

CAIS Poster: Information Diffusion on Social Media: Why People Share and 'Re-share' Online

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Abstract: What prompts an individual to forward a link via email, retweet it on Twitter, or share it on Facebook? This research investigates why news and information are propagated through social media, examining the characteristics of information that determine whether and with whom it is shared.

Résumé:

1. INTRODUCTION

Why do people share what they do online? Social media has become a profound part of everyday communication and a mechanism for sharing and 're-sharing' of information. Social media users are "turning online for both emotional support and as an information resource" (Joinson 2008, 1027). Users interact with each other and their mutual friends through instant messaging or social networking sites (Correa, Hinsley, and Zuniga 2010) and email (Canada, Parliament, Senate 2012). Part of that interaction is sharing information from other sources. According to Allsop, Bassett, and Hoskins, 59% of individuals say they frequently "forward information found on the internet to colleagues, peers, family, or friends" (2007, 399).

This paper presents initial results of a study on user motivations for the sharing of non-self generated content on social media. The study uses qualitative interviews to examine how users evaluate non-self-generated content, and how they decide whether and with whom they re-share this information.

2. PREVIOUS LITERATURE

What motivates people to share what they share? Previous literature has explored motivation to share information from a psychological and sociological perspective: "People are sharing content not only to enrich the lives of others in their online networks, but also to define themselves in whatever community they've taken part in" (Bjoran 2011). Bjoran suggests that according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, n.d.), people share for self-esteem and for self-actualization. People may share "practically useful content for altruistic reasons (e.g., to help others) or for self-enhancement purposes (e.g., to appear knowledgeable)" (Berger & Milkman 2009, 5). Constructing persona and self-enhancement depend, however, on the value of the content being shared.

What do people share and why? The process of sharing overlaps with the process of seeking and browsing information. "We gather opinions from others, we incorporate them into what we know and feel, and pass that along to others" (Allsop, Bassett and Hoskins 2007, 401). Berger and Milkman claim that "one reason certain content may be highly shared is because it has inherent value or contains useful information" (2009, 5). For instance, the Internet is saturated with reviews and recommendations on hotels, restaurants, gadgets and gear. People share comments to help others save money, to

educate and even to generate reciprocity (Fehr, Kirchsteiger, and Riedl 1998). The purpose behind the sharing of links to news releases about a violent demonstration or a video of a cat in a shark suit riding a vacuum cleaner is less obvious. Berger and Milkman, in a study of virality, suggest that positive content is more likely to be shared than negative content, noting that “positive content is more viral than negative content, but .. the relationship between emotion and social transmission is more complex than valence alone” (2009, 2). Thus, while emotional valence of the content may influence re-sharing, other factors will also have an impact.

How do people share and how does this affect what information is shared? The information shared between and within social networks may depend on the content platform and the particular audience intended. On one hand, different platforms may be chosen to address a certain audience or offer different ways to present information (Canada, Parliament, Senate 2012; Madden 2010). On the other hand, the exchange of information between people within a social network may also have an effect on the content itself. Online social networks offer information to participants that might not otherwise be discovered through the strength of weak ties (Granovetter 1983). Wellman & Gulia suggest that “the kind of people you know is more important for obtaining information than the number of people you know” (1997, 174).

3. RESEARCH QUESTION

Previous research has examined the sharing of self-generated content, addressing issues such as the emotional and psychological motivation behind the sharing of content (Berger & Milkman, 2009) and on the reasons why certain content is more likely to be shared (Bjoran 2011). There is, however, little previous work that examines the sharing of non-self generated content such as news and an individual’s evaluative process of sharing that type of content online. The current study addresses this gap, focusing the following issues:

- 1) How and why do individuals decide to re-share content such as news stories with individuals in their online social network?
- 2) With whom is this information shared?
- 3) What type of information is most likely to be shared?

4. METHOD

Interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of participants from diverse social backgrounds and varied ages (18 years of age or older) who have used one of the following forms of social media: Facebook, Twitter, or email. Semi-structured interviews lasting 30 to 60 minutes were conducted with each participant. The format allowed for a conversation-like process that followed a specific pattern and technique (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 27). Interviews explored a specific instance or instances of information sharing on a social media platform by the participant. Interview questions included:

- Tell me about something you that was shared with you recently? Who was it from? What does that tell you about that person?
- What is the last thing you shared with someone online?

- Who did you share it with, where, and why?
- What made you want to share that particular piece of information?

Interviews were transcribed and emergent coding used to develop a codebook for content analysis. Open coding or “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 61) allows the researcher to gain insight from the iterative process of interview transcription and analysis and use those insights to inform the next iteration of data collection. This iterative process, or constant comparative method, continues until a strong sense or understanding of the phenomenon emerges (Cohen & Crabtree 2006).

5. DISCUSSION AND PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Several themes emerged in preliminary findings: 1) audience considerations are critical in sharing decisions: the content or news item being shared must have value to the person or audience to whom it is directed; 2) sharing of information is part of online identity construction, since sharing is in large part determined by how the content reflects on the sharer.

Many participants insisted that they would share content that would be of interest or benefit the receiver. Similar to Berger & Milkman’s (2009) suggestion that people share useful content to help others, participants indicated they normally share something that the intended audience would find useful, be interested in, or would be entertained by. Furthermore, most participants expressed their desire to vet content, confirming the validity of the information before passing it on to intended readers.

Participants also indicated that they were selective in what type of content they would forward on. There was a strong emphasis on news and information that they would not share; individuals differed in the *types* of content they chose to not share in their social networks but not in their decision to not pass it on.

6. FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research will investigate how people choose platforms (e.g., social networking sites, twitter, or email) for re-sharing of information, what content gets shared and what is more likely to be shared, and how the method of transmission affects the content being shared (through social networks and the platform used) and who the user shares content with.

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