

John Benjamins Publishing Company



This is a contribution from *Dynamism in Metaphor and Beyond*.
Edited by Herbert L. Colston, Teenie Matlock and Gerard J. Steen.
© 2022. John Benjamins Publishing Company

This electronic file may not be altered in any way.

The author(s) of this article is/are permitted to use this PDF file to generate printed copies to be used by way of offprints, for their personal use only.

Permission is granted by the publishers to post this file on a closed server which is accessible to members (students and staff) only of the author's/s' institute, it is not permitted to post this PDF on the open internet.

For any other use of this material prior written permission should be obtained from the publishers or through the Copyright Clearance Center (for USA: www.copyright.com).

Please contact rights@benjamins.nl or consult our website: www.benjamins.com

Tables of Contents, abstracts and guidelines are available at www.benjamins.com

Relevance theory perspectives on web-mediated communication

Charles Forceville and Natalia Sánchez-Querubín
University of Amsterdam

Cognitivist approaches are in need of an inclusive theory of communication. Relevance theory (RT) is well-equipped to develop into such a theory, but to fulfill its promise it should be able to accommodate digital-platform-based exchanges. Since communication via digital platforms often takes place between people who do not, or hardly, know each other personally, the issue of trustworthiness becomes much more important than in the face-to-face variety that is RT's paradigmatic type of communication. Using TripAdvisor as an illustrative example, we make suggestions for how RT can handle, and provide useful perspectives on, communication via digital platforms, paying specific attention to the creation of trust.

Keywords: web-mediated communication, relevance theory, cyberpragmatics, TripAdvisor, trustworthiness

[W]e believe that both conceptual metaphor theory and blending theory would benefit if they also incorporated relevance-theoretic ideas
(Tendahl and Gibbs, 2008: 23)

1. Introduction

Cognitivist approaches to meaning-making need to be embedded in a communication theory. We propose that relevance theory (RT) can fulfill this role. The key premise of RT is that in all communication senders of a message try to be optimally relevant to their addressees (Wilson and Sperber, 2004, p. 612). This predisposition toward optimizing relevance is hardwired in humans' brains, and is thus activated automatically and largely subconsciously. Sperber and Wilson and colleagues have worked out this plausible idea in great detail (e.g., Sperber and Wilson, 1995; Wilson and Sperber, 2012; Carston, 2002, 2010; Clark, 2013). But in order to fulfill

its promise to be an inclusive communication theory, RT must be able to accommodate other types of communication than just the face-to-face variety upon which the theory was built. Using the travel review site TripAdvisor (with which one of the authors has ample experience as a contributor) as a test case, we will in this chapter reflect on how communication mediated via websites can be accommodated within an RT perspective, with a specific focus on the building of “trust.” The primary goal of our essay is thus to further strengthen RT as an inclusive model of communication. In turn, we expect that RT can feed into new media analyses of the factors that have an impact on the perceived trustworthiness of web platforms.

Web-mediated communication “is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of types of communication on the Internet” (Yus, 2015a, p. 1551) occurring through email, chatrooms, social media sites, and websites. The field of web-mediated communication is extensive and researchers often conduct qualitative studies of user-generated messages in terms of sentiment, linguistics, and discourse (Baym, 1995; Harrison, 1998; Androutsopoulos, 2006; Page, 2013; Yus, 2015a, 2015b; Zappavigna, 2018). Various forms of web-mediated communication occur via TripAdvisor. For example, in TripAdvisor there is synchronous and asynchronous user-to-user communication in the form of reviews. In this latter case, individuals address a (potentially large) group of people who often do not know the communicator personally. This differs from a chatroom or social networking sites such as Facebook in which individuals know each other. In TripAdvisor, communication also flows from the “system to the user” (Yus, 2015a: p. 1551), namely via automated messages.

Studying web-mediated communication also involves the study of design elements (buttons, labels, and menus), affordances such as postings and ratings, and ranking processes. Here one can also see the website as a socio-technical infrastructure that mediates communication and interactions between users as well as exchanges between data. In addition to conducting qualitative analyses, one can also perform what in new media studies is known as “discursive interface analysis” (Stanfill, 2015, p. 1061). The latter sees productive power in design and approaches a websites’ affordances in terms of how “they reflect, and help establish, cultural common sense about what Users do (and should do), producing the possible and normative rather than acting on any particular individual” (Stanfill, 2015, 1061). It is worth clarifying that the approach is not deterministic. One is not studying the actual visitor of the website but rather the visitor ‘imagined’ and addressed by the website. In reality, a person can, within the boundaries of what is technically possible, use a website in unexpected ways. Hitherto, web platforms are also studied with reference to how they articulate an “engineered sociality” (Bucher, 2012a, 2012b); and more broadly, to how public metrics and calculation inform notions of value and participation (Helmond, 2015; Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013; Gerlitz, 2016; McCosker, 2017, Van Dijck & Poell 2016).

