
Enterprise Social Media and Network Cultivations

Penny Trieu

University of Michigan
School of Information
Ann Arbor, MI 48104, USA
dieptl@umich.edu

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Abstract

Enterprise social media (ESM) platforms feature certain key characteristics of social network sites (SNS), including the masspersonal forms of communication and the articulation of connections, but situate it in the workplace environment and network. How then can lessons and theories from the SNS literature be applied to ESM? This paper discusses how the SNS literature has distinguished between active versus passive usage on these sites and to what extent this distinction may or may not apply to ESM, drawing from the social media as social lubricant metaphor.

Author Keywords

Social network sites; enterprise social media; weak ties; latent ties;

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3 [Computer-supported cooperative work]

Introduction

ESM, as defined by Leonardi, Huysman, and Steinfield [10] are:

"web-based platforms that allow workers to (1) communicate messages with specific coworkers or broadcast messages to everyone in the organization; (2) explicitly indicate or implicitly reveal particular coworkers as communi-

cation partners; (3) post, edit, and sort text and files linked to themselves or others; and (4) view the messages, connections, text, and files communicated, posted, edited and sorted by anyone else in the organization at any time of their choosing."

ESM thus feature certain key characteristics of social network sites, including the masspersonal forms of communication and the articulation of connections, but situate it in the workplace environment and network. In this paper, I argue that ESM is particularly useful for connecting weak and latent ties in an organization. Communicative patterns previously theorized to be associated with beneficial outcomes of connecting with others through SNS are also briefly reviewed. Finally, I draw from the concept of social media as social lubricant [11] to highlight a potentially beneficial browsing behavior on ESM.

Connectivity Potential of ESM

When an organization establishes its ESM, the organization creates a structure of communication for practically everyone within the organization. According to media multiplexity theory advanced by Haythornthwaite [8], in a network, weakly-tied pairs, as opposed to strongly-tied pairs, need to rely on a "common, organizationally established means of communication and protocol established by others." [7] Moreover, latent ties—connections that technically exist but are yet to be activated—can also benefit from such organizationally established means. Following this logic, ESM would thus be most salient to weak ties and salient ties. Indeed, in a classic study on ESM, DiMicco et al. [4] studied the BeeHive network, a homegrown ESM established at IBM. One of the principal uses of ESM, as surfaced by [4], is for people to seek out those they do not know well or know at all.

However, the mere presence of ESM within an organization cannot guarantee increased connection between weak and latent ties. As we learn from the literature surrounding whether SNS are beneficial or not to their users, how users use SNS matters [5, 6, 2, 12, 9].

Cultivation of Networks on ESM: Passive versus Active Usage

As with any tool, what you do with ESM matters. The SNS literature has established a difference between passive use versus active use of SNS. Generally speaking, passive use refers to browsing behavior, where users look at content without necessarily interacting with it. Meanwhile, active use refers to looking at and interacting with content. Social benefits, such as social capital or greater closeness, are consistently associated with users' active behaviors that cultivate relationships. Meanwhile, passive behaviors, such as browsing content without interacting, has been shown to lead to decreases in well-being [9, 12].

Verduyn et al. [12] conducted two studies, an experiment and a longitudinal experience sampling method, to examine the influence of Facebook usage on well-being. Both studies identified a negative effect of passive Facebook usage on well-being, even when controlling for other dimensions of Facebook usage.

Addressing the other side—active Facebook usage, a line of research [3, 1, 2, 5, 6] all demonstrates how active relational maintenance and cultivation behaviors on Facebook are associated with social benefits. One particular benefit is bonding and bridging social capital. Social capital in general refers to resources accessed through social relationships. Bonding social capital refers to resources accessed through strong relationships, while bridging social capital refers to resources accessed through weak ones.

Through tracking Facebook users' activities, Burke et al. [3] identified that direct communication with other users and postings positively predicts well-being and social capital, while greater consumption is associated with increased loneliness and decreased bridging social capital. Similarly, Ellison et al. [6] found that relational maintenance behaviors, such as responding to friends' questions or good news on Facebook, predicted bridging social capital, especially for those with fewer actual friends. This finding again speaks to the particular salience of SNS for weaker ties, who might be less likely to be considered "actual friends." In other words, those with a higher proportion of weak ties in their Facebook's network reported a higher association between network cultivation behaviors and bridging social capital.

Social Media as Social Lubricant: Benefits of Purposeful Browsing?

Interestingly, a few studies with organizational focus have identified that associations exist between purposeful browsing of content (but not necessarily interaction with content) and outcomes such as bridging social capital [5] or satisfactory knowledge exchange [11]. Highlighting how SNS can serve as a "social lubricant," Ellison et al. [5] identified a relationship between the connection strategy of using Facebook to look up latent ties and bridging social capital. It should be noted that Ellison et al. [5] primarily situated the social context to be among college students at the same university. Specifically, students who used Facebook to look up other students reported greater social capital. Drawing from the same metaphor, Leonardi and Meyer [11] identified purposeful browsing behaviors as helping to transfer knowledge between members of an organization. Leonardi and Meyer [11] described certain knowledge as "sticky," especially when the information needs to be transferred between weak or latent ties in an organization. As such, when

the knowledge seeker observe the knowledge holder's activities on enterprise social network, these activities can help create conversational material and ease the transfer of this type of sticky knowledge. Indeed, frequencies of such "browsing" behavior was associated with satisfactory knowledge exchange afterwards [11]. Importantly, the browsing Leonardi and Meyer [11] studied was purposeful rather than passive: they inquired participants about specific people whom they wanted to seek knowledge from within an organization. As such, a purposeful mindset in seeking out and maintaining weak ties is probably important if you want to accrue benefits from them.

Conclusion

Through a brief overview combining literature from organizational studies, communication, and computer-supported cooperative work, I have outlined in this paper some of the mechanisms through which ESM can facilitate connections between weak and latent ties in an organization and benefit the users. Notably, it seems that while passive SNS usage is associated with negative outcomes, the similar browsing behaviors, if purposeful, are associated with positive outcomes for users by acting as a "social lubricant." Investigating further this purposeful browsing behavior can serve to advance our understanding of the relationship between patterns of ESM/SNS usage and accrual of social resources.

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