

DOCTORAL PROGRAMME

SOCIAL MEDIA AFFORDANCES AND THE STRUCTURE OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE

By

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# 1 A Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Social Media and Public Discourse

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*Abstract: This chapter introduces this thesis on the role of social media in public discourse. The chapter motivates the need for a multi-disciplinary approach to bring together the problematization of public discourse and the conceptualization of the social media artifact. It presents the core arguments of the thesis and the summary of the three essays that are in the chapters that follow. It discusses a multi-disciplinary framework to study the effect of social media in public discourse.*

*Public discourse on traditional mass media is problematized using theories from mass communication, linguistics, and political science disciplines. Consolidation of the mass media industry and proliferation of media channels are shown as detrimental to an open, rational, and critical discourse on matters of public interest. Social media is presented as the solution to the problems in public discourse. It is argued that the conceptualization of the social media artifact and incorporating the artifact into the theory will help better explain the effect of social media on public discourse. The information systems discipline provides tools and theory to conceptualize the artifact. Accordingly, the chapter argues for a multi-disciplinary study designed and conducted from the information systems perspective.*

## 1.1 Introduction

The proliferation of the internet and widespread use of social media in production, distribution, and consumption of news has disrupted the mass media ecosystem (Papacharissi, 2008; Benkler, 2006; Hindman, 2008; Shirky, 2008; Entman and Usher, 2018). Before the advent of social media, mass media organizations had effective control over the market-oriented production and distribution of news (Benkler, 2006; Webster, 2014). In the traditional mass media ecosystem, ordinary citizens did not have many opportunities to produce news or to shape the distribution of news. Instead, citizens' participation in the public discourse has largely been as consumers of news that reached them through channels established by the mass media organizations. Social media has empowered ordinary citizens not only to produce and distribute news but also to customize the flow of news content for their consumption (Miranda et al., 2016; Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). Social media impelled the transition from

## 2 Social Media Affordances: Scope of the Artifact used in Public Discourse

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*Abstract: This essay delineates the scope of the social media artifact used in public discourse and conceptualizes it for research on the role of social media in public discourse. Social media is positioned as a general term to describe certain artifacts with characteristic features such as user-generated content and vast online social networks. It is argued that individual social media applications differ vastly in terms of the additional features they possess. It is those additional features that determine the fit of a social media artifact for a specific context such as public discourse. Identifying those features that make social media suitable for public discourse and integrating them into theory is critical in research into the role of social media in public discourse.*

*This study does an exploratory review of literature on social media from the mass communication and information systems disciplines. Whereas the mass communication discipline provides the unique context of public discourse, the information systems discipline provides theoretical tools to identify the features and conceptualize the artifact. The review leads to the identification of features and functionalities of social media that are salient in public discourse. The features and functionalities are conceptualized in terms of novel social media affordances. The novel affordances of political participation, news production, news distribution, and news consumption are then used to define a composite artifact that is used in public discourse. The implications of the conceptualization to theory on social media in public discourse and theory on affordances are discussed.*

### 2.1 Introduction

The term social media encompasses a large number of Internet-based applications that provide a wide range of features and functionalities (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011). These applications have a disruptive effect on a wide range of social phenomena, including relationships among members of a family; production, distribution, and consumption of news; the interaction between firms and their customers; the interaction between governments and their citizens; and organization of citizens in pursuit of social and political causes (Benkler, 2006; Hindman, 2008;

### 3 The Fluidity of Gatekeeping Power in Public Discourse on Social Media

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*Abstract: The objective of this study is to investigate the effect of social media on the power structure underpinning public discourse. The research is motivated by the argument that the concentration of gatekeeping power in the traditional mass media caused the failure of traditional mass media to act as a platform for open, rational, and critical public discourse. Social media is conceptualized as an alternative to mass media that social media enables the emergence of new and more diverse gatekeepers, with different actors holding gatekeeping power at different times and on various issues. The argument is developed by decomposing gatekeeping power on social media into two components – latent and manifest gatekeeping powers.*

*It is theorized that whereas the latent gatekeeping power has structures similar to mass media, manifest gatekeeping power has a different structure, and this structure changes from discourse to discourse, leading to a weak association between latent and manifest gatekeeping powers. Further, it is theorized that the weak association between latent and manifest gatekeeping powers can be explained in terms of specific patterns of feature use, which account for some variance in the manifest gatekeeping power. The theoretical propositions are tested using data from the Twitter discourse on four different issues of public interest in India.*

*The data is analyzed using a mixed-method approach by doing an in-depth exploration of each discourse to examine the changes in the power structure, and using econometric modeling to explain the fluidity in the structure. The detailed examination of the gatekeeping power across cases provide evidence for fluidity in the structure of manifest gatekeeping power. The econometric analysis explains fluidity in terms of the offline status and the online behavioral patterns of the individual users. The implications of our research to policymakers, political campaign managers, and the theory of social media and public discourse are discussed.*

#### 3.1 Introduction

The proliferation of the internet has led to the use of social media as an alternative to traditional mass media in creating, distributing, and consuming news (Papacharissi, 2008; Miranda et al., 2016; Vaast et al., 2017). In the early years of internet penetration, it was believed that the emergence of an

## 4 Visibility Affordance and the Polarization of Public Discourse on Social Media

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*Abstract: Social media has become an important component of digitized mass media. Research into the effect of social media on the polarization of public discourse has produced mixed results. This essay contributes to this ongoing debate by applying the technology affordances lens to explain the structural conditions that affect polarization. The point of departure for this study is the argument that diversity in social media networks is not conducive to polarization. The essay theorizes about the patterns of diversity in social media networks based on the visibility affordances perceived and enacted by different stakeholder groups in social media public discourse. The theory is tested using data from the Twitter discourse on an issue of public interest in India. The results show that different visibility affordances perceived and enacted by different stakeholders lead to contradictory forces simultaneously accentuating and attenuating polarization. The implications of the results to theory on media effects, social media, and technology affordances are discussed.*

### 4.1 Introduction

The proliferation of the Internet has led to the widespread use of social media for creating, distributing, and consuming news (Benkler, 2006; Papacharissi, 2008; Miranda et al., 2016; Vaast et al., 2017). Before the advent of the Internet, traditional mass media – including newspapers, radio, and television, has been the dominant authority in the creation and distribution of news and played a decisive role in shaping public opinion (Benkler, 2006; Webster, 2014). In recent years, social media has emerged as a dominant player in the media ecosystem. On the one hand, ordinary citizens use social media to create, distribute, and consume news content (Miranda et al., 2016). On the other hand, media organizations use social media to increase their reach, and journalists use social media as a source of valuable information (Jungherr, 2014; Bright, 2016). Social media is thus embedded in the traditional mass media ecosystem, even as it disrupts the way public discourse is conducted in the ecosystem.