

Innovative Research Methods in Social Media Scholarly Literature: A meta-research analysis

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Abstract

Basically, the expansive use and applications of social media poses a substantial landmark for communication scholars. Nowadays, there is a need for studying the empirical repercussions of the extensive implications gained by media scholars. In this regard, one can critically assume that traditional media effects are retransformed to be induced on users in different shapes and forms by means of the diffusion of social media. Remarkably, social media impacts were conceptualized in scholarly communication research on socio, cultural and political levels. Indeed, the topic of social media's importance stems from its novelty as a genre of media study that is related to many epistemological disciplines. Social media studies represent the crystallization of interdisciplinary studies that entail media, anthropological and socio-political genres.

The current study aims at studying the empirical results gained from the scholarly literature done on social media in a way to figure out the latest innovative research techniques and methods in media studies. The researcher is going to conduct a meta-research analysis over an epoch of time to come up with definite descriptive analysis of the proposed methods and techniques that are used in social media studies recently. To this effect, the following research questions are highlighted:

- 1- What are the recent characteristics of social media research regionally and globally?
- 2- How far methods and techniques of social media differ from that of traditional media?
- 3- What is the new epistemic added-value to the genre of media studies?
- 4- What are the future implications for media studies in an interdisciplinary setting?

Thus, in light of the said methodology and the above research questions, the researcher proposes a scheme of research that spans an interval of time in a way that enables him to figure out the expected new methods, techniques and research tools utilized by communication researchers. Finally, the current topic matches with the key themes of the conference. The topic lies under the themes of research patterns of social media and methodological challenges.

Introduction

Basically, communication scholars are currently considering the social reality of new media platforms that are functioning very active in the social fabric of the society. Social media come in continuation of the development of traditional media. Solid research of the past indicated the substantial impacts and effects of traditional media on the massive audience. Currently, there is a dire need for exploring and empirically studying the possible impacts and effects of social media on users. Scholarly research in the Arab schools and institutes of mass communication started to address the relationship between social media and traditional ones. Furthermore, scholars try to figure out legislative and socio-cultural aspects of social media.

Liverouw (2004) posed the concept of cultural globalism that later on opened new horizons in tackling the issue of social networking. Evans (1990) addressed the development of communication research. In light of both scholars' attitudes, there seems to be a need for coining a relationship that interprets the duality of developing communicating research and coping with rapid pace of social media in communication literature. That is why media institutes and scholars in the Arab World are strongly advised to explore the new epistemic scopes of social media. Here-upon comes the possible importance of the current study. Critically, there is a gap between technological innovation and theoretical explanation of the different impacting processes of social media in both human communication and socio-cultural interaction.

The researcher endeavors to trace and highlight some possible innovative research methods in social media scholarly literature. In addition, one needs to investigate if there is a difference between using research methods in traditional media from using them in new media. Empirically, communication scholars seek for the possible contribution of methodological techniques in the genre of new media studies. As much as, methods and techniques gave in-depth understanding in the analysis of mass media key phenomena, it is expected that social media can be conceptualized by means of innovative research methods.

Objective

There are definite goals of this study that need to be realized. One, figuring out the differences between traditional and new communication methods need to be investigated. Second, what will be the value-added result of researching social media? Third, to what extent Arab media scholars are familiarized with updates in the field; and how does this relate to their curricula and pedagogical development?

Importance of the Study

The possible importance of the study stems from the future aspect that looks for the new imperatives imposed by social media scholarly literature. Arab communication scholars held annual conventions to address related topics. Hence, it is the role of theorists and media practitioners to benefit and contribute to the academic development in the field. Clearly, theorists need to feed researchers with new approaches that illustrate and conceptualize the process of social media on the levels of audience and society. Needless to say that during the last three four years, social media played a key elementary role in changing scope of media research in the Arab media institutes. Furthermore, the expansive introduction and incorporation of social media in traditional media systems posed the dire need for developing more methods and techniques that push forward field research addressing social media.

Literature

Studies of social media took different scopes of research (Atkinson, 2008, Tomasello, 2010 & Dick 2009) in a way that reflected various levels of analysis. For example, interactivity posed a new stage in the development of communication research. In addition, “mediamorphosis” has been introduced as a new concept that explains the change in the course of media research. Besides, new methods like: ethnography, action and network research have been diffused in new media studies. Therefore, social media opened up limitless research opportunities in terms of issues (Nabi & Oliver, 2010). Thus, it is believed that new media effects. In turn, communication scholars need to reassess theoretical assumptions and cater for coining new ones that explains media issues of social significance.

