DYNAMICS OF WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION: A NEW AGE MODEL

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to focus on how digital technology, more specifically social media, has resulted in a paradigm shift in the basic model of the process of communication. The traditional communication model, which explains relationship between the sender, medium and receiver and the feedback, may have become obsolete with the advent of a more complex communication channel called internet and its various communication tools. The linear broadcast model of communication is fast being replaced by a multidimensional model of communication using the social media. Many new barriers of communication and challenges have emerged due to social media's inclusion in communication. As social media becomes the favored mode of communication, due to its extensive reach, workplaces cannot remain unaffected by its use. As a result there is information and communication overload and formal channels and boundaries of communication are becoming obsolete. Although stated as a boon for communication, its impact on workplace communication cannot be termed as positive alone. There have been many adverse effects impacting office communication and creating new barriers of communication. The revolutionary change has created need for a more dynamic model of communication.

Keywords: social media, barriers of communication, work places

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Key points: Social media intrusion causing paradigm shift in basic model of the process of communication.

New age office communication and its effect on work culture

Communication deadlock due to internet causing information overload

Changing dynamics at office communication due to social media

Introduction

Technology has entered every sphere of our life and communication is no exception. The communication process is constantly evolving bringing with it new opportunities and challenges. Many researchers have identified the landmarks in the evolution of communication as a result of invention of language, writing, printing and digital technology. Sheoran (2012) in his study, mentions the noteworthy inventions in means of communication which include drawing, printing, telegraph, telephone, radio, photography, television, cellphone, digital technology, digital marketing, including social media.

Modern day communication is characterized by speed, increased accessibility, ever changing technology, multiplicity of channels, new emerging jargon, specialized training and technological glitches. Social media and Chat applications like Whatsapp, Facebook etc have transformed the ways in which we relate to other people in workplace. We see, in these media, a powerful set of tools to reinvent Communication. Social media and applications are pervading not only our private lives but our work lives too. With almost everyone accessing the internet every day or almost every day, whether it's at home or at work, it seems unlikely not to use the medium to its full potential including communicating with colleagues at workplace.

Social media Intrusion

Social media offers a great opportunity to communicate with colleagues in a way that helps increase greater affinity. Undeniably, on one hand these 'Real time Communication'facilitate the communication process but on the other hand they are throwing up new challenges and creating new barriers.

Social media is really changing the way people communicate with innovative ideas making its appearance on almost a daily basis. Earlier absence from the office might have meant a break in office communication but that is clearly not the case anymore. People have access to social media 24*7 thanks to smart mobile phones. All of this is creating an environment of constant communication, social affinity and consistent interactions. This environment may also create subjectivity for the type of information they receive, when they receive it, and how they receive it. Social networks connect individuals and communicate interests and activities and this could result in certain information getting public which was best kept confidential. The latest controversy over Facebook making private information, which is shared on Whatsapp, public, is just one example.

One of the greatest dangers with social networking sites in relation to the disclosure of confidential information is that employees forget how 'public' it can go and what responses it may elicit. In addition, the very nature of many sites is to encourage participation in the 'on line' conversation, where an exchange of views or information can feel like a private discussion but is in fact available for all to see. In the circumstances, there is great scope for the accidental disclosure of confidential, private information.

Barriers to communication

It is clear that there is more to this 'hip' communication than what meets the eyes. Although, one can't deny the advantages of these communication delights, one must ponder over the so called hazards of communication, through social media, and its effects. Although known for creating a more amicable and friendly communication environment, could it be impeding communication?

A closer look will expose a magnitude of problems that advent of social media could be posing at workplace. It may be dividing people instead of uniting them. It may be creating newer psychological and cultural barriers in communication and creating unseen, unheard of hurdles in natural flow of communication at the workplace which was earlier formal and structured. Formal means of communication like memos, notices and official correspondence could have been a slow and sluggish way to communicate but the chances of miscommunication and misunderstanding could be completely ruled out from them. Informal channels of communication which are gaining popularity due to social media emergence have been

instrumental in making communication more dynamic. It is breaking the class ceiling by crumbling hierarchies, by breaking boundaries and by bringing everyone in the domain of communication.

