Synthesizing Paper: Challenging the Normative Discourse of Social Media

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Introduction

Scholars (DeLunca & Peeples, 2002; Harlow & Guo, 2014; Hayes, Smock, & Carr, 2015) have discussed writ large the social media habits among society. Some scholars (Hayes, Smock, & Carr, 2015; Rose et al., 2012) have addressed social media as a platform where citizens self-select content to display resulting in questionable legitimacy of information. Other scholars (Harlow & Gou 2014; Vats, 2015; Warnick, 2007) have addressed social media as a medium for political and social debates and discussions.

Researchers (DeLunca & Peeples, 2002) argued that people reside in a constant state of distractions, and social media aids in this preoccupied mindset. The normative discourse that society wastes their time on social media platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, is harmful because social media can aid in encouraging social action and can provide a medium for people to spread ideas. The lens through which society views social media should shift away from a time waster and a way to procrastinate or disassociate from life to a medium to voice thoughts and opinions and engage in social and political action.

Normative Discourse: Social Media is a Waste of Time

Running parallel to the notion that social media wastes time, scholars (Cox, 2014; DeLunca & Peeples, 2002; Warnick, 2007) have researched some potentially harmful ways society uses social media, including using media solely for entertainment and as a distraction, which wastes time. I will review this normative discourse and discuss the ways social media provides a questionable validity of information, the primary uses of social media, and the lack of accuracy of content due to the vast public access.

Questionable Validity of Information

Researchers (Harlow & Gou, 2014; Hayes, Smock, & Carr, 2015; Rose et al., 2012; Vats, 2015) have discussed the questionability of the accuracy of information on social media. Scholars (Cox, 2014; Rose et al., 2012) have described the ways society chooses to self-select publicized information. Rose et al. (2012) discussed the ways men and women display selective self-presentation online. Cox (2014) described the way the television captured an environmentally friendly task, saving whales, and displayed the endeavor as a reality television show, focusing the attention on the human characters in the show as opposed to the educational values, which stem from saving the whales. These examples both represent the ways in which media, and social media can depict misrepresentative information. Misleading information is harmful to social media users because this information clouds the truth of the important circulating discourses. If a citizen exclusively views misrepresentative media, this can be detrimental. However, the use of tainted, pointless media is not usually the only content an individual will view on social media.

Scholars (Harlow & Gou, 2014; Hayes, Smock, & Carr, 2015) have also claimed the half-hearted use of social media can cause situations to lose their importance and meaning. Citizens who use social media from the comfort of their couches at home have a smaller chance of enacting productive action or implementing actual change to their society. Users of social media who perform "couch advocates" (Harlow & Guo, 2014, p. 472) have the potential to not be fully informed and to not expel information that truly calls for social or political action. This possible mislead information could be projected as a time waster because the receivers have little context of the credibility of the sender of information resulting in detriment to the validity of the information. Tsukayama (2015) stated that teens use their phones for an average of nine hours

every day, this staggering number leads one to think the time expended on media could not possibly all be spent productively however, the primary uses of media vary.

Primary Uses

Scholars (Cox, 2014; DeLunca & Peeples, 2002; Warnick, 2007) have discussed the variety of ways citizens consume social media. From reality television (Cox, 2014) to televised protests (DeLunca & Peeples, 2002) to public discourse through political campaigns (Warnick, 2007) media is framed and reframed to capture audiences, and television producers rarely seek accuracy of information as they strive for more clicks, more views, and more exposure.

DeLunca and Peeples (2002) discussed how society encourages itself to reside in a constant state of distraction. This state of distraction reassures citizens that their constant use of media for communication, news, and entertainment has no consequences. However, according to DeLunca and Peeples (2002) and Warnick (2007) the public sphere, on the Internet and within media, constrains the public and limits the efficiency and effectiveness of communication. If the primary intent of media is solely to entertain, then the time citizens spend being entertained has to hold value and provide more to the viewer than a pastime. The concept of television supplementing the public sphere by encouraging activism and action to span more than one medium frames television and media in a way that can aid in challenging the normative discourse on media. The notion that media users are lazy and passive could constrain the potential media can have on a society and the potential the media has to be a medium for social and political action. While media should not be relied on entirely for promoting social action (Harlow & Guo, 2014) societies should not discredit the media's potential to create real, tangible change within a community. The circulating discourse that social media can negatively impact

generations is a generalization that needs to be challenged due to the prospective possibility of media being an effective tool within societies.

