



On Social Media and Mediatization

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Abstract. Ever since the emergence of digital technology at the end of the twentieth century, human communication has been mediated by digital alternatives, including social media. In the light of digital technology-based communication, this paper poses the question: what has transformed in human communication at the advent of digital age? By using qualitative method, this article discusses technology-infused human social urgers as reflected in digital storytelling, virtual communities, and other social media practices. The findings are 1) mediatization is the result of digital technology, especially that of the Internet, however 2) gathering and exploring digital data continue to be a challenging issue. The goal of this paper is to argue social media mediated communication is not just a form of mediation by, more critically, a form of mediatization. The paper aims at offering a critical review that summarizes research and discussion across the past decade and opens up opportunities in further exploring digital humanities approach on research in social media topics.

Keywords: Social Media · Mediatization · Digital Technology-based Communication · Digital Humanities

1 Introduction

We all agree with the human need for connection. On daily basis, we make the effort to communicate in ways that overtime have been through changes and alterations. Communication itself in its broadest sense include both verbal and nonverbal social interaction, with or without technology [1]. Nevertheless, those changes and alterations are dependent on technology. According to Simmel, many of the most recent media developments are fulfilling that significant need [1, 2]. While the word technology is often used to describe high-tech, unthinkable, rocket-science matters; the definition of technology itself emphasizing the application of scientific knowledge in order to create practicality for human life [3]. It is all inventions that make human activities easier, and they are not necessarily electric or digital. What interesting in the notion of technology is that the progress it served creates a reflection of change, development, and manipulation of the human environment as it transforms itself whilst transforming the world [3]. This spirit of transformation is what this paper aims to have a closer look at within social media and the agenda of mediatization.

As the term “social” underlines a basic feature of human life, Couldry & Hepp [2] used the approach of phenomenology to define the social world in three points: 1) that the social world is intersubjective, 2) everyday reality is the foundation of the social world, and 3) the social world is internally differentiated in domains. All of the statements are heavily highlighting connections, associations, and interlinkages. Intersubjectivity in the literal sense means “two minds connected” – that is as long as there are human beings with their need for connection, there will be a social world. It is also associated with human everyday interaction and experience in daily lives as the foundation. The act is not limited to offline interaction but also online, of which is also a bodily deed in reality done virtually. These interactions are set within domains humans shared which interlink one to another where media is noted as playing a key role in the proliferating complexity of social ordering [2]. This approach sent us to the fact that our social world is structurally connected with the help of media.

Syntactically, media is a plural form of medium; although, the noun “media” can also be treated as both [4]. By definition, a medium is located in-between and serves to connect one end to the other – technically any kinds of connection need media. With the same logic, Couldry & Hepp [2] argued that human communication is fundamentally mediated. We can run through the kind of mediated communicative experiences we may have used from time to time: from sending letters and making phone calls to composing emails and joining video conferences. Those examples give a broad sense of what media is or can be. Nevertheless, the discussion of media is not as technical. According to Couldry [4], media are many things: technologies, contents, institutions, audience – and the complexity occurred is due to the interconnectivity and interdependence of the world since media operate within society. Media cause our communicative experiences less absolute but a continuous gradation instead; and at the same time highlighting its position in affecting the construction of the social world as reality [2]. As a concept, Bakardijeva mentioned how mediation is both social and technological sets of practices of which combination helped shape people’s relationships [5]. That is, our social life is constructed by connections made possible by media that mediate.

The understanding of what media and mediation are gives a foundation to the notion of mediatization. According to Couldry & Hepp [2], mediatization is a concept to help analyze the interrelation between changes in media and communication, and changes in culture and society critically. In short, mediatization is a concept to understand transformation in mediated communication. It started with human nature to communicate, the use of media, and the signs of progress of mediated human communication. Mediatization highlights the outcome of the progress: overtime the media people use to communicate change; it then changes how people communicate that resulted in a transformation in the construction of human social life. Couldry & Hepp [2] grouped such transformations into four waves of mediatization: mechanization, electrification, digitalization, and datafication. Mechanization involves non-electronic prints, electrification involves electronic transmission, digitalization involves computers, and datafication involves media manifolds. Each of the waves changed the media environment fundamentally where technology took place in advancing human social processes. It can also be seen, the interval between waves gets shorter and shorter as technology advances.

