



Doing being an ordinary technology and social media user

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses discourse and conversation analysis of naturally-occurring conversations to describe how participants construct themselves as “ordinary” users of communication technologies—devices such as mobile phones, their communicative affordances, and the mediated interaction they enable (e.g., access to online communication via social media platforms). The three practices analyzed are (1) *managing motivations* by downplaying interest and stake in using technology and participating in online activities; (2) *calibrating quantities* of one’s time and involvement using social media; (3) *identifying investments* in social media use through categories and identities that position users as appropriate or inappropriate. These techniques comprise an accounting practice that accomplishes identity construction in service of situated social actions to manage the moral implications of communication technology use.

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1. Introduction

New communication technologies and their affordances, particularly smartphones and social media, are a frequent source of complaint in public discourse. From decrying the behavior of millennials to bemoaning the loss of genuine conversation, media often depict modern technology use as a new, and undesirable, “normal” (e.g., Beck, 2016; Roberts and David, 2016). In actual face-to-face conversation, then, participants are faced with the dilemma of how to perform and construct their own technological conduct as unproblematic. After all, we are accountable for being anything other than “ordinary,” where ordinary is the natural, taken-for-granted attitude that pervades and holds together the social world (Garfinkel, 1967). How then do people manage the potential reproachability of their conduct against this backdrop of recurrent public criticisms of how people use new communication technology?

This paper analyzes ordinary conversations to examine how the mundane yet meaningful features of social interaction are enrolled in socially constructing stances around talk about technology and social media use. Drawing on ethnomethodology and applying discourse analysis and aspects of conversation analysis, we focus on moments in which participants produce accounts that implicate norms of communication technology usage, specifically devices such as mobile phones and their communicative affordances (Gershon, 2017; see also: Hutchby, 2001), or the possibilities for mediated interaction that these devices enable (e.g., access to online communication via social media platforms). We draw on two complementary meanings of accounts, including the accountability interactants have to co-producing ordinary intelligible meaning (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks, 1984), as well as accounts as speech acts and social activities in which proffering and demanding accounts tends to occur moments in interaction where morality is at stake (Buttny, 1993). These are related concepts, since as Garfinkel (1967) showed with his breaching experiments, something that threatens the apparent normalness of day-to-day interaction (Garfinkel, 1967)

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will require an explanation. By examining *when* and *why* interactants offer accounts regarding such matters, we can therefore gain insight into the interactional, relational, and cultural assumptions that interactants rarely articulate explicitly. Furthermore, we gain insight into how such assumptions shape how we engage with and rationalize technological aspects of social life.

We describe three interactional practices that work to present participants as “ordinary” users of communication technologies: (1) *managing motivations for social media use*, where participants downplay the interest and personal stakes they have in participating in online activities; (2) *calibrating quantities of social media use*, where participants reference one’s time and involvement using social media; and (3) *identifying investments in social media use*, where participants deploy categories and identities that position their technology use as appropriate or inappropriate. Each of these practices comprises specific structures, features, and social actions through which participants sequentially accomplish “strategies” for doing being ordinary “about” their uses of new technologies and social media. Taken together, these practices comprise a larger accounting practice that accomplishes identity construction in service of situated social actions to manage the moral implications of communication technology use, providing insight into the “folk metalinguistics” (Taylor, 2016) of technological conduct. Our analysis of this practice shows how technology and social media use may be positioned as morally accountable, and how interactants construct their participation in these activities as “ordinary” to manage possible reproaches.

There is a tremendous body of research examining the psychological motivations, attitudes, and functions of engagement in online spaces and with social media, much of which correlates aspects of social media use with variables such as narcissism, extraversion, self-efficacy, support and belonging (e.g., Bargh and McKenna, 2004; Gangadharbatla, 2008; Lu and Hampton, 2017; Ong et al., 2011). This paper takes an alternative approach by examining in detail how people in ordinary conversation spontaneously topicalize and evaluate use of technology and social media platforms, particularly with regard to their own and others’ behavior. This research contributes to discussions of the ways that norms around new technology and social media use are constructed moment-to-moment through everyday social interaction.

Drawing on a corpus of more than 30 h of naturally-occurring video-recorded conversation, we apply discourse and conversation analysis (Ehrlich and Romaniuk, 2014) to detail how people jointly construct what it means to be an “ordinary” user of modern communication technology related to social media behavior. This work builds on our previous research, which examines situated uses of mobile phones in face-to-face interaction, to develop a more fine-grained perspective at how people display and co-create what “ordinary” comportment and identities regarding technology use are or should be, through conversational actions that explicitly discuss and assess people’s stances toward moral implications of uses of social media platforms. The results highlight some of the ways in which participants use language and embodiment to accomplish mundane morality and locally build cultural and ideological stances toward technology and social media use as a relevant dimension of social life (Barker, 2008; Gershon, 2010). In the next section we discuss literature at the intersection of conversation and technology, followed by a discussion of our methods, analysis, and some reflections.

2. Conversation and technology

When sociologist Harvey Sacks (1992) described in an opening lecture that his course would deal with “the technology of conversation” (p. 413), he could hardly have imagined the contested relationship the words “technology” and “conversation” would have with one another across public discourse a few decades later. Sacks used the word “technology” in a broad way, similar to the idea of a technique or practice: something with a defined use or for a particular function, for example, a membership categorization “device” in descriptions, which lumps certain sorts of people together and separates them out from others (Sacks, 1986). In the so-called “digital era,” technology has become a shorthand for objects—tangible and intangible—that have had the effect of massively changing our lives, whether by allowing us to cross huge distances in hours, or to see someone living in another country speak to us in real time (Herring, 2015).

Nowhere have these changes been more visible, or publicly debated, than in the case of information communication technologies. Studies of information communication technologies (ICTs) have been especially lively among researchers in the last decade (e.g., D’Urso, 2009; Herring, 2015; Tidwell and Walther, 2002; Walther et al., 2005a,b). Social media has become a central feature at the nexus of communication and technology, implicating as it does the communication of messages, social interaction, technological advances, mediated discourse, and mobility (Herring, 2015; Lievrouw, 2014).

Popular media has featured a number of voices in the public discourse lambasting or valorizing social media and its role in society (e.g., Hampton, 2012; Turkle, 2015b), generating various counterarguments (e.g., Oppenheimer, 2014); and research has highlighted its role in everything from business to education to protests (e.g., Bennett and Segerberg, 2011; Hickerson and Kothari, 2016; Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Other research seeks to understand how people themselves see the role of social media in their lives, usually through surveys, questionnaires, and interviews about self-reported beliefs and attitudes (e.g., Akar and Topçu, 2011; Kennedy et al., 2015; Westerman et al., 2016). However, over the past decade there has been an increasing stream of work that inspects how communication technologies such as smartphones and other mobile devices, and social media platforms, such as social networking and online dating sites, are made relevant to or unfold in particular ways in actual interaction (e.g., Arminen, 2005; Brown et al., 2014; Haddington and Rauniomaa, 2011; Laursen, 2012; Rivière et al., 2015; Raclaw, et al., 2016). The affordances (Gibson, 1977; Lu and Hampton, 2017) of new technologies and their impacts on everyday life (see Boyd, 2010; Ling and Baron, 2013) have consequences demonstrable in how they are used and talked about in everyday conversation, and these local practices build and reflect ideologies about their meaning in society (Thurlow and Brown, 2003).

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