Critically, the genre of social media studies crystallizes the importance of interdisciplinary approaches. This is of close relationship to the idea of developing new methods and techniques. For instance, sociological and anthropological parameters are heavily used in new media literature. Sutter (2005) called for “sociological media theory” that interprets the social aspects of new media whose effects are engulfing both individuals and institutions. In addition, definite approaches like “media inclusion” and “socialization” are currently evident in social media literature.

In light of the interdisciplinary idea, (Rice, 2005, Livingstone, 2006 & Couldry, 2004) focused on the socio-cultural and political dimensions of new media. Social networking analysis was widely used to assess and evaluate how online communities of users interact. Coincidentally, (Kerr, 2006 & Butt, 2006) maintained that there is a need for a new theory that supersedes the empirical findings of traditional media. Meanwhile, Buckingham (2009) stressed on the need for more critical approaches to study visual communication.

It is evident that social media studies keep scholars at dilemma because they are encouraged to develop new paradigms and approaches that presumably explain and found pillars for new theorizing in new media. However, this is appears problematic due to the disintegration between social sciences in the scholarly media studies in the Arabic library. Also, Arab communication scholars have not yet produced new techniques that differentiate social media from traditional media in terms of scholarly handling and treatment. Based on this, one needs to critically investigate the incorporation of some theories and methods in the field of anthropology and sociology to be applied in the social media studies. The peculiar and distinctive aspects of this integration may lead to new outbreaks that depart from traditional methods like surveys, content analysis ...etc. Still, coining such new methods will be subject to academic ratification.

Benson (1999) maintained that Pierre Bourdieu’s “Field Theory” help communication scholars to study social media because this theory handles both cultural production and scientific knowledge. If one applies this to new media research, then one is after creating interdisciplinary approaches towards theorizing and developing new methods and techniques.

Clearly, the concept of interactivity is believed to be the major cause of change in the course of mass communication methods and techniques.

One crucial point is that new media audience maintains freedom of choice and diversity of content. To this effect, they tailor the content according to their preferences. Actually, there are many overlapping audiences because there are many types of meaningful digital content. Remarkably, this kind of media transformation from traditional to digital already revealed the role of the audience as participating in shaping the new media landscape.

Young Min Baek (2007) examined the causal relationship between communication technology and society. He came up with two ideal types of empirical causality: technological and social approaches. He conceives of the technological diffusion as inducing social change. Furthermore, he found that Giddens maintained that the diffusion of innovation led to the social shaping of technology. This argument seems important because it helps in dealing with the idea of social construction which is the main topic of the study.

Baran and Davis (2006) treated the issue of the media construction by tackling the roles of media in the everyday life. They wanted to check if the increasing availability of new media enabled the audience to make some changes. To this effect, they presumed that new media can bring about widespread changes in what people do with the media. In turn, these kinds of changes can have powerful impact on the media industries.

Joshua Atkinson (2008) addressed the importance of audience interactivity. To this effect, he presented a multilevel analytical system to explore interactivity in alternative media production networks. Furthermore, he introduced some core points to be examined. One of these is the role of interactivity in the media production and the creation of social networks. He explained the mechanism of this system as composed of four aspects: the organizational scope of the media, the content, the audience, and the feedback (p: 230).

Furthermore, three types of interactivity have been figured out including the user-to-system, user-to-user, and the user-to-document. Basically, these kinds of categories and classifications seem important in studying the reality of the online audiences. Clearly, the mentioned categories and classifications sketch out the major characteristics of the online audience which may in turn allow communication scholars to study analytically the concepts of: social networking, public sphere, fragmentation, pluralism and diversity.

According to, Stanley Barran & Dennis Davis (2006) the social construction of reality implies an active audience who process information and reshape it to serve definite cultural ends (p: 249). So, this argument assumes that the online audience seems to be socially active to the extent of reproducing information or content in a new shape.