2 Methods

In the arena where technology advanced in a rapid fashion, social studies discussion on computer-mediated communication (CMC) is not competitive. The most popular product of CMC is social media due to its main-stream merit of all Internet activities, set right in the first decade of the twenty-first century [6]. Unfortunately, it is implied in research on media and social media the difficulties in decent coverage with on-going, unprecedented features on each platform [6–8]. In capturing the idea of mediatization in this wave of datafication, this article is set on three parts: digital storytelling, virtual communities, and other social media practices that have been discussed over the span of ten years. It is an attempt to seek opportunities and challenges in research on social media topics while considering digital humanities as an approach.

3 Discussions

3.1 Digital Storytelling

When we hear of the term social media, we might have the same perception of what is included as social media, i.e., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (not by significant order). Yet, what social media really is has been on debate in social media research. Like media, the definition of social media is as broad. Page used the term social media to refer to “Internet-based applications that promote social interaction between participants” [6]. Seemingly in the same fashion, Lee [7] and Van Dijck [9] added and highlighted its functionality to connect, share information or interest, and experience collaboration. On the other hand, Lomborg [1] dismissing the phrase as “nonsense” due to its inability to specify what he proposes as “genres”. Similarly, Voorveld et al. [8] also concluded that “there is no such thing as social media” due to its variety. Regardless, most seem to agree with the fact that Web 2.0 powered the existence of social media platforms [1, 6, 8, 10]. In this discussion of digital storytelling, we are expecting to see the cognitive level of human in communication and how social media is used to do so. It covers narrativity, genres, and sensemaking.

Narrative goes with beginning, middle, and end. With social media, Page [6] highlighted the non-existence of such linear narrativity in social media posts whether on personal or professional use. Page adapted narrative dimensions and possibilities from Ochs and Capps that divided into five: tellership, tellability, embeddedness, linearity, and moral stance. Tellership involves a story by single or multiple tellers. Tellability is about whether the story is valuable; worthy or irrelevant. Embeddedness is the extent to which a story can be detached from or embedded in its context. Linearity is the structural qualities, and moral stance being the narrator’s attitude, whether it is certain or fluctuating. With these five dimensions in mind, Page took discussion forum genre as an example and summarized that discussion forum is heavy in tellership and beddedness since discussion forum started with a thread is created by a single teller (but not necessarily first story) and others made comments helping to build the narrative. These dimensions strengthen the idea to non-linear narratives of digital storytelling where people post whenever, wherever, without noting a beginning or ending of a story – no plot, more fragmentation, and open ended.

The notion of whenever-wherever led us to terms of temporality and spatiality in digital storytelling. When discussing Twitter genre, Page [6] boxed them into “orientation” talking how a link can contain contextual information prompting these time-space cues. Location and time stamps are common in nowadays social media genres giving users choices to opt in or out when publishing a post. It promotes the recency of which Georgakopoulou mention about “Breaking News” and Fiske would describe as the presentation of “nowness” on reality television [6]. Nevertheless, the real time and place of photos or videos taken may be different from the time of upload and place tagged. This asynchronous nature of CMC creates three different time frames – the time of event, narration, and reception [6]. On the other hand, Zhao stated how online communication has supplemented the face-to-face interaction of “here and now” to “there and now” [2]. These expressions dismissed the temporality trait in live streaming communication. While space may or may not be shared physically, Boyd argued that spatial structures in mediated virtual space do not limit the audience [2]. Thus, temporality and spatiality are still vague and questionable ideas depending on the platform and its user behaviour.

