Networked Technologies and Exploded Context: The Case of Facebook Activism

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Abstract

This poster examines the Facebook presence of two grassroots political movements as two distinct information worlds. Upon examining Facebook pages that supported and decried the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements, it was found that while there were some clear differences in ideology and information values, there was also a considerable amount of overlap in rhetorical approach and "positioning." Situating this behavior within Erdelez' (Burnett & Erdelez, 2010) idea of "exploded context," which conceptualizes context as always multiple, this research also offers the opportunity to explore barriers between the groups, and whether these are surmountable or an innate part of the groups' information worlds.

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1   Introduction: Exploded Context

Speaking at a 2009 "Fishbowl" session about the role of context in information behavior at the ASIS&T Conference held in Vancouver, B.C., Sanda Erdelez (Burnett & Erdelez, 2010) observed that, in a world mediated by networked technologies, "context" must always be understood to be multiple rather than singular. Further, information – and the ways in which it is encountered, used, understood, and valued – is thus also always a function of the multiple contexts in which it is found and by the ways in which it is mediated. To put it simply, a bit of information, even if it may originate in a particular context where it has particular significance, ends up being housed somewhere else such as an online site where it becomes accessible to a widely distributed audience of individuals, each of whom is situated in his or her own – and often incommensurate – context. In social media settings such as Facebook, where information exchange is inextricably intertwined with social interactions between often widely divergent groups of people, such contextual multiplicity becomes a defining aspect of information: it is always cut loose from its original context and situated in a socio-technical environment that is marked by exploding and intersecting contexts.

This poster presents one part of a case study of political communication and information sharing – by American Tea Party and Occupy groups – on Facebook, exploring a series of questions related to this sense of intrinsically multiple contexts and the impact such multiplicity has on the value and meaning of information. The fundamental question asked here is: What happens to "meaning" when context is intrinsically multiple? Several other related questions further inform our investigation:

- What is the relationship between intersecting/exploding contexts and representations of political events?
- Is the value of political information in such contexts in line with or separate from the factual accuracy in the representations of political events?
- Can information be meaningful and of value to a group if it is demonstrably factually inaccurate?

To conduct this study, a set of openly and publicly accessible Facebook pages – both pro and con – devoted to the Tea Party and Occupy movements were chosen; choices were limited to pages that were explicitly categorized as community or non-profit organizations or as media outlets, in such a way that they were

clearly distinguishable from private or individual pages. Each page was sampled once a week over the course of two months, analyzed inductively to allow interpretations and conclusions to emerge from the data itself rather than from pre-determined concepts.

2   Literature Review: Political Information in Online Settings

Recently, a considerable amount of scholarship has addressed online political activity, particularly as it relates to social media. Kushin (2009) examines Facebook as a tool for political discussion, finding that most conversations take place between those with similar viewpoints, but that conversation with those who have differing viewpoints was civil in the majority of cases. Lotan et al. (2011) examined the level of involvement in the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings by different groups of Twitter users, and found that news content was being co-constructed by activists and bloggers alongside those working as journalists. Groshek and Al-Rawi (2013) studied 1.42 million Facebook and Twitter messages during the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election, and found that the framing of candidates by opponents' supporters in overly critical ways.

Fernandes, Giurcanu, and Bowers (2010) studied student Facebook groups supporting the two major party candidates in the 2008 elections. They found that students used the site, that the two groups displayed different levels of site activity, and that, while they focused on different issues, both used it to facilitate discussion and foster political involvement. Woolley, Limperos, and Oliver (2010) also found higher levels of activity and Facebook group membership among Obama supporters, noting that racial, religious, profane, and age-related language also varied in relation to how each candidate was portrayed. Skinner (2011) situated the Arab Spring and Occupy movements within three of the paradigms outlined in Raber (2003), with a focus on media use.

3   Ideological Positioning, Accuracy, and Competing Information Values

Much of the information exchange that takes place on Facebook pages sponsored by groups aligning themselves either with or against the Tea Party and Occupy groups on Facebook occurs through the posting of "memes," which are, most often, relatively simple captioned images referencing a recent event or issue. Such memes are not only mechanisms for spreading information, but are also, almost always, explicitly ideological, staking out clear positions on the events or issues represented. In many cases, conversations – sometimes brief, but sometimes very lengthy – follow these posts, in the form of "comments" posted by people who "like" the pages. Such conversations can range from consistent expressions of support for the positions articulated in the memes to often vehement arguments between supporters and detractors; comment threads may be either moderated or not, with moderators sometimes deleting comments that may be deemed to be somehow offensive, often because they express – sometimes very bluntly – disagreement with or criticism of the positions advocated.

