Understanding the digital social media from McLuhan's idea of medium-ambience

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Abstract

This text proposes an understanding of contemporary digital social media from McLuhan´s idea of medium-ambience. Firstly, it reflects on McLuhan's concept of medium, taking into account which means as cultural ambience and relating it to the notion of midiatization. Then, examines some of the major appropriations of interact- ing on Twitter website which allow to understanding it as a digital social media using a point of view derived from McLuhan's thought.

Keywords: supervision, control, media ratings

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INTRODUCTION

The present work, which can be characterized largely as theoretical exploration, focuses on the notion of ambience or environment that is central to McLuhan's notion of "medium" and his contribution to understanding the ways in which digital social media are appropriated today.

Digital social media (blogs, microblogs, social network sites and sharing of videos and images) are understood in this text as "medium", that is, in a way that takes them beyond the notion of technical base to see them as constitutive elements of the cultural environment (MARTINO, 2001; PEREIRA, 2006; SODRÉ, 2002).

The socio-technics of the digital era inaugurate new ruptures between poles of emission (centralized within mass media), allowing an infinitely greater number of actors to participate in processes of production, distribution and content and information sharing.

The perspective which looks at medium as environment is related to the notion of mediatization (SODRÉ, 2002), that takes support today from current modes of appropriation of digital media. In order to discuss these processes, we analyze a particular case: the micro-message Twitter site, appropriated in such a way that users' action becomes the determining factor in its constitution as a means of communication and informative medium.

MEDIATIZATION: *MEDIUM* AS ENVIRONMENT

In order for social media to be taken as medium, each in its own right, we need to go back to McLuhan's (1967, 1969) aphorism, "the medium is the message". It would be incorrect to understand this aphorism as proof of its author's "determinist vision of technology", as many critics of his work would claim. On the contrary, this Canadian author breaks with a tradition that limits itself to study of the effects of messages, moving on to highlight the importance of media as fundamental elements of communication.

McLuhan, following Innis' footsteps[1], believed in studies of communications media primarily as theoretical and methodological strategy. Yet this should not be taken to mean that the authors who are seen today as the Toronto School ignored other crucial factors of communication processes. On the contrary, in choosing media as an interpretative key, they mapped out an approach which, developed through some core proposals, essentially becomes a theory of communication.

If it is through media that McLuhan's theory enables us to analyze society, the medium is not just a technical support or neutral or invisible channel through which media messages flow. The McLuhanian medium, as becomes clear in his later work, is the environment that affects, creates tensions within and suggests significations and meanings. In asserting that "the medium is the message", the author reminds us that the medium, given its technical, symbolic

236

and organizational characteristics, produces effects that are as important or even more important than those produced through the contents that media transmit. From this perspective, the notion of the medium bears, in and of itself, a cultural character that defies any attempt to locate McLuhan within a deterministic framework.

Within the given context, each new medium -beyond the content of its messages and insofar as cultural and technological device - promotes tensions in the workings of earlier media, leading to their transformation. This assertion is pertinent to digital social media platform and the possibilities they bring for the creation of new languages and the legitimation of new communicative forms. These are transformations that occur through socio-technical processes, which means that, as technological apparatuses, social media are instruments programmed for determined ends. Yet each new technology is used in ways that go beyond its initially-intended purpose, and are constantly reappropriated and reinvented.

The issue of critical appropriation has to do with personalized use of digital tools; in other words, it involves that which the technological system did not initially foresee but rather was brought about through users' interaction. Appropriation, a prime characteristic of the digital era, is related to *deviations* from the original intentions of a tool's programmer or manufacturer that users create (LEMOS, 2004, p. 239). Digital media tools bear significant potential for re-creation, leaving possibilities for social appropriation that are much wider than in the case of other media, less susceptible to social re-configuration..

According to Sodré (2002), a Brazilian author who has made a significant contributions to McLuhan's legacy, mediation - in its original sense- is linked to the notion of a technical medium, something that is placed between the human being and the world in order to make communication possible. Yet at the same time, any form of mediation implies the establishment of an institutional order (the environment, or "ground" for McLuhan). Mediation is not neutral, since its actions shape and transform the subjects whom it involves. Even language, as universal mediation, establishes, limits, creates and recreates the subject, as the most complex of all mediations -institutions – do.

> Present within the word "mediation" is the meaning of the action of building a bridge or making two parts communicate (which implies different types of interaction) – yet this in truth results from the original ability to discriminate, make distinctions, that is, from a symbolical place, where all communication is founded. (SODRÉ, 2002, p. 21).

"*Mídia*" is the word which used in Portuguese, coming from the Latin *media*, plural of *medium*, which is the means, in the sense of means of communication, but goes beyond the notion of mere conveyor. Thus, the term medium extends over the whole set of communication media and means, representing a social institution with a set of values, norms, rules – the environment, the background and culture. Media, in this sense, refer not only to technical means – television, radio, computer – but include communication flows, techno-social interaction, symbolic appropriation and cultural and organizational issues.

Thus, media are related to a "symbolic place", founding a environment that emerges from the complex relationships between technology, society and subjects. We agree with Sodré's proposition (2002, p. 20) for the concept of media as "communication flow coupled with technical device". Thus, rather than a support base through which messages flow, it is seen as a means that incorporates values and norms that mobilize individual and group action within society.

At the current stage of techno-social evolution, media are no longer a specific field of mediation but become an environment through which all fields of human experience pass. In McLuhan, the medium was seen as affecting experience, thereby founding a mediatization process, long before acquiring its characteristics as a visible social phenomenon. The phenomenon of mediatization, according to Sodré (2002) configures a new mediatic *bios*[2], through which the media function as a new prothesis of human action ("extensions of man") transforming society and founding new forms of interaction among subjects and between them and the world, transforming the way in which messages are mobilized, in which bonds are established, and even in human cognition itself.

In today's society, the logics of the media have made a profound mark on all fields of social interaction. Media can be less and less seen as an autonomous field, since they have become an extremely significant part of people's daily lives, part of their perception of the world and social practices as a whole, whether centered on the individual or the group. They have a profound impact on institutional sphere, which appropriate media logics within their own processes of legitimation and their tasks.

If electronic media (radio, television) have founded an audiovisual civilization, internet and digital technologies have widened the mediatization process through mechanisms of correlation, in a way that makes it impossible to claim - as some of McLuhan's critics have argued - that technological determinism is a central flaw in the medium model. While we do agree that there McLuhan's earlier works left room for such interpretation, in his latter production the author was able to clarify some of the obscure aspects of his theory, making it clear that his view of the means [medium] went far beyond its material structure.

238

In his work *Laws of Media*, written in partnership with his son Eric, McLuhan highlights the notion of environment, through which he affiliates himself with a cultural perspective that highlights social and symbolic aspects of technological means. In this text, using the notion of "ground", McLuhan recognizes that all technology is conditioned by socio-historical context, in the same way that its appropriation depends on the cultural environment in which the technology is employed:

> The ground of any technology or artefact is both the situation that gives rise to it and the whole environment (medium) of services and disservices that it brings into play. These environmental side-effect impose themselves willy-nilly as a new form of culture. (MCLUHAN; MCLUHAN, 1988, p. 5).

Thus, if the mediatization process begins with electronic media, marked by a logic of mass communication, the current socio-historical context (a society that is open to the new, scenario of less centralized forms of communication) in correlation with digital technologies (with inherent interactive characteristics that enable social and political forms of agency) makes the emergence of a new moment in history possible. Today, media can go beyond their mass character and become interactional and - defined by users' appropriations - social.

SOCIAL DIGITAL MEDIA

Within mass communications media, interactions generally occur through media messages, in people's daily lives, rather than between message sources and receivers in the arena of mass media themselves. This scenario is transformed with the advent of the internet and possibilities for communication between all in non-linear, network-based patterns.

One of the major ruptures that are brought about by digital technologies refers to the possibility of bringing two communication models together ("one to one" and "one to all). It is important to keep in mind that possibilities for mediated conversation did exist before the advent of current technologies, for example, through the telephone and the telegraph. Yet these tools enabled only a private reciprocity, that is, between few people ("one-to–one"). Mass communication, on the other hand, brought public communication, making the creation of communities possible, transmitting information to a number of people at the same time, yet through centralized broadcasting structures ("from one to all"). It is only with the launching of digital technologies that it has become possible to combine the advantages of both of these previous systems. According to Lévy (1999, p. 44), cyberspace "[...] allows for the simultaneous occurrence of reciprocity in communication and shared context. This is communication according to the "all for all" arrangement".

The participation of those who interact in processes of production and/or distribution of content is one of the major changes brought about by internet and digital technologies. People's interconnectedness through digital platform networks infuse these digital media with meaning. For Massimo di Felice (2008), digital media, which today can be considered ever more "social", are permeated by the collaboration of participants, transforming the very notion of society. According to this Italian researcher, this form of participation , open to all, founds a new, more democratic and inclusive way of inhabiting the present.