Digital storytelling would not happen had there not been platforms for aforementioned narrative creations. These platforms are what the general public would call as social media. Even if all social media platform is seemingly connecting people, Lomborg [1] suggests there is certain genre within the field of social media; that is, every social media formulaically different and we should not call them collectively. In his discussion, he introduced blog as a firm genre, Twitter as a genre in the making, and Facebook as a mixed genre. Looking at Page’s timeline of web genres and terms, blog, short for Web Log, was coined by John Barger in 1997 [6]. It made blog more mature of a genre as it is the oldest in comparison to Twitter that arrived in 2006 and Facebook in 2004 (but not gaining popularity until 2008 due to the application of embeddedness [1]). It is also mentioned how blog and Twitter are examples of “pure” genre whereas Facebook is a subcategory of social media instead. Nevertheless, these genres are problematic in recent social media platforms where features are intertwined, shared, embedded, and connected – or we should say every social media platform is now mixed-genres. Take Instagram as one platform: it can caption like Twitter can, send messages like WhatsApp can, video like YouTube can, reel like TikTok can, 24-h stories like Snapchat can. Genres might be elastic, but they are introduced as a device of sensemaking.

Sensemaking itself is a process people go through in understanding the world – “it is as natural as breathing and eating” [11]. The natural cognition allows us to employ social activities when trying to make sense of information, thus it is context-dependent [1, 11]. Seemingly people are able to deliver sensemaking naturally in a non-digitized environment when communicating, yet the discussion of sensemaking often appears within the realm of Internet usage where communicative activities are set onto a mediatized world of media manifold. With tons of data online, it will be difficult to determine each of its credibility, let alone finding the right source of information we need. As an example, Lomborg [1] introduced genres to sort platforms in making sense of social media, citing Moscovici’s view on making sense of human experience and our ability to make the unfamiliar familiar. Stefik [11] further introduced the need to have digital sensemaking skill to survive the big data wave in three efforts: information quality and relevance evaluation, shared understanding development, and information use placement.

In this digital storytelling section, we have discussed briefly the non-linearity of storytelling in a mediatized world which led to issues in temporal and spatial understanding of “here and now” to “wherever and whenever”. This problem may have risen not only due to the platform timestamp feature but also the user behaviour in social media usage. Platforms have been tried to put into genres by Lomborg who despised the notion of social media as a collective. Nevertheless, recent social media platforms are mixed-genre which made genres too elastic to determine each and every one of social media platforms. The discussion of genre started off the discussion of sensemaking out of their connection: the amount of platforms, data, information in the digital world that is beyond human comprehension needs to be made sense by. Sensemaking as a skill comes naturally in people as we communicate, yet mediatization calls it out differently as Stefik introduced it as digital sensemaking skill. Like any skill, it surely takes practice to do so, as users then as digital sensemakers.

3.2 Virtual Communities

Users are commonly addressed as netizen i.e., net citizen or the citizen of the Internet. Nevertheless, in studies of online communities, the term “users” are generally used to define netizen. Lomborg described social media users as the drivers of genre development and interpretation by “experimenting with different contents, forms, and stylistic-expressive means” [1]. In reciprocity, users are generally the cause of genre elasticity. Popular social media platforms, such as Facebook (founded in 2004), YouTube (in 2005), and WhatsApp (in 2009), have reached at least 2 billion of monthly active users by 2022 [12]. With roughly 8 billion global population, it apparently does not guarantee high usage of a platform. There are platforms discontinuing their service due to decreasing number of users such as Friendster (ended in 2015), Path (ended in 2018), and even Google + (ended in 2019). This means users hold great power in determining life and death of social media platforms. Taking off from these matters, in this section, domains, users, and participatory culture will be discussed in relation to people involvement in virtual communities.