In our study of TripAdvisor, we address web-mediated communication not by engaging in the qualitative study of messages, but by analysing TripAdvisor's interface through the lens of relevance theory (henceforth: RT), focusing specifically on the building of trust. We reflect on the following questions: (1) To what extent can target audiences find a message relevant if they do not know the communicator personally? (2) How does the TripAdvisor platform make communicators knowable and trustworthy? (3) Where does the TripAdvisor platform shade from being just a mediator for communication between humans into becoming a communicating agent itself?

In Section 2 we present a bare bones summary of pertinent dimensions of RT. In Section 3 we focus on how web platforms help build the communicator's identity and trustworthiness by turning pre-designed types of user activity into data points (Gerlitz, 2016). Section 4 briefly describes the TripAdvisor platform, while Section 5 shows how the study of the communication TripAdvisor enables can be accommodated within RT. Section 6 addresses the question whether web platforms ought themselves to be considered communicators. We end with some suggestions for further research.

2. An ultra-short & informal version of key dimensions of RT

Individuals engaging in communication share the key interest that the addressee (for practical purposes traditionally male in RT) of a message understands what the sender (traditionally female in RT) wants to convey. There is the expectation that each utterance (or: "ostensive stimulus") comes with the presumption (not: guarantee!) of optimal relevance to its envisaged addressee. An ostensive stimulus is relevant to the addressee if it triggers changes in the beliefs that contribute to the realization of any of his goals. Relevance is thus always a result of combining the contents of the message with the sum total of everything the addressee knows, believes, has done, experienced, etc. – called his "cognitive environment." The communicator wants the addressee to understand her and to think and act in accordance with this understanding (Sperber et al., 2010, p. 364). The better the communicator knows the addressee, the better she is able to assess his cognitive environment, and the better she can present the message in a relevant manner. Crucially, then, relevance is always relevance to an individual (Sperber and Wilson 1995, pp. 142–151). The relevance principle, as has been argued by Forceville (2005, 2014, 2020) and Yus (2016, Chapter 5), functions no less in mass-communication than in live face-to-face communication between two people standing next to each other.

Relevance is determined by two factors: effect and effort. "Effect" pertains to whether a message affects the short-term or long-term goals of the addressee. If it

does, a message triggers “a cognitive effect that contributes positively to the fulfilment of functions or goals” (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p. 265). Cognitive effects result from combining information in the message with contextual information which, typically, result in the addressee (1) adopting new beliefs; (2) strengthening or weakening old beliefs; or (3) revising old beliefs. To most addressees, messages such as “There’s an ugly-looking man with a hatchet standing behind you” and “You just won €1 million” would count as cognitive effects if coming from a reliable source. So would “the supermarket is closed today,” said to someone who is about to go shopping there. Cognitive effects can also include, or even exclusively pertain to, triggering an emotion or mood (Yus, 2011, p. 65). An example of the latter would be, “You look great today!” The second factor that governs relevance is “effort”: the more mental energy an addressee needs to summon to derive relevance, the more relevance decreases.

RT distinguishes between the explicit content (“explicatures”) and the implicit content (“implicatures”) of an utterance. The explicatures can be recovered by decoding the linguistic meaning of words and grammatical structures in a sentence and enriching this information by assigning referents, disambiguating ambiguous expressions, and supplementing incomplete information on the basis of knowledge that the communicator assumes can be considered to be shared by herself and the addressee, and thus mutually, if often latently, manifest to both of them. Thus, the complete version of (1a) “He will leave for the supermarket soon” may, in a given situation, be something like (1b) “Your father will leave our house by car, to go to the supermarket downtown, within the next few minutes.” This latter is an explicature. But often the derivation of explicatures is not enough to achieve relevance for the addressee. The situation in which a mother would utter (1a), her son would need to combine the enriched explicit information in (1b) with ad-hoc contextual information to derive a relevant implicature, for instance (2a): “My mother warns me that if I am quick I can join my father when driving to the supermarket, so that I can conveniently buy and transport beer for my party tonight.” This implicature (“I need to get ready fast”) is *strong*: the son must derive it to achieve relevance. If he should infer (2b): “My mother wants me to accompany Dad to the supermarket in the interest of father-son bonding,” this would count as a relatively *weak* implicature since, in the situation sketched, there is less justification for him to derive (2b). Strong and weak implicatures, to be sure, are points on a continuum (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, pp. 199–200).

