Talk Digitally: Communication Models Applied to Multimedia Platforms and Networks within the Social Web

(… is thinking about …)

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Hardly a new field of research, social media is still an enigmatic research opportunity. In my bachelor thesis, I tried a more general approach and analysed whether digital communication on the social web still follows the core principles of established albeit dated communication models and whether these, consequently, can still be applied to the social web. This way, conclusions are more classic and not bound to cutting-edge research while still presenting usable results.

I applied communication models by Roman Jakobson and Gerhard Maletzke to blogs and social networks. My research was conducted on a qualitative level so the outcomes should be treated as case studies. Still, the theoretical background and references to established works with the communication models further confirm my research results that communication in itself is an ageless process not susceptible to different media forms.

(Student Paper)

1. Background: Specific Properties and Traits of the Selected Communication Models

In my bachelor thesis, I applied two communication models to two types of social media. In communication, there is often a division between simple face-to-face communication and a kind of faceless mass communication.

The Field Model of Mass Communication was conceived by Gerhard Maletzke and concentrates mostly on the mass aspect of communication where there are a single producer of information, a specific medium through which the message is channelled, and a multitude of recipients. Maletzke worked for the German broadcast during the 1960s, which explains why his model is heavily influenced by TV and radio.

Roman Jakobson's communication model on the other hand concentrates on a dualistic face-to-face communication with a focus on the informational content of the message. As a Russian formalist, Jakobson relied heavily on a pragmatic view of communication.

Both models are conceived as a standard in their field and are thus good options for a general analysis.

1.1 Roman Jakobson's Communication Model

Roman Jakobson developed a communication model in the 1960s based on face-to-face communication and the Shannon & Weaver model of the 1950s. A sender conceives a message based on context, code and contact and sends it to a receiver. Both parties are equal, so the receiver has the same opportunities as the sender. They are part of a dialogue in which both parties are communicating on an eye-to-eye basis and get the same message; no distortion or modulation of the message occurs.

This idealized one-on-one communicative situation is, however, a problem when applying Jakobson's model to social media. In discussions, especially via social networks such as Facebook, there may be one sender but there is a multitude of receivers. Even when just two users communicate with each other, all contacts in both their networks are able to see this conversation and are able to chip in.

1.2 Gerhard Maletzke's Field Model of Mass Communication

Gerhard Maletzke, probably unknowingly, addressed some of the problems in Jakobson's model with his own research but neglects others. Maletzke worked for the Southern German Broadcast (Süddeutscher Rundfunk) and researched mass communication when he developed the Field Model of Mass Communication during the 1960s.

Maletzke's rather complex model contains a communicator that forms a message restricted only by situational aspects like their public situation (e.g. a radio broadcaster) that forces them to certain actions. The message is then sent through a medium (a technical channel like radio itself) to a receiver. Receivers are mostly passive and part of a disperse audience. According to Maletzke, they can give spontaneous feedback via letters, telephone calls, etc.

Maletzke's model addresses aspects like a mass audience and a certain modulation of the message through a technical medium but neglects aspects like direct communication between communicator and receiver. In social media, there is a direct link between both participants. The receiver is not just part of a disperse audience and their feedback is not always just spontaneous.

2. Background: Specific Characteristics and Properties of Selected Social Media Platforms

Blogs, Facebook, Instagram, as well as other platforms are considered social media. There are many alternating designations in use since modern media combine spheres of communication that were separated up until this point. We may call this by many names; modern, digital, new, or social media, social web, or Web 2.0 (Runkehl 2012). This just further proves the contemporary aspect of this field of study since no dominant term has emerged but merely a multitude of different but similar terms. In this article, I will settle on the term *social media* for digital platforms that are helping users interact with one another. This interpretation is often seen as a typical aspect of the so-called Web 2.0.

Up until the 1990s, the Internet was nothing more than a system for the military and a research tool for academics. While Bill Clinton was President of the United States, this changed. He initiated the process of making the Internet available for everyone.

The commercialisation of the Internet gave rise to the so-called Web 1.0 (Runkehl 2012). "The first wave of Web developers focused largely on publishing content. Web 2.0, on the other hand, develops services that allow users to share their own content and to use the Web as a platform. Examples of Web 2.0 sites are the Wikipedia, Flickr and Facebook" (Rettberg 2008: 9). During the 2000s, the consumer became a producer. This started as early as guest books or comment sections in blogs were introduced. Producers were actively seeking advice, feedback, or calling for contributions by their respective audiences.

This paradigm shifted again in recent years when more bandwidth and computing power lead to the Web 3.0 in which there is a so-called prosumer – a producer as well as a consumer. These users are actively connecting knowledge via hyperlinks, algorithms, various social networks, or projects like Wikipedia. They are both recipients and producers of information.

These phases have been proposed by Runkehl (2012) and are, of course, idealized approximations. The numerical endings mislead to the assumption that the Internet

is similar to software that can be updated. However, it represents a suitable overview of the recent digital development.

This can help to understand how communication in social media works. A change in technology always precedes a change in the manner of communication (Faulstich 2004), so in understanding the recent changes in technology, we can help to understand the current changes in communicational behaviour.

