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Phatic Communication on Social Media

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[**Abstract**: This paper argues that social media*ted* communication is essentially phatic communication, serving social purposes more than intellectual purposes. Also, social media contents are less *informative*, and users consume them frequently to satisfy their entertainment and social needs. This paper borrowed the concept of *entropy* from Wiener, Shannon, and Fiske and the idea of *sociability* from sociology to construct arguments for this position. At the core of the argument, the paper claims that lower entropic content is preferred by social media users because of its communicative convenience more than higher entropic content.]

***Keywords*:** entropy; social media; redundancy; phatic communication; sociability.

Introduction

When you talk to your friends, what do you talk about? Freud-Lacan? Shannon-Weiner? Or something more ordinary, everyday conversation, like the interesting game you played last night, the show you watched in IMAX, or just asking their whereabouts? Presuming that we primarily communicate with others to maintain social bonds, not to gain knowledge and wisdom, I argue in this article that such ordinary communication cues are essential and have social significance. More precisely, I endeavor to explain the following conceptual problem: Why do people use social media? Do they want to become Socrates by pursuing knowledge on social media? Or do they use it simply for common social purposes? For the sake of my argument, I chose social media, a vital communication space for billions of people worldwide. Social media is "an umbrella term that refers to the set of tools, services, and applications that allow people to interact with others

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using network technologies" (Boyd, 2008, p. 92). I discussed social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, in this paper because of their networkability, popularity, and social significance. Boyd and Ellison (2007) and Boyd (2008) also emphasized SNSs in their research due to SNSs' comparative and communicative importance.

Relying on the contrasting concepts of entropy and redundancy and knowledgeability and sociability, I posit that social media platforms are full of phatic cues, and users are more likely to engage in communication for social and entertainment purposes, let alone for searching for knowledge and intellectuality. I would also like to acknowledge that such communicative behavior should not be overgeneralized or overstated solely based on the following theoretical argumentations without precise empirical evidence. Therefore, this paper intends only to widen the threshold for further dialogues on this topic.

Phatic Communication: Definition and Debate

Language is a string that binds humans in society together by conveying relationship talks. In this light, phatic communication or expression can be addressed as *small talk* that is more conversational than transactional, allowing communicators to transmit conventional and easily perceptible information. Malinowski (1923) defined phatic expression as an element of communication that mainly serves social functions (e.g., maintaining and building relationships, pleasantry) instead of transmitting "valuable" information and ideas for intellectuality and wisdom. This notion, however, faces some epistemic doubts: How should we measure and determine the *conventionality* and *obviousness* of information? How should we determine the value of information? We can explain these questions in the following ways.

First, the predictability and value of information are subjective and depend primarily on individuals. Second, without contextual analysis (i.e., pragmatics analysis), it might not be possible to define the conventionality and value of information. From this aspect, the previous understanding of phatic communication seems problematic, which should invite further scholarly attention. Žegarac and Clark (1999) also acknowledged that phatic communication had been improperly conceived in scholarly literature despite being an important topic. Moreover, the defining terms of phatic communication, such as a minimum of information vs. a maximum of supportive chat, cognitive information vs. social information, conventionalization, and de-semanticization, are not explanatory (Žegarac & Clark, 1999, p. 228). Sometimes, the utterance can be phatic, although it is not conventionally *phatic*. In that regard, the context and the aim of

conversation seem two critical issues to reconsider while discussing phatic communication.

For this paper, as a working definition, I conceive the idea of phatic communication more broadly as *the* communication that serves a social purpose, that contains plain talks, meanings, and information, and that is more useful to make connections among people (e.g., friendly talk in a coffee shop) rather than producing intellectual insights (e.g., graduate lectures in universities). The merit of such communication may be understood by its content, including trivial popular discourse and trendiness, everyday talk, humor, stories, and cues for sociability. Therefore, instead of an in-depth philosophical approach, I have taken a more conventional approach to explain phatic communication, which seems more aligned with the idea of Malinowski (1923). However, unlike Malinowski, who thought phatic communication was not that important (Malinowski, 1923; Radovanovic & Ragnedda, 2012), I would instead postulate that it has a significant role in the social context.

Entropy, Phatic Communication, and Sociability

The concept of entropy is defined by various theorists, such as Boltzmann, Gibbs, Wiener, Shannon, and Kolmogorov-Sinai, in various disciplines, such as physics, biology, and communication and information studies (Wiener, 1988). For this paper, the entropy of Norbert Wiener and Claude Shannon seems more relevant. When proposing the theory and arguments regarding cybernetics, Wiener (2019) conceptualized entropy broadly as *chaos* and *disorder*: "Just as the amount of information in a system is a measure of its degree of organization, so the entropy of a system is a measure of its degree of disorganization" (Wiener, 1988, p. 37). That means the amount of disorder in a system is that system's entropy. This statement may also suggest that information and entropy are two different things: information is something expected, whereas entropy is not.

