

The humanisation of media? Social media and the reformation of communication

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Humans are communal animals with innate desires to be with and interact with others of our species. We establish and maintain familial, tribal, and community bonds. We express our thoughts, our feelings, and our aspirations. We share our observations and interpretations of the world about us. We communicate in many ways—speech, gestures, art, music, performance, text, and photography. If we are unable to use one form of communication to effectively connect, we find another because communication with others is fundamental to who and what we are as humans.

Communication is thus a natural element that promoted collective life and created capacities that made humans one of the most social species.

For millennia we gathered around fires and told the stories of our ancestors. We chanted, sang, and danced together. We fished, hunted, and farmed, passing on our knowledge of those skills to others. We sewed hides and cloth and gossiped about others. We ate together and talked of developments in our lives and how we should respond to them. Facile and informal communications with family, friends, and others in the community were the norm.

Then technology and population scale began taking that away from us.

Desires to overcome constraints of time and space led us to use technologies to express who and what we are. We began drawing on the walls of caves, carving totems, and putting characters onto stones, tablets, and parchment. Each of these uses of technology expanded our ability to communicate, but the very mediating of communication added artificiality and alienated the communication from those communicating as well as those being communicated to. It thus dehumanised our communication.

As population increased, we became more isolated from those around us. We began living in individual dwellings, with greater distances between us, and taking part in fewer informal communal gatherings. This changed the ways in which we communicated and passed on information and knowledge. It altered the ways that we made sense of the world about us and how we made collective decisions. Institutions emerged to serve those purposes. Tribal gatherings, town councils, schools, churches, and apparatuses of nation states all developed. And with them came formal communication processes and needs for technologies to communicate more widely with larger groups of people.

Enter mass media.

The solution for communicating more widely arose with the emergence of print, then recordings, and broadcasting. By their nature, these developments introduced formality into communication and limited who could speak and be heard. Not everyone could participate, because communication was unidirectional. Others were left out because to receive the communications required literacy,

reception and playback equipment, and electricity—all of which are unevenly distributed even in the twenty-first century.

Although mass media offered new and effective ways to communicate across space and time, the emergence of text and printing, photography, and broadcasting all introduced alienating forms of communications that separated those expressing information and ideas from those who received them. Mass media made interaction between those expressing and those attending to the expression impossible. It stole individual voices from the majority of people and gave voice to only a selected few.

The operation of mass media required the creation of institutions with structures and processes. It created conditions in which individuals could be directed, manipulated, and exploited by those with a voice. It became a means of elite empowerment. It enslaved. It objectified humans, transforming them into audiences that could be commoditized and traded in markets.

All of these factors created artificiality and alienation, distance and separation, estrangement and detachment, isolation and loneliness. Communication became brutalizing, debasing, and dehumanising.

Mass media made this dehumanisation worse because of its ubiquity and its growth to encompass a large portion of communication behaviour and time.

The promise of social media

The emergence of the Internet and the development of social media have been seen as fundamentally altering communication, restoring voice to the public, and introducing elements that re-humanise communication.

Social media have been lauded for their abilities to support exchange of ideas and information and to facilitate communities. They have reintroduced multi-directional communication. They have restored informality to communications. They allow us to discuss and debate, to share information from storehouses of knowledge, and to exchange ordinary and banal information.

Social media have given voice to those wanting changes in society, becoming a font of information, allowing us to gossip and discuss soap operas, and giving us videos of cats and people doing stupid things.

Social media are lauded as well as bemoaned as being the sum of the human experience....our highs, our lows, our accomplishments, and our foibles

Digital and social media functionalities are humanising communication by displacing some of the artificiality and alienation of mass communication. This is forcing change on media companies and content providers of all types, altering the ways they address and interact with their users, and the types of content provided. These changes are disturbing to elites and dominant social groups because they are stripping control and influence previously afforded them and diffusing the abilities to assert ideas and values, to shape culture, and to direct the course of society. The greater role of

vox populi in public communication has significant political economic and social implications to mass public life.

What should we as social observers and communication scholars make of this humanisation, this re-endowment of media with more natural human characteristics and attributes?

The challenge of technology

To begin, we must understand the nature of technology and the ideas of progress associated with it.

No technologies are neutral and without social effects, because they were created for specific purposes. Although changes in technology are typically portrayed as progress, with attendant connotations of desirable development and improvement, they do not always produce beneficial social results.

This is especially true of the contemporary technologies of communication, which have often been created for specific types of exploitation of social and commercial opportunities. Their structures produce and enforce power arrangements. Although social media have moved mass communication away from an industrial content production process, making it more people-centric than legacy mass communication, this should not be construed as removing them from the influences of power and elites.

Out of sheer naiveté and wishful thinking many proponents of and commentators on social media—including many of our colleagues in communication and media studies—have portrayed the Internet and its services as an empowering force, a democratizing institution, and a space free from the constraints that hobbled legacy media. These observers exhibit inadequate critical thought and analysis, venerate the technology, and tumble into the trap of technicism.

Technology is a value-laden activity from inception to use. It is culturally based activity designed as a means to some end. It changes and transform interactions and transactions for the benefit of some. It transforms thinking. It becomes social practice. It extracts value. It commoditises. It constrains actions. It can be co-opted to reinforce existing elites and power. It can diminish existing power arrangements and create new elites and power. It is anything but benign and equalising.

Clearly, social media are a technical artefact worthy of deep consideration for their effects on individuals and society. But we must study them with a critical perspective.

Structure, power, and influence

Even with the most cursory consideration, we are all aware of the increasing commercialisation of social media and their growing use by business interests and political elites. Advertisements are appearing between messages from friends and colleagues, and companies are tracking our behaviour and analysing our comments to improve marketing. Companies are “engaging” with consumers on social media for commercial benefits. Political elites are bypassing legacy media and promoting their interests without even the pretence of constraints of truth and accuracy.

