

THE EFFETENESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

Social media are a new phenomenon attracting the interest of researchers from different fields—marketing experts, sociologists, anthropologists, even philosophers and semioticians. The problems related to them vary and many remain unanswered. The current paper analyzes the level of social media habituation, taking Charles Peirce's evolutionary cosmology, and more specifically the concept of effete mind, as its milestones. Other important studies considered here are from the fields of anthropology and media studies.

Communication and the transfer of information have always been vital for living creatures, not only humans but animals, plants and even micro-organisms. During the centuries of our existence and evolution we have developed complicated sign systems to satisfy the need for knowledge transfer among the members of our social groups. In the digital era many

questions about the new forms of communication arise. Here I will analyze one of them: are these new media something totally new or do they follow some kind of universal tendency and predisposition? To answer this question I will consider Charles Peirce's ideas of habit and habit-taking tendency, his concepts of living and effete mind, together with the studies of Robin Dunbar and Tom Standage

In his book *Writing on the wall. Social media—the first 2, 000 years* (2013) Standage examines the question of writing on the walls as one of the oldest methods of communication and knowledge transfer. It dates back to the age of cavemen, long before any of society's modern tools were even considered possible. Over the centuries these methods evolved and became more sophisticated but it kept their essence and main function—to transfer information for the well-being of the group and its members. Centuries ago at the dawn of human kind, the necessity of survival shaped our predisposition for communication. Since then, the tools have changed but the necessity and the reasons for it remain the same. As such, the current state of well-developed digital social media could be considered a manifestation of the Peircean concept of habit-taking tendency, combined with human natural need of communication and information sharing stated by Standage and also by the evolutionary anthropologist Robin Dunbar.

Keywords: effete mind, habit, social media, Peirce, knowledge

Habit-taking as an evolutionary process

The problem of habit and habit-taking as an active force in the universe are vital to Peirce's philosophical system. To be profoundly understood these concepts should be discussed in the context of his evolutionary cosmology, and in relation to his categories, sign model, and method of pragmatism. But considering the limitations of the current paper I will present them only in their function of evolutionary elements.

Mentioned in many texts, the problem of habit is presented in-depth in the late metaphysical essays of Peirce. His project is to unite them into a book entitled *A Guess at the Riddle* (1887–1888), but this never happens. The metaphysical essays are often neglected by researchers because of their high degree of abstraction. But the idea of evolution of the universe from chaos to determinacy, with the function of habit and habit-taking tendency, is fundamental for current research and could bring light to the question of the nature of social media.

In Peirce, the function of habit is not restricted solely to the organization of human life, but has a much wider meaning. It is a property of everything in the universe – a universe that is governed by laws and represents a boundless, developing mind. In *A Guess at the Riddle* Peirce considers its evolution and makes the following generalization: “(...) three elements are active in the world: first, chance; second, the rule; and third, habit-taking” (W6: 208). These elements bear the names of tychism, synechism and agapism. The first, pure chance, is defined as follows:

(...) an element of pure chance survives and will remain until the world becomes an absolutely perfect, rational, and symmetrical system, in which mind is at last crystallized in the infinitely distant future. (W8: 110)

The second element, synechism, denotes the tendency of phenomena to have duration and to exist together, while agapism is the creative love and compassion in the universe. The last term is devoid of metaphoricity and is to be understood literally, since for Peirce the universe is an evolving mind and love is its building element, a characteristic of the movement from living to effete mind. The development from chance to determinacy is normal both for the universe and the separate phenomenon. This is how he recognizes two other evolutionary elements called “living mind” and “effete mind”:

The general laws of thought are the deep traces of the effete mind. Originality is provided by the living mind when it meets the patterns of the effete one. Very soon the searching thought (the supervenient self) falls into the track of the effete mind and takes the route of the cliché. (Mladenov 2006: 94)