Following their phenomenology approach, Couldry & Hepp [2] suggested that there is only one material world which consists of many constructions of complex institutions called social domains. Different from Lomborg’s genres, social domains depend on distinctive relations of meaning. They adopted Searle’s Institutional Facts to pinpoint the agreement made, constructed, and agreed by good number of people to make the rules stay followed. In the virtual world, the said agreement is called set of community guidelines that put forward humanity and legal responsibilities. Page on her discussion forum coverage also found a set of rules for users to comply [7]. Instagram, for example, offers shortened version of their community guidelines: “We want Instagram to continue to be an authentic and safe place for inspiration and expression. Help us foster this community. Post only your own photos and videos and always follow the law. Respect everyone on Instagram, don’t spam people or post nudity” [13]. As a comparison, the National Geographic website also addresses its community rules with a similar tone [14]. Domains exist due to agreements in forms of constant use and regular reproductions that is translated as acceptance.

On the account of acceptance and agreement, often times users would accept terms and conditions before joining a platform or installing certain application without reading it thoroughly. Steinfeld [15] conducted eye-tracking experiment on policy reading and found people are reading when they did not need to sign or accept; but did otherwise when they needed to. This raises the question of security and data privacy safety. Another form of acceptance is how each platform has different “calling” for connectivity state within their domain. Regardless of the audience being family, lovers, friends, acquaintances, or strangers, the linking expression is set e.g., Facebook for friends, Twitter and Instagram for followers, LinkedIn for connections, and YouTube for subscribers. In the discussion of mediated intimacies, Chambers [5] discussed interrelationships between users that are now mediated on the rise of digital technology and social media. Problems were raised surrounding the clashing of reality and virtual in Facebook and MySpace where users declared their friendship, kinship, and relationship in the platforms. According to Coons & Chen [16], there are sentiments built around these callings that led to exhibiting solidarity and empathy. From these cases, we can see that the material world that is suggested as being only one by Couldry & Hepp appeared to have clashing of reality between two realities since users “live” in both.

It is important to discuss on types of users and their behaviour. Lomborg cited Lüders on social media as deinstitutionalised space which he then concluded where “ordinary users and media professionals alike have equal, easy access to the means of digital production and distribution of content” [1]. According to Markham & Lindgren [17], users belong to different categories based on their level of contribution. Mason & Thomas came up with “90-9-1 theory” from their extensive research on user participation levels in *A Million Penguins* site. The numbers reflect the percentage of contribution with 90 percent of Internet users having zero contribution, 9 percent contribute occasionally, and 1 percent contribute frequently [6]. They called the 90 percent as *lurkers* which, using Bakhtinian metaphor, are seen as *crowd* while the rest are the *performers* – while Frazen et al. & Setoyama et al. also labelled the non-contributors as lurkers, the more active users are called *posters* and *leaders* [17]. Regardless of the labels, the division works similarly. Nevertheless, the idea of deinstitutionalised space might come odd for platforms that offer operating modes (private or public; personal or professional) and exclusive features for performers like Instagram.

In recent media, lurkers are dubbed as *followers* while the *performers* and *leaders* are commonly addressed as *influencers*. Influencers can be individuals or trusted brands/companies. Their accounts can be verified as long as they meet the requirements from the platforms. The validation comes similarly in all platforms thus far which is a checkmark symbol at the end of the account name (in Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp). While lurkers might be seen as passive users, they are far more important than it seems: 1) as a crowd, they determine the state of an influencer since influencers must have great number of followers or a trusted brand/company in order to be seen and validated as one, and 2) their “silent” moves add on to the algorithm – algorithms are set of logic that are used to mine data and generate decision-making for users [10, 18]. “Using discourse-analytic criteria, a person might be classed as a relatively frequent or infrequent user of a site, influencing their identities as core or peripheral members of an online group” [6]. Every single activity is a form of participation.

