MISQ Archivist

Are Social Media Emancipatory or Hegemonic? Societal Effects of Mass Media Digitization in the Case of the SOPA Discourse

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Abstract

Mass media digitization is an unfolding phenomenon, posing novel societal opportunities and challenges that researchers are beginning to note. We build on and extend MIS research on process digitization and digital versus traditional communication media to study how and to what extent social media—one form of digital mass media—are emancipatory (i.e., permitting wide-spread participation in public discourse and surfacing of diverse perspectives) versus hegemonic (i.e., contributing to ideological control by a few). While a pressing concern to activists and scholars, systematic study of this issue has been elusive, owing partially to the complexity of the emancipation and hegemony concepts. Using a case study approach, we iteratively engaged with data on the discourse surrounding the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and source literature to identify six facets of interpretive media packages (i.e., competing social constructions of an issue) as measurable constructs pertinent to emancipation and hegemony. These facets included three structural constraints (on authorship, citation, and influence) and three content restrictions (on frames, signatures, and emotion). We investigated propositions regarding effects of social versus traditional media and lean versus rich social media on these interpretive media package facets by comparing the SOPA discourse across two lean traditional and social media (newspapers and Twitter), and two rich traditional and social media (television and YouTube). Our findings paradoxically revealed social media to be emancipatory with regard to structural constraints, but hegemonic with regard to an important content restriction (i.e., frames). Lean social media mitigated structural advantages and exacerbated content problems. These findings suggest that, as with traditional media, some inevitable evils accompany the societal benefits of social media and that mass media is having a detrimental effect on public discourse. We offer practical steps by which private and public institutions may counter this effect, theoretical implications for wider consideration of the six interpretive media package facets proposed here, and encouragement to MIS researchers to increase efforts to compare different digitized processes so that a more comprehensive theory of the effects of different forms of digitized processes can be developed.

Keywords: Social media, traditional mass media, social construction of meaning, network analysis, case study, content analysis