Social media are a form of human communication. There are different affordances of networked interaction and multimodal exchange but this paper is concentrating on language only. While there are communication models based on a technical point of view (Shannon & Weaver 1948 and others) there are not many models that are applied to technically-mediated communication from a linguistic point of view. Many of the models based on computer sciences can easily be adapted onto de-centralized networks like the Internet since the technical aspects of a network are often the same, just the size is different. However, many models from linguistics are based on direct face-to-face communication. Beginning in the 1960s only, there was research on mass communication gained momentum and still focussed mainly on broadcasts (Maletzke 1963). These established communication models from linguistics are not familiar with handling both mass-communicational and dialogical situations simultaneously. They concentrate on aspects of mass media or individual communication, often just dialogues (Auer 1999: 30) or only the processing of communicative input (Austin 1979 and others). Nonetheless, for some time now there has been research on how modern media and media culture emerge and form. Werner Faulstich and his student Carsten Winter are to be mentioned here. However, there is no present model that is widely accepted and combines the individual and mass media aspects of digital communication, especially social media communication.

Modern media increases the speed of traditional mass media, the intermingling of script, speech, text and graphics as well as private and public spaces (Schmitz 2004).

Since social media as a field of study is constantly changing, new discoveries grow old very quickly. That in mind, it is of further interest for researchers to find an underlying system or at least some common and long-living aspects. How do social media work? In my thesis, I concentrated on two forms of social media: blogs and social networks.

2.1   Blogs

Blogs are primarily for publishing information digitally via a content management system (CMS) that is either self-hosted software or a service (often) provided by a commercial company like WordPress or Tumblr. The start page contains some static links and pages but the most integral part of a blog is the news feed which is a stream of postings in chronological order with the newest one on top (Langenfeld 2008: 43).

Maletzke's Field Model of Mass Communication is an appropriate model for the description of blogs as both are based on a single author of information who addresses a vast, mostly anonymous, and disperse audience. Blogs seem to fulfil these attributes very well, thus applying the model to them should result in best-case data and in remedying the shortcomings of Maletzke's model.

2.2   Social Networks

Social networks are a visualization of human relationships via data presentation and are often organized in profiles, sites, and groups with different attributes (Runkehl 2012). They are very well-known through examples like Facebook, Google+, or the German business network XING.

The main goals of these platforms are informational networking, establishing contact, and interactions between users. Thus, Jakobson's communication model fits in very nicely because of a similar focus.

3.   A Matter of Choice: Maletzke, Jakobson, and Social Media Platforms

There are numerous communication models and social media platforms, so choosing the right examples for an analysis can be challenging. Social media communication is a hybrid of individual and mass communication. Many people are addressed but one can reply in a face-to-face style. Thus, social media communication deviates from standard types of communication and breaks with the old sender-receiver dualism.

Receiver can turn into senders in their own right. Maletzke already mentioned that sender and receiver are just roles that can change (Bürgi 2002: 294).

Maletzke's and Jakobson's models are good choices for social media because both are very broad models that can easily be applied to new situations and they fit in nicely with blogs (Maletzke) and social networks (Jakobson), respectively.

Maletzke's model emphasizes the relations between the communicational partners. A communicator picks a theme from a subject and forms his own specific statement out of it. This statement is then transmitted via a medium which has its own dramaturgical and technical conditions (Burkart & Hömber 1997: 74). The recipient then receives the message via the chosen medium; only acoustic via radio, optical and acoustic via TV, or as a collaborative event in a cinema.

This model heavily relies on a formal setting: One sender and a mass audience that are hierarchically disparate. The sender is on a higher level and controls the communicational situation whereas the audience can merely react in a disperse and spontaneous manner. This fits very well with blogs, which are often seen as modern newspapers with one sender (the editorial staff) and a recipient (the reader), who cannot directly react and has no real possibility of consulting with other readers to make a case.

Jakobson's model on the other hand focuses on the content of a message in a dualistic face-to-face communicational setting between a sender and a receiver. All parts of the model have an additional dimension. The sender is at the same time a self-expression of the person with an emotive function while the receiver is the imperative addressed in a conative function. There are four additional dimensions that are part of a successful communication: the message itself which fulfils a poetic function and is an auto-reflection of the sender. The context in which the message is delivered provides referential information. The chosen channel is the physical and phatic assurance that the communication can still proceed. Finally there is the code, e.g. a language or a specific choice of words.

The focus is much more on content and not so much on delivery. Thus Jakobson's model works well within social networks. On Facebook, a message is theoretically delivered to an innumerable audience but often enough addressed to a specific person or

group. The communication is focused on a dialogue between two persons on the same hierarchical level.

4. Applying Communication Models to Social Media

First of all, neither Maletzke's nor Jakobson's model was designed with social media in mind. Therefore, they have a different background and a different set of tools. But much to my surprise, these models proved quite adaptive to changing communicational situations. On the one hand, this means that analogue models are quite suitable for analysing digital communication. On the other hand, it further proves that communication as such remains more or less unchanged even in new media settings.