Although Wiener moved toward a broader conceptualization of entropy, Shannon conceived a narrower definition of entropy (Wiener, 2019). Shannon built his theory of information by defining *entropy* as the quantity of information a data source or a message contains. Put another way, entropy is the measurement of the amount of information, which partly lies in the *predictability* of information. The predictability of information can be measured mathematically by asking questions: The more questions you need to ask to know an answer to a question, the more informative that question, message, or topic is. If a piece of information is highly predictable, it is low entropic. On the contrary, lower predictability makes a piece of information highly entropic. In other words, high entropy

indicates high informativeness. This definition of entropy by Shannon later becomes linked to human communication, germinating a new idea called *redundancy* (Fiske, 2010).

The levels of entropy and redundancy explain the un/predictability or un/certainty of information but in contrasting ways, meaning they are opposite (Table 1). The higher unpredictability of a piece of information increases the entropy level while making it less redundant. It implies that redundancy is more about predictable and conventional information that may not aim to improve one's intelligence level. Hence, high entropic information might not be conducive to phatic communication, which requires a more conventional, predictable, and low definition of information, like redundant information. Referring to Wiener's (1988) conception, higher entropy with informational unpredictability and uncertainty tends to amplify disorder and disharmony in communication, which seems less desirable and discomforting for engaged groups. Therefore, according to communication and behavioral theorists (Fiske, 2010), low entropic and highly redundant information benefits human communication and social relations.

Table 01

Features of entropy and redundancy

Entropy	Redundancy
Higher amount of newer information	Lower amount of newer information
Higher level of uncertainty	Lower level of uncertainty
Lower level of predictability	Higher level of predictability
Increases chaos and disorder	Increases harmony and conformity
Conducive for knowledge and intelligence	Conducive to social relationships

In what other ways entropy is relevant to human communication demands further discussion. In traditional communication models, the sender sends an encoded message to the receiver, who must decode it. The decoding process depends on several factors, including the receiver's cognitive ability and the form and type of information. In the case of successful communication, both entropy and redundancy in content need to be balanced. When entropy is too high in content, the receiver needs to put more effort into decoding it.

On the contrary, content with low entropy can easily be decoded and understood because of its less uncertainty and more structuredness. Classical studies on information-seeking behavior expose that humans tend to put less effort into receiving the maximum amount of information from a

source (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Sometimes, individuals can avoid highly unpredictable content or content that is difficult to decode. From this perspective also, lower entropy makes communication easier.

Knowledge may positively correlate with entropy: the higher the entropy, the more the knowledge. The body of new knowledge contains information people do not know about, that is not predictable, and that logically has a higher entropy. Higher entropic new knowledge sometimes produces discontent and chaos among people if it contradicts any established notion or system (Rogers, 1983). It may also face resistance from various levels of society because many fear that new knowledge may replace the existing knowledge they are more familiar with. In this regard, I would argue that people tend to protect established knowledge systems instead of accepting new knowledge that has a chance of producing dilemmas and disorders. Therefore, people seek entertainment and pleasure more than knowledge. In this case, social media as a communication space allows them to fulfill their affective needs. Put another way, people use social media for relational and emotional purposes rather than educational purposes.

Phatic communication and social media

The intersection between phatic communication and social media is loosely established in academic scholarship, making the concept challenging to frame and explain. From my previous research experience, I observed that social media promotes phatic communication (e.g., the word *social* indicates the purpose of *sociability* of social media), and users are more interested in building informal networks among themselves. In this section, I would argue in favor of social media's phatic services based on three premises and questions: Why do people use social media?; what content do they consume and why?; what do they talk about on social media?

First, why people use social media has been investigated widely by communication scholars to date. They found various driving factors and motivations of users for using different social media platforms. For example, Novak (2008), relying on previous literature, identified 22 reasons for using social media: achievement, affinity, altruism, ambient intimacy, autonomy, collaboration, curiosity, emotional, entertainment, influence, informational, instrumental, peer pressure, positive experience, routinized, self-augmentation, self-esteem, self-expression, self-understanding, share, social capital, and social interaction. In another study, Hoffman and Novak (2012) empirically explored seven driving forces of social media usage: learn, socialize, network, update statuses, shop, new people, and media fun.

Both studies imply that *most* reasons revolve around social functions rather than knowledge and learning.

Some studies found that users actively seek information from social media, such as news (Paulussen & Harder, 2014; Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014; Stassen, 2010). Even some platforms like Facebook and Twitter serve as their primary information source (Bene, 2017; Gottfried & Shearer, 2017; Silver & Matthews, 2017). However, most of these studies did not specify the nature of such information. On the other hand, some studies found contradictory insights as well. For example, Bergström and Belfrage (2018) stated that users seek information on social media, but it might not be their primary goal. Even this information-seeking behavior for acquiring knowledge has been experiencing a gradual drop in the last few years (Al-Zaman & Noman, 2021). In a survey, Smith (2011) explored that 67% of users use social media to stay in touch with their friends and families, and most do not use it for knowledge. If knowledge consists of highly entropic information, these findings suggest that social media users are less attracted by it. Instead, they prefer to become sociable, continuing low entropic phatic communication.