Critically, I assume that the issue of interactivity can also be interpreted and elaborated within the paradigms of the “symbolic interaction theory.” Due to the interactive relationship between the audience and the media, two systems may exist including the system of meanings and symbols on the one hand and the system of the induced behavior on the other hand. Again this kind of interpretation leads also to the idea of construction that I conceive of as affecting the medium itself irrespective of its type and the audience equally.

Mark Poster (1998) contended that the diffusion of the Internet led to the creation of the “networked society.” Critically, I think this would bring new social realities and induce new communication imperatives that shape the types of relationships among the online users. This kind of judgment maybe built on the tenants of the duality of both the uses and gratifications and the symbolic interaction approaches.

Sally McMillan (2002) found that interactivity is the major characteristic of social networking. The author maintained that interactivity already became a recurring concept in communication research related to the new media. That is why this leads communication scholars to introduce new approaches and paradigms to answer many of the questions revolving around the social construction of the online audience.

Actually, studying the social effects of online media on the social relationships among the users led scholars to examine the reasons that lead those people to delve into that type of networking. Shah, Mcleod, and Yoon (2001) found that online social networking negatively affects the matrix of social relationships among individuals due to the amount of uncertainty regarding the real identity of users.

Loges and Jung (2001) studied the power of social relationships resulting from using the Internet. To do so, they focused on examining the context, the type of online relationships, and the process of interactivity. In terms of methodology, Stempel et. al. (2000) found in their study a relationship between the use of the Internet and the demographic variables.

I think that the issue of using the Internet poses two core points. The first one is related to the development of the process of Internet use itself, and how does it take several shapes and patterns as will be explained in the current study. Meanwhile, the second deals with the audience's gratifications of these types of uses. Basically, the online media content is not only produced by media organizations but also by the wide scale of audience members like many of the content available via the You-Tube for instance.

Finally, Thomas McPhail (2006) maintained that new media affect both the ideological and value systems, the social organization, the matrices of power and social interaction (p: 53). He added that empirical precision requires an added method or technique to handle these types of effects.

In light of the previous presentation, global communication scholars realized that new media research has been shifted from “orthodox” paradigms of communication to newly coined concepts and approaches like: the networked society, mediamorphosis, public sphere, interactivity..., etc. Hence, many of the scholarly literature revolved around exploring new models, paradigms, methods and techniques. To this effect, there was a need for determining the key questions that need to be answered in this regard.

Method

A meta-research analysis has been conducted during an interval of ten-years. Two phases has been included. The said is the first and the second one is a post meta-research.

Research questions:

- 1- What are the new mass media methods?
- 2- What are the major new techniques?
- 3- What are the new theories in the field of media studies?
- 4- What are the current topics of new media?

Hypotheses

- H1- new media studies’ methods oppositely differs from traditional ones.
- H2- new media techniques’ are relatively new compared to traditional ones.

Theory

Two theories appear substantial to be used in the current study. The “*social shaping of technology*” and the “*social construction*” may possibly give a broader scope for theorization.

Topics of new media in the 10 years interval

Table (1)

Topics of Phase I.	Topics of Phase II.	Topics of Phase III.
Communication Technology	Social Movements	Political Blogging
Digital Divide	Blogs	Social Media
Cultural Diversity	Interactivity	User Generated Content
Traditional Media and Change		
Media Convergence		
Social Structure & Internet		
New Media Development		
Blogs		

Methods and Techniques of New Media

Table (2)

Method & Technique in Phase I.	Method & Technique in Phase II.	Method & Technique in Phase III.
Habermasian Analysis	Ethnography	Lexicometric Analysis
Case Study	Survey	Critical Thematic Analysis
Content Analysis	Discourse Analysis	Textual Analysis
Survey	Content Analysis	Ethnography
Ethnography	Case Study	Social Network Analysis
Focus Groups	Scenario & Web Feature	Survey
Participant Observation	Symbolic Interaction	Longitudinal Trends of New Media Use
Social Network Analysis	Empirical Research	Qualitative Analysis
		Case Study
		Focus Groups
		Registration Analysis

Theories of new media in the 10 years interval

Table (3)

Theories of Phase I.	Theories of Phase II.	Theories of Phase III.
Knowledge Society	Social Shaping of Technology (SST)	(SST)
Social Interaction	Media Niche	Grounded Theory Approach
Social Control	Digital Divide	Symbolic Interaction
Symbolic Interaction (SST)	Uses & Gratifications	Actor Network Theory
Political Communication (SST)	Media Effects	Diffusion of Innovations
Diffusion of Innovations	Post Marxist Discourse	Digital Divide
	Diffusion of Innovations	Social Interaction

Discussion

Table (1) reveals the development of communication research from early traditional studies till recent ones. What may attract scholars' attention is the gradual change from past to present that was marked with a substantial scholarly era of "interactivity." It paved the way for new media studies to emerge on a wide scale in many global communication journals.