Review of Literature

Social media is considered a boon as a tool of communication due to its wide spread reach. Not only the social interactions but also workplace interactions are gradually getting dependant on it. However, as it is strengthening its stronghold in workplace communication people are also waking up to its negative implications. Businesses embraced social media mostly to communicate benefits to their employees without realizing that any tool meant for social interaction will have consequences which may have distant indirect impact on workplace culture. Businesses identified the main benefits of using social media as; brand building, fostering collaboration and communication, as way of recruiting new talent, improving employee engagement and driving innovation. (Trott 2014).In the same opinion paper, many perils of social media are also mentioned like time waster, leaking confidential information, recruitment risks, management-employee relationship etc.

Exon (2010) commented on invasion of privacy by business houses through social media. The unfortunate part is that participant on social group are not aware to what extent the privacy is invaded upon and what are its consequence.

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) the revolutionary trend of social media has grown substantially since 2008 and is not slowing down anytime soon; sharing anything from daily thoughts, feelings, observations, as well as photos and video on a daily basis has become the new norm amongst the social media generation. Introduction of smart phone has further popularized social media for uploading and sharing information.

Daft and Lengel (1986) propounded Media Richness Theory which talked about effectiveness of communication through media and media as a tool to remove ambiguity due to the social presence it allows. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), have discussed its implication on the society and its role in changing norms in the society. They quoted the example of Twitter, which has a total

word limit of 140 characters that makes it crisp and abrupt. This trend can roll over to verbal communication in society which may be judged as rude and disrespectful.

Social media has created an environment in which we have an abundance of weak ties with various networks of people, yet have devalued some of the close tie relationship characteristics such as face-to-face interaction, quality time, as well as respect. This reflects a dangerous trend that signifies people judging each other through their media profile before a face to face introduction. (Pezolla 2013)

Kane et al. (2014) emphasized on the behavioral aspect of social media and stated that due to social media's rapid adoption and widespread use of these tools even relatively minor technological differences may result in profound theoretical consequences for individual and organizational behavior. In another study, Shrivastava (2012) brought out the challenges that new technologies have posed on communication.

The above mentioned studies have shown some of the negative aspects of social media. The behavioral, cultural, psychological effects are going to directly impact the communication in an organization.

Objective

Business houses are blindly following social media due to its extensive reach and influence on people. Although, it cannot be denied that social media has proved to be a very useful tool in conveying any message across to millions of people its negative impact is gradually being noticed.

This paper focuses on how digital technology, more specifically social media, has resulted in a paradigm shift in the basic model of the process of communication. Many new barriers of communication and challenges have emerged due to social media's inclusion in communication. The researchers go on to propose a multidimensional, multidirectional model of communication which is of relevance while communicating using the social media.

The said objectives have been achieved by carrying out an extensive literature review and personal interactions with experts from the corporate who are witnessing the social media invasion into the workplace factually every day. No specific industry was targeted for carrying out this survey as this is an untouched exploratory work. However, the next phase of the study would involve carrying out an industry specific and empirical validation of the model proposed in the study.

Paradigm shift

The traditional communication model, which explains relationship between the sender, medium and receiver and the feedback, may have become obsolete with the advent of a more complex communication channel called internet and its various communication tools. The linear broadcast model of communication is fast being replaced by a multidimensional model of communication. Now, the effects of a simple message sent by an unsuspecting sender will have multitude of responses, from myriad people of varied personality types and perceptions, all due to the latest smart chat applications. Personal communication has a new meaning now. People are communicating with groups instead of a single person. As was expected, workplace has not been unaffected with this change. There are informal work chat groups with no official sanction or defined aim/common objective. People are added into these groups with no specific intention. The commonality in these groups can be as vague as the same organization. People from different verticals may fall into these groups and inadvertently become part of some communication with no relevance for them.

