

The Gossip Economy of Online Social Media

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The spread of online misinformation should not be understood as a problem of false news, but rather of gossip run amok. Misinformation must be addressed as part of the social dynamics of groups. In this paper, we reformulate the notion of misinformation as part of a gossip economy. It highlights the logical similarities between misinformation and gossip, with consequences for how we combat online misinformation.

CCS CONCEPTS • Human-centered computing • Codes of ethics • Socio-technical systems

Additional Keywords and Phrases: Gossip economy, misinformation, social networks, exchange economy

1 INTRODUCTION

In a recent paper (Bourbon and Murimi, 2020), we argued that the spread of information through online social media should not be understood simply as a diffusion of data through a network, but as a gossip economy. Two key claims inform our argument. First, information is better understood as gossip, rather than as knowledge. And second, the spread of gossip is accomplished as part of an exchange economy of social capital that has a specific logical form (or discursive grammar) mimicking ordinary human gossip. If we understand the problem of misinformation diffusion as the consequence of a peculiar form of gossip, we can more clearly determine how to respond to the dangers of social media.

Information and misinformation are contested terms. We lack a precise concept of information, except for Claude Shannon's mathematical description, which does not distinguish between kinds of information. What we call information ranges from temperature to beliefs about states of affairs to knowledge about the universe. Any study of information diffusion must specify what kind of information is diffused. Different kinds of information, spread at different rates and for different reasons. Facts, like who won the Superbowl, can spread more easily than beliefs about politics, since what new thing you will believe depends on what you already believe.

In order to avoid this complexity, some theorists construe the problem of misinformation as a problem of knowledge, hence of ignorance. This assumption leads to solutions in which bad information (false belief) is resisted by good information (true belief). Swire-Thompson and Lazer (2020), for example, rely on an epistemological model of information, leading to proposals to counter misinformation by establishing epistemological legitimacy. Not only does such an approach misconstrue the corrigible nature of science, it ignores the social dimensions driving the spread of misinformation amongst the general population. Other theorists highlight socio-cultural factors in the spread of misinformation (Karlova and Fisher, 2013). Chen et al (2015) and Laato et al (2020) investigate the motives behind the spread of misinformation, including the belief that 5G network towers facilitated the COVID-19 contagion. Laato et al found evidence of what they call cyberchondria: the "unfounded escalation of concerns about common symptomology based on review of online content" (Starcevic and Berle, 2015). In what follows, we argue that online misinformation should be understood primarily as a form of gossip, and thus as socially motivated. In Section 2, we sketch the discursive grammar (logical form) of traditional, off-line gossip. In

Section 3, we describe how social media can be viewed as a gossip economy. In Section 4, we conclude by describing how the Internet amplifies the dangers of gossip and misinformation.

2 THE DISCURSIVE GRAMMAR OF GOSSIP

If we are to understand online information spread as primarily a form of gossip, then we need to establish the minimum (or basic) discursive grammar of gossip. Bourbon has provided such a logical grammar in an earlier paper (Bourbon, 2015). He argued that gossip has two fundamental characteristics. First, gossip is more expressive of the community of gossipers than it is *about* the target of the gossip. Second, what is said in gossip floats free from responsible counter-statement, because of the irresponsibility in which it is exchanged and its accepted lack of warrant, and because of the way gossip is dispersed and held within the community of gossip exchange.

While gossip is about states of affairs, it invokes and provokes beliefs and anxieties. It has no foundation or warrant that can be readily examined; it is by definition irresponsible speech, and thus bounded only by its transmission and the dispositions of a community to accept it. Small face-to-face communities police themselves through gossip; a kind of social mode of governance. The volatility of gossip is checked by the face-to-face nature of traditional communities, and limited by the stricter proprieties organizing life within clans and families. When breakdowns do happen in such communities they tend to be violent and extreme. (See, for example, *Fanshen*, William Hinton's remarkable historical account of the breakdown of the traditional order in a Chinese village during the Cultural Revolution; see also Peter Laslett, "The Face to Face Society.") Propriety, a normative pattern of behavioral constraint, infused with moral overtones, dampens the disruptive powers of gossip, which is often motivated by resentments against particular people. When propriety breaks down through social change or ideological fervor, as in the Cultural Revolution, gossip becomes an unchecked form of social resentment and power. Similar cultural conditions have been created by social media, leading to similar breakdowns in propriety facilitated by gossip.

3 SOCIAL MEDIA AS A GOSSIP ECONOMY

As one of the most important online transactional spaces, social media becomes a mode not simply of communication, but a means and a context for the formation of communities and the exchange of gossip. Since communication is highly mediated by the Internet and its social platforms, information easily falls into the logical form of gossip, where no one is fully responsible for its content, and warrant is not relevant. Information becomes more rumor than fact. Since news feeds are themselves filters reinforcing the interests and beliefs of particular user, they are always in danger of becoming rumor-mongering channels. Below we describe the key similarities between online social media exchanges and gossip.

1. The tendency of people to befriend others of like beliefs and commitments and the design of social media push-strategies creates a situation in which the targets of negative statements are absent and silent relative to those making or sharing these statements (regardless of whether these statements are true or false). This is a prime characteristic of gossip. Such a situation is not only self-confirming, but it reinforces the group of identity of those who gossip relative to those who are the absent targets of this gossip. Bessi et al (2015) in their study of Italian Facebook, for example, found that communities supporting various conspiracy theories formed easily, leading to the formation of social "echo chambers."

2. Many social media theorists construe knowledge as a form of personal belief. This is misleading. Personal belief hardly counts as knowledge, since knowledge must be not only believed, but justified and true. Online interactions encourage factitious justification, too often tied to the perceived status and authority of the various people involved. Confirmation bias and a reticence to question one's own beliefs encourages an uncritical attitude towards information. As a consequence, our highly mediated interactions through social media often take the form of personal advertisements and displays of status. Social media advertises and sells means of confirming our beliefs. This, of course, is another characteristic of gossip.

3. Gossip encourages belief without adequate warrant. People with little understanding of science or statistics, for example, accept journalistic statements about scientific studies, without realizing how provisional such studies often are. Scientists are not immune to this. They, too, often draw erroneous conclusions and make numerous statistical errors, and are subject to confirmation bias and the negative effects of consensus (about statistics Reinhart, 2015; Spierer et al, 1998; about consensus errors in science see O'Conner and Weatherall).

In non-scientific, online communities, the exchange of information encourages superficial kinds of knowledge (often simply pseudo-knowledge). This information lacks context and is read (or 'consumed') amidst other activities. Like many forms of self-education, the foundations for understanding are lacking and are removed from the questions and controversies that inform any particular intellectual discipline. The prime activity on social media, besides passive consumption of various stimuli, is browsing, which is a kind of stimulus-response activity. Its primary effect is entertainment, which tends again towards easy confirmation of previous beliefs or basic ideological commitments (Carr, 2011).

4. The systems and powers that coordinate or contribute to the functioning of the Internet constitute a network infrastructure, often called an ecosystem. This metaphor describes the user's online environment, where content is treated like features of an ecosystem—where users consume, exchange, collect information. These ecosystem metaphors have some salience, but they are in general misleading when used to understand how users interact through social media. Such metaphors depersonalize information. Online transactional spaces like Facebook and Yahoo Homepage create the illusion of a neutral environment of information. This illusion diminishes the sense that anyone in particular is responsible for the information offered. This is one of the central characteristics of gossip as hearsay: no one is responsible for its content.

5. The social function of online gossip encourages trolling and is facilitated by the liking of posts. People naturally want other people to like their posts. Liking a post might express agreement, but its primary effect is to mark an exchange or investment—an investment of social capital through a transaction of praise (or in other contexts of blame). People collect positive (or negative) transactions. Such simplified interpersonal transactions mimic gossip's social function of establishing and maintaining allies and communities, creating an immediate and vast means of establishing social value, monetized in what are called 'influencers'.

6. The primary effect, if not purpose, of gossip is the building and confirmation of a community of gossip-friends, often in relation to social enemies or outliers. What is shared or produced by such gossip-friends are rumors, not information modeled on knowledge. In such cases, justification is lacking and its truth is often irrelevant.

7. Since the Internet encourages a breakdown of proprieties and manners, it skews its information economy towards gossip, with little of the face-to-face checks that traditionally mitigate the negative effects of gossip. In Zollo et al (2015), the authors studied the emotional responses evoked by misinformation. They found that with longer online discussions, the sentiments of posts became increasingly negative.

These seven points suggest that social media behavior should often be described as a form of gossip. Although the Internet can facilitate learning in specific constrained domains, what we call information is best understood relative to the communities it helps form and maintain. Online exchanges might ultimately lead to our acceptance of information as knowledge, but often the factual questions are absorbed in social dynamics. Information must be understood not simply relative to its content, but relative to its role in a social economy. The exchange of gossip has social significance, a mix of competition and cooperation for social advantage. The veracity of what is exchanged matters mainly relative to social advantage or disadvantage. The truth value of gossip is irrelevant to its social value.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Internet gossip communities being unconstrained by either face-to-face interactions or by established proprieties, are likely to drift towards polarization. Unsurprisingly, this drift is further facilitated by the tendencies of people to self-aggregate with like-minded people, facilitated by social media algorithms to push content to a putatively sympathetic audience. Calling the content exchanged through gossip misinformation ('false news') misdescribes this situation. Our response to this situation should not rest on a belief that what is at issue is a question of fact. Rather, it is a question of belief, community formation and maintenance. What kind of commitments and trust, common action and exchange will be possible or encouraged by modern communities founded through and on gossip and rumor? How will democracy survive situations in which propaganda characterizes the fundamental form of social discourse? We must consider and answer these questions to counter the negative effects of online social media culture. If information diffusion is understood as a form of gossip, then we must understand diffusion as primarily not an issue of good or bad information, but as a function of various social imperatives, shaping, reinforcing, undermining communities and individuals.

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