

Lecture 021 - Open Learning

1 Net Smarts

According to Howard Rheingold literacy can no longer be conceived as a solitary skill or attribute, but must incorporate increased levels of collaboration and social competency. If you were developing a social media campaign how would you incorporate the five literacies for thriving online that Rheingold describes? (Rheingold, 2012).

1.1 Attention

According to Rheingold thinking critically and mindfully in the network media environments that we share is much more difficult than in previous times because of the volume of traffic and information, and because of the speed at which new information is sent to us. Successfully filtering this information is based on training our attention management skills and focussing on how we can filter out the bad information that we don't desire. According to Rheingold, "basic information literacy, widely distributed, is the best protection for the knowledge commons; a sufficient portion of critical consumers among the online population can become a strong defence against the noise-death of the internet".

1.2 Participation

New media technologies allow a degree of participation in the communications process like never before. According to Rheingold, recognising the potential power of the media equipment that many of us carry around with us in our pockets is a starting point for a more general change in society, one that values contributions more than passive receivers of information. As Rheingold says, 'a participant is active' and forms of collaboration have the potential for greater levels of global social understanding.

1.3 Collaboration

Social networking tools have the power, according to Rheingold, to 'amplify' the collective actions that we may wish to undertake. As we use the net to overcome barriers to cooperation we will find that, according to Rheingold, we will be able to achieve 'higher' ends and goals based on the idea that as humans we are 'optimised' for social activity and collective problem solving.

1.4 Critical Consumption of Information ('crap detection')

According to Rheingold basic information literacy is essential if we are to protect ourselves as consumers and citizens online. Being able to tell the difference between the spin and the marketing messages and those that are authentic messages of people actively engaged in activities for the benefit of other people is essential. How do we trust information to be accurate? Rheingold calls this skill an intention and suggests that we ensure that our 'crap detectors' are well attuned to filter out the credible from the incredible information.

1.5 Network Smarts

Rheingold argues that we need to encourage a wide range of skills to help us manage our life online in the form of Net Smarts. These are skills that will help us to maintain our social position and enable us to manage our reputations online, engage in different social networks and to track and trace the footprints that we leave on the net without undermining our sense of self as individuals, or our ethical sense as a community. Rheingold sees these net smarts as a set of media tools that we can learn to use effectively.

2 Spreadability

Henry Jenkins et al argue that spreadability is an emerging concept that helps to explain the way that media circulates online and gives rise to new affordances in the sharing of media artefacts. Explain how you would factor-in media spreadability to a social media campaign? (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013)

2.1 Stickiness

Jenkins argues that "While stickiness may provide the prevailing logic for the creation of online business models, any content or destination that has gained relevance with audiences online has done so through processes of Spreadability" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 7). In this sense the traditional forms of mass media, with their established channels of delivery are regarded as retaining some value as they remain the dominant way of getting content out to many people across a broad area. This mass media model was dominated, according to Jenkins, by the 'stickiness' model, in which content was expected to make an impression on the life world of the consumer, and promote a sense

of engagement and loyalty to the product, but there was little expectation that the user would actively engage in the re-dissemination of the content. As Jenkins argues “mass media channels are still valuable resources for getting information out and sharing content of great common interest because they have such widespread reach” (Jenkins et al., 2013). Therefore, and despite some radical changes in the infrastructure that supports communication “stickiness still matters... Any creator – whether media company, fan, academic, or activist – produces material in the hope of attracting audience interest” (Jenkins et al., 2013).

2.2 Spreadable Media

In the spreadable media model, however, Jenkins raises questions about what happens when “many people make active decisions to put content in motion by passing along an image, song, or video clip to friends and family members or to larger social networks?” (Jenkins et al., 2013). In the pre-networked media environment, i.e. the broadcast environment, media would circulate at a planned and control pace, determined largely by the broadcasting companies and the major advertisers. Now, so the argument goes media circulates at an “exponentially greater speed and scope, thanks to the affordances of online social tools” (Jenkins et al., 2013). The consequence of which suggests, according to Jenkins, that we are now part of a networked culture where “citizens count on each other to pass along compelling bits of news, information, and entertainment, often many time over the course of a given day” (Jenkins et al., 2013).

2.3 Network Culture

As Jenkins argues “In this networked culture, we cannot identify a single cause for why people spread material. People make a series of socially embedded decisions when they choose to spread any media text: Is the content worth engaging with? Is it worth sharing with others? Might it be of interest to specific people? What is the best platform to spread it through? Should it be circulated with a particular message attached? Even if no additional commentary is appended, however, just receiving a story or a video from someone else imbues a range of new potential meanings in the text” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 13).