The term "social media" gained strength from some appropriations that were made of the web 2.0 – a term that Tim O'Reilly (2005) coined to explain a series of transformations that gave users a new role as (inter) actors. TThe web was spawned with the promise of the democratization of information, but when it actually began to give more power to the userfreeing up action on the broadcasting (transmission) end, it became what is now called "web 2.0". It is now characterized as a platform in which context is generated by those who interact therein, rather than merely by editors and programmers (characteristic of its earlier phase, in which sites were more static and interactive potential was weaker.)

New possibilities for conversation, in which subjects are able to participate from positions of greater equality, is one of the key elements distinguishing social media from mass media. In the latter case, communication follows a more one-directional model. Possibilities for interacion between subjects is limited or non-existent. The major tools that make information exchange and content sharing possible today, within the web 2.0 scenario, are the instruments that have been denominated social media. These are sites and applications in which anyone who has access to the web can produce and distribute content. This in turn works to sustain social networks.

We recognize that the idea that all media should be understood as social in essence demands greater clarity in the use of the term. For this reason, we propose the use of the name "digital social media" to characterize the new environment of communication and information flux that unfolds through (inter)actors active participation, including commentaries, recommendations and sharing and disseminating of contents produced by oneself and/or others. These means have inherent potential for social use, although they may also be employed in mainstream, massive and centralized ways.

Sites that serve as a support base for social media are examples of this type of new media. They make it possible for creative use, conversation among users and the emergence of social networks or communities. Concrete examples of digital social media are Orkut[3] (social network site), Facebook[4] (social network site)

Youtube[5] (vídeo sharing site), Flickr[6] (photo sharing site) and Twitter[7] (microblog or micro-message service). Each one has its specific operational mode of operating while making combined forms of usage, according to actors' appropriations, possible as well.

In order to understand digital social media, we should make a few distinctions between analogic and mass media. Any opposition between the two must be treated with care. We do not mean to infer that digital systems never reproduce the linear communication model of mass media. Many sites and social media profiles use digital platform for the mere purpose of transmitting information, rather than enabling dialogue. The difference is that any (inter)actor can appropriate the information as s/he desires, doing so within the very same platform in which messages were disseminated.

For this reason, we opt to contrast mass media to digital social media; the difference lies less in the technology (digital or analogic) and more in the logic of user's appropriation – transmissive, in the case of mass media, and through networks, in the case of digital social media. In other words, digital media are more inclined to function as social media, although they can also be used as a "channel" for transmitting information, non-interactionally, depending on how they are appropriated.

Lemos (2009, p. 9) creates an opposition between mass and digital (or post-mass) medias, asserting that "mass medias are information medias. The new post-mass medias are medias of communication, dialogue and conversation. Nonetheless, in our understanding, mass media also involve communication (even while limiting possibilities for interaction between broadcasters and receivers) and digital social media involve not only conversation but also appropriation of a more informative sort.

Even insofar as they may be appropriated according to mass patterns, social media tools, unlike traditional mass media such as television and radio, obey a non-linear logic, network-based and interactive, in which users do not depend on authorization coming from the sphere of production. In this way, they overcome the separation between spheres of message production and separation. The micro-message site Twitter is one the most exemplary manifestations of this new media ambience, in which (inter)actors' appropriations determine social function.

MAJOR USES OF TWITTER

Although it has been in existence since 2006, the microblog Twitter underwent rapid popularization as of mid 2008. (HONEYCUTT; HERRING, 2009). Twitter can also be denominated a "micromessage service", since it limits posts to a maximum of 140

characters (RECUERO; ZAGO, 2009). We understand it here as a digital social media insofar as it constitutes an environment that brings together characteristics and functions which, in a certain sense, encourage participatory appropriation, decentralized mediation and conversation.

Initially, Twitter mobilized users around the question, "What are you doing?". Yet, with the expansion of uses geared more toward exchange of information of journalistic and social relevance, that phrase was substituted by another one, "What is going on?" Right after it was launched, the service was used primarily by people who were interested in talking about their daily lives. Yet over time, it was increasingly appropriated for informative and collaborative uses (HONEYCUTT; HERRING, 2009). At present, the service is considered a new means for information sharing, currently used more for news than as a social network (KWAK et al., 2010).

Unlike that which occurs in the case of many digital social media built up around social networks and strongly influenced by concerns for interactional connections between actors, Twitter is dominated by information-spreading functions, , such as sharing of news and links (KWAK et al., 2010; RECUERO; ZAGO, 2010). The informational function, however, continues to be related to conversational uses, since appropriation of information can lead to conversation and vice versa. Information and conversation can be understood as macro functions that underlie the different uses that are made of the tool, a type of hybridization that is characteristic of digital social media.