RT teases apart two aspects of communication that are normally conflated. The first, the “communicative intention,” pertains to the aspiring communicator’s task of attracting the attention of a targeted addressee, making clear that she wants to convey something to him, for instance by speaking or waving to him, or catching

his eye. If the addressee is aware of the invitation to engage in communication, he *recognizes* the communicative intention. If he responds positively, he both recognizes and *fulfils* the communicative intention; if not (e.g., by turning away or leaving the room), he does not.

If the communicative intention is recognized and fulfilled (usually in a split second in face-to-face communication), the “informative intention” comes into play. This intention pertains to the derivation of specific explicatures and implicatures by the addressee: he needs to be able to recognize (i.e., understand) the message’s intended contents. Communication may break down at this stage for all sorts of reasons. The addressee may for instance not know the language in which the communicator speaks, or be too far away to hear her. If such problems do not arise, the addressee either accepts or discards the communicated assumptions as true or probably true (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p. 39; Clark, 2013, p. 301). If he accepts it, both the communicative and the informative intention have each been recognized and fulfilled (for more discussion on the recognition and fulfilment of intentions, see Forceville, 2020, Section 2.3). Communication can now be said to have successfully taken place, resulting in the addressee changing his thinking or behavior (in very minor or very significant ways) on the basis of registering, understanding, and accepting the message conveyed.

More recently, relevance theorists have started to pay more attention to how the credibility of the communicator can be accommodated in RT. If a message comes from an unreliable source, after all, this may jeopardize the fulfillment of the informative intention. While the default is that communicators trust each other, such trust is not unconditional: “people take a critical stance towards communicated information, and may end up rejecting it. [...] Vigilance (unlike distrust) is not the opposite of trust; it is the opposite of blind trust” (Sperber et al., 2010, p. 363). The issue of trust is a central issue in communication. Indeed,

it could be that any piece of communicative behaviour activates two distinct processes in the addressee: one geared to identifying the relevance of what is communicated on the assumption that it is trustworthy, and the other geared to assessing its trustworthiness. (Sperber et al., 2010, p. 364)

A reliable communicator must therefore be both competent and benevolent (Sperber et al., 2010, p. 369).

3. The co-construction of identity and trust on web platforms

In digital communication via websites the addressees more often than not do not know the sender personally. A vigilant addressee of a web-mediated message, then, needs to judge its potential relevance both on the basis of a sender's competence with respect to the information conveyed and the communicator's trustworthiness (see Fuoli, 2017, 2018; Fuoli and Hart, 2018). Usually, the platform itself provides safeguards to foster trustworthiness and to enhance the idea that it provides its users with 'good' content. This situation can be accommodated within RT since in web-mediated communication non-humans, too, can be actors "as long as one of the participants in the communicative process is a human being" (Yus, 2015a, p. 1551). Given that the platform plays a crucial role in enabling and facilitating communication between stakeholders, it is vital to describe how it co-shapes this communication, and how it helps the user to trust the often unknown communicator.

Crucially, on web platforms, communication takes place within a pre-structured range of actions, which have been anticipated and formalized into technical affordances. In a platform dedicated to product reviews communicators adopt the role of "product reviewers," providing for example their age, gender, affiliations, and interests. Both communicators and their utterances are monitored and valued in terms of metrics (number of reviews) and status-markers (one can be a "top reviewer" or "expert"). The latter are examples of abstract values such as "reputation, influence, and conversation" (Gerlitz and Lury, 2014, p. 175), calculated and updated on the basis of the weighted frequencies and types of interactions.

This interplay between users' identity, credibility, and metrics is the central issue, for instance, in Mackiewicz' (2010) analysis of 750 reviews of digital cameras on Epinions.com. Like RT, Mackiewicz considers expertise and trustworthiness the central concepts in the assessment of credibility (2010, p. 407). Adopting the Aristotelian concept of "ethos," understood as a speaker's perceived (lack of) authority to speak on a particular subject, she distinguishes between "invented ethos" and "situated ethos." This leads to the following dimensions of reviewer trustworthiness: invented expertise (= *ad hoc* signals that the reviewer is knowledgeable about the topic at hand), situated expertise (= the reputation of knowledgeability the reviewer has built over a series of reviews), invented trustworthiness (= *ad hoc* signals that the reviewer can be trusted), and situated trustworthiness (= the reputation of trustworthiness the reviewer has built over a series of reviews). In short, platforms provide facilities to the user for evaluating the reputation of the reviewer, thereby co-construing the (lack of) credibility of a particular communicator.