4.1 Results of Applying Maletzke's Model

I applied Maletzke's Field Model of Mass Communication to blogs because the model was designed for mass-communication media and blogs are a form of digital newspapers, so they fit very nicely in that description. But even with convenient

examples there are some discrepancies that occurred, mainly:

1. **The utterance can be translated differently.** In Maletzke's model, the communicator utters a statement that is then sent through a medium to the recipient. The utterance that is sent to the medium is the same that is received by the recipient. Maletzke, like Shannon & Weaver, thought of the utterance or the message as a container in which the information is encapsulated. However, in social media and most other non-face-to-face communications, a message can be distorted when sent through a medium, like Westley & McLean postulated in their model.

2. **Feedback from an organized audience.** Maletzke's model postulates a disperse audience with feedback being an exception. In social media, however, communities and audiences coordinate themselves via the Internet. Comment sections or message boards are visible for all participants. Members of the audience can read up to the latest point of a discussion, inform themselves, and then chip in the discussion.

4.2 Results of Applying Jakobson's Model

In my thesis, I selected social networks (Facebook pages) for Jakobson's model because they encourage dialogue and one-on-one conversation. That way, the examples are very suitable for Jakobson's model. However, even in best-case conditions some inconsistencies occurred, namely:

1. **The message is conceived during communication.** In Jakobson's model, the message is fixed in its content and is not modulated in any way during the process. In social networks, this is not true because the message can be distorted or changed via technical interference or by the users themselves. So-called shitstorms are a good example like *#McDStories* on Twitter, in which the fast-food chain McDonald's tried to promote their food suppliers but users hijacked the hashtag and wrote about their bad experiences in McDonald's restaurants. P.N. Medvedev, a fellow Russian formalist, criticized that a message between two persons "is constructed in the process of their

interaction" and is not pre-determined (Auer 1999: 37).

2. **Feedback via a community.** In Jakobson's model, there is only one sender and one receiver. In social media, there is a multitude of possible senders and receivers. In addition, both conversational partners are in different situations. The sender is surrounded by a number of receivers that cooperate with each other and know about each other. Also, the sender often has exclusive rights, like Facebook pages where the sender can delete comments from receivers or mute them entirely.

When confronted with different circumstances other than best-case conditions, both models face challenges they were not designed for. Social media tend to form new communicational forms. Complex multimodal communication as found on social media and visualizations like infographics could not have been predicted by either Jakobson or Maletzke.

5 Conclusion and Further Research: Changing Communication and Media Priorities in the Social Web?

Like the current of a river, languages and communication can take us to unexpected places. Since time immemorial, the human mind is formed by the kind of language it is confronted with. Does this hypothesis by Sapir & Whorf (Kay & Kempton 1984: 65-79) hold in the modern world with its digital realms of the Internet changing our way of understanding, researching, shopping, and of course communicating with each other?

With the dawn of the digital age, there were massive changes of infrastructure, computing power, and media technology, so it is of no surprise that the use of language changed as well. Maletzke's Field Model of Mass Communication is a good fit for blogs, although Maletzke's model is based on the linguistic black box principle, i.e. the content of the message stays the same. This is not true for social media since different geographical and chronological situations of content reception lead to altered message reception and thus to different kinds of feedback. Said feedback is produced by online communities which are semi-spontaneously organized and give constructive

feedback. Again, the model cannot be adapted to this.

Jakobson's communication model, on the other hand, concentrates on face-to-face communication and focuses on the content of the message and not, like Maletzke, on its delivery. Jakobson's model is a good fit for social networks like Facebook because of the network's focus on direct interaction and relationship building. While Jakobson's model can compensate the aspects of different media, it falls short in two other areas: Jakobson's model thinks of a message as a fixed thing while it is often just conceived during a conversational process. And again, like Maletzke, Jakobson's models could not predict the occurrence of something like an organized community that gives feedback.

Maletzke and Jakobson both created their models during the 1960s when the Internet was not even a feverish dream. Despite that, their models apply surprisingly well to this new situation. This further proves that communication does not change radically in a new medium.

Communication stays the same, although its medium can change over time. Still, when applying communication models to social media – in this case a blog and a

social network – it is to be noted that the focus shifts towards the main purposes of the medium. If blogs are considered some kind of digital newspaper, their main focus is on publishing and spreading information. Social networks like Facebook, on the other hand, focus more on asking and answering questions and thus, creating a dialogue.

Communities are an organizational and communicational hybrid specific to social media – neither group nor mass but something else entirely. These groups tend to form in a semi-organized way and often communicate temporarily only. Thus, it is paramount to receive and process information very quickly. This in mind, it is of no surprise that this gave way to a rise of pictorial communication. The visual turn affects digital communication as well, and different studies (e.g. Borkin 2013; Glezer 2015) show that pictures are an important factor in modern communication.

We communicate, among others, to express ourselves. While this reason for communication does not change, our way of self-expression does change. Thus, I will ask in my Master thesis: Can pictorial communication replace text-based communication? How important have pictures become in recent years, especially on the hybrid-blog platform Tumblr?

What do you think? I would be delighted to get feedback on my thesis as well as my current research.

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