According to Peirce, even before the existence of time, space and the objects, in its first phase of development, the universe was formless and indeterminate, an absolute chaos. Then, by the principle of pure chance and spontaneity, something emerges that we may call a “flash.” This is a “completely undetermined and dimensionless potentiality” (CP 6.193). The flash happens simply because it is possible – it is a manifestation of tychism. After that, second and third flashes are generated, establishing a rule (law). The duration in time and the co-existence of the phenomena in the universe is a manifestation of synechism. “The tendency to form habits, or tendency to generalize, is something that grows by its own action, by the habit of taking habits itself growing”. (W8: 387)

This generalization is valid for the whole universe, and habits are rules that grow and obey “their own action” (*ibid*). Thus the universe develops from absolute chaos to absolute order, becoming increasingly determinate

with time. Peirce calls the final point of this evolution ‘crystalized mind’. This is the stage at which logical hypotheses for the understanding of everything will be created. But this last phase will not be reached in the foreseeable future, therefore the habit-taking tendency continues to work. Obviously the living mind and the effete mind can be taken as the two endpoints in the development of the universe. Then why is the effete mind named as the final point of the movement rather than crystallized mind? The view of reaching a stage of absolutely logical knowledge of the universe is too idealistic, and puts an end to evolution where spontaneity or habit formation is no longer possible. Although Peirce does not say it explicitly, in his philosophical system achieving a crystallized mind is the end of the universe as we know it. This is why, when we speak of evolutionary processes, the living mind and the effete mind will be used as the two extreme points. Between them Peirce sees the active elements – tychism, synechism and agapism, which build up the line of habit formation and determine the evolution of mind. The habit is a final goal, or a necessary link in evolution.

Peirce describes the process of movement from living to effete mind as a process which begins with a situation of hesitation when we are to decide how to act. After that, some actions are repeated, some are not. Gradual repetitions become habits that eliminate the irritation in further situations of hesitation. This direction, followed by all processes in the universe, is called the habit-taking tendency: “The tendency to obey laws has always been and always will be growing. (...) all things have a tendency to take habits” (W6: 208). Thus their number grows incessantly until, in the indeterminate future, it reaches the stage of complete determinacy. Turley points out that for Peirce, the habit-taking tendency is an evolutionary principle from which stems the formation of time, space, substance, and natural laws (Turley 1977: 75). As part the universe’s evolution, habits create a ring of strong gravity which retains the achieved knowledge and orders the world of the separate human beings and their social groups. Habits are necessary because they establish models of behavior and save mental energy in everyday life. But despite striving towards establishing rules and laws, evolution itself is a growing process that can be found in all aspects of being.

Considering Peirce’s evolutionary cosmology and his concept of habit-taking tendency, we can define digital social media as manifestations of our society’s living mind, though they already show certain traces of effeteness. In his research on social media Standage tracks their development through the centuries, proving that they have existed in different forms since the beginning of human societies. It means that they represent a vital habit for the living creatures—to communicate in terms to satisfy the need

to transfer knowledge and information. This urge of communication first appeared as a spontaneous flash of the primitive mind, but fast obeyed the habit-taking tendency and became the beginning of social interaction and the development of social networks. If the act of communication was not habitual by nature it would be difficult for it to survive. Habit is the highest manifestation of synechism, or the ability of phenomena to last. Without the active force of habit and synechism, the knowledge in social groups would not have been able to grow, and the evolution of both human beings and the universe would be impossible.

Communication is a complex phenomenon and can be analyzed with different perspectives and semiotic approaches. Here I choose to analyze it from a Peircean point of view, as a manifestation of habit-taking tendency and also as an evolutionary element. This approach allows me to focus my attention on the new forms of communication (a.k.a. social media) and examine the question: what is new and what is already established and known in their structure and functions. The following parts of that paper will also focus on the question: can we consider social media to be living mind following Peirce`s concepts and terminology? And if we can, what does this mean for their future development?

Tendencies and forms

Studies on communication and its principles have been conducted since the beginning of the XXth century. Not only semioticians but biologists, sociologist and even journalists have discussed them. It is impossible to apply here all the contributions made on that question, so I choose to focus on research conducted by Dunbar and Standage.