Lack of Accuracy Due to Public Access

Scholars (DeLunca & Peeples, 2002; Harlow & Guo, 2014; Hayes, Smock, & Carr, 2015) have discussed the expansive publicity an individual has when using social media, and how this massive public forum where anyone has access creates a lack of accuracy. Such a large number of people have access to being online and letting their voices be heard that promoting action becomes less meaningful than offline participation in current events (Harlow & Guo, 2014). Because of how public the Internet is people who use it tend to present only their best selves, their most astute opinions, and their most reputable attributes. However, this presentation is detrimental to the information that spreads through social media as everyone puts forward their best selves, but how close their best, public self is to their actual self is not disclosed.

Rose et al. (2012) defined self-presentation online as "the process of packaging and editing the self in order to create a certain impression for an audience" (p. 595). This definition leads one to believe that the pressure of the public forum that is the Internet hinders one's ability to put forward their true selves and this falsification of what one thinks is the self they should present to the media distorts the perception of the viewer. This can be frustrating to a social media user because the time spent on media, observing the surroundings and gathering information could potentially be all for naught if the information collected is not entirely representative of the person divulging information.

Analysis of Scholarship: Social Media Encourages Social Action

The research I have conducted has strengths and weaknesses. While the research does focus on media being a waste of time, a distraction, and sometimes a promotion of false

information the research also urges people to use media as a tool for encouraging political and

social action (Harlow & Guo, 2014). Critiquing the normative discourse that media is a waste of

time is beneficial because users can communicate over distance, instill new ideas, and participate

in activism in ways not previously available to the masses.

Social Media as a Tool for Activism

Harlow and Guo (2014) and Vats (2015) have discussed the way social media is an

effective tool for activism. The world can communicate and effectively protest, band together,

and discuss issues and concerns in their world. This is beneficial because citizens can include an

entire nation in one conversation when media produces this kind of public sphere. The public

screen has become a primary place for political democracy to happen and the vast inclusivity of

so many different political parties and points of view can be incorporated into a single

conversation (DeLunca & Peeples, 2014). This concept of such a vast discussion is new to the

American people and has aided in involving more people in the political conversation. This is

useful because the more people are involved and the more conversations that are being had, the

more people can get done as efficiently and effectively as possible. This medium also creates an

inclusive platform where all voices can be heard; even the voices of "couch advocates".

Although advocating and creating action holds importance Harlow and Guo (2014) stated

social media should be used as solely a tool for action. One should not rely on media to get

things done, what gets things done is people being out in the world spreading their ideas and

banding together to accomplish similar goals. Society should view media as a tool for

organizing or finding likeminded individuals to join a cause, but a revolution will not occur

through social media alone (Harlow & Guo, 2014).

Platform to Spread Ideas

Researchers (DeLunca & Peeples, 2002; Vats, 2015; Warnick, 2007) discussed the benefits of social media as a platform to spread ideas. However, after an idea is spread to a society offline action is the best way to accomplish a goal (Harlow & Guo, 2014). DeLunca and Peeples (2002) stated that visual rhetoric (a large portion of social media) is a predominant portrayal of messages, especially online. This form of communication however, is limiting because there is not room for effective and persuasive face-to-face communication.

While social media is a great way to create awareness or spread ideas, there is no community feeling in an online forum (Harlow & Guo, 2014). Harlow and Guo (2014) advocated that communicating face-to-face is more powerful than "mobilizing a revolution" (p. 473) and while the normative discourse that social media is a waste of time does not fit here, researchers (DeLunca & Peeples, 2002; Vats, 2015; Warnick, 2007) generally fail to account for the lack of personal intimacy that comes from communicating offline.

Researchers (Harlow & Guo, 2014; Hayes, Smock, & Carr, 2015; Vats, 2015; Warnick, 2007) have discussed the ways that social media is a positive medium for encouraging political and social action. This challenge to the normative discourse helps me to view popular culture in a different way, as social media is not only an outlet for people to express themselves and communicate casually, but is a way for people to connect with others I their country and around the world to incite action and create a public sphere where people can participate in their communities politically and socially to stand up for what they believe in. This discourse also leads me to ask questions like in what ways can people use social media to start meaningful and productive revolutions to better themselves and their society?

Conclusion

Rhetorical critique is powerful because it encourages one to further analyze and discuss the normative discourse in their immediate community and view their society and actions through a different lens. Students of rhetoric should critique popular discourses that circulate in popular culture to better understand their community and to realize that they can make a difference in their society by asking questions and looking into the true meaning of the discourses that surround them. These kinds of critiques produce innovative and meaningful conversation that can enact actual and effective changes like social media not being a waste of time but allowing society to view media as a way to engage in political and social actions in their communities.

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