Notably, convergence and interactivity took an epoch that started since the mid 1990s. Some scholars named this as the era of displacement effect on traditional media. Critically, one can't ignore the existence of traditional studies till now but the wave of scholarly research is overwhelmingly directed to new media. To this effect, the introduction and viable usage of new media platforms led to coining new subjects like: social movements, user generated content and political blogging. Furthermore, topics of digital divide were extensively studied as a continuation of the traditional political communication literature. Remarkably, one can attain that interdisciplinary approaches have been widely incorporated in media studies. For instance, sociological parameters were substantially considered with the diffusion of the topics of social shaping of technology and the construction of social reality of new media platforms.

Banuelos (2008) contended that the practices of new media users can be conceived of two systems of: cultural consumption and social interaction. In light of this, he developed a semiotic study of the textual construction and the reception categories resulting from the social interaction processes.

Sundar (2004) argued that there is a need for developing theories tackling the effects of interactivity. Based on this, he categorized three classes of interactivity: behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive. The importance of these three items reveals the power of interactivity and social interaction in initiating actions, changing the attitudes and altering the consumption of media content and information processing.

In terms of the research implications, Fuery (2009) maintained that new media's existence required the advent of new media theory. Furthermore, the author maintained that idea of the culture of new media revolves around four key conceptual moments.

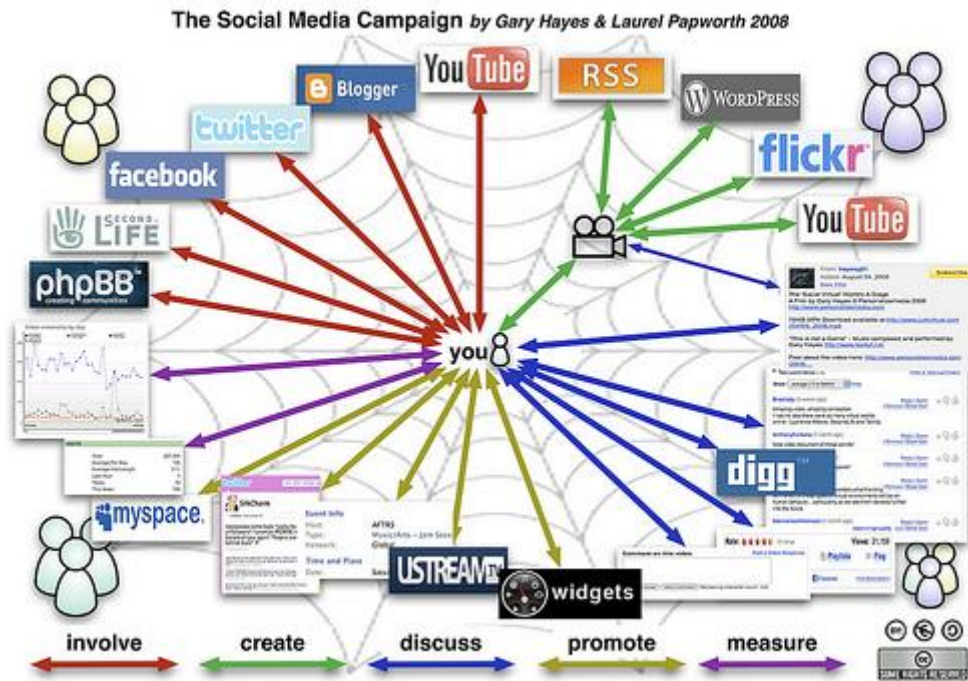
- 1- How can we locate the endless attributes of the new media?
- 2- What is the impact of new media on the formation of identity?
- 3- How can new media be conceived of in terms of relations?