Participatory culture coined by Henry Jenkins invites interactions and collaborations [6]; he foresaw the Web as a site of consumers participation and fans meaningful public culture [19] that is rather “bottom-up” in comparison to “top-down” traditional media [20]. Users are undoubtedly producers. According to Coons & Chen [16], users of social media are no longer passive, as they can contribute in many ways all at the same time: post, view, share, comment, like, send, reply, forward, etc. The fact that users can be sources of information have changed the traditional media industry structures of which Henry Jenkins described as “media convergence” [20]. In digital storytelling section, we have mentioned Och and Capps narrative dimensions: tellership, tellability, embeddedness, linearity, and moral stance. Not only having the platform to have a say, but users also have dimensions of saying it. Tellership, tellability, and embeddedness are holding key roles in mediatization since they support the convergence of media manifolds. Posting, reposting, and commenting are forms of tellership because it is adding into the digital storytelling whether as the first teller or the next. The detachability of the telling is then covered by embeddedness which forwarding, sharing, and linking within platform or outward to other platforms. Tellability is a determination of value which users often show with likes and dislikes. All of the above are forms of engagement which help gaining visibility [6] for a certain individual, brand, or company.

The complex virtual communities covered the discussion of domains, users, and participatory culture. This second subsection aimed to refine the understanding of mediated communication within the sense of the doer that belong in a domain full of other doers. In the discussion of domains, we learned that domains exist due to agreement of users to dwell and use in a constant manner. Written community guidelines act as a set of rules to obey in order not to get dismissed from a platform or site. The effect on real life raised the question whether the notion of one material world by Couldry & Hepp applied well in the discussion of virtual space since users live in both spaces. Users and their behaviour hold important role as a part of mediatization is where the transformation of communication and social order can be felt. Mediatization of datafication does not only talk about one or two-way communication, but a more spreadable and powerful narrative dimensions of tellership, tellability, and embeddedness.

3.3 Other Social Media Practices

Media manifolds allow users to conduct social life and liven their beings within the Internet. As users, we can reflect on our habit in social media regardless of what platform we are using as we digital story tell or as a part of a virtual community. Interestingly, social media activities being forms of procrastination has been said quite often. Twitter, Facebook [1], and Instagram [8] are ones to appear as survey results. The mixed-genres which offer greater narrative dimensions are becoming space to kill time. The rhizomatic Internet offers one-click-away branching options that led users dwell and spiral down into the pool of information. This was tackled by Stefik’s suggestion on digital sensemaking so that users able to search, find, and understand information they really seek [11]. While obtaining the sensemaking skill is still in question, the procrastination and confusion of users seem continuing to be the loophole in network society. In this section of other social media practices, challenges and opportunities surrounding the notions of social media usage will be discussed, including that of research on digital humanities.

Social media practices include many aspects of human interests. From communicating and photo-sharing to gaming and dating, the narrative dimensions of “like-comment-subscribe” exist. “Everything is content” is now a motto for influencers (or at times, content creators) for the fact that trifles as trivial can gain users’ attention. What also exists alongside this is the freedom of expression of being oneself. Yet, Chambers [5] found that “when someone’s personal life is being conducted in public, every word and gesture can be open to criticism”. Thus, the options to have multiple accounts are not closed for users to unleash their alteregos (online self) or worst, identity theft. In the discussion on narrative authenticity, Page [6] brought up the case of YouTuber “LonelyGirl15” named Bree who started posting day-to-day video of young teenager. Bree was later exposed as a fictional character played by Jessica Rose, an actress. The sort of identity building raised people attention, trust, and built empathy. The question of authenticity is raised as viewer interest is capitalized.

