

The Dual Nature of Participatory Web and How Misinformation Seemingly Travels

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INTRODUCTION

Social media is called ‘social’ as it is primarily ‘produced’ by people (user-generated) and there is less or no commercial aspect involved. The platform lets people to communicate in horizontal using multimedia (text, photos, videos, music, etc.), thus, also making them reporters and publishers in the process. Social media has brought in a revolution in the way people express their views and share their likes and dislikes (Asur, Huberman, Szabo, & Wang, 2011; Ellison, 2007; Kumar & Jan, 2011, 2012). This media sits on Web 2.0 technology. In this article the author argues that the web is a neutral medium which could be used from transmitting good and bad information. A hypothetical model of how misinformation travels is also presented.

BACKGROUND

Web 2.0 does not refer to the update in the technical specification, but rather new applications and technology that makes web experience more interactive. While talking of Web 2.0 the applications such as Ajax or Openlaszlo are stated, which make the web as a ‘Participatory Web’. This is in contrast to the earlier version Web 1.0 which was essentially an ‘Information Web’. The main features of Web 2.0 are user-interaction, dynamic content, meta data and scalability (Best, 2006). Social media sites such as Facebook and Flickr make use of Web 2.0 technology in order to give interactivity to their sites. McAfee (2006) refers to the following technological features of Web

2.0, acronymed as SLATES – Search, Links, Authoring, Tags, Extension, Signals. Search enables keyword search, Links helps in linking to other documents within the page or elsewhere on the Net, Authoring refers to the ability to update, iterate and cumulate content, Tags help in searching and helping to avoid category rigidity, Extensions help in leveraging the Web as both document server and application platform, and finally, Signals that help to inform users of changes in the social media content. In more technical terms, Web 2.0 technology is based on two sides – Web browser side (client) and Web server side (server), and they utilize softwares like Ajax, JavaScript, Flash etc. to fetch data to and from the Web server and to carry on instant updates. Flash software technology is also used in music and video sites. YouTube is a good example of Flash technology. The popularity of Web 2.0 has encouraged all web allocations with collaborative and interactive functionality to append the term 2.0 to it – interestingly these name are, for example, Library 2.0, Publishing 2.0, Social Work 2.0, Travel 2.0, and the list goes on. Essentially all these Web applications use Web 2.0 technologies to provide better functionality in their domain of business.

In this article that author argues that although these new technologies are making Web even more popular and accessible, they are also making people spend long hours on seemingly unimportant and irrelevant conversations, dialogues, reviews and opinions. According to Andrew Keen, writer of ‘*Cult of the Amateur*’, Web 2.0 has “created a cult of digital narcissism and amateurism, which undermines the notion of expertise” (“Web 2.0 has created a cult of digital narcissism and

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amateurism?," 2010). Just as a river, that carries everything – good or bad – as it flows, social media makes no discrimination between what it carries. Some people use it for a good cause, some as a campaign tool, while others use it to spread hatred and false news.

Through surveys and content analysis of some comments of Social Media, which includes blogs, discussion forums, newscasts, market research studies and traditional websites, on three determinants – 1) social service, 2) politics and 3) misinformation – we do a critical examination to see if social media is a double-edged sword – a technology which could be used to transmit both good and bad information.

A Great Vehicle for Political Propaganda

In politics, people elect their representatives. These representatives then govern a county or a country. Political news have always captured the front pages of our newspapers. A country is more secured and safe if its political climate is stable. The way people elect their representatives and the way representatives campaign during the elections, differ from place to place and from country to country. Let us take the example of two biggest democracies in the world – India and USA. In India, a large percentage of people who cast their votes are still farmers, low income group people and the elderly. Political parties in India, thus, go all out in wooing the farmers and it's the farmers who actually bring a candidate to power. Unfortunately, most of the farmers are either illiterate or semi-literate who have almost nothing to do with Computers or latest online technologies. One can forget about how Social media would ever affect their voting decisions. In contrast, USA is a country where most of the voters are literate and have access to internet and other latest electronic gadgetries. The way social networking is bringing people together, its communicating power and speed, its "peer to peer" and "word of mouth" potency have been understood

quite well and quite early in the game of politics in America.

Social media based videos in particular are becoming a popular medium for political propaganda (Noguera & Corretero, 2010). This was clearly evident in the last major US presidential elections (year 2008) which remained in the news for over 2 years – first the elections between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama within the party and then the fight to the finish between the Democrats and the Republicans. Both McCain and Obama used Social media technologies to the hilt. We particularly know Obama for his Social media savoir-faire. Barack Obama appointed Scott Goodstein as External Online director ("How Obama used social networking tools to win," 2009) for *Obama for America*. According to Scott, there were three main factors instrumental in the effectiveness of the campaign – 1) using deadlines to test new ideas, 2) allowing consumers to engage and, 3) validate and moving with the marketplace. There's lot happening on the Net which one can either ignore or engage in it. Scott believed that they were able to successfully engage and move with the marketplace, which helped them win the elections. His social media strategies helped attract 1.7 million supporters on Twitter, 6.5 million on Facebook and over 2 million supporters on MySpace. Speaking in Singapore, he stated that Social Media put Obama's slogan 'Change you can believe in', front and centre. Obama, himself an exceptional communicator, needed the right messenger and social media proved to be just that right one. It helped Barack Obama's message to clearly reach the audience. People were talking and discussing about him in Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and everywhere.

US has been seeing a shift in media consumption. There are lesser and lesser number of people interested in TV or newspaper. More and more people have been reaching out to Internet for news and entertainment. Understanding this, the online campaign team of Obama meticulously handled social networking campaign platforms, including those that were catering to the ethnic

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