In his book *Neocortex Size as a Constraint on Group Size in Primates* (1992), Dunbar describes the correlation between the size of a primate`s neocortex and its communicational needs and skills. One of the most important contributions of his study is the “Dunbar number,” which points out the average group size for the human beings according to the size of the brain. The number Dunbar specifies is 148, which he rounded to 150–this is the maximum number of people with whom it is possible for us to have reciprocal relationship. Groups of under 150 people are also considered by Dunbar to be self-regulated, which means that everyone knows everyone else personally, which naturally regulates relationships inside the group by decreasing the social deviations and the possibility of crimes or other misbehaviors. The Dunbar number is also considered by the military forces when groups do not exceed 180 people.

The research made by Dunbar stresses that people usually have up to five intimate friends and up to ten close friends. These numbers are very similar to the numbers we could find in the so called “grooming coalitions” in ape societies. More than twenty years after Dunbar’s research was published, in the era of digital communication, Standage decided to verify whether his contribution is also valid for social media and human behavior there. After analyzing users’ habits on Facebook Standage discovered a lot of similarities with the numbers already drawn by Dunbar:

Interaction on Facebook (in the form of regular comments and messages) is similarly concentrated within a core group of intimates, with an average of seven other people for male users and ten people for female users. This core group is the digital equivalent of a grooming coalition (Standage, 2013: 14).

He also concludes that in digital environments human beings had to switch from physical “grooming” to virtual grooming using messages, likes, comments, tags and other new forms of communication. But the more important development is that even subconsciously they try to keep the habitual size of their intimate and close friend groups. It seems that social media facilitates interaction among the closest members of a social group, allowing them to express their positive intention for “grooming” others not only one by one but also by keeping the group together in shared chats or in multiple picture and event tags. Such kinds of online group “grooming” saves a lot of time and also allows the group to “stay together” if one or several of the members are physically far away from each other. Standage points out the advantages of online interaction as follows:

But speech has three big advantages over physical forms of grooming. It allows grooming of more than one person at a time, while chatting in a small group. Grooming can also be carried out while performing another activity, such as eating, foraging for food, or resting. And grooming via speech, in the form of the exchange of gossip, enables people to find out about events within their social circle that they did not witness directly. This provides more information on which to base judgments about whether someone is trustworthy or not (Standage, 2013: 15).

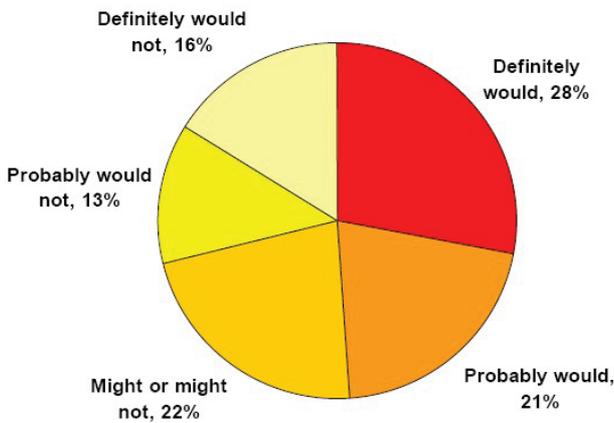
Considering the research conducted by Dunbar and Standage we can conclude that social media keep the habitual functions of offline communication on a social level, but expand the possibilities for the group to stay together longer and to exchange bigger amounts of information in a quicker and more efficacious manner. Social media guarantee the survival of these social groups in a dynamic environment where travel is faster and easier, living abroad is more and more common, and social and personal changes

(like loss of job, money, personal belongings and properties, etc.) can happen unpredictably. In the fast-changing offline reality human beings need to stay connected with the closest members of their social groups in order to deal with the insecure and more and more “unfriendly” environment.