As is common with social sites, these applications also become the platform for sharing personal information, plans, moods, news, views etc. Social and professional protocols have no meaning for these applications. The result could be a plethora of communication, interpersonal and professional problems. This may be giving rise to disputes and conflicts beyond communicational redemption. Most unfortunate part would be ignorance towards these conflicts. The party to disputes may not even know there is a problem and the problem may remain unresolved, giving rise to even greater conflict. This would be mainly because a misunderstanding created here will never find an explicit vent due to presence of many people in the group. The conflict would be not in the visible form but will take the shape of poor judgment,

bias, misunderstanding, clash of opinion, jealousy and anxiety. People are not prone to discussing these psychological components of nature especially in a group. A group chat has constraints like time, technical impediments, presence of large number of people which impede communication and results in matters remaining unresolved.

Examining the above in a workplace scenario will surely prove the hazardous implication of social media intrusion in professional relationships. People have neither time nor will to resolve personal conflicts at work. But these unsolved conflicts can result in poor communication, lack of understanding, interpersonal problems thereby causing greater implications like loss of productivity, rise in attrition rate, crumbling hierarchies, poor workplace environment.

A new framework of the consequential effects of social media on communication will show the barriers it has created in the new age communication. Figure 1. shows the new model for the process of communication relevant to social media.
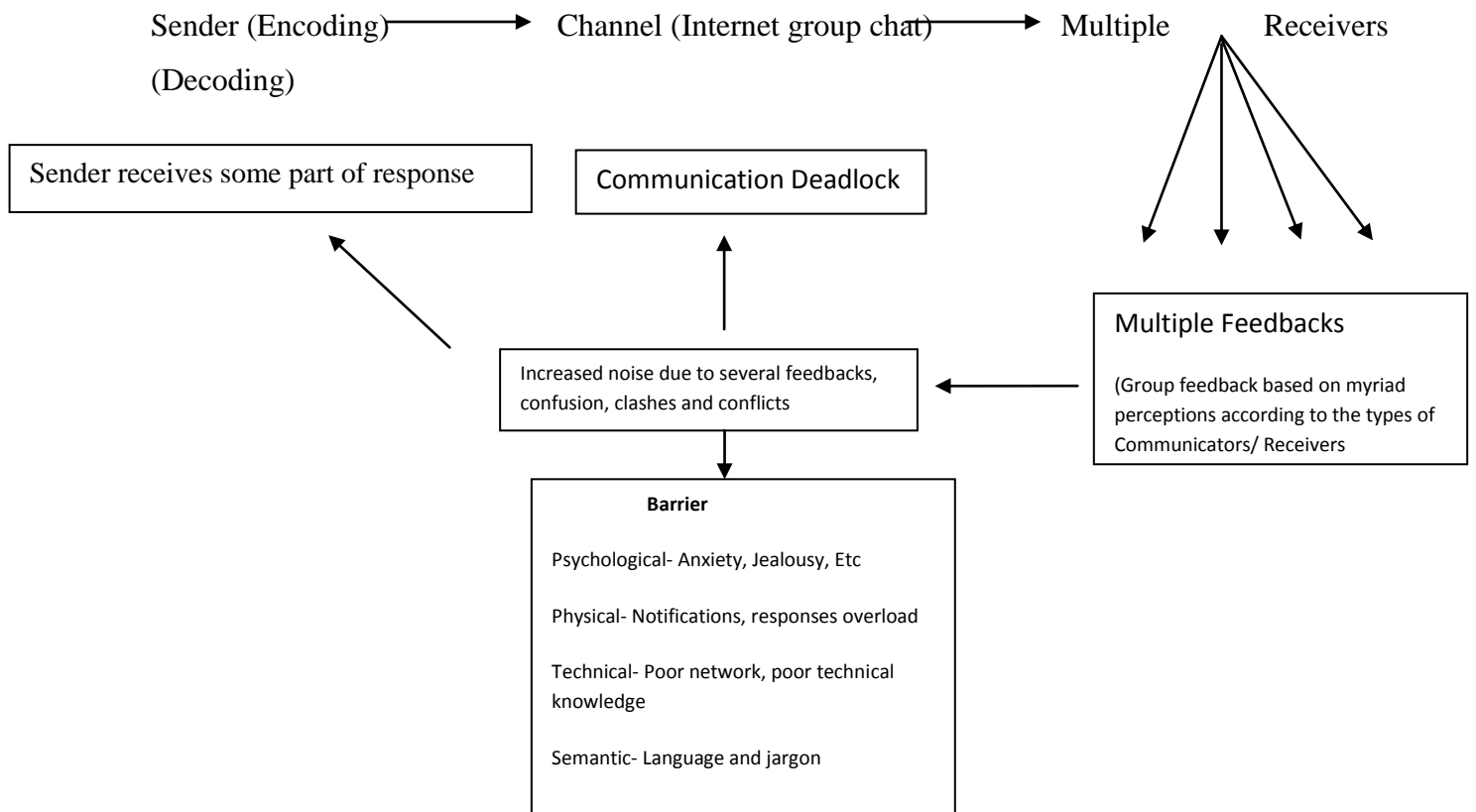