One frequent way of staking out a position is to bluntly criticize the opposing position, and those memes that clearly do so are highly valued across groups. This is often seen with overt "othering" behavior, portraying opponents as monsters or hateful, as in the following meme from a pro-Occupy group:

Figure 1

Such an act establishes, concisely and in an easily-digestible fashion, a context that relies heavily upon creating distance between opposing views, visually situating the context of the opposing viewpoint somewhere "over there," and alien to the followers of the page.

Ideological positioning in memes also relies upon conveying the popularity and centrality of a group; Tea Party and Occupy groups, accordingly, often rhetorically situate themselves explicitly as the true representatives of "We the People," thus implicitly marginalizing opposing groups. For instance, one of the most striking examples on Occupy pages (below) is the use of photos from large-scale protests worldwide, usually re-shared from other Occupy pages. These photos are typically not captioned by page admins, and the few with captions show statements of support for the protestors. Those that are not taken at Occupy protests are the only ones with consistent captions, and these usually include a statement explaining why the protest is taking place and how the driving ideals behind those movements are the same as those of the Occupy movement.

Figure 2

Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the most common occurences in the use of memes is the invention of fake quotes as captions, as in the following from the page of an anti-Tea Party group:

Figure 3

Such rhetorical moves serve function, to a great extent, as somewhat heavy-handed satire; here, direct irony (Republicans cannot oppose violence against women because to do so would be the equivalent of rape) is employed in order to suggest that there is a critical contradiction at the heart of conservative politics. In such cases, comment threads often erupt in arguments that explicitly circle around the relationship between factual accuracy and what could be called the information value of the position expressed. In this case, supporters contend that the quote – despite being clearly falsified – accurately reflects a truth about the politics of the Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives who voted against the Violence Against Women Act (or, as one commenter put it, bluntly, "Republicans support violence against women"); conversely, critics argue that misrepresentation should not and cannot be "true" in any sense, and is always a trick used by those who espouse the opposite ideology (as one commenter said, "Wow, how far back does somebody have to go to fact check all your sh*t?! This is the problem with you liberals, you don't fact check anything.")

What is particularly interesting is that such questions about the relationship between factual accuracy and information value play out in precisely the same way on both sides of the political divide, and occur regularly on pages related to both the Tea Party and the Occupy movement, and on both pro and con pages. For example, the same debate unfolded, at considerable length, on a pro-Tea Party page in the comments about the following image, of an ex-marine who positioned himself as a guard, in full uniform, in front of a school following the mass shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School:

Figure 4

In this case, the issue of the value of false representation did not involve any misrepresentation in the meme itself, but out in the world itself: here, the debate revolved around the question of whether an ex-marine's choice to present himself as though he was on active duty protecting children was an effective framing of a valiant act or, as one commenter put it, made him and his act a "fraud," because "the information is wrong."

4   Problematizing the Wall: Can Barriers be Broken?

A wall, built of rhetoric and ideological positioning, seems to exist between these two sets of activists, evident in the examples above. Further, each of these cases can be seen in terms of exploded context. Each refers directly to a specific "real world" context, in which a particular event took place and re-situates that event, via a meme, into the context of a Facebook page; further, each reader of that Facebook page is, him or herself, positioned in multiple additional contexts: their own "real world" setting and the context of their own particular mix of their Facebook friends and the information that they choose to access. Context is, in other words, intrinsically "exploded" and multiple in each of these cases, and the value or meaning of the information being exchanged is always a function of that multiplicity. Exactly the same information, filtered through a Facebook page and referencing exactly the same event, to put it another way, means fundamentally different things to different observers, depending on where they are situated in terms of ideology and social context(s). And this appears to be the case across Tea Party and Occupy groups throughout Facebook, even when those groups use identical strategies for offering up information; the two groups, interacting in a distributed context that somehow brings them together, express fundamentally incompatible understandings of the political "realities" of the world around them.

This raises the question: Can the wall separating groups such as these be broken down in the kinds of online information worlds we're examining, or does the exploded and multiple contexts inherent in such a setting make them an integral part of the structure of those worlds? Using several pages from each political movement, it seems evident that, while cross-group conversations do occur, they are often dominated by overt and ongoing attempts by members of each group to discredit the other, often by criticizing rhetorical strategies used consistently by both. While the question remains open, this case seems to suggest that the contextual multiplicity of technologically mediated social information sharing on sites such as Facebook may do as much to build such walls as it does to break them down.

5   References

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6 Table of Figures