Social Media as Online Information Grounds: A Preliminary Conceptual Framework

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Abstract. Researchers are increasingly grappling with ways of theorizing social media and its use. This review essay proposes that the theory of Information Grounds (IG) may provide a valuable lens for understanding how social media fosters collaboration and social engagement among information professionals. The paper presents literature that helps us understand how social media can be seen as IG, and maps the characteristics of social media to the seven propositions of IG theory. This work is part of a wider study investigating the ways in which Information Technology (IT) professionals experience social media.

Keywords: Social media use, information professionals, IT professionals, information grounds theory, collaboration, social networking**,** Twitter study

1. Introduction

This paper is a review essay that is part of a larger study that uses the theory of information grounds (IG) to explore how Information Technology (IT) professionals use online social networks when compared to face-to-face networks. IG are social settings where information, people, and place come together to create information flow within a physical environment [2]. This research uses the IG framework as a lens for understanding how social media (SM) fosters collaboration and social engagement among Information Technology (IT) professionals, which includes Digital Library professionals and researchers. It attempts also to understand how users within SM actually experience it as a place (a place to be in, a place to go to, a place to gather, or a place to be seen in) – or *information grounds* – and use it for professional purposes such as information sharing, networking, dissemination of their work, public communications, or for collaboration. This is vital for digital library

professionals to understand how their users are getting and sharing information.

2. Information Grounds Theory

Karen Pettigrew first proposed the theory of information grounds in 1998 wherein she proposed that wherever people come together at a physical space informally for one purpose, there is a space created spontaneously where information exchange and sharing takes place [2], and that "information grounds are synergistic environment[s] temporarily created when people come together for a singular purpose but from whose behaviour emerges a social atmosphere that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information" [2] Pettigrew's theory of Information Grounds was built upon Granovetter's theory of "The Strength of Weak Ties" [4] which suggests that any individual's network comprises weak ties (acquaintances) and strong ties (close family, friends), but that weak ties are more useful sources of new information because strong ties usually possess the same information as the individual. In terms of social networks, this theory can be interpreted in the following manner – broad and diverse networks with weak ties are a richer source of new information than narrow and homogenous networks with just strong connections. IG theory can also be connected to the theory of Third Place [5]; Ray Oldenburg, an urban sociologist proposed the concept of the "third place" or so-called "hangouts at the heart of the community". Soukup [6] proposed that computer-mediated communication is highly suitable for being considered a "third place" in the contemporary world. However, the social engagement within the online spaces does not usually provide deep emotional support, although they expose individuals to a diversity of worldviews [7]. Although rooted in Granovetter's [4] and Oldenburg's ideas [5], Counts and Fisher [1] propose seven propositions of IG where they focus on the information sharing aspect. They are:

- Information Grounds (IG) can occur anywhere, in any type of temporal setting.
- People meet at IGs for a primary purpose other than information sharing.
- Information Grounds attended by various communities play different roles in information flow.
- Social interaction is a primary activity at Information Grounds.
- Individuals participate in formal and informal information sharing.

- People use information obtained at information grounds in alternative ways.
- Many sub-contexts exist within information grounds and are based on people's perspectives.

Many researchers agree that information grounds can be virtual and digital [3, 9] but Pilerot [10] found that there is no existing framework demonstrating the connection of people, place, and information in information sharing and seeking activities. Such a study has potential to offer us some new knowledge into digital and social media communication within both everyday and professional contexts.

3. Social Media as Information Grounds

Traditional physical information grounds such as office tea rooms, hair salons and cafés facilitate people to come together physically for reasons other than information exchange, but information exchange happens nevertheless, albeit in a dynamic and unplanned manner, although it is restricted to the physical space and time and hence to the number of participants that can be part of the communication [2, 3]. Instead, social media platforms foster temporary virtual spaces and enable information grounds that can be accessed anytime, anywhere, and is not restricted to the number of participants [1]. The openness, transparency, and availability of social media has also helped users share, disseminate, and find information in online spaces [11]. This element agrees with proposition #1 of Counts and Fisher [1] that "information grounds can occur anywhere, in any type of temporal setting and are predicated on the presence of individuals".

Mobile social media applications have also overcome the limitations of mobile-device-based services, which were previously limited to targeted communications and direct marketing [1] and did not aid information discovery. Now, with increased mobile connectivity and also geo-location services integrated with social media, serendipitous information discovery is more common within social networks and this accords well with IG propositions #2, #4, and #6.

Morris and Unsworth [12] found that social media technologies have also helped academics develop social spaces and communicate with fellow academics and students anytime and anywhere [13]. Thomas and Thomas [14] state that many academics prefer to engage in social media because it encourages their students to actively participate and collaborate in discussions in a social manner, but where they can

also share educational information. Social media plays a similar role as physical spaces for communication and collaboration purposes, and online environment is local, unique, and accessible, which has transformed traditional social network connections in developing a community of experts [15]. Social media tools match proposition #2 in that "people gather at information grounds for a primary, instrumental purpose other than information sharing" and is relevant to proposition #4 in that "social interaction is a primary activity at information grounds such that information is a by-product". These findings show that virtual spaces can be similar to information grounds, but there is no research that maps this similarity (or the differences) through empirical research. Additionally, virtual spaces may have additional dimensions of facilitating communication that could be revealed in this study.

Social media also enables professionals to develop a hub for a specific target audience to disseminate information for serendipitous discovery by others [16]. Fisher, et al., [3] also found that offline interactions have significantly influenced the social interaction within the online spaces, where the offline and online relationships overlap. This element relates to proposition #5 as "Individuals participate in formal and informal information sharing and information flow appears in many directions" and as well as proposition #7 that "many sub-contexts exist within information grounds and these are based on people's perspectives and physical factors". Social media platforms are unique and focal, which enable users to foster collaboration, develop communities of practice, and serendipitously discover useful information through both strong and weak ties.

4. Implications for Digital Libraries

This work is part of a wider study of how IT professionals experience social media for professional purposes, and is using online observations of IT professionals on Twitter and interviewing them in order to map out the connections between IG and social media. IT professionals, along with information science and digital library experts (who often work together on digital library projects) are often involved in designing and building digital libraries. With social media becoming more and more prolific and prevalent in our society it is important for us to understand social media use on a conceptual level, for just like many other online interfaces, digital libraries too can flourish and become

more integrated within communities if they can become information grounds where people and information meet in cyberspace.

5. Conclusion

The key gap in our understanding of the social media phenomenon is how it functions as a place despite being in cyberspace, along with an understanding of how it is experienced by its participants. This paper proposes that *information grounds* theory is a viable conceptual framework for understanding how social media can be perceived as place. The *information grounds* theory is a well-understood and validated theory that is built upon research in physical spaces. It proposes the people-information-place triad, which fits in with what online social media facilitates. This calls for empirical research to understand and theorize this phenomenon in a scholarly manner.

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