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Abstract

This short essay discusses social media as spaces of conversation, ritual and prefiguration.

Keywords

social media, conversation, ritual, transmission, prefiguration

What I find most exciting about social media is that they have put the emphasis back on conversation. They make us see the media as both texts and contexts, as both the channels of representations and the spaces of interaction.

This is what is particularly “social” about social media. Not that they facilitate conversations or that they are spaces of sociality—all media do and are in one way or another—but that they make conversations much more visible and easier to study. It is a refocusing of the lens that I believe is much needed within media and communication research.

For so long, this field was dominated by a view of communication as transmission. Carey (1989) notes the predominance of this perception within American culture, suggesting that it is “formed from a metaphor of geography or transportation” (p. 15). Communication is perceived as the beaming “of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control” (Carey, 1989), and distinctions are made between senders and receivers, producers, and consumers of messages.

There is, however, another view of communication that social media seem to be bringing to the fore—the notion of communication as ritual. For Carey (1989), this view is based on the metaphor of “sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality” (p. 18). The emphasis lies on communication as conversation, a process through which people collectively experience and enact their world (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). This is a view that makes no distinction between producers and consumers but considers everyone as a participant in the occasion.

Social media make it impossible for us to disregard how people create and remake the world collaboratively and in interaction. From the early days of social media platforms, when we were still calling them “web 2.0,” the debate focused on their architecture of participation, the ways in which their design shaped interaction and collaboration.

Conversations are what social media are designed for and where they draw their power from. Data and metadata on how people converse with each other and interact with the platform lie at the heart of social media business models. Conversations are the main fodder of not only commercial but also state surveillance, with intelligence services engaging in bulk collection of data in the name of security.

Focusing on conversation provides us with a more nuanced view of how communication power operates. We usually think of communication power in terms of media effects, of the persuasiveness of messages and media representations, of their biases and prejudices, and of the ways in which these are shaped by political and economic interests. But once our attention turns to conversation, we see other, less overt ways in which power is wielded. This is when the power of the architects of conversations—of the platform designers, moderators, and administrators—becomes evident. It is a power that derives from their ability to shape and enforce the rules of the conversation. It comes not from telling people what to talk about but from regulating who talks about what, when, and where. It is the power of the context provider as opposed to that of the text creator and publisher.

Yet, an emphasis on conversation allows us a better understanding not only of power but also of empowerment. It helps us to investigate the ways in which people can enact a better world through communication, how they can prefigure and constitute the society they would like to see. It is

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communication not only as ritual but also as prefiguration, its purpose is not only to affirm community but also to imagine it, not only to preserve but also to create and innovate. These are the kinds of social media that I would like to see and what I hope they will become.

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Anastasia Kavada (PhD, University of Westminster) is Senior Lecturer at the University of Westminster, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication. Her research focuses on the links between online tools and decentralized organizing practices, democratic decision-making, and the development of solidarity and a sense of common identity among participants in collective action.