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

## The social media revolution: Sharing and learning in the age of leaky knowledge

Paul M. Leonardi

Technology Management Program, UC Santa Barbara, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 23 January 2017

Accepted 23 January 2017

Available online xxxx

## Keywords:

Social media

Knowledge sharing

Communication

Affordances

Contribution

Retrieval

## ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that social media may be useful for knowledge sharing because they are leaky pipes for communication - the directionality and content of a particular message is visible to people not involved in it. However, social media are only useful for knowledge sharing if some people contribute knowledge that can leak from them and others retrieve knowledge that is leaking. I draw on interviews with employees from a financial services firm to develop a typology of reasons why new employees would not want to contribute what they know to a social media or retrieve from it knowledge contributed by others. Then, I use existing theory on knowledge sharing in organizations, coupled with recent writings about social media affordances, to develop propositions about how these barriers to knowledge sharing might be effectively overcome through strategic use of the social media affordances themselves.

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Managing knowledge is hard work. If managing knowledge means that the right people in an organization have the right knowledge at their disposal at the right time, knowledge management entails, at a very minimum, convincing people who develop knowledge to share it with others and convincing people who need it to find it and use it. More than two decades of research into knowledge management has shown that people need a lot of convincing. Despite exhortations to do so, the number of people who actually contribute their knowledge to communal systems that could benefit others in the organization remains quite low (Cress, Kimmerle, & Hesse, 2006). It seems that people just don't like documenting what they know and contributing that documentation to some system (Heinz & Rice, 2009). Also, people who need knowledge often don't know it. If they do know they need it, they often don't know whether it exists somewhere in the organization for them to find (Choi, Lee, & Yoo, 2010). If they do know it exists, they often express a preference to ask other people for it rather than go to the databases where it is stored (Yuan, Fulk, Monge, & Contractor, 2010). Given all this complexity and lack of enthusiasm, it appears that systems of knowledge management in organizations may need an overhaul.

In the last few years, a number of scholars have begun to suggest that use of social media within organizations may represent such an overhaul (Ellison, Gibbs, & Weber, 2015; Jarrahi & Sawyer, 2013; Leonardi, 2014). Not only are social media new tools through which knowledge sharing can occur – affording behaviors that make it easy to identify and communicate with experts (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013) – they portend to change the process by which knowledge management unfolds. Their ability to effect such change has to do with their leakiness.

Although the particular features of the various technologies like blogs, social networking sites, social tagging sites, and wikis that constitute the category of social media are all somewhat different, they share at least two underlying affordances (Trem & Leonardi, 2012). First, they make people's communication with each other visible for third parties to see. People not involved in a specific communication between two others can literally see what those people communicated to each other. Second, those communications persist over time as threads that reflect the context in which they emerged. The result of these affordances is

E-mail address: [Leonardi@tmp.ucsb.edu](mailto:Leonardi@tmp.ucsb.edu).<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.infoandorg.2017.01.004>

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Please cite this article as: Leonardi, P.M., The social media revolution: Sharing and learning in the age of leaky knowledge, *Information and Organization* (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.infoandorg.2017.01.004>

that communication about routine work matters between people can (by design) leak out of the channel and into other people's streams of awareness. Typical modes of mediated communication used in organizations such as email, instant messaging, and memos do not have this leaky property. Less technologically mediated forms of communication such as hallway conversations do, but their reach is typically limited to a few feet around those in conversation.

If one believes that knowledge is produced and enacted through talk and action (Leonardi & Rodriguez-Lluesma, 2012; Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003; Orlikowski, 2002), then those communications that leak out of social media are, by definition, leaking knowledge. It is with this realization in hand that scholars have begun suggesting that social media may stand to revolutionize the way knowledge sharing happens in organizations and, consequently, they way organizations might think about managing knowledge. This is the perspective that Kane (2017) takes in his interesting essay on the promise of social media for knowledge management. In it, Kane (2017: 37-46) argues for the link between social media, leakiness, and knowledge:

Knowledge is leakier than ever. In the previous generation of KM, managers were concerned that IT tools would allow valuable knowledge to “leak” across organizational boundaries (Brown and Duguid, 2001). In many ways, mobile social media is a KM system ideally suited for leaking knowledge.