The previous questions pave the way for communication scholars to explore new horizons in the genre of new media. To this effect, many scholars introduced their own critical views. For instance, Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006) maintained that the nature of the relationship is more central to the analysis of new media and their social consequences (P: 27). Meanwhile, Hollingshead and Contractor (2006) believed that technology can be thought of as a set of social practices that emerge and evolve over time (P: 123). Finally, Slack and Wise (2006) called for the need a cultural approach to study the current effects of new media. They maintained that this approach of the Cultural studies' emphasizes on the radical conceptuality of phenomena under study (P: 141).***

Table (2) typifies the new methods and techniques used during the last ten years. Qualitative research methods are prevailing to include: ethnography, discourse analysis, registration analysis and Internet lexicometric analysis. What differentiates this epoch is the novelty of topics that led communication scholars to reconsider innovative research methods in the genre.

The following diagram of social media platforms gives an idea of how important communication scholars investigate the power of platforms' effects and applications on both individuals, societal and corporate levels. As shown below in the model, one needs to consider ethnographic research methods and techniques while studying new media platforms. The reason for this is twofold. First, new media comprises both qualitative and quantitative characteristics like users' technical features, registration data and their behavioral narration on their walls. Second, numeric visits and posts are highly important in doing survey research because it highlights the power and density of usage.

Source: www.personalizemedia.com



In Table (3), communication theories included: symbolic interaction, critical theory, political economy ...etc. This is one of the key areas that have not been much changed with the advent of new media platforms. In the mean time, one can attest that there is some gap in theorizing about new media. Critically, classical theories are currently in use and these can't cope with the new epistemic thoughts. For example, new media literature revealed news epistemology and identity research; thus how can these two realms be interpreted with new theories. Graham (2004) maintained that the end of the 1990s paved the way to new subjects in media studies.

Also, Herring (2004) contended that new media studies went back to computer mediated communication (cmc). However, scholars are confronted now with new methods in the media genre like discourse analysis, registration analysis and web features. Similarly, “media niche” theory appeared to be at the forefront of media studies. Philosophy, equally, played a role in feeding communication scholars with new approaches like the “wittgensteinian approach” and the “public good theory.”

Indeed, many communication scholars (Mansell, 2004; Rainie & Bell 2004; Schneider & Foot 2004; Wellman 2004; Wakeford 2004; Kim & Weaver 2002; Livingstone 2003) maintained that there should be new methods and theories to overcome some research shortcomings that appeared very clear in empirical media studies. In the mean time, there was a dire need for enlarging the scope of studying the audience, the social classes and the effect of new media platforms on society.

Political communication research took a different shape in new media studies represented in political blogging. In this regard, some communication scholars started to envisage new themes, methods and techniques to be considered. Barnes (2000) called for new concepts to study the “symptomatic developments” that are taking place. Also, the idea of “social construction” was widely used to handle the new imperatives of social media. Arceneaux and Weiss (2010) merged old grounded theory with constructivism in a way to handle qualitative studies of communication.

Etling et. Al (2010) studied Arab blogosphere that was a trodden subject due to the social movements in the Arab World. They incorporated some new tools like: URL link analysis, term frequency analysis and coding of blogs.

On the contrary to many communication scholars, Mitchelstein & Boczkowski (2010) maintained that research on digital news did not differ from traditional media research because it included all methods and techniques. Tillema et. al (2010) shared the same opinion but they focused on the need for sketching out the audience of new media.

Results & Conclusion

Several scholars tried their best to figure out and create new methods and techniques in the field of new media studies. Indeed, (Powell 2010; Faiola, Davis & Edwards 2010; Brandtweiner, Donat & Kerschbaun 2010; Tomasello, Lee & Baer 2010; Stromer & Marty 2009; Matzat 2009; Gerhard & Schafer 2010; Bryant & Miron 2004; Nightingale 2008; Hanitzsch 2007) worked on developing and exploring new research paradigms and tools for the genre of new media. They believed that new media research granted scholars with new contexts that need to be investigated like: new theorizing, content of new media, new tools and the development of the epistemological perspectives within the realms of new media.

Thus, it has been found in the current study that continuous efforts and research are required to cope with the rapid impacts and effects of new media on both societies and individuals. Future studies in the field should address the different contextual aspects of new media pertaining to the platforms themselves that appear to be the medium or to users who are the audience.

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