2.4 Collaboration

Crucially, according to Jenkins, this culture of spreadability is “Built on technical affordances that encourage iterative approaches to tasks, fluid roles and a lack of hierarchy, shared rather than owned material, and granular approaches to problem solving, network society encourages collaboration on projects by a ‘hive’ community. This community creates through an ‘on-going, perpetually unfinished, iterative and evolutionary process of gradual development of the informational resources shared by the community’” (Jenkins et al., 2013).

3 Participation

According to Howard Rheingold, “digital participation literacy employs a toolbox of skills.” These skills include a “social element to participation literacy in addition to the individual how-to- skills needed to participate” (Rheingold, 2012, p. 114). What are Rheingold’s participation literacy skills and how would you anticipate their use in a social media project?

Rheingold argues that the skills associated with “persuasion, curation, discussion, and self-presentation” are foremost in the range of skills that people need to be able to work and operate successfully online. Rheingold also points out that “crap detection” and “mindful participation” are essential skills that can enable online participants to benefit from mutual interactions.

3.1 Digital Literacy Skills

Rheingold suggests that building digital literacy skills includes things such as posting and sharing content in the form of images, videos, writing blogs, editing wiki entries and so on, but that by itself these actions will not ensure that “everyone will express themselves effectively.”

According to Rheingold a lot of content that is posted to the web can be “boring,” so users of the web have to be able to filter the content that they want to read, thus challenging their “infotention-filtering” capability. The ease by which comments can be added to posts and articles, means that much of what is written is not worth reading because it takes too long. Therefore, according to Rheingold, it is useful to cultivate our attentiveness and our ability to stop reading. This might be because of the overall number and length of the comments, but also because of the potentially “toxic” nature of the comments.

3.2 Participatory Culture

The ability to successfully participate online, according to Rheingold, can be learnt by adopting a mind-set of attentiveness and ‘crap-detection.’ As Rheingold points out:

“As citizens, professionals, and consumers, we hit big, manage to get by, or fail utterly in large part because of our ability to connect and converse with others by way of digital networks.” In this way we are able to gain some personal advantage, however, Rheingold believes that we will also be able to “help build a more democratic, more diverse culture – a participatory one.”

3.3 Participatory Tools

“Participatory culture,” according to Rheingold, “is one in which a significant portion of the population, not just a small professional guild, can participate in the production of cultural materials ranging from encyclopaedia entries to videos watched by millions. And it is a culture populated by people who believe they have some degree of power.”

This means that “social media literacies are potential tools and weapons in these struggles over participation,” and that communities are increasingly formed around the use and the production of digital media, rather than as traditionally was the case when people knew one another through their proximity. As Rheingold describes, “they are created by people who had not previously known each other but [who] use digital media to find each other, hang out, and share the products of their mutual interests.”

This means that:

“We can all filter by simply sharing what we find when we pursue our interests, selecting the best stuff for our own edification, and then recommending it to others.

Making connections is a learnable skill that is amply rewarded by networked publics – and every blog post that includes a link makes a connection.

‘Everybody is a critic’ is a cliché, and again, although some will be better critics than others, the aggregated critiques of ordinary people directed toward politicians, products, or the service at the restaurant they ate at last night can add up to a valuable public good.

Whether it is opposing or proposing leash laws for dog owners... supporting or defeating a political candidate, or raising money for medical research, everybody at some time or another has a cause to advocate whether or not they have a platform for broadcasting their views.”

4 DIY Media & Communities of Practice

Alternative media practices that enable people to create their own media, either in the form of DIY media or communities of practice, are said to have the potential to transform the way that we think about everyday life, and the way that we organise our practices of everyday living. Explain how ‘reflexivity,’ as Chris Atton describes, is able to “connect the self with the lifeworld” (Atton, 2002, p. 154)?

Faris and Meier (Faris & Meier, 2013) suggest that social media has the potential to resist repressive social regimes by challenging the hierarchical organisational structures by which they are organised. According to Faris & Meier this is a process of adapting and changing technologies that may force authoritarian states to become more democratic.

The desire for social change, according to Faris & Meier, is often represented in “dissent, protests, or direct action” and represents a “collective action problem” for states and organisations that are repressive and authoritarian. The desire for a more democratic social order is part of a process of participation in which people are able to voice their opinions and dissent from the mainstream views, while retaining a sense of the public good.

4.1 Faris & Meier suggest that

“Digital tools have the capability of lowering the costs of group-formation, group-joining, and information-sharing to nearly nothing. Social media networks also make it easier for members of such groups to agree upon ideas and courses of action, and dividing the labour accordingly. By lowering the cost of contribution, they make it more likely that individuals will participate in one of the many ways afforded by the technologies themselves.”

