Commentary: Connecting, responding and engaging, not yet relating online

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Abstract

Is social media really the relational tool it appears to be? For the field of public relations, whose remit is to relate to publics, this study suggests that our current interactions online promote connecting, responding or engaging – falling short of relating. This study distinguishes connecting, responding and engaging as distinct concepts in online interactions. All three concepts are important in designing strategic communication in online contexts and precursory activities potentially leading to relating. Applying Gee's (2014) model of discourse analysis, this study investigates the social media discourse of a recent Australian Government campaign on youth binge drinking to explore these concepts. Understanding the dimensions of social media interactions is important for contemporary communicators as designers of online communication to make interactions strategic and purposeful in online contexts.

Pieckza (2011) explains that what public relations deals *in* is communication and what it deals *with* is relationships. Social media is essentially about relationships; therefore investigating its potential in enacting relating to others in online contexts is a useful line of inquiry for public relations (Theunissen, 2015). Exploring the online interactions and discourse of participants around the issue of binge drinking, this study explicates the components of discourse and the nature of interactions that may enact relating to others in social spaces online. The central question guiding this study was: *How can social media help us in enacting relating online?* Acknowledging the risks, while maximising the possibilities of social media, is fundamental for public relations, whose core functions are equally rhetorical and relational. The rhetorical orientation positions public relations as influencing meaning production and sense-making (Heath, 2001; Valentini 2015). The relational orientation focuses on the discipline's other key function, being the strategic relationship building and management process (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). While the literature confirms building relationships with others, publics and stakeholders remains a central activity of public relations (McAllister–Spooner, 2009) the relational potential of social media continues to be largely unrealised in practice (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Understanding the nature of social media interactions is important for communicators in planning, creating, maintaining and leveraging connections in mediated spaces online and converting such connections into something more (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). An understanding of the behaviours and interactions of participants online can improve our current engagements in online spaces, transforming interactions into something more meaningful and akin to relating in such contexts.

A recent Australian Government social media campaign provides the data for investigating the nature of online interactions and the possibility of relating to others via social media. The campaign, called Be The Influence (BTI), set out to engage youth to talk about the issue of binge drinking amongst their social networks and peers. Binge drinking is understood as drinking too much on a single occasion of drinking, or drinking continuously for a number of days or drinking to deliberately get drunk (DrinkWise Australia, 2014). Analysing the online discourse of this campaign provides the context for exploring how participants behave and interact online around social issues and what designers of strategic communicative interactions can learn

from it. Such knowledge is useful in developing communicative interactions around social issues and in particular, understanding the types of interactions likely to be more effective in reaching others online.

Themes from the literature

Two themes from the literature frame this study: relating within public relations and the nature of discourse online.

Relating within public relations

Valentini (2015) suggests there are two main components to public relations, the rhetorical and the relational. Rhetorical interactions are enacted via participants connecting, sharing, liking, responding, conversing, and engaging with others in mediated environments online. Such interaction is important in realising social structures in online contexts and instrumental in understanding how to interact purposefully with others online. Social media has engendered new ways of interacting and provided the means to build relationships online, relying on understanding the varying aspects and capabilities of the myriad of social media tools that emerge and evolve almost daily and the nature of interactions that take place within them (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011). Kent (2013) suggests that success in using social media lies in thinking about our online spaces dialogically, with others criticising the profession for failing to nurture the dialogic moments necessary to enact relationships online (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012).

The nature of discourse online

Discourse, in online contexts, represents the sum of the communicative interactions online; language, text, conversations, images, videos created and shared amongst participants that represent their social reality (Gee, 2014). Discourse is how participants bring social objects into being online, enacting the social lives the discourse sets out to describe (Parker, 1992). Discourse includes ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions with ways of thinking, believing, valuing, tools and objects in enacting social identities, real or imagined. Discourse explicates the multiple realities participants construct within social spaces online around social issues like binge drinking, often providing a site for rich debate about societal issues with a view to effecting change (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001).

This study investigated the question: How can social media help us in enacting relating online? Analysing the BTI discourse provided insights into participants' use of discourse, language, text, talk, images and videos, in building realities and identities recognisable to others within their online social networks. The data analysed was drawn from the BTI campaign's Facebook posts between 1 January 2013 and 30 April 2013 and for the same period one year into the campaign, 1 January 2014 to 30 April 2014, with the page receiving a total of 163,638 likes throughout the campaign. In total 120 posts' text, images and videos were analysed. Several assumptions accompany Gee's (2014) approach in analysing this discourse; meaning derived is situated in the context of this campaign, based on our construal of that context and our past experience. Situated meaning is constantly revised and negotiated between people in and through communicative social interactions. Finally, the reflexive nature of the discourse reflects multiple realities – the ways things are and how the role of discourse exists within those realities (Gee, 2014). There are four stages in Gee's approach. Stage one involves looking across the data set for motifs, themes or images that correlate with each other, connecting diverse parts of the data. Stage two applies six tools of inquiry to further interrogate the data: Form-function correlations, situated meanings, social languages, discourses, conversations and intertextuality. These tools focus our attention on how social activities and socially situated identities are enacted within the data. Stage three analyses the enacting dimensions of language by answering reflecting questions around three areas: sign systems and knowledge, connections, and relationships. Finally, informed by the answers to the reflective questions, stage four identifies areas of convergence, coverage and agreement within the data (Gee, 2014).

