

Introducing the Concept of Social Noise

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ABSTRACT

Social Noise is a term I have coined to describe the influence of personal and relational factors on social media information behavior. Knowing that others in the social network may observe posts, comments, and, likes, a user may interact differently with information than if they encountered it privately. This social pressure of observation by peers, colleagues, family, and other members of the social network may amplify, confuse, or distort information being communicated. Under the influence of Social Noise, a user may moderate their communication based on external cues regarding what behavior is acceptable or desirable, consciously or unconsciously attempting to present themselves in a more desirable way within the network.

The objective of this study is to investigate how observation by members of the social network influences social media users' information behavior. The Social Noise Model serves as the theoretical framework for this exploratory study. Using Shannon's Mathematical Model of Communication and Alfred Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory as inspiration, the Social Noise Model introduced here is designed to represent and characterize this new facet of human information behavior. The model illustrates information being received by the individual and filtered through personal and environmental factors prior to the observable information behavior.

Data analytics, including LDA, LSA, and clustering, were performed to identify the presence of Social Noise in a large dataset of Facebook posts and comments, but they could not provide information about users' motivations and thinking behind their observable information behavior. Twenty user observations and semi-structured interviews provided insight into how Social Noise influenced the way information was received, understood, and acted upon on Facebook.

Four key constructs of Social Noise were identified, and sub-codes were assigned within each construct as patterns emerged, providing insight into the different facets of Social Noise. Additionally, in most instances more than one of the four constructs were present, layering their influence on the information behavior. Based on these findings, social media users are not always interacting with information based on true personal beliefs or desires; instead, concerns surrounding their personal image, relationships with others, core beliefs, and online conflict are influencing their observable information behavior. The results of this study provide a basis to further develop the Social Noise Model. Qualitative data provides insight into the thinking and motivations behind social media users' observable information behavior, specifically in the areas of Cultural Agency, Relationship Management, Image Curation, and Conflict Engagement.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

information use; social media; sociology of information

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

human information behavior; social media; information theory