The tool's main functions are constituted by *mentions*, in which users are conversant with one another or make reference to other profiles present through the tool; *replies*,which enable direct conversation between (inter) actors and *retweets* or RTs, used to reply or share information posted by another person. Some of these functions have been incorporated by the tool's official site although originally created and appropriated by users.

One important appropriation of Twitter has been (inter)actors use of the # key ("hashtags") as a way of labeling issues and grouping posts, which can then be recovered easily through searches or followed through in real time. Its open API[8] also facilitates appropriation for diverse purposes, by mixing original functions with those of other systems.

In 2010, a change in the Twitter webpage[10] incorporated some of the functions that already existed in applications for using the service, or that internauts had already informally adopted. This is the case of the replies, which today have a button of their own on Twitter's website. As a social media, the tool can be appropriated for a wide range of purposes, depending on users' abilities and interests. Below, we will look at the categories of conversation, participation, sharing and dissemination, which refer to major forms of users' appropriation, according to Carvalho's (2010) research.

Conversation

Programmed to work as a service for users' message exchanges on matters of daily life, Twitter has been widely used for interpersonal conversation. However, there has been an increase in the tool's use for information-providing functions which have in fact gone beyond its possibilities as a social network support base, largely because Twitter interactions do not require reciprocity. This is not the case for the majority of social network sites[11] (KWAK et al., 2010).

Inicially, conversations via Twitter were indicated by the use of the @ sign in posts, placed in front of the users' name. Over time, however, it became clear that not all *tweets* containing the @ sign were meant to engage in dialogue or be characterized as "conversation". Rather, when citing another user through the use of the @ sign preceding the person's name, they might simply be sharing information (RT) with friends and followers.

At present, we can define conversation, within this media form, by the way information circulates and is commented, responded to and shared. It can be considered a conversational form of information circulation.

Participation

Although digital social media can refer to commentaries, recommendations and shared contents, we use this category in relation to users' participatory dissemination of information. On Twitter, (inter)actors participation is fundamental in configuring the service as a media oriented toward information flows that are of primarily journalistic interest. (BOYD, 2010).

Participation becomes important, for example, in times of catastrophe and conflict, in which expedient communication becomes a priority. In such situationd, the service is used as a means for collaborative work, involving journalists and non-specialized (inter)actors who keep the public informed as to what is going on.

Sharing

Sharing, which can also be understood as replication, or passing on of information, is part of the collaborative culture of digital social media. whenever a Twitter, (inter)actor gets or has access to a post that s/he deems to be of shared interest, s/he can use *retweet*, or RT. Sharing information contents through Twitter is linked to the tool's informative function (JAVA et al., 2007; MISCHAUD, 2007; RECUERO; ZAGO, 2010). The person who "retweets" is making sure to pass information on while not omitting its source. In some cases, an RT includes user's commentaries. Another way of sharing information via Twitter is by including "via@johndoe" in the message.

Publicizing information

Twitter use for informational purposes has far exceeded its use for purposes of conversational interaction (KWAK et al., 2010). This has made it possible for organizations to resort to it as a media support service, publicizing links, headlines and corporate needs, among other journalistic and advertising uses. Twitter posts with links to multi-media spaces in which (inter) actors have acess to interactive maps and graphics are also common.

Publicizing here refers to the mass dissemination functions of the tool, without placing emphasis on interaction. Posts containing information published by (inter)actors, for informative purposes, pertain to this category.

CONSIDERATIONS ON DIGITAL SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE THEORETICAL MATRIX OF McLUHAN'S THOUGHT

Studying the centrality of media in today's society, which flows from the notion of mediatization, rests on the continued relevance of Mc Luhan's aphorism, "The medium is the message". It implies that those who do research in this area must move beyond the technological determinism that the theory seems to suggest, respecting the legacy of the cultural perspective McLuhan left within media studies.

It is from this vantage point that we observe the uses that (inter)actors give to Twitter, in which the potential for conversation and information exchange – as indicated by its major functions, as correlated to forms of appropriation – define usage itself.

Since it was first launched in 2006, Twitter appropriations have demonstrated the importance of individuals and collectivities in defining the way technologies are used. Actors are capable of redefining both the major functions and social role given to media. From simple messenger, meant merely to facilitate the exchange of trivial information on people's daily lives,

to a means of communication and source of information the world over, Twitter has been used for purposes of social and political mobilization, thus serving social, political and journalistic purposes.

Twitter, as a digital social media, can be taken as a medium-environment, demonstrating that, although it still bears the functions and characteristics that its creators and programmers meant for it, its use has developed out of the coming together of predefined functions and the socio-cultural context in which it is put to use. We should emphasize that the discussion presented above is but a brief segment of broader research which explores the potential that the notion of mediation (media environment) holds as context for the study of digital social media.

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