It is a significant fact that since 2011 The American Red Cross started active work with social media channels to inform and educate users on how to act more efficiently during emergencies, social crisis, or natural disasters. Besides informing users on how to engage social media to protect others during crises, the organization also conducted studies to gather statistical data about the real usage of the digital technologies during such events. *Figure 1* shows the results which prove that nearly half of users will post on social media to send their closest social group members information about their well-being. This example proves the statement above, that the insecurity of the offline world and the technical characteristics of digital media provide social groups with new and more efficient tools for communication, helping them to stay together despite these events.



During an emergency, nearly half would use social media to let loved ones know they are safe.



In an area-wide emergency, how likely would you be to use social media channels to let your friends and family know you are safe?



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Figure 1: How likely would you be to use social media channels to let your friends and family know you are safe?¹

¹ <http://www.redcross.org/about-us/news-and-events/publications>

These social media represent two old, evolutionary habits of the humans—to exchange information inside their social groups, and to “groom” each other, not only to show a friendly attitude but to prove their own belonging to the group. It seems that a more dynamic and insecure offline reality also helps for the quick development of social media to preserve the evolutionary and survival habit of communication.

The effeteness of the social media—is it possible?

To consider social media as living mind in the terms of Peircean evolutionary cosmology does not seem problematic. Even being a stable digital environment, they participate in sign creation and sign exchange processes, meaning that they also allow the meanings of some signs to change and develop compared with their offline usage. An example of such expansion of meaning in social media is the word “like”. The sign still keeps the traditional and already effete linguistic meaning; but in its transition into the social media context it is widened. Offline, “to like” merely signifies mental activity related to sympathy and approval of some phenomenon. But when used in the digital environment the sign supplements its meaning with the physical activity of pressing the specific button on the web site and displays an iconic sign for the other users. This visualization of the sign is an important transformation in social media because it is quite different in offline reality. In order for a sign which operates only on a mental level in the offline world to be manifested, a transition into other signs like smile, voice timbre, etc. is needed. In digital media “to like” brings iconicity and transfers its meaning through it. These sign changes in social media are significant proof that they still operate in the state of living and developing mind.

But we already mentioned above that certain traces of effeteness could be recognized in social media. How can we explain this fact? If the effeteness means to follow a certain pattern and to bring the characteristics of well-established cliché, then social media certainly show a tendency to get more and more effete over time. Analyzing them as an overall phenomenon we notice that they become more and more habituated in time, meaning that their level of effeteness increases. For example, at the beginning of Facebook users' generated content was more heterogeneous and was dominated by discussions, shares of personal thoughts and experience, personal pictures and videos. Today these forms of communication still exist but are dominated by marketing content, political and social discussions, corporate profiles and advertising-oriented content. These types of messages are similar in their purpose, form, and language, and generate similar responses from the audience. They explicitly show social media's effeteness

on structural and functional levels. Even the time schedule of publication of corporate messages is similar (concentrated in two time ranges—in the morning around 9 a.m. and in the afternoon around 5 p.m.) due to users' habits and behavior online.

The rising number of corporate messages in social media, created and distributed according to commercial goals, turns them into cliché. Even if the topics and the content of these messages vary, the level of their structural similarity is high—their creation follows certain rules which guarantee success. For example, we can find specific formulations of the titles (Top 10; How to; Breaking news; etc.), few predominant formulations of the opening lines (personal stories; unexpected news; not very well-known fact; etc.), as well as some requirements on visual level—these messages are always accompanied with attention grabbing pictures or galleries. Video content is also recommended. All these specifics of corporate messaging on social media are easy to trace, and we can find many online sources providing directions for creating successful business content.

The facts above prove the statement that social media are developing in terms of the growing cliché. Following Peircean terminology and evolutionary cosmology we can conclude that social media are still in the phase of developing living mind, but the tendency of habituation and growing effeteness is visible, and we can expect this effeteness to expand in future. What will happen to social media if they become totally effete—and is such a state possible for them? These questions are still open for discussion—we can only speculate about these topics, as a single hypothesis is difficult to formulate and prove. So I leave these questions unanswered with the expectation that only time will provide the correct answer.

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