3. The Impact of Covid-19 and the Strength of Social Networks

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Abstract:

An increased use of social networks is one of the most far-reaching consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Aside from the traditional media, as the main drivers of social communication in crisis situations, individual profiles have emerged supported by social networks, which have had a similar impact to the more specialized communication media. The aim is to understand the relationship established between the population in general and digital media in particular through the measurement of engagement. The results point to a new communications model that opens up a new space for agents whose content has a degree of engagement comparable to and even exceeding that of digital media specialized in health communication. The conclusions show that the crisis of the pandemic has accelerated the transformation of the communication sector, creating new challenges for the communication industry, media professionals, and higher education institutions related to market demands.

Keywords: *Social Networks, Fifth Power, Covid-19, Social Networking Sites*

3.1 Introduction:

The nature of social interactions in the 21st century, transformed by the change into a digital, connected, and globalized context, and concentrated in digital media, has become a phenomenon which has transformed the organization and representation of knowledge.

This transformation has been so considerable that in the past few years the impact of social networks has resulted in a media metamorphosis, triggering a change not only in the communication-information ecosystem, but also in the roles of the consumers and producers of news, information, and knowledge. The worldwide explosion of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the exposure of the entire population to a disease without a specific pharmacological treatment and with exponential levels of infection, have underlined the value of digital media as the preferred communication channel about health.

Thus, aside from the traditional media, as the drivers of the social communication thread in situations of crisis, to which they greatly contribute by providing a truthful, informative story, other social agents have appeared. These new agents are supported by social networks, and are massively and efficiently contributing to the re-direction of the management of communication in a worldwide pandemic, along with the social instability it has brought.

The traditional pattern of the communication-information narrative is enriched with other narratives and channels that take the floor, the social networks. These are sponsored by digital environments that are able to reach vast amounts of the population, and when championed by specific individual profiles, capture a flow of communication that runs parallel to the formal discourse of the media. This phenomenon breaks the traditional study or classification of the information sources in emergency communication situations, adding new mediators to the communication scenario. These, when legitimized by the public in general and the digital context in particular, forcefully rise up due to the trust and impact they create. Thus, despite the counterproductive ability of digital media to create hoaxes and fake news, especially during times of crisis, an overwhelming mass of followers is imposed on the networks, which promotes an information–communication flow related with communication about COVID-19 and health.

The participation of citizens in digital media as equals, and the creation of an interconnected global dialogue, have provided a growing importance to these digital Agoras. It has shifted the formal communicative discourse, as shown in recent studies conducted in different spheres such as politics, where the participation of the young is strengthened thanks to their participation in social networks, as well as the areas of education, social life, and leisure, but also in the area of health. The study presented aims to analyze and describe how citizens can actually have an impact that is equal to traditional media in social networks in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. This work strives to draw a new reality in which social communication is not driven by traditional media alone and where social dialogue is being established by new social agents that have emerged and are encouraged by the power of digital media.

3.2 The Fifth Power-Social Networks:

If for finding information in the 20th century was to sit in front of the television, buy daily newspapers or listen to radio now in the 21st century it is more likely to browse items in the internet with any smartphone, tablet or computer. Social media has become a platform of connecting almost half of the world's population.

Aware of their power to reach and their impact on the people, the seven most-significant companies in the sector—Facebook, Google, Twitter, YouTube, Microsoft, LinkedIn, and Reddit—published a joint declaration on 17 March 2020, in favor of a mutual effort to fight fraudulent and false information, and to support the content of governmental platforms and authorities related to health in the entire world. Of these seven giants, it is interesting to highlight that Google owns, among its multiple services, the YouTube platform, and Microsoft bought LinkedIn in 2016, so the degree of concentration is actually reduced to only five large companies.

There are various communication barriers of the users which are being nearly summed up with the emerging ICT technologies. Semantic and controlled web are also bridging these barriers. The Web 4.0 will have features of Web 3.0 where artificial intelligence plays a major part. In Web 4.0, it is the web that has the feature of gathering, analyzing and disseminating the ideas to the users who have identical subject areas. Web 1.0 represents the entertainment seen on television whereas blogs, podcasts, user created contents are Web 2.0. People are jumping into the virtual world thereby making them active which is the sign of the ongoing Web 3.0. Upgradation of technology in the future will make humans connected to the internet always.

This process has started where users communicate over the web and they contact with their fellow mates. These has made a great change in the technology environment. Here lies the importance of the present research, which analyses some of the main profiles of health communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, as far-reaching social phenomena and legitimate alternatives for the flow of information–communication during times of crisis. Thanks to social networks, professional workers from many fields have had the opportunity to provide the population with vitally-important information, before any other institutional organs or communications media, and in a more direct manner.