Fig. 1 (Multidimensional model of social media communication)

New Age Barriers

It is imperative to understand the indirect implications of using social media especially at workplace. There can be a lot more than meets the eyes. We did not realize how and when it crept into office networking. The indelible line which should have been drawn to mark checks and boundaries got deleted before it was even marked. Social media's unstructured communication and storage opens organizations to additional liability and loss of trade secrets. Social media tools are a double edged sword that could create inefficiencies and diminish intellectual property. (Templin 2012).

We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (Boyd and Ellison 2007).

As per Wikipedia "**Social media** are computer-mediated tools that allow people or companies to create, share, or exchange information, career interests, ideas, and pictures/videos in virtual communities and **networks"**. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines social media as "forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)." The same source defines networking as "the exchange of information or services among individuals, groups, or institutions; specifically: the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or business." (Seymour 2011)

The definitions are a clear indication the massive barrage of information that can be exchanged through this medium. The word 'virtual communities' has changed the definition of a simple receiver. Now the message is transported to people, known and unknown. Some of them we have never even met. The unknown destination of the message may not have been considered while encoding the message. And, what's more, the information may come in shapes of images, quotation, shared information and would not be confined to a fixed text.

It is a known fact that communication is the mother of all that goes around in the world. In recently published news in Edmonton Journal, Social media was blamed for 80% increase in gonorrhea among residents of Alberta. The stats in Alberta were troubling as according to Edmonton Journal, there were 82 Gonorrhea cases per every 100,000 Albertans in 2015, the highest rate since 1980. Same was the case with Syphilis, the cases of which have doubled too. Twitter, the social media chat tool, was quoted as the culprit. The reason was anonymous sexual encounters with strangers people met through social media communication. There is the increase in STIs because it is difficult to later contact partners for follow up testing and treatment. (Source: Gizmodo.com)

This news piece is a very valid analogy to substantiate our point although it may not directly show its effect on communication. We will now therefore, elaborate our point by examining social media's effects and see how the old definition of communication barrier is finding new meaning in the current scenario.

Physical Barriers

 Physical barrier is the environmental and natural condition that disrupts communication. Physical barriers like doors, walls, distance, etc. do not let the communication become effective. The barriers are less if the proximity of the sender and the receiver is high and fewer technologies are used. Disturbance in hearing due to thunders, telephone call disconnection, problems in television reception, message not being sent in chat, etc. are some examples of physical barriers of communication. Any number of physical distractions can interfere with the effectiveness of communication, including a telephone call, drop-in visitors, and distances between people, walls, and static on the radio. (Fred 2010). The new age physical barrier is 'Notification'. All chat applications come with notification alerts and are a constant disruption in communication. Once a notification has been received by a receiver there is a compulsive urge to attend the virtual conversation. The receiver is mentally transported from the present to virtual and loses connection with the current conversation. This could happen in the middle of a meeting or during the resolution of an existing conflict.