Mobile technologies have the potential effect, according to Faris & Meier, to streamline the “tactical organisation of dissent.” So instead of printing fliers and leaflets it becomes possible to use blogs, social media and shared multimedia content to make “calls for action.” The internet makes it possible for people to organise and hold meetings without having to be in the same social space, therefore broadening the drive for social participation.

4.2 Dissent

As Faris & Meier point out, “the instantaneity of communications conducted electronically, as well as the ability to conduct many-to-many communications, means that many more people can be reached in a much shorter period of time – making it possible to adjust plans on the go.” This means that more people who would like to take part in efforts to bring about social change, but who are restrained by cost or geographical proximity, are able to take part in efforts to participate.

4.3 Two Way Process

This is not a one-way process, however, because while social media can make dissent easier to voice, it also means that states and organisations can clamp-down on dissent by tracking people who post and voice their concerns on social media. However, as Faris & Meier argue:

“While the state may still arrest individual writers or block websites, with digital activism it is harder to shut down pathways of dissent – in other words you can arrest a blogger or disrupt a social media web site, but chances are that someone is still writing and distributing information about something the state would like to squash. Digital media tools, in the hands of ordinary citizens, also make it possible for citizens to document and challenge rights abuses by the state, by capturing images and videos of transgressions.”

5 De-hierarchalisation

Fundamentally, however, the challenge that comes from social and online media is in the ‘de-hierarchalisation’ of the social and civic structures that maintain small elites of technocratic and bureaucratic control. Digital activism explores new avenues for participation and challenges the more rigid forms of social organisation.

According to Faris & Meier “learning and adaptation are key to surviving rapidly changing environments,” so embracing the “new possibilities afforded by digital technologies are an important part of the equation.” Therefore, knowing how and when to use these tools, how to integrate them tactically and how to learn from their use are “important factors that will determine the future of the cat-and-mouse game between regressive regimes and popular resistance movements.”

6 Social Change

“While social change was always multidimensional, we are faced with ever increasing complexities, irregularities, and unpredictable flows. This means that when we try to understand social change we can never explain it in general and all-encompassing ways” (Lindgren, 2017, p. 290).

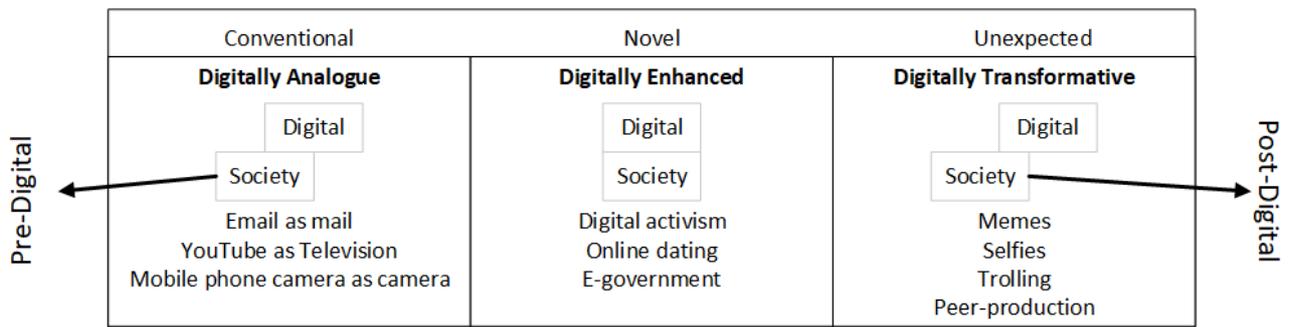
“Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996: 33) has argued that there are five disjunctive cultural flows that must be taken into account:

- *Ethnoscapas*: flows of people.
- *Mediascapas*: flows of media.
- *Technoscapas*: flows of technology.
- *Financescapas*: flows of capital.
- *Ideoscapas*: flows of ideologies. (Lindgren, 2017, p. 290).

“The media that we use will affect what we see, how we speak, and what we do. Therefore, it is impossible to talk about social and cultural change without taking into account the roles of the ecologies in which people and media are embedded” (Lindgren, 2017, p. 290).

“Generally speaking, digital media can transform social behaviours and relationships completely, but they may also change them just a bit, and sometimes nearly not at all. Contextual factors are what decide which one of these scenarios – or what combination of them – end up becoming realised” (Lindgren, 2017, p. 290).

Contextualised Outcomes of Digital Media Use



(Lindgren, 2017, p. 291).

7 References

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