Capitalism plays a huge role in social media. In relation to freedom of self-expression characteristic in social media, Lomborg [1] stated that “despite a strong focus on individual user agency in social media, this agency is of course to a great extent framed by the institutions and companies who provide social media services and used them to mine user data for their own purposes”. According to Murdock [21], consumers profiles can be tracked from every click on hyperlinks and every login across the Internet for the sake of tailoring more effective personalized promotional appeals. At present, we are no longer surprised to see what we have been browsing come up as suggestion for purchase. This is the consequence of advertising business model that use Web 2.0 which permanently annoyed users with ads for consumer goods [22].” This means, users’ procrastination habit is a big opportunity for business where users involvement is based on freewill and contributing to narrative dimensions. Couldry & Meijas [23] saw such “business opportunity” as “colonization by data”. They stated that every layer of human experience is becoming targets of profitable extraction and it is a key dimension to evolution in today capitalism [23]. Mediatization that appears to transform communication and social life is no exception in turning human life into subject to capitalism.

The challenges may be overcome with opportunities in digital humanities research. Digital humanities was born from traditional humanities research and computation methods [24]. With similar transformative spirit of mediatization, humanities research also shifts alongside it. Like mediatization of datafication, digital humanities emerged within digital era and carried questions that focus on human, about human, and for human. Linguistics approach is familiar in research of the Internet that often is text-based and itself was built on language programming. As an example, in differentiating genres, Lomborg [1] used genre analysis framework which covers composition, style, content, and pragmatic uses. In more recent research, digital humanities approach is used more often for it is involving big data. It is difficult not to think and close-read these topics in multidisciplinary approaches and perspectives. In many ways, technology-aided communication is fundamentally living up to digital humanities.

Many previous researches on social media are sampling on singular data. For example, Page’s [6] discussions on digital storytelling are majorly done through interview and observation. The manual approach to big data in today’s era might be a drawback. Yet, introducing digital humanities may also be a form of drawback. The downside of

digital humanities research is the need to team up with language programmers and/or other experts since the approach highlights multidisciplinary collaboration. Furthermore, the data of networked trackback protocols on web semantics that are used to track and mine user behaviour must be extracted and mined before we can analyze them. If analytics used in order to see patterns and hit the right target, digital humanities research get opportunities by asking the right question. While mediatization analysis functions to see the deep implication in the process of mediation where the role organizations in wider institutionalized fields and their contribution to social order are at stake [2], digital humanities approach deal with data mining and visualization to map their interconnections and seek patterns. With such combination, we can help improve safety, intimacy, and privacy matters in the network society.

4 Conclusion

Our communication and connection needs underlie the use for media which led to technology-infused mediated social urges. In large-scale surveys done in the United States and Europe, it is confirmed how the daily lives of adolescents are embedded by digital media use [5]. With the darting digital technology over time, it is safe to say that our social life has been penetrated by digital media use. While our communication is claimed to be fundamentally mediated, mediatization has been the concept to make sense of the transformation human experience from time to time regarding their social life [2]. In digital storytelling, we have discussed human cognition in regard to their beings in virtual world through how the needs to story tell resulted in the needs of obtaining digital sensemaking. In the discussion of virtual communities, we talked about domains, users, and participatory culture. The agreement and community guidelines are a form of blurred boundaries between one material world that Couldry & Hepp suggested and the similarly bigger domain, the Internet world. Users, regardless of their types, are all contributors to the semantic web and these contributions are found to be worth a price. Safety and privacy become the issue of authenticity, while digital technology allows users to be tracked through contributions made. Our procrastination trait when using social media is seen as a gap to be filled by capitalism.

This article is an attempt to capture the transformation in mediatization of the time period. From the discussion we got to find many aspects in social media that we are familiar and not familiar with; in which many have submitted and might be taken advantage of. We then argue and conclude that mediatization is a product of digital technology, especially that of the Internet where media manifolds with unlimited dimensions and depths. This led to the fact that, as social science researchers, to compete with the rapid growth of digital technology and its products (including our contributions as users) will need collaboration with experts in computing or data mining. It is also a form of invitation to reflect on our Internet usage, especially on social media habit, as sensemaking or digital sensemaking needed to be obtained before the next wave of mediatization comes along.

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