Although it is true that individuals and civil society organisations are able to use this new means of communications more, and in more ways, than they were able to use legacy mass media in the past, the structures and processes of the Internet and social media are being greatly influenced by those who control the infrastructures and systems necessary for its operation. These new institutional arrangements are based on corporatist interests that determine the fundamental aspects of operations and practices, ultimately channelling and controlling content.

Measured reflection leads us to understand that social media themselves are creating powerful structures and institutions that are shifting mechanisms of influence and control from public to private spheres. This makes public oversight more challenging and reduces the ability of the public to influence social media with democratically determined policy.

The digital ecosystem seems to have a more amorphous structure than the legacy media ecosystem because of the large number of participants and its use of hardware and telecommunications systems operated by others. However, this appearance masks the reality that a very small number of enterprises control the functionality of the digital sphere and that users are dependent upon them. The operation of the ecosystem is based on consumption of hardware, software, and services from intermediary firms that control gateways and provide essential facilitating services. This produces mechanisms for social control and influence by firms that now have more power than many nation states.

These firms are exploiting their central positions to extract value from the users of the new communication networks and limiting communication just as did legacy media who organized their own monopolistic markets. The mechanisms for doing this come at a price.

We are experiencing a reduction in privacy, changes in norms of communicative behaviour, and unparalleled surveillance by both commercial firms and governments.

Uses of social media are affecting general public norms and expectations of privacy. Thoughts, emotions, and personal behaviours previously shared only among close relatives and friends are voluntarily disclosed and widely disseminated. Where people go, what they eat, what they see and do, the state of their relationships, and sexual activities are voluntarily chronicled.

Social media are clearly altering social behavioural norms. Instead of supporting social virtues such as humility, civility, restraint, and kindness, the artificiality and alienation fostered by social media tend to encourage narcissistic communication, deprecation of others, and celebration of misbehaviours.

Quiet conversations and personal communications have given way to a system in which those with whom we communicate, what we communicate, what we see and read, and what interests us are now publicly disclosed and available. Interactions are recorded, and how often we communicate, what content we circulate and receive, and what topics interest us are logged. Similar tracking occurs when we use other digital communication systems as well.

This provides significant information about individuals that is harvested by companies and governments. The scope and scale of information available is enormous. Although digital companies criticize governmental uses of this data, they do not seem to recognize this conflicts with their own uses of that data.

The digital systems and their management are creating new mechanisms for control and influence.

It should be no surprise that every major government in the world conducts surveillance using the Internet and social media. They are not likely to stop even though revelations may lead to some constraints on their activities. Why would they? Governments have opened the post for centuries and have eavesdropped on telephone calls and tracked bank transfers for decades.

The companies at the heart of social media are using their positions to gain advantages over their users and to find ways to sway their behaviour and susceptibility to influential messages. The Facebook behavioural science unit has, among other things, conducted experiments on unsuspecting users to manipulate their emotions and improve their vulnerability to certain types of messages.

Technologies that provide the abilities for some to use and control communication to exercise power over others will always be exploited.

Popularised communications

Giving the public a platform is conceptually a benefit, but it also carries costs and risks.

Social media focus attention on amusements and the inconsequential details of individuals' lives. This is not itself decadent or appalling, but the sheer magnitude and triviality of communications created through social media turn attention away from other functions and information, lowering and debasing the quality of public communications.

The mores of social media lend themselves to belligerent venting of anger and malicious public shaming. Although it is psychologically healthy to release annoyance and resentment, and public shaming can serve purposes of supporting social norms and moral behaviour, all too often social media are used as a weapon to damage or destroy others. Unfortunately, most of us allow this to occur without registering our disapproval or pointing out its unfairness.

The popularisation of communication also produces a multitude of voices that can leave us vulnerable to hysteria and moral panic. When this occurs there is little scope for debate and deliberation. The perceptions of the crowd can easily turn masses into rabble with demands for under-considered social or political action.

Social media thus create a conundrum involving the values of free individual expression and desires for a noble social ethos, a nurturing culture, and the maintenance of social order.

Is this humanising?

This leads us to the questions of whether social media represent a reformation of media and are acting as a humanising force.

There is no doubt that social media provide more ways for individuals to express and share observations, ideas, opinions, and content that pleases or stimulates. They also afford opportunities to publicly assert and perform an identity, and to support relationships and communities that previously were difficult to construct and maintain through mass communication.

We benefit from those who use social media to record and disseminate current events, photograph and distribute evidence abuses of power such as police brutality, and provide information and documentation that contradicts or moderates elite interpretations of the world about us. At the very least social media have reduced the power of and shaken up the complacency of legacy media.

Nevertheless, they still remain highly mediated communication, incorporating artificiality and lacking genuine authenticity. Social media at best represent only a slight improvement on the legacy media of the past. At worst, they are replicating legacy media as a means of social control.

Are social media humanising? Perhaps to the extent that they allow more individual voices to be heard, albeit with constraints. However, there is no evidence that social media are moving us toward the ideals of becoming enlightened, tolerant, rational, cultured, and civilised human beings. Neither is there convincing evidence that social media are making society any more egalitarian by reducing the power or wealth of elites.

For the past century, each new medium introduced—motion pictures, radio, television, cable, and the Internet—has been extolled for its revolutionary capabilities to lift the human spirit, improve education, reduce conflict, and empower the public. Such worthy aspirations have been trumpeted with the appearance of social media. Unfortunately, it appears—that like the other media before them—social media are being co-opted by commercial and elite interests and that their use is overwhelmingly for amusement, escapism, commerce, and inconsequential chatter.

It's a damn shame.