Psychological Barriers

Psychological barriers such as fear, lack of confidence, anxiety etc are the greatest deterrent in communication. Researchers have associated social media with stress due to overflow of information -much of it distressing and challenging. It is easier now to track what friends, enemies, and foes are doing and to monitor raises and falls in status on a near-constant basis. There is more social pressure to disclose personal information. These technologies are said to takeover people's lives, creating time and social pressures that put people at risk for the negative physical and psychological effects that can result from stress (Hampton et al. 2015).

Social media has many ways to attack people's psychology and thus causing psychological barriers in communication. Follies of human nature are accentuated when the information is forced upon them and there is no way to block or escape that information. Some direct outcomes of social media and its indirect effects on communication are discussed in the following paragraphs:

i) Perception

Perception has been majorly effecting communication. Listening, understanding, assimilation and responses are influenced by perception. The perception barrier is so potential that it can change the whole meaning and sometimes it can alter it to the extent which is not intended by the encoder at all. The perception of each one of us is so different that it can result in different and multiple interpretations of the same incident due to which perceptual barriers occur (Shrivastava 2012).

A sender's message on a social media tool will meet several perceptions thus causing communication stalemate. There are grave chances of miscommunication. One man's understanding will be another man's confusion. Based on the perception each person will have individualistic interpretation of the message. Moreover, the chain of responses may clash with several perceptions which may add to chaos. This at times may vary from the understanding the message intended to create thus leading to misunderstanding.

ii) Competitiveness

Confidentiality used to be the hallmark of professional life before social media raised its pretty head at work culture. Whatsapp group may have come out as the most effective tools of communication but people seldom see how it has polluted the very core of communication. Constant sharing of information, pertaining to personal lives, has given rise to some negative emotions that earlier had no place at workplace. Now people compare their economic status, number of leave and vacation, proximity to superiors, happiness index and almost everything that may be compared. Who has eaten dinner at which swanky restaurant becomes national news in seconds and those not as fortunate as that will not take that news lightly and pleasantly. The competition is now not limited to the award and appreciation at the workplace. As the healthy competition becomes negative and unnecessary feeling of inferiority and jealousy, the office ambience may not remain unpolluted and can impact communication.

iii) Judgment

People pronounce judgment on people based on their profile pictures, status updates, shared posts etc. While the shared material may reflect a person's personality or perception, judging them entirely on that basis may not be termed fair. This inadvertently interferes in professional relationships thereby causing a huge barrier in normal flow of communication? A good example is a superior's image of a subordinate based on social media projection. The subordinate may be branded as frivolous, shallow or non serious immensely coloring his/her professional image. This may take a toll on how seriously his/her work or communication will be received at workplace.

iv) Bias

Bias and prejudices are the worst enemies of communication. In case of social media it's the open book that creates more biases. People's cultural and socio perceptions are read through their activities on social media. An inactive person may be understood as unsociable and active communicator on social media may come across as too friendly or sociable. This may not always be true as people's virtual presence may not match his/her real presence.

v) Anxiety

Diamond and Seth (1984) define anxiety as a function that, physiologically and psychologically, warns the self of potential danger. Competitiveness, jealousy and curiosity will be the foundation for anxiety. People are worried and anxious about their status, future prospects, recognition and acknowledgements due to the information load they receive from social media. It can deeply impact mental state of a worker causing conflicts and crisis in interpersonal communication.

vi) Intrusion into privacy

The closely guarded privacy has now become the public domain thanks to social media. People are more curious towards each other's private lives. People are shifting their focus from a strictly professional environment to something more. This 'uncalled for' curiosity may disrupt the flow of communication.