Vásquez analyses typical discourse features in a sample of 1,000 consumer reviews on five web platforms. One way of inspiring trust in the text itself, she notes, is for reviewers to mention various "groups" to which they belong, in terms of

relationship/family status, gender, age, sexual preference, lifestyle, and consumption patterns (2014, p. 67). Such indications help readers decide to what extent they can identify with the reviewer (“the reviewer is someone like me”) and thus assess the relevance of the reviewer’s evaluations for *them*. In RT terms, opportunities for identification with the reviewer enhance a mutually shared cognitive environment.

Vásquez observes that the platform itself generates feedback about the performance of messages and interactions in the form of ways to verify reviewers’ identities. By awarding badges, and calculating numerical values or rankings, the platform complements content with quantitative information about this content’s relevance to earlier addressees. In addition, it uses this information to continuously organize and filter messages, for instance by automatically privileging content based on criteria such as “best reviewed” or “most engaged with.” These types of filtering are interpreted by Yus as interventions in the communication: “Instead of the user clicking on potentially relevant links it is the site that feeds the user with pre-established topics of interest” (2015b, p. 85).

We can summarize the situation of web-mediated communication as follows. While much of the potential relevance of a message from a communicator to the targeted audience resides in that message’s content itself, the platform plays an important role in enhancing and co-creating relevance by facilitating the build-up of the communicator’s ethos through providing numerical values and rankings that allow addressees to judge the communicator’s credibility. An RT analysis adapted to web-mediated communication, we argue, needs to account for three key web platform dimensions, namely, as a service enabling contributors to create an online identity; as a template for communicators to produce messages; and as an interface for addressees to assess the messages’ usefulness. The interplay of these dimensions determines the degree of relevance and trustworthiness of messages.

4. The TripAdvisor platform as service, communication template, and interface

TripAdvisor as service for creating an online identity

Internet sources have a major impact on tourism (Lee et al., 2011; Simms, 2012; Aureli et al., 2014; Standing et al., 2014; Filieri, 2015; Kamoen et al., 2015). TripAdvisor enables non-professionals to review hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions online, who thereby help other travelers to make informed choices. To become a reviewer, one has to create a profile, requiring minimally a (nick)name, an e-mail address, and a password. Optional categories are a photo, a geographical location, information about gender, age, and self-characterizations by selecting one

or more phrases pertaining to one's lifestyle. A review can be submitted only after the reviewer has ticked a box declaring that she is independent and unbiased. The review is verified by the platform through various automated procedures, occasionally complemented by human checks, with regard to its (probable) authenticity and appropriateness, and if found OK it is published. Due to space limitations, we will in this section only consider TripAdvisor's "restaurant" review option as applicable in the summer of 2018.

Format of the communication template

A reviewer is offered a template with the following mandatory categories: (1) Overall rating of restaurant in terms of one to five "owl eyes" (Jeacle and Carter, 2011, p. 298), from "terrible" to "excellent"; (2) Title of review; (3) "Your review"; (4) Type of visit (e.g., "couples," "family," "business"); (5) "Were you here for ...?" (e.g., "lunch," "dinner," "drinks"); (6) Time of visit. Optional categories include information about the type of restaurant, price-level, recommendable dishes, and photo-uploads.

Interface from the receiver's perspective

The user (here equivalent to RT's "addressee") of the site is presented with generic contact information about the restaurant reviewed; the average score on the 1–5 rating system and the number of reviews on which this score is based; a specification of the distribution of ratings over the 1–5 scores; a characterization of the type of food served; and the restaurant's rank in the city where it is located. Moreover, the source of any uploaded photographs (by the restaurant management or the reviewer) is given. All this information is aggregated by the platform.

The reviews as seen by the addressee-user comprise among other things the reviewer's name or *nick*; her photo (if uploaded); her geographic whereabouts; (1), (2), (3) and (6) of the list above; the total number of reviews written; and the number of "helpful votes" she hitherto collected. Clicking on the reviewer's "full profile" enables users to get to know the reviewer even better, among other things specifying "levels" and "number of cities visited."

5. An RT characterization of communication on TripAdvisor

Various mandatory and optional categories TripAdvisor requires its reviewers to complete are of a “multiple choice,” and hence coded, nature, giving rise to explicatures of the type, “This reviewer commits herself to the following evaluations of (aspects of) the performance of the restaurant under discussion.”

TripAdvisor reviewers intend to be optimally relevant to their envisaged audience, consisting of individuals they usually do not know personally, by coming up with the best possible ostensive stimulus. But why would this envisaged audience pay attention to a review, let alone trust its author? Prospective addressees may completely rely on the text of the review itself (Mackiewicz’ [2010] “invented ethos”), and thereby typically recognize and fulfill the communicative intention as well as recognize and, hopefully, fulfill the informative intention.

But the platform itself helps enhance credibility. Inasmuch as part of reviewers’ profiles and status are standardly visible, a reader immediately knows their “track record.” This “situated ethos” presumably contributes (or fails to contribute) to the reviewer’s perceived expertise and trustworthiness. A full profile may increase the chances that users will not just recognize but also fulfill the informative intention. One strategy for users to increase relevance by minimizing their mental effort might be to only read reviews by contributors that are widely travelled, have written many reviews, and/or have earned many helpful votes. To what extent this information actually matters to addressees is, however, unclear. Filieri finds that “[TripAdvisor] users rarely check the profile information of reviewers” (2015, p. 181). If this is correct, invented ethos is considered more important than situated ethos by these users.

TripAdvisor enables readers as well as restaurant owners to “flag” inappropriate, or possibly fake, reviews, with the promise to look into these, which presumably further contributes to the credibility of the reviews. This is crucial, since “the submission of biased reviews remains one of the core concerns that critics can levy against the integrity of the site” (Jeacle and Carter, 2011, p. 298).

We can now provisionally answer the question how addressees that often do not know the communicator can find a TripAdvisor review relevant. In the very act of accessing a specific reviewer’s information (minimally: the review itself and the reviewer’s basic profile; optionally: the reviewer’s detailed profile and status), an addressee-user has accepted the invitation to be the recipient of the review-message. If the addressee believes the reviewer to be both trustworthy and competent, he then processes the explicit information (explicatures) in the review, thereby recognizing the informative intention. If this information chimes well with the sum total of knowledge, values, and ideas in his cognitive environment, he will not only derive explicatures from the review, but also implicatures, such as increasing or

decreasing the likelihood that he will, sooner or later, plan a visit to the restaurant reviewed, that it would be (not) nice to take his in-laws there, that it is close to/too far from his house/hotel, etc. Any of these, and a range of others, would count as cognitive effects, and thus be relevant to this user. The second question we asked was, “How do platforms make communicators and their utterances knowable and trustworthy?” Precisely because TripAdvisor’s reviewers are not personally known to users, it is inevitable that “trusted information comes very often packed in rankings” (Origgi, 2013, p. 35). The long-term ethos of competence and benevolence (Mackiewicz’ [2010] situated expertise and trustworthiness) depends on ratings and evaluations that are awarded by human beings. But helpful votes and flags remain data that are *calculated* and *mediated* by TripAdvisor in what Cheney-Lippold calls an “interplay between data and algorithms interpreting that data” (2017, p. 25). Some parts of the communicator’s ethos, and thus her online-identity, are even entirely calculated by the platform, namely the number of helpful votes, cities visited, and “levels” achieved.

6. From platform to agent: TripAdvisor as communicator

Our third question is whether there are reasons to consider TripAdvisor not just as a mediator for communication between humans, but as having itself traits of a communicator. As Van Dijck and Poell warn, social media platforms “are never neutral channels for data transmission” (2013, p. 10). Crucially, they are also businesses providing services profiting from the production of user data, and they put forward as well as enforce understandings of what ideal interactions between users, and users and systems, might look like (Gillespie, 2010). That is, they have their own agendas, work with certain ideological assumptions, and by their very design decide how a communicator can be optimally relevant to her envisaged audience. RT insists that a human communicator is partly constrained by her willingness and ability to provide the best possible ostensive stimulus (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p. 278). A communicator may for instance use very indirect language (thereby demanding extra mental effort), because she wants to avoid being offensive by being more direct, or because she is simply not able to formulate her thoughts more concisely. For web-mediated communication (as for other forms of mass-communication) it is sensible to expand “being able” to include “being permitted,” given that, and how, a platform’s technical parameters do not only enable, but also steer, and even forbid certain forms of communication. In short, TripAdvisor provides not just opportunities, it also imposes constraints.

A review, for instance, requires a minimum of 100 characters, and there are mandatory categories. Moreover, it provides a five-point rating scale, with the

descriptions “terrible,” “poor,” “average,” “very good,” and “excellent” – somewhat surprisingly prohibiting a “good” rating. A blunter three-point scale (“bad,” “average,” “good”) or a more nuanced ten-point scale would have forced reviewers into deciding on different cut-off points. There are other constraints: it is impossible, after submission, to edit or retract a review; restaurant owners, but not others, are allowed to write responses to reviews; and by awarding 100 points for a complete review and a mere 5 points for a photograph or a 1–5 rating without additional text, it imposes a hierarchy of values for contributions. More importantly, to optimize advertising revenues, it has a vested interest in encouraging both reviewers and their readers to check the site as often as possible, for instance by “constantly renewing themes so people keep coming back to their outlets” (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013, p. 4). In this way, TripAdvisor gets to know a reviewer better with each new review – and as a result is able to send the reviewer more personalized advertisements, thereby targeting the restaurant reviewer (who provides the review for free) as a prospective client whose clicks generate income for the platform.

Whereas these medium-specific features may not be consciously noticed by many reviewers, and/or not be experienced as constraints, TripAdvisor also makes its presence felt in more emphatic ways, namely by sending reviewers e-mails directly. In this way it thus arguably acts as a communicator: “we just received your latest review”; “your reviews are ready to read on TripAdvisor”; “Restaurant expert level 27: one review required.” Here Yus’ reformulation of RT’s “cognitive effects” as “cognitive rewards” (Yus, 2011, p. 65) is useful: the goal is not just to inform reviewers of something they did not yet know (“X people read my review,” “I received Y new helpful votes,” “my reputation in the community currently has badge Z status”), but is also intended to evoke emotions (“implicatures”) such as satisfaction, pride, and happiness. Even though “trust” may be diminished by the fact that these are computer-generated messages, they are surely governed by the relevance principle just as much as any other type of communication. In short, the platform’s messages come themselves with the presumption of optimal relevance to their envisaged addressees (here: the reviewers).

All of these issues have ethical dimensions – and those pertaining to other web platforms may be more consequential than the ones we sketched above for TripAdvisor. For instance, Academia.edu’s rankings could be said to have as a by-effect promoting a sense of competition rather than collaboration among scholars, and by suggesting that the user invite “friends” from other networks (such as Twitter and Facebook), it encourages an idea of mixing professional and personal contacts that some scholars might consider objectionable. Moreover, Academia.edu ceaselessly encourages its users to upgrade to a (paid) premium account, which provides more information about who accesses one’s profile, and which blocks ads. Other, more serious issues are at stake. Values embedded in

platforms have affected online and offline understandings of concepts such as friendship (Amichai-Hamburger, 2013), self-disclosure, and intimacy (Bazarova, 2012). Freshness, popularity, continual engagement, always-on, and real-time feedback are communication values enforced by the platforms. The limitations of automated evaluation of relevance have landed Facebook in trouble, examples being the “Year in review” and “On this day,” where the platform brings to the attention of the contributor status updates somebody produced long ago but that the algorithm considers still relevant because of their timing (e.g., because something happened exactly a year ago). As a result, some users have suddenly been confronted, much to their distress, with images of ex-partners, dead relatives, and other painful memories (King, 2016; Rajan, 2016).

7. Concluding remarks

We hope to have demonstrated that the RT framework can accommodate web-mediated communication, taking TripAdvisor as an example, and in turn provides useful concepts to analyze such communication. We have illustrated how, given the (relative) anonymity of communicators on TripAdvisor, as on many other platforms, a platform needs to build into its design procedures to convince users that communicators are trustworthy. Inevitably, these procedures have a strong quantitative component. We have pointed out that TripAdvisor does not just enable communication, but also constrains the ways in which it allows it. Systematically analyzing both affordances and constraints reveals certain ideological presuppositions of the “ghost in the machine” – which may be ethically debatable. Finally, we have argued that the platform itself can become a communicator vis-à-vis the contributor by triggering implicatures, and thereby relevance, in the form of cognitive rewards. This latter feeds into broader discussions about bot-human interaction, and the benefits and dangers this entails.

Clearly, we have only scratched the surface of the topic at hand. Issues deserving further theoretical and empirical research include the following:

- How does the *effort* needed to understand a platform’s (possibly user-unfriendly) interface, etiquette, and navigation opportunities affect overall relevance for a given user? How much effort can a novice contributor be reasonably expected to invest to understand the results of her actions (for instance in terms of privacy settings, or signing away copyrights to a platform)? This has ethical dimensions as well.

- What is the relative weight of elements of “situated ethos” for relevance? It would be worthwhile to test empirically how much or little importance TripAdvisor’s users attach to a reviewer’s track record (e.g., by taking into account how many reviews she has written, or how many helpful votes she already collected).
- How important are age, gender, experience and other personal features for the assessment of a given communicator’s trustworthiness for a user? How vital are full profiles? (Lee et al. [2011, p. 684] somewhat surprisingly found that reviewers who did *not* mention their gender in their profiles, gathered *more* helpful votes than those who did). Or is the recency of messages far more critical?
- How do visual features affect relevance? RT is only beginning to venture into the realm of visual communication, having long maintained that “non-verbal communication tends to be relatively weak” (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p. 60). But platforms may also use or enable pictograms or emojis – coded elements that give rise to explicatures (for more discussion on RT and visuals, see Forceville, 2005, 2014, 2020; Yus, 2014, 2022).

Combining RT with insights from web platform studies, in which platforms are seen as active participants in communication by analyzing them in terms of ideology, design, technical affordances, and numerical practices, helps build bridges between cognition and communication research on the one hand and between new media and cultural studies on the other.

References

- Amichai-Hamburger, Y., Kingsbury, M., & Schneider, B. H. (2013). Friendship: an old concept with a new meaning? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(1), 33–39.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2012.05.025>
- Androutsopoulos, J. 2006. Introduction: Sociolinguistics and computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 10(4), 419–438.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9841.2006.00286.x>
- Aureli, S., Medei, R., Supino, E., & Travaglini, C. (2014). Online review contents and their impact on three and four-star hotel reservations: some evidence in Italy. In Z. Xiang & I. Tussyadiah (Eds.), *Information and communication technologies in tourism 2014* (pp. 381–393). Berlin: Springer.
- Baym, N. K. (1995). The emergence of community in computer-mediated communication. In S. G. Jones (Ed.), *Cybersociety: Computer-mediated communication and community* (pp. 138–163). London: Sage.
- Bazarova, N. N. (2012). Public intimacy: Disclosure interpretation and social judgments on Facebook. *Journal of Communication*, 62(5), 815–832.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01664.x>

- Bucher, T. (2012a). Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook. *New Media & Society*, 14(7), 1164–1180. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812440159>
- Bucher, T. (2012b). The friendship assemblage: Investigating programmed sociality on Facebook. *Television & New Media*, 14(6), 479–493. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476412452800>
- Carston, R. (2002). *Thoughts and utterances: The pragmatics of explicit communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Carston, R. (2010). Explicit communication and ‘free’ pragmatic enrichment. In B. Soria, & E. Romero (Eds.), *Explicit communication: Robyn Carston’s pragmatics* (pp. 217–285). Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230292352_14
- Cheney-Lippold, J. (2017). *We are data: Algorithms and the making of our digital selves*. New York: New York University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1gk0941>
- Clark, B. (2013). *Relevance theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139034104>
- Filieri, R. (2015). Why do travelers trust TripAdvisor? Antecedents of trust towards consumer-generated media and its influence on recommendation adoption and word of mouth. *Tourism Management*, 51, 174–185. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2015.05.007>
- Forceville, C. (2005). Addressing an audience: time, place, and genre in Peter van Straaten’s calendar cartoons. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 18, 247–278. <https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.2005.18.3.247>
- Forceville, C. (2014). Relevance Theory as model for analysing multimodal communication. In D. Machin (Ed.), *Visual communication* (pp. 51–70). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110255492.51>
- Forceville, C. (2020). *Visual and multimodal communication: Applying the relevance principle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190845230.001.0001>
- Fuoli, M. (2017). Building a trustworthy corporate identity: A corpus-based analysis of stance in annual and corporate social responsibility reports. *Applied Linguistics*. Epub ahead of print. 13 February. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amw058>
- Fuoli, M. (2018). A stepwise method for annotating appraisal. *Functions of Language*, 25(2), 229–258. <https://doi.org/10.1075/fol.15016.fuo>
- Fuoli, M., & Hart, C. (2018). Trust-building strategies in corporate discourse: An experimental study. *Discourse & Society*, 29(5), 514–552. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926518770264>
- Gerlitz, C. (2016). What counts? Reflections on the multivalence of social media data. *Digital Culture & Society*, 2(2), 19–38. <https://doi.org/10.14361/dcs-2016-0203>
- Gerlitz, C., & Helmond, A. (2013). The like economy: Social buttons and the data-intensive Web. *New Media & Society*, 15(8), 1348–1365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812472322>
- Gerlitz, C., & Lury, C. (2014). Social media and self-evaluating assemblages: On numbers, orderings and values. *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, 15, 174–188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2014.920267>
- Gillespie, T. (2010). The politics of ‘platforms’. *New Media & Society*, 12(3), 347–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342738>
- Harrison, S. (1998). E-mail discussions as conversation: Moves and acts in a sample from a listserv discussion. *Linguistik Online* 1. <https://bop.unibe.ch/linguistik-online/article/view/1083/1772> (last accessed 8-7-20). <https://doi.org/10.13092/lo.1.1083>
- Helmond, A. (2015). The platformization of the web: Making web data platform ready. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603080>