He goes on to argue that the most “impactful outcome” of such leakiness may well be people's “ready access to mundane details of life inside the company.” Leonardi, Huysman, and Steinfield (2013) also argue that such leakiness is a characteristic of social media. As they suggest:

Using the metaphor of a leaky pipe we mean to suggest that the directionality of a particular communication (to whom it is directed) and the content of that communication (what the parties involved actually said to each other) is visible to people who were not involved in it. Although the message may be communicated for an intended audience, many others for whom the communication was not intended can learn that two people are communication partners and what it is that they communicated about because the technologies make not only the message public, but indicators of who the sender and recipients are as well. (p. 7).

Because social media make communication public, even messages directed to a particular audience can be seen or heard by others in the organization. In other words, the pipes through which the communication travels are not watertight; instead (by design), they leak the knowledge contained in them out to a wider and often unknown audience.

This characteristic of leakiness has the potential to upend the way we think about managing knowledge within organizations. The dominant model of knowledge management tied to the use of knowledge management systems reads like an idealized sequenced of events: someone generates knowledge in the practice of her work, she encodes that knowledge into a document, she uploads that document to a shared repository, someone deciding that he needs knowledge goes to the repository and downloads the document, he reads the document and decodes the knowledge so he can apply it to his work. The model promised by social media and outlined by Kane (2017) as well as others looks much different and, in fact, much simpler: in the course of their normal work people communicate with each other and those communications produce knowledge, someone stumbles upon those communications and reads them and their context cues and learns either the knowledge, who has certain knowledge, or both.

As this new model would have it, people do not have to go to the extra work of trying to abstract knowledge from practice (which scholars often argue cannot be done anyway (Nicolini, 2012)), put it in some repository, and wait for others to find it and try to re-contextualize it so they can use it. Instead, people simply communicate as they always have, just through a different channel. As Leonardi (2014) argues, this new practice of knowledge sharing via social media use removes the burden of effort from the person who has the knowledge and places it on the person who needs the knowledge. The person who has knowledge can simply communicate as he or she has always done about routine tasks and not have to be concerned about summarizing those tasks, reflecting on what knowledge was used to conduct them, codifying those thoughts into some document, uploading it to some database and advertising that it is there. The burden on the person hoping to receive knowledge is also greatly reduced since that person has only to observe other people's communications and, through such observation of ambient communication, will become aware of relevant knowledge (Leonardi, 2015). In such model there is no need to download documentation and try to re-contextualize it in a projected version of the practice in which it might have been produced. Instead, people who stumble upon third-party communications that are visible and persistent in social media can participate vicariously in the very conversation that produced knowledge and, in effect, become an actor in the (re)production of that knowledge him or herself. Such a new model of knowledge sharing would, of course, require us to rethink how we manage knowledge. Consequently, as Kane (2017) argues, in an era of leaky knowledge, “the promise of effective KM as a key organizational competency first envisioned decades ago are far from dead and – in fact – may still only be in its infancy (Kane, 2017: p. 37-46)”.

Of course, social media will only achieve such promise if some people are contributing knowledge that can leak from them and, conversely, if other people are retrieving the knowledge that is leaking. In what follows, I begin with a discussion of the types of knowledge that can be produced through the use of social media. Next, I draw on interviews with new employees from across six divisions of a major financial services firm to develop a typology of reasons why individuals would not want to contribute what they know to social media or retrieve from them knowledge contributed by others. I then turn to the body of research on knowledge sharing in organizations to consider, in a general sense, how some of these barriers can be overcome effectively. I develop propositions about how these research findings might be actualized through the use of affordances particular to social media implemented within organizations. The goal of this project is to extend Kane's (2017) argument about the role of social media in an era of leaky knowledge by beginning to build theory about how the affordances of social media themselves

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