vii) Crumbling hierarchy

As the working professionals become social media buddies the professional hierarchy begins to crumble. Whereas it was easier to maintain a hierarchical distance earlier, the access to private life has shrunk the boundaries. It has done the maximum damage to the semantics. Professional terminology and formal language has taken a real hit. Net friendly language now constantly makes its appearance at board meetings and formal get-togethers.

viii) Suspicion

Too much communication between peer groups can cause suspicion in people's mind regarding the ingenuity of a person's words. People read between the lines, misread statements, use jaundiced perceptions. Cross checks, questions and clarifications become the customary outcomes.

ix) Rising expectations

As we expect media behavior to match social or professional behavior the demand becomes unfair. People find it difficult to match up to their social media image in professional life and in consequence they may face social ostracization. In addition to that 24*7 accessibility for work related issues are expected and if not met with it can create misunderstanding.

x) Stereotypes

These are assumptions people make about the characteristics of members of a cultural or social group. Many stereotypes are negative or even hostile and are a serious barrier to workplace communication. A joke on a particular community, shared on social platform, can have serious repercussion in interpersonal relationship thereby causing implications on communication beyond redeemable limits.

xi) Ethnocentrism

As the world becomes flatter and communication technology becomes more widespread, the chance for interactions between people of drastically different cultures also grows (Cavanaugh 2015). Ethnocentrism can also impede communication unimaginably. It is the tendency to judge other groups or communities according to the standards and values of one's own group and community. Ethnocentric views have found a new platform in Social media. It not only acts as a communication barrier but can hinder employee morale and productivity. If your culture opines that making small talk prior to conducting business is important, you may consider someone who gets right to the point to be rude. However, from another cultural perspective, someone getting down right to the business may come across as rude to you. A check on this barrier would be a difficult task during social media communication. The way people use the Internet varies worldwide. This applies to usage frequency, number and type of contacts, interactivity, and content. For example, the topics dominant in blogs or social media in Asia are different from those in the West. (Kendall and Mooji 2014). Social media with its cultural mix can be a cause for greater misunderstanding.

Technical Barriers

Devices are electronic systems and they keep facing errors every now and then, causing unpredictable communication errors in terms of its delivery to the desired end. Sometimes even the accuracy of these gadgets is questioned. The more we depend on these technological tools, the higher the chances are of getting error harms involved in the process (Shrivastava 2012). Delay in download, data loss, network failures, are some of the types of error that can have devastating effects in ongoing communication. The stress of inability to communicate, due to network error can stall normal life. (Brooks 2015) in his study examines the effect of personal

social media usage on technology and happiness. He indicated that higher amount of social media usage led to lower performance on task and higher levels of techno-stress, thereby resulting in lower happiness levels.

Semantic Barrier

Semantic and language barrier has become more complex with the new terminology cropping everyday on internet. The terminology is not only new but it also comes with different connotations for different situations. To communicate effectively, both parties need to speak the same language and use words that clearly say what is meant. (Conrad 2014). For a novice of social media keeping tab on the ever changing terminology may become a task. Also, ignorance of net specific language can give rise to miscommunications and misunderstanding. (McKenzie and Qazi 1983) brought out the communication barriers between native English speakers and non-native speakers. With the intrusion of social media the barrier are expected to increase.

To conclude

There are, as with most things in life, risks and rewards in the use of social media in the workplace but, one thing is clear, it is not going away and employers have little alternative but to address it. Many organizations are putting a blanket ban on social media tools in the office which may or may not be a great idea depending upon how each individual reacts to it. There will be a time when employees and employers both will be able to use social media more responsibly. Whatever may be the case, it becomes imperative for the workplaces to have policies for a controlled use of social media. The present paper brings out the above mentioned points very succinctly and elucidates about the fact that social media intrusion affects this work place communication. More work in this regard is being done by the present authors and will be communicated in later empirical studies.

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