dijk (1997) identified discourse in three dimensions which are language use, communication of beliefs and interaction in social situations. He further noted how the use of language is not only limited to speaking but also encompasses written text communication where ' text' is defined as the product of writing. Written texts are integral in how one wants to communicate with language through speaking and writing and the modes for this discourse is what Van Dijk (1997) termed as ' Users', who include authors and readers. This theory is appropriate in Social Media where texts play a vital role in the communication and interaction process.

Meaning is another important element in a discourse. Laughey (2007, as cited in Hall, 1982) observed that, " Meaning is a social production, a practice. The world has to be made to mean. Language and symbolism is the means by which meaning is produced". He further explained that, language is made to mean something by encoding by the producers and this is then made to mean something through decoding by audiences. The encoding and decoding model of semiotic theory for meaning creation helps to know if Social Media messages have meanings rather than just reflecting meanings (Hall, 1993).

In understanding meaning in a discourse, Van Dijk (1997) postulates two notions; Topic and Reference. ' Topic' is the general meaning that defines the unity of a discourse and most often are expressed in sectors of media as headlines, posts or summaries and an example can be seen on either of the social networks posts. He also posit that, topics are usually the best remembered part of a discourse which I agree to because when one has about 500 friends on Facebook and posts a content with the topic " Ebola in

Scotland", the topic easily circulates and be remembered when the reader or recipient might not have been able to remember the whole detail of the information. The other notion is ' reference' and this is the way a discourse and its meaning are linked to imagery events that is been talked about or trending as we call it in Twitter. Therefore in achieving a consistent discourse resulting in a meaningful one, Van Dijk (1997) argues the text of the content must be about events or situations that relate at least with the speaker or sender.

A meaningful discourse can therefore be defined as a process of partnership and social negotiation with the goal of sharing different viewpoints and ideas and to collaborate on solving problems and knowledge building activities (Gilbert and Dabbagh, 2005 as cited in Duffy and Cunninggham, 1996).

Let's consider one of the Social Media platforms in perspective and how it is lessening meaning in a discourse. Twitter is a social networking platform where users send and receive text-based updates called tweets (Fairclouth, Mulderrig and Wodak, 2011). These tweets can be delivered and read web based or via instant messaging clients. On this platform, users choose whom they want to follow either an individual or a group or even strangers; they then receive all updates written and posted by them. About engagement on this platform, a Twitter user follows a range of people and some of these people do post updates of which some offer useful words of advice, links, news or amusing tales. But many of these messages might just be scanned through, no much concentration, appeal and sometimes put the person off. Sometimes the intimacy of Social Media contexts is not always positive as Crawford (2009) postulates. It can create discomfort, confusion or

resentment. She therefore mentioned that sometimes Twitter users may require dexterity based on its demands of news updates to messages, information about what is trending in the day or what somebody had for breakfast.

Korschun and Du (2012) argues that Social Media users are not passive audience but rather are active co-creators of worth but Asur et al. (2011) rebuts that, Social Media generates a never-ending wealth of content and that only few messages and topics manage to attract enough attention and engage in public discourse.

In this technological age, one is able to express his/her opinions, ideas, and thoughts freely via the Social Media at no cost or charge. No form of regulation is binding users for signing in/up, liking a post on someone's page, or following someone on Twitter. The only thing evident is the attainment of information. With Social networks like Facebook and Twitter, ' liking' something is assumed as the determinant of worth to the one who posted that information. Liking does not necessarily mean anything to the recipient because we cannot argue if just liking something on a page describes how the recipient is feeling or thinking when doing that (Zappavigna, 2012). I can testify to this myself as an ardent Social Media freak that, most often, the thought process in liking something on a page maybe absent hence done passively.

A Facebook user can log into his/her account only to be welcomed with a well of texts or posts and even begging you to see more. When messages are posted on Social Media and become disturbing to the recipient, they lose

meaning and thus become ' noise' to audiences or users. Any undesired uncertainty of message or information received is called noise (Nunes, 2011). He also mentioned that noise can reduce the potential of communication in a discourse. This case of noise cuts across all the platforms of Social Media for example with one of the social networking platforms called Twitter. This system can provide pop up messages on users screens whenever messages called ' tweets' are received passively serving as disproportionate fracas (Zappavigna, 2012).

Social Media users have come to trade commitments with engagements or interactions for a pat on the back, and this discourse is eroding that true culture of dialogue and the ability to nuance values we actually like. Think about it in this way, the majority of content posted on a social/web page each day and contrast that with interacting in real life. Which is meaningful? About content on Social Media, Lee (2014) posit that, it is not a discussion but a statement and this makes the internet an accumulation of statements, thereby resulting in dialogue lost for a meaningful discourse. One can testify to how information presented in person through interaction in real life feels.

Another limitation for a meaningful discourse is when content is ignored and considered unworthy to recipients and when content is in the viral state. When a user is present online, his/her account cannot disallow posts from trawling onto the page but the only remedy is to ignore them. Lee (2014) identified virulence on Social Media as the circulation of a statement online which does not offer room for discussion. An example of such incidence is the confusion on mislabelling a missing student as the suspect following the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. Somebody jokingly posted his name on

Twitter and his name ended up trending nationally, though he had nothing to do with the attack. All these factors account for the depreciation of the worth to address and discuss issues in depth.

The proliferation of misinformation on Social Media is in influx and easily goes viral. Examples of such include posts on misguided drug use/health, false organisations or individuals appear to deceive or fraud people, false information circulating and many more. An example can be traced to the recent first diagnosis case of ' Ebola' virus in the United States on September 30, 2014. The patients were tested and proved negative but Social Media users on Twitter kept ' tweeting' as if the virus was running rampant in the country.

There is nothing wrong with how Social Media use has helped in engaging and communicating with a large and diverse virtual community of people but the argument here is that it does not provide fulfilment on the platform. Interaction between individuals physically confers a much better way to dialogue and know who the person is and how well trust can be expressed on them. The anonymity of oneself on cyberspace allows others to in some way disassociate with their ideas, thoughts and even actions.

One may argue of having friends on Facebook for example but that does not define what a true community is but is rather classified as a virtual presence. Interaction on this platform is not face-to-face even if the friends appear online to be engaged in an interaction. How can you justify if the supposed friends are the real people you are engaging with at that time?

Sometimes unperceptive arguments are started online for example in politics and before you realise feelings are sparked unleashing a swath of ridiculous and offensive comments making it look so dramatic. Social Media discussions are becoming so much dramatic and provocative much more than the usual physical interactions would have been (Beirut, 2009).

Social Media in my opinion detracts from meaningful discourse; the concept of engagement and presence is one of the challenges that has been forfeited and relegated for the virtual presence. Social Media evolution has brought about a lot of impacts and contributions but the reality is this, it is teaching us to know the better forms of interaction and engagement that is deeper and truer within a meaningful communication discourse.

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