Second, what types of content are consumed more on social media? Referring to the notion that people are more likely to engage in low-entropic content I just discussed, it is essential to understand the content shared on social media platforms. Twitter, for example, allows its users to write posts of not more than 240 characters. Therefore, most posts shared on this platform are somewhat forced to be simple, linear, low entropic, and easy to understand, aiming to inspire public engagement rather than producing and/or spreading knowledge. On the other hand, Facebook allows writing a longer post, allowing users to write complex and higher entropic text.

However, these platforms seem fundamentally designed to invoke *phatic* communication with functional communicative elements, such as reaction buttons and emojis, interactive and endless commenting, sharing, and mentioning options, and interpersonal inbox*ing* options. These are also useful for generating monetary benefits for the companies because the more interaction among users, the more data the platforms produce, and the more profit the companies can make by selling data and advertisements. On top of that, I doubt whether people really want to search for knowledge on Facebook as most users engage more with trivial videos (e.g., Reels) and photos (e.g., memes): this visual bias is increasing rapidly (Al-Zaman, 2022). This tendency indicates the easy accessibility of visual information I have partly discussed in the previous section. Visual and audio-visual content spoon-feeds the information to the users. They do not need to

struggle to accumulate and/or decode information from it, which provides them with some relaxation. Therefore, it can be argued that users are likely to engage with low entropic phatic posts (Radovanovic & Ragnedda, 2012).

Third, what do users talk to each other about on social media? It indicates what binds people and society together and what creates a bridge among people. It is nothing but stories: either long or short, complex or simple, ordinary or elegant, creative or conversational. In fact, in our everyday life, we communicate with each other through various stories (Fisher, 1987). Stories can have topical differences: some can be political (e.g., national history of the plight and pride), and some religious (e.g., holy scriptures, prophets, avatars). While some stories are meticulously weaved and told, some are shorter, conversational, and temporary: both, to a greater degree, aim at *sociability*. Oral storytelling is a traditional practice that has existed for thousands of years across different societies.

However, virtual platforms and digital communication technologies have transformed explicitly and remarkably how stories are told and interacted with nowadays. Such stories and storytelling have unique features, which can be viewed from contrasting perspectives. In many cases, on the one hand, social media stories and storytelling seem more short-lived and less impactful, casual, and conversational and serve an immediate purpose. For example, when Facebook users share their casual experiences on their profiles, other Facebook friends comment on these posts. These shared stories may not have continued profound impacts on others' lives. A large share of shared stories on social media is like this.

On the other hand, such platforms serve as archives, stories can be lengthy and complex and have long-term impacts. For example, the engagement of many users in news and discourse regarding a particular governmental policy may lead to a policy change, say, establishing digital centers in rural Bangladesh where people are deprived of digital technologies, which can have long-term impacts on the professions, skills, and livelihoods of the associated people. This sort of engagement and sharing is also commonplace on social media but is more complex and multilayered than in the previous type of stories. Such broad and impactful stories are helpful for social media campaigns and online mobs and movements. *Hashtivism*, for example, can only be possible when there is a suitable shared story that many people believe in and share. Sometimes intellectual debates and discourse are also built around these stories.

However, it is still contested and under-investigated that the largest share of the users participates in critical discourses for intellectual deeds.

It might merely be a trend that most people like to participate in by observing others, which gives them a sense of community and belongingness. It is a crucial function of sociability that offers people a psychological bond and shelter, more of an *imagined community*, in the trade of their engagement. I argue that this practice leads to virtual *sociality* more than intellectuality.

Conclusion

To sum up, we can state that "people crave connection" through trivial communication, not scientific knowledge, following unpredictability and highly entropic information (Makice, 2009). In light of this discussion, however, some might wonder whether social media through low entropic phatic communication *always* serves the purpose of sociability. How would we define individual and group contention and mob behavior on social media if it really does? How should we define the role of social media communication in disintegrating social cohesion through inflicting or promoting harmful content and violence? Social media platforms are indeed cultivating more harmful content, perhaps to generate more profit from increased users' participation around such content, such as misinformation (Hao, 2021). Here, we also should ask questions like, do many users tend to communicate with harmful content? Studies show that most users refuse to communicate with such content (Altay et al., 2022). If some people do, then in one way, it inspires chaos and disorder; in another, it creates a bond among those same-minded people who positively communicate with such content. Also, trusting misinformation indicates users' reluctance to properly decode the content's true meaning and informational value by cross-checking with other available information sources. Therefore, more empirical studies should be required to explain such gray areas appropriately.

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