- Jeacle, I., & Carter, C. (2011). In TripAdvisor we trust: Rankings, calculative regimes and abstract systems. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 36, 293–309. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aos.2011.04.002>
- Kamoen, N., Mos, M. B. J., & Dekker, W. F. S. (2015). A hotel that is not bad isn't good. The effects of valence framing and expectation in online reviews on text, reviewer and product appreciation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 75, 28–43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2014.10.007>
- King, H. (2016). Facebook 'On This Day' brings back bad memories of Charlie Hebdo attacks. *CNN Tech*. <http://money.cnn.com/2016/01/07/technology/facebook-charlie-hebdo-memories/index.html> (last accessed 8-7-20).
- Lee, H., Law, R., & Murphy, J. (2011). Helpful reviewers in TripAdvisor, an online travel community. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 28, 675–688. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2011.611739>
- Mackiewicz, J. (2010). The co-construction of credibility in online product reviews. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 19(4): 403–426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2010.502091>
- McCosker, A. (2017, 2 Oct.). Data literacies for the postdemographic social media self. *First Monday*, 22(10). <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/7307/6550> (last accessed 8-7-20). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i10.7307>
- Origi, G. (2013). Democracy and trust in the age of the social web. *Teoria Politica. Nova Serie, Annali, II*, 23–38.
- Page, R. E. (2013). *Stories and social media: Identities and interaction*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203148617>
- Rajan, N. (2016, February 8). Facebook 'Friends Day' sparks controversy after showing images of dead dogs and exes. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/02/08/facebook-friends-day-sparks-controversy_n_9185070.html (last accessed 8-7-20).
- Simms, A. (2012). Online user-generated content for travel planning – different for different kinds of trips? *e-Review of Tourism Research*, 10(3), 76–85.
- Sperber, D., Clément, F., Heintz, C., Mascaro, O., Mercier, H., Origi, G., & Wilson, D. (2010). Epistemic vigilance. *Mind & Language*, 25(4), 359–393. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0017.2010.01394.x>
- Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1995). *Relevance: communication and cognition* (2nd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Standing, C., Tang-Taye, J.-P., & Boyer, M. (2014). The impact of the internet in travel and tourism: a research review 2001–2010. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 31, 82–113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2014.861724>
- Stanfill, M. (2015). The interface as discourse: The production of norms through web design. *New Media & Society*, 17(7), 1059–1074. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814520873>
- Tendahl, M., & Gibbs, R. W., Jr. (2008). Complementary perspectives on metaphor: Cognitive linguistics and relevance theory. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40(11), 1823–1864. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2008.02.001>
- Van Dijck, J., & Poell, T. (2013). Understanding social media logic. *Media and Communication*, 1(1), 2–14. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v1i1.70>
- Van Dijck, J. & Poell, T. (2016). Understanding the promises and premises of online health platforms. *Big Data & Society*, 3(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951716654173>
- Vásquez, C. (2014). *The discourse of online consumer reviews*. London: Bloomsbury.

- Wilson, D., & Sperber, D. (2004). Relevance Theory. In L.R. Horn and G. Ward (eds.), *The Handbook of Pragmatics* (pp. 607–32). Malden MA: Blackwell.
- Wilson, D., & Sperber, D. (2012). *Meaning and relevance*. Cambridge.: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139028370>
- Yus, F. (2011). *Cyberpragmatics: Internet-mediated communication in context*. Amsterdam: Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.213>
- Yus, F. (2014). Not all emoticons are created equal. *Linguagem em (Dis)Curso*, 14(3), 511–529. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-4017-140304-0414>
- Yus, F. (2015a). Website-mediated platform communication. In K. Tracy (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of language and social interaction*, vol. 3 (pp. 1550–1555). Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118611463.wbielsio62>
- Yus, F. (2015b). The role of cognition and relevance in new digital narratives. In E. Carpi (Ed.), *Prospettive multilingue e interdisciplinari nel discorso specialistico* (pp. 81–107). Pisa: Pisa University Press.
- Yus, F. (2016). *Humour and relevance*. Amsterdam: Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/thr.4>
- Yus, F. (2022). *Smartphone communication: Interactions in the app ecosystem*. London: Routledge.
- Zappavigna, M. (2018). *Searchable talk: Hashtags and social media metadiscourse*. London: Bloomsbury.