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Transformation or continuity?

The impact of social media on information: implications for theory and practice

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ABSTRACT

This panel debates whether the ways in which social media are changing the nature, creation, seeking, use and sharing of information constitute a transformation or are primarily marked by continuity. Ubiquitous and everyday access to social media (for some) seems to be bringing about changes in social practice, including of information-related activities, such that conceptualisations of information itself are potentially reshaped. Discussants draw inspiration from the pervasive impact on information activities of the everyday adoption of social media. At a theoretical level they also draw inspiration from the analytic resources of contemporary practice theory and its emphasis on materiality and embodiment, routine and change, social expectations and social identity, and knowledge as a process. All the participants of the panel have conducted new empirical research on social media use with a focus on its deep as well as broad impact. The audience members are invited to discuss with the panelists questions such as how social media relate to routinised daily practices and institutionalised practices and hierarchies, how their use refashions social relationships, how they turn information seekers and users into information managers, producers and creators and shape perceptions of information authority and trustworthiness, and how a new theorisation can help librarians, information professionals and researchers understand change and assume a proactive role in it.

Keywords

social media, information practices, practice theory

1. INTRODUCTION

This international panel debates whether the ways in which social media are changing the nature, creation, location, use and sharing of information constitute a transformation or are primarily marked by continuity. Social media, currently a widely used umbrella term for web sites and services based on users creating and sharing content and making connections, such as blogs, microblogs and social network(ing) sites. Ubiquitous and everyday access to social media (for some) seems to be bringing about changes in social practice, including information-related activities, such that conceptualisations of information itself may need to be rethought [cf. **?**]. For example, through social media new forms of information are shared; and new channels of information created, often implying new audiences. Existing information channels can be subverted. Social relationships and patterns of information sharing change. How information authority is defined can also be remoulded. Information users may become creators and managers. Ultimately what constitutes information is itself potentially redefined. In this session each speaker and his/her partner "discussant" consider whether changes identified in a wide range of research and practice contexts are transformational or merely a continuation of familiar phenomena and conceptualisations of information.

Discussants draw inspiration from the pervasive impact on information activities of the everyday adoption of social media. At a theoretical level they also draw inspiration from the analytic resources of contemporary practice theory and its emphasis on materiality and embodiment, routine and change, social expectations and social identity, and knowledge as a process [Bräuchler & Postill 2010; Corradi et al. 2010; Feldman & Orlikowski 2011; Schatzki 2003; Wenger 1998]. With some notable exceptions [Cox 2012; Haider 2011; Lloyd 2010; Pilerot & Limberg 2011; Talja & Lloyd 2010] this body of theory has been neglected by information science. Yet it provides rich resources for rethinking how the place of information activities within social practices is reshaped when social media uses are increasingly woven into the fabric of everyday and working life. Arguably, these empirical changes in the degree of access to and control over information force a transformational shift in theorisation away from "information behaviour"concerns such as purposeful seeking for textual information sources by knowledge workers towards everyday seeking of information as a strand of activity within nearly everything that people do.

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In spite of the large number of empirical studies, theoretical discussion and an impressive corpus of practical literature on the use of social media and its anticipated implications in various contexts, there has been remarkably little discussion that brings together individual theoretical and practical insights into how social media use is influencing the practices of work and everyday life [Vuori & Okkonen 2012]. The literature has had a tendency to focus on either broad phenomena of the information society such as information divides [Yu 2011] or micro-level analysis and often relatively one-sided use of individual services (as remarked by Hall 2011). Cho and Lee have criticised the lack of studies that consider the complete process of computer mediated communication [Cho & Lee 2008]. Goode [2009] makes a related call for the necessity of establishing a research agenda that addresses how social media relates to and influences practices (in his case citizen journalism) in ways not confined to the online sphere. The gap is apparent also in the consideration of how specifically changes in social practice driven by social media use, reshape the practical use of information and also its theorisation.

All the participants of the panel have conducted new empirical research on social media use with a focus on its deep as well as broad impact. By tightly integrating theoretical and empirical approaches this panel will be able to explore the transformative potential of social media in different contexts, and draw out the empirical and theoretical implications for information science. Panelists address a number of topical areas ranging from archives, libraries and museums, to scholars and scientists in different disciplines, to different types of everyday life practices. These all raise complex issues in themselves, but as material collectively offer a focus for inquiry into general changes in the practice and theory of information.

Thus audience members are invited to discuss with the panelists questions such as the following: a) How are social media related to routinised daily practices and also institutionalised practices and hierarchies? And how does their use reshape social relations? b) In what ways do social media turn information seekers and users into information managers, producers and creators? And shape perceptions of information authority and trustworthiness? c) How therefore is information reshaped as a practice and a theory? d) How can a new theorisation help librarians, information professionals and researchers understand change and assume a proactive role in it?

2. ORGANISATION OF THE PANEL

Each panellist will contribute a 5 minute statenment (illustrated with presentation software) which will be followed by a reply of equal length by one of the other panellists in the role of "discussant". The pairing of presenter and discussant has been established in advance as detailed below. This arrangement of speakers will ensure a closely argued debate. In addition to inviting the audience at the venue to contribute to the discussion, and in order to enable a deeper debate, the panel will use the Twitter hashtag #asistsocmedprac to collect points for the discussant to take up, both in advance and during the panel session. This will ensure a lively, yet focused debate both online and offline, with conference delegates and other members of the society able to participate. Offsite members will be able to view the discussion through a live videolink.

3. CONTRIBUTING PANELISTS

Andrew Cox (Discussant: Helena Francke)

Lecturer
Information School, University of Sheffield, UK

Cox's research explores the place of information within the social practice of food blogging, a weaving together of cooking, writing and photography [Cox & Blake 2011]. Information seeking, while important, is subsidiary to the creation and promotion of a personal information resource, shared with others. The wider, diverse audiences with whom the blog allows foodie enthusiasms to be shared creates personal information management challenges and an interest in intellectual property rights and access management: to carefully manage flows of attention, "traffic". Tensions between a personal focus and engagement with professional journalistic practices becomes a source of community debate. Ultimately how information is conceived and used is shaped by foodie values. It is argued that these features do seem to constitute a transformation in the relation of individuals to information, and demand a new theoretical approach.

Helena Francke (Discussant: Jutta Haider)

Senior lecturer/Assistant Professor
Swedish School of Library and Information Science,
University of Borås, Sweden

Francke draws on a study of blogging activities and interviews with bloggers within the areas of the environment and current events to investigate how trustworthiness and credibility are constructed and negotiated in blogs. These blogs display features from several genre practices with conflicting expectations of how credibility is achieved. The bloggers and the people commenting on blog posts establish their contributions as credible through various activities, such as providing references to sources. These activities evoke discussion and how they are employed is occasionally called into question. The panel contribution will explore these discussions between bloggers and readers who comment in terms of emerging information practices around credibility in blogs which relate to practices in other communicative genres, but also draw attention to conflicts between these practices. In doing so, the presentation will engage with theories around credibility and cognitive authority [Metzger & Flanagin 2008; Wilson 1983] as well as genre theory [Bazerman 2000; Swales 1990].

Jutta Haider (Discussant: Andrew Cox)

Senior lecturer/Assistant Professor
Library and Information Science, Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University, Sweden

Haider's recent research revolves around environmental information as it is enacted in routinised daily practices and the materiality of everyday life and specifically how it is shaped and circulated in social media [Haider in press]. In greener living experiments, as documented in blogs, on Facebook or Twitter, ethically motivated decisions and practices often play out in the form of pre-defined projects; e.g. buy-nothing periods, keeping in-and-out lists, or set tasks relating to awareness-raising campaigns. This makes the routinsation of certain environmentally relevant practices very tangible. By favouring this - what could be loosely called - project-based information, social media play an important role in a project orientation of greener living and they reshape the type of information available. Haider highlights how this way the reporting on environmentally relevant practices in social media contributes to making often abstract environmental information meaningful, while also favouring a liberal framing of greener living by conceiving of information as predominantly relating to consumer choices. Hence it could be argued that while the predominant type of information in this regard is made possible and shaped by the affordances of social media, its location is characterised by continuity.

Hazel Hall (Discussant: Isto Huvila)

Professor
Centre for Social Informatics, Institute for Informatics and Digital Innovation, Edinburgh Napier University, UK

Hall explores how the AHRC-funded Developing Research Excellence and Methods (DREaM) project has used social media to support a new network of library and information science researchers in the UK. She reflects on how social media have been employed as part of the project, particularly around event amplification [Kelly 2011] to extend the reach of the network's activities. A social network analysis of the DREaM workshop "cadre" - a cohort of 30 researchers and practitioners who participated in the DREaM workshop series - reveals how relationships changed over the course of the seven month period between the start and end of the workshops, and provides an opportunity to consider the role of social media in, for example, binding particular individuals and cliques together, allocating network power, and encouraging more naturally passive participants to contribute in online space. Hall also speaks about using social media to support the practice of researchers and practitioner researchers by providing easy access to a sustainable network of identifiable peers, and the levels of moderation and intervention required to achieve such an outcome. The findings from this project are of relevance to other professional groups which comprise academic researchers seeking to work more closely with their practitioner peers, for example social workers and teachers. The work has already attracted the attention of archaeologists who hope to implement similar practices based around social media as a means of strengthening ties between research and practice, and enhancing the opportunities for research impact.

Isto Huvila (Discussant: Hazel Hall)

Associate professor
Information studies, School of Business and Economics,
Åbo Akademi University, Finland

Huvila has conducted empirical research on the institutional work practices in archives, libraries and museums and discusses in his contribution how social media informs (and augments) institutional practices at these institutions. The findings of his study show how various social media tools function as an informal backchannel and a shadow infrastructure of the work at the institutions. This informal context of social practices is often more influential than the formal digital and social infrastructures endorsed by the institutions and provide a venue for a counter discourse, which was very different from the ones articulated in social media strategies and institutionally promoted uses of social media. Using a combination of practice theory, soft systems theory [Checkland 2000], ecological approach [Gibson 1979] and domestication theory [Berker et al. 2006], Huvila discusses the underpinnings and implications of the role of social media in the contexts of archives, libraries and museums.

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