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# Discourse, Context and Media

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/dcm](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/dcm)

## The form and function of quoting in digital media



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 29 September 2014

Received in revised form

19 January 2015

Accepted 23 January 2015

Available online 11 February 2015

#### Keywords:

Quoting

Content sharing

Computer-mediated communication

Social media

Twitter

Retweeting

### ABSTRACT

In this article, we discuss the function of quoting and information sharing in social media services and argue that certain aspects of quoting point to similarities with oral culture, where the social functions of sharing complement the aim to inform or disseminate information. We approach the issue by first providing a brief historical account of content sharing practices from the early days of the Internet to the contemporary social media environment, in which content sharing is both prevalent and facilitated by platform architecture. We then conduct an exploratory quantitative content analysis of three Twitter hashtags relating to different topics, and link their structural variation to the different content sharing practices prevalent in them. We conclude by arguing that the social use of quotation in social media discourse can be a predictor of community structure, but that the degree to which this is the case differs locally.

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### 1. Introduction: technology and the reproduction of discourse

Strategies for relating another speaker's words have considerable socio-communicative relevance and accordingly belong to the linguistic repertoire of many languages. Both oral quoting (Tannen, 1989) and textual quoting (Moore, 2011) are longstanding areas of interdisciplinary inquiry and raise interesting theoretical and conceptual issues, both for linguistic pragmatics and for discourse analysis (Buchstaller and van Alphen, 2012).

The pragmatic dynamics of textual quoting are at once shaped by situational factors (the relation between the writer, the reader, and the related discourse) and by the technology of reproduction, and they react to change, both formally and functionally, as an increasing number of instruments for quoting is at the disposal of writers. Bakhtin highlighted the pragmatic volatility of speech reproduction and its potential for creative expression when he argued that "the relationship to another's words was equally complex and ambiguous in the Middle Ages... the boundary lines between someone else's speech and one's own speech were flexible, ambiguous, often deliberately distorted and confused" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 69). Oral reproduction places significant cognitive demands on both speakers and listeners, as both must be able to assign different discourse roles correctly in the absence of a physical speech situation, and different conventions, both of production and of interpretation, exist to deal with the discourse of others (Harnad, 1995). Scholars from a variety of disciplines have investigated the formal, functional, and cultural

dimensions of speech reproductions in settings such as scholarship, journalism, political discourse, and everyday life. In this article we examine the role that technology plays in shaping the form and function of quoting, and provide evidence for the discursive affordances of quoting in digitally mediated discourse, using Twitter as our example. Our main argument will be that the function of quoting is locally configured and that its meaning differs not just between different channels of communication, but from one community to the next. A range of strategies are used to represent quotation in print, such different kinds of quotation marks, indentation, font style and color, and yet more are common in computer-mediated communication (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1996) and Herring (1999), for two early accounts). In addition to dramatically increasing the means by which text can be marked up in digital documents, technology has also changed the way in which a piece of writing can be copied, from mechanical reproduction (i.e. in photocopying) and digitization (scanning and optical character recognition to digitize printed text) to digital reproduction (i.e. use of an operating system's copy and paste function), and, finally, content sharing functions such as liking, retweeting and reblogging. Arguably, the techniques available for quoting have become both easier to use and more powerful over time, and as a result their popularity has increased.

### 2. Interdisciplinary perspective on quoting across media

Scholars have conceptualized quotation in several distinct ways, based on their theoretical orientation and preferred analytical approach. Abbott (2003) provides a concise overview of research from (predominantly) linguistic semantics and pragmatics, and discusses some of the

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recurring themes, such as the formal distinction between open vs. closed quotes (Recanati, 2001) and the conceptual difference between quotation as description vs. quotation as demonstration (Clark and Gerrig, 1990). Most of the approaches discussed by Abbott seek in one way or another to distinguish quotation from non-quotation, and to establish formal differences between distinct types of quotation. Sociolinguistic and discourse analytical studies form another direction of linguistic research, which has tended to focus more strongly on the social and interactional aspects of reproduction, particularly in spoken discourse. A central object of interest have been quotatives – devices that signal the reproduction of spoken discourse in spoken language and their historical development and proliferation (Buchstaller and van Alphen, 2012; Macaulay, 2001; Romaine and Lange, 1991; Tagliamonte and D'Arcy, 2004).

Accounts that focus on the role of technology for the production and interpretation of textual quotations are somewhat rarer. Moore (2011) provides such an account, focusing on the historical development of media technology in tandem with the formal and functional development of quoting. The evolution of typographical standards for quoting took place alongside general standardization: printers eventually settled on specific markers and discarded others as the meaning of quotations became conventionalized. The written reproduction of writing also gave rise to a set of norms different from the more generous conventions of reproducing spoken discourse orally. Reporting speech in writing, e.g. in the news media, is very tightly bound to conventions of precision which are an integral part of journalistic ethics, just as citing sources correctly is paramount to scholarly practices (Zelizer, 1989). In journalism “quotes should be faithful to the words and meaning of the speaker.” (Clark, 1995, para 1), a norm that also applies in to scholarship, and to many formal written genres. While the importance of faithful reproduction holds both for writing and for speech, truly verbatim reproduction is unrealistic in many contexts of spoken language use (cf. Clark and Gerrig, 1990, p. 795). While technically available to anyone, the proliferation of written quotation beyond specific communities of practice seems to be a recent development, especially when examining the evolution of quoting in computer-mediated communication (CMC). The technological means of reproduction – ‘copy and paste’ in older forms of CMC, and buttons that allow easy sharing, retweeting and reblogging in contemporary social media platforms – arguably impact the role of quotation in CMC more broadly, especially when taking into account the large user communities that engage in the production and reproduction of information in CMC contexts (Kwak et al., 2010). Assuming a view of quotation that emphasizes its characteristics as shaped by technology (and technology in turn being appropriated by a range of actors in a variety of sociocultural settings) therefore introduces a new dynamic into the study of quoting. Many of the relevant influences are issues that apply more broadly to discourse analysis in computer-mediated settings and relate to specificities of CMC, such as the combination of spontaneous production with the permanency of data storage, the influence of technology on the shape of the discourse, or the relation of the discourse produced to the community that produces it. Bolander and Locher (2014) and Giles et al. (2014) provide valuable overviews of central issues in sociolinguistic and discourse analytic perspectives on CMC that are important in this context. In what follows, we will trace some of the technological determinants of quoting on the Web.

### 3. From quoting in early CMC to sharing in social media

Computer-mediated communication has changed considerably with the rise and proliferation of the Internet since the 1980s and the emergence of the World Wide Web in the 1990s, with important implications for quoting and content sharing. While CMC was initially tied to the closely controlled environment of desktop

computing, it has since then become mobile and ubiquitous through laptops, smartphones and tablets, all of which support a broad range of applications which are effectively synchronized through wireless networking or mobile Internet services. The line between synchronous and asynchronous interpersonal communications, and closed 1-to-N messaging systems where content is principally open to anyone is increasingly blurred, as web sites converge with apps on mobile devices (Herring, 2007). The broad usage of mobile devices makes the interaction with existing content increasingly attractive, as platforms and services that enable co-creation and blur the boundary between producers and consumers proliferate (Bruns, 2008). Rather than just providing content that can be passively used, with a relatively high barrier for content creation, social media environments place a strong emphasis on interaction without the need to invest much time, for which information sharing is an ideal instrument. A second noticeable change in CMC is the shift from an open Web to platforms. Services such as Twitter and Facebook depend on measurable user interaction in order to generate data that makes user engagement visible (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013). Original content creation is just one proxy for engagement, another is the sharing and retweeting of content produced by others. Quoting in CMC blends a technique well-established in print culture with the affordances of a new technology, by means of countless functions that allow the redistribution of content through the push of a button.

While initially information-sharing was a key development aim of both the Internet as a decentralized network and the World Wide Web as a service based on an open hypertext standard, technical intricacies and high costs made it largely impossible for most early users to contribute content. Users of the 1990s Internet were mostly confined to the role of readers, downloaders and consumers, rather than content producers. The facilities for redistributing information were limited and the content itself was largely textual. Many users were introduced to digital textual quoting through email, while some were already familiar with the conventions of inline text production through newsgroups and message board systems (Herring, 1999). Both email and newsgroups offered means of replying to others that incorporated quoting, though compared to social media, the means were still relatively cumbersome. Herring (1999, p. 8) characterized quoting in early CMC as a means of “creating the illusion of adjacency” in a sequence of email messages. Increasingly, such an illusion can be at once discursive and social. Content sharing in social media platforms generally creates a visible link between the quoter and the quotee, intuitively making it a mean of establishing affiliation between two users. This is possible although the person being quoted may not be consciously aware of the fact that they are being quoted, or may not agree to it. It is in this vein that Boyd et al. (2010) argue that retweets in Twitter are not just a form of content diffusion, but allow users “to validate and engage with others” (p. 1), and that Page (2012) notes their potential to “display connection with others or to signal influence” (p. 183).

Sharing content is also a vastly popular activity online. It ranks among the most popular activities on a wide array of social Web platforms, such as social networking sites, blogging and microblogging services. Not only have functions related to content-sharing become central in services such as Twitter by supporting specific platforms from which the content is taken and by increasingly offering facilities to embed and preview the material (for example videos posted on YouTube), but new services built specifically around content sharing have also emerged, such as Tumblr and Pinterest. Tumblr is a hybrid social networking site and microblogging platform designed to share content by posting it to the user's tumblelog. Different formats such as photo, (textual) quote, link, chat, audio, and video are supported. Objects shared by users are visible in their tumblelog, the equivalent of the Facebook timeline. They can be reblogged to one's own tumblr, but it is also possible to allow other

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