Findings

This study explored the question: How can social media help us in enacting relating online? The participants' behaviour within this study emerged as one of three levels of interaction: connecting, responding or engaging, with each posing different challenges and implications for interacting with others online. The text that appears italicised in this section of this paper indicates it as direct quotes from the participants of the campaign.

Connecting emerged as the base level of interaction by these participants requiring minimal effort, such as liking an image or sign system, using hashtags such as *#bealegendnotamess* or sharing a video posted by influencers online, such as Figure 1 below, without commenting.

Figure 1: Exemplar of a sign system used within the BTI campaign.

Many connections began between these participants through sharing images depicting their social lives, experiences and interactions with others. Sign systems, visual means of communication (such as selfies, in Figure 2, below) videos and graphics were privileged means of community and sharing meaning within these participant's virtual social networks.

Figure 2: Selfie posted to the BTI Facebook 3 February 2014.

The vernacular language of these participants was social and playful, maintaining connections established through sign systems. Participants socialised using Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to continue their social banter such as: *Make a pact with your mates to drink less, avoid the bar queue and own the dance floor instead (Tweet, 18 April, 2013).*

Responding represents a stronger level of interaction than connecting, as participants identified with the language, social identity or social practices conveyed by others. Using vernacular language, a peer-to-peer tone, and sharing novel content continued, maintained and strengthened connections between participants. Responding to others online was more likely where the discourse of participants

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reinforced the social reality of others, such as the post to the BTI Facebook page 14 January 2013 which asked participants: *The best thing about summer is…?* Responses included: *"Puking and waking up on a park bench regretting everything about the night before"; "Getting smashed in nothing more than me boardies and embarrassing all your peers and yourself because you don't know when to stop".* These posts conjure up images of socialising, and engaging in the very practice the campaign was seeking to eradicate, excess drinking. In terms of interacting with others, responding was more than connecting, but not yet engaging.

Engaging assumes the previously described dimensions of both connecting and responding. Engaging requires an active response from

participants such as sharing, reposting, responding multiple times, generating new content or attending offline events. Participants engaged by developing music video posts around the perils of binge drinking, creating graphics, using hash tags such as #be a legend, #not a mess and attending events sponsored by the campaign such as surfing competitions and sharing images online. Further, observing the conventions and protocols established by online communities and social platforms enhanced the chance of engaging over connecting or responding. Others engaged by developing original video content around the various aspects of binge drinking. One participant, for example, created a music video around binge drinking that he shared with others online.

Figure 3: Original participant video posted to the BTI Facebook page, 23 April 2014.

Engaging was diverse, spontaneous, inconsistent and unique to what appealed to individuals at various stages in their interactions and exchanges with others. Many of the interactions that constituted engagement were responses and one-way exchanges, with very few of the interactions leading to a conversation or interaction that could be described as dialogic.

The interactions of the participants in this campaign represent connecting, responding or engaging rather than relating, which is the ultimate goal and central to public relations. Designers of online interactions using social mediums must be clear on the intent of communicative practices. The question must be asked: Are we using social media as a means of connecting with participants, encouraging a

response or engaging them more fully around an issue?

Connecting relies on identifying common interests through sign systems and language. Connections can be nurtured, offering opportunities to move participants towards responding. Where connecting is the objective of the communication, knowing the sign systems and language used by participants can help achieve connection. Eliciting a response from others online is more likely when the language used reflects and communicates established social identity. Vernacular language, peer-to-peer tone and the novelty of content continues, maintains and strengthens established connections. Engaging participants via online discourse assumes the principles of connecting and responding as well as observing the clues provided by participants and the

protocols of the online spaces in which people are present.

Interacting is enacted through establishing connections via sign systems recognisable and appealing to others. Language then supports and maintains those connections as well as terminating them in some cases. For professional communicators, then, trying to reach and engage others in online spaces, an awareness of the role of sign systems in establishing connections and paying close attention to the choice and tone of language in building on those connections may enable them to interact more purposefully online.

Designing online communication that enacts engaging, possibly leading to relating, is proving challenging in online contexts. The dimensions of online communication – information sharing, sign systems, and language – enact different types of connecting and relating around social issues. Implications include considering these elements of communication to move online participants from connecting, through responding, to engaging and perhaps something more. The levels of interacting within this study assist in developing knowledge further in designing communication with aims of connecting, engaging or relating to others in online contexts. Communication strategies that embody the social nature of online communication are more likely to be successful in, at the very least, connecting and engaging participants, amongst the clutter online. Understanding the dimensions of social media interactions is important for practitioners in planning, creating, maintaining and leveraging connections online. Further, understanding the role of language within online interactions offers insights in converting connections into something more like relating in mediated spaces.

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Sharon Schoenmaker specialises in organisational communication, social media and issues and crisis management. She has worked in public relations, organisational communication, employee communication, strategic planning, policy development and on public information campaigns. She lectures in both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the areas of strategic communication, issues and crisis communication, organisational communication and event management. Sharon is a recipient of the Charles Sturt University, Faculty of Arts Award for Teaching Excellence. She has recently submitted her dissertation for a Doctorate of Communication, researching social media, relationship management and contemporary public relations practice.

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