3.3 Engagement and the Potential of Social Networks:

Engagement which is an important emerging issue found in the literature of social media. It is a psychological state. Within the context of study of the social networks, new associated terms have appeared which provide conceptual support and symbolic meaning to the phenomenon, to explain the volume of audiences that the networks muster around specific profiles.

The exacerbated need to obtain information when facing a situation of crisis creates an unmeasurable anxiety for knowledge, and this allows for the creation of engagement with health professionals who have a presence in the social networks.

Engagement, as a conceptual explanation of the phenomenon, implies the massive following of specific profiles, and from a psychological perspective, it implies an interactive and co-creative experience as a response to a stimulus (the COVID-19 crisis, in this case), with respect to an object, i.e., a profile that becomes a communication–information referent. One of the most important emerging issues found in the literature about social media is, without a doubt, engagement, as a psychological state of motivation that results in the act of following.

Its study brings us closer to the communication paradigm that emerges from the online environment. This paradigm is especially interesting in a scenario that sees an inflection point of a new communication sphere in exchange of the producer–consumer and medium–audience roles.

The study of engagement has been addressed from various perspectives as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that explains different types of commitments and has gained importance with the proliferation of interactions through social networks.

Four different levels of engagement can be established in social networks, having in mind the degree of commitment of the user: (1) observer—content is consumed but there is no interaction or intention to follow; (2) follower—content is consumed and the following of the profile who created it starts, with the first degree of interaction shown as the "follow" action; (3) participant—the user moves to a second degree of interaction in which not only does the user consume the content shared and follow the profile, but also participates actively with likes, retweets/reposts and comments; and (4) defender—this is a greater level of engagement in which aside from following and interacting, content is created and shared that is in favor of the profile or brand that is being followed. It is within the conjunction of the last two types of engagement that the present research addresses the study of audiences in social networks and the establishment of metrics, with indicators depending on the characteristics of each social network analyzed.

3.4 Strengths of Social Media:

This crisis shows some of the strengths of social media about how they can be used communal and emotional support. Social media also informs people in every corner of the world and reaches out to them. The platform gives us sense of what is happening around the world. It also helps to connect with family, friends and like-minded peoples for socialization and emotional support

People are making funny videos and doing creative stuffs during this lockdown. People through Facebook, WhatsApp groups are organizing entertainment things and also helping the neighbors if they needed any help with health care, childcare, grocery shopping etc. The rise of these apps have allowed for live chat and video sessions with peoples. It has also have the educational system to disseminate information to the knowledge seekers. Most of the educational institutes have conducted many only competitions through these platforms. This is social media at its full and best functioning.

3.5 Fake News: Dark Side of Social Media:

People turn into social media not only for entertainment purpose but also spread fake news. This is the dark side of social media. The platforms are also slow in recognizing their responsibility in helping the users to differentiate between fake news and the facts.

People should crosscheck the information that are published in the social media platforms from atleast two other information sources that are available in government websites or any high quality news official outlets. We, the people have a great role by not spreading rumours or fake new through the social media platforms.

3.6 Companies and Marketers Adopting their Social Media Strategies:

These are two different terms. The companies are using social media platforms for commercial purposes or communal purposes. They are branding, selling and marketing their business with the help of social media. More importantly they are connecting to their customers and share a bond together.

The marketers have to relate their contributions in the social media in the real-time context. Companies have offered free resources to their customers to face the calamity. For distance learning academic publishers have also made their content available online for free to help the teachers and students worldwide.

Some other have started YouTube channel where they posts about how to remain fit and other important information so that people can learn this staying at home. During the COVID-19 crisis, brands are forced to take up the communal logic of social media instead of posting the self-glorifying social media brand.

The post in social media should be user-centric rather than producer centric. Those brands which are ready and able to deliver messages are considered more important because they provide useful information and relevant advice that will help to come out of the crisis.

3.7 Conclusion:

COVID-19 has had a huge impact on our lifestyle and it has created a global health crisis. People were intended to find comfort with the company of others but this pandemic has refrained people from doing that as there's a physical threat. Social media has the ability to reach people in large numbers and convey a sense of unity. But this media also creates discrimination and spreads fake news. The social media technologies can be utilized to provide safety measures by the World Health Organizations to fight against the pandemic. Media industries can also help by promoting various preventive measures dealing social and physical distancing and reduce inequalities, stigma, prejudice etc. Social media platforms are the primary sources for disseminating information and news in the world. But in some developing countries the spreading of fake news might create panic. News are shared rapidly in these platforms and fake news can lead into something disastrous. In developing countries the officials don't consistently share the correct information. In our society unverified claims and subjective opinions spread rapid through these platforms rather than scientific and medical facts which is the bitter truth.

Governments should take necessary steps and refrain these advertisement. They should provide accurate details. Public health personnel, teachers, religious and political leaders must come forward to post about COVID-19 on social media that is informative and make sure that their followers know what's happening and the situation overall in their premises, local, National and international level.

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