Social Media at SocioSystems Inc.: A Socio-technical Systems Analysis of Strategic Action.

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Abstract

In this study, we present preliminary results from case research at a global IT firm with demonstrable success in the strategic use of social media. From the theoretical underpinnings of interest-based homophily, action theory, and social movement theory, we propose a conceptual framework and analytics to consider the question “how can organizations motivate strategic directed action from participants within social media to accomplish organizational goals?” We discuss the theories of interest-based homophilie to identify and explain how organizations can develop information-based analytics appropriate to motivate strategic action in social media using similar approaches to those utilized by social movement and social movement framing. There has been little theorizing on the nature and structuration of social media from which appropriate directed action can be strategically conceptualized. This paper presents novel theoretical foundations from which to understand social media and develop effective strategies to advance organizational interests.

1.0 Introduction

Social media are increasingly the platforms where the world interacts. The environment in which organizations must compete is rapidly transitioning from one dominated by one-to-one relationships to one based in one-to-many relationships, consequent to the rise of social media and advances in ubiquitous mobile technologies. Individuals are constantly connected to one another, and can exchange ideas and information from any place at any time. This shifts the locus of control for organizations regarding messaging around their brand. They increasingly have less authority and control in this changing landscape than they have previously been accustomed. Consider the role of social media in the recent failure of the U.S. Congress to pass the SOPA/PIPA legislation, or in the online-only anti-sweatshop protests which prompted Nike to adopt new employment policies in its Asian manufacturing facilities, or in the recent faculty uprisings against the publishing powerhouse Elsevier. These examples illustrate that social movements can organize in social media and motivate directed actions from movement participants to advance the movements’ strategic goals. Social movement organizers/organizations have demonstrated their ability to craft compelling vocabularies of motive, informed by the values, beliefs, and needs of their audience, to motivate them to take directed actions which advance movement goals. Yet, organizations grapple for strategies to themselves motivate directed action in social media.

In this study, we define directed actions as actions taken by participants in social media in response to the motivational strategies of the organization or organizers, actions which are aligned with the organization’s goals. How can organizations motivate participants in social media to take actions which are aligned with the strategic goals of the firm – actions which help the organization foster environmental munificence, create demand for its products and services, and marshal intelligence from its social media peers?

Organizations recognize the strategic importance of social media, and are investing heavily in this increasingly competitive space. Worldwide social media advertising has grown to $6 billion dollars in 2011 - a 71% increase over 2010 [1]. Lacking strategies attuned to the unique nature of social media, many organizations satisfice with repurposing vestigial broadcast advertising strategies to social media. General Motors recent high-profile decision to discontinue its $10 million advertising on Facebook due to poor ROI highlights difficulties organizations face with these strategies. Traditional advertising strategies fail to acknowledge or derive benefit from the dialogic essence of social media. They ignore the expectancy among an organization’s social media peers for social engagement. Traditional advertising strategies aim to engage people with brand while social media engagement involves the communicative exchange of ideas. Ideas are the germs around which
conversations in social media action organizes. Strategies formulated to leverage the dialogic power of social media to motivate directed action must recognize idea as the locus of social engagement.

Social movement activists have utilized the potential of idea as an organizing principle to motivate directed action in social media. Social movements cultivate and resonate ideas across social media to mobilize adherents, attract resources and motivate directed action to advance strategic goals, which often involves changing the behavior of organizations. Social movements motivate organizational change by bringing pressure to bear in the firm’s organizational field. Social media makes it easy for social movements to propagate messages that invite and heighten public scrutiny of the contested behaviors of a target organization, or organizations. A nascent body of social movement literature has begun to consider how organizations may defensively reframe or publicly contest ideas promulgated into social media by others to which they are opposed. There remains a critical need for theorizing around how organizations can move beyond these defensive strategies to cultivate proactive management strategies for effective social media engagement that achieves strategic directed action in social media. Specifically, there is a need for research to explain how organizations can proactively engage in social media to motivate directed action and achieve management goals, absent the traditional authority and control of communications and interactions to which they are normally accustomed.

As we turn to IS literature to inform our analytical framework with which to evaluate our case, we find that the majority of contemporary IS literature around social media takes a social network approach to theorizing around social media. However, in its purest form, social network analysis is concerned only with the structure of relations among nodes rather than the attributes of individual nodes. In the context of social media, this approach de-emphasizes the importance of social actors’ individual characteristics as well as the underlying social and psychological processes which motivate interactions within a social media. Understanding motivation is critical to strategies to motivate directed action. Social network analysis offers no explanation regarding why collectivities form, how social norms emerge to impact behaviors, how shared understanding occurs, how shared knowledge is produced and inculcated. Researchers struggle to understand these phenomena. Homophily is often used in communications research to describe the role of individual demographic attributes of various actors in the frequency of interactions among them. However, demographic attributes have been shown to have little utility in explaining or predicting interactions in online contexts. Demographics are proving themselves problematic as the appropriate analytic with which to inform organizations’ “advertising” strategies in social media. Social media is concerned with “human” interaction. We turn to sociology to inform our conceptualization of social media. Surprisingly little research exists which seeks to integrate the rich body of sociological study into the consideration of social media. We incorporate and integrate well-understood sociological theory developed over the last century to re-conceptualize social media as social systems of human interaction.

2.0 Context of Study

2.1 Case Background

We examine the phenomenon of strategic engagement in social media to motivate directed action in the context of a business consulting, technology, engineering and outsourcing firm (Socio-Systems Inc.) with annual revenues exceeding $7 billion. SocioSystems Inc. designs and delivers technology-enabled business strategies and solutions for Global 2000 companies in over 30 countries by leveraging domain and business expertise and strategic alliances. Senior management has expertise in building, executing and quantifying social media marketing programs, community building and e-CRM initiatives. Our multiple interviews with key social media and digital marketing strategy personnel provide understanding of their social media strategy for SocioSystems Inc.

Socio-Systems Inc. actively pursues open innovation in social media, collaborating with stakeholders to seek and incorporate key market inputs through social media interactions. These influence corporate strategy and positioning in social media. Socio-Systems Inc. actively engages its stakeholders in social media through various social media destinations including corporate blogs, third-party hosted blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Slideshare and LinkedIn. Socio-Systems Inc. actively engages in social media to motivate directed action.

The broad objective of social media strategy at Socio-Systems Inc. is to achieve an enhanced level of engagement with current and potential partners in the social media and further the positioning of the organization as a thought leader. The company views social media as key to accomplishing this. Based on their long history of strategic engagement in social media, Socio-Systems Inc. is an explanatory case well-suited to developing a nuanced explanation of how organizations cultivate topical collectivities in social media to drive open innovation.
2.2 Methodology

The methodological approach we adopt in this research-in-progress is explanatory case research [2]. This approach allows in-depth analysis of the complex issues surrounding how organizations cultivate topical collectivities in social media to drive open innovation. Case research is most appropriate in the context of this study as there is limited research on organizational strategies toward social media, or on how organizations execute open innovation in the peer-to-peer communicative environment of social media. The case research method allows us to tease out subtle and rich data to build researcher understanding on how organizations operationalize the business process of open innovation in social media.

Yin [2] describes explanatory case research as iterative explanation building which stipulates causal links about how or why the phenomenon of interest occurred -- in the context of this research, how organizations cultivate topical collectivities in social media to drive open innovation. Yin [2] describes explanatory analysis as a special type of pattern matching where the researchers develop a theoretic position, case study evidence is examined, and the theoretic position revised, with the case evidence re-examined from the new theoretic perspective.

Recognizing that little exists in research or practice with regard to social media strategies for open-innovation, this research seeks to develop a content-rich case around the phenomenon with the goal of cultivating depth of understanding toward the topic. Based on guidance from Flyvbjerg [3] regarding information-oriented case selection, Socio-Systems Inc. represents a particularly appropriate case, as management at Socio-Systems Inc. employs a rich palette of social media strategies. They are well-suited to the research aim of this study, which is to understand how organizations can strategically engage in social media to advance organizational goals. Further, Socio-Systems Inc. is a global leader in information technology and consulting services, and is heavily engaged in the strategic use of social media. They represent a valuable and perhaps unique exemplar in that regard.

Over the last two years, we have interviewed key staff and analyzed documentation from various sources within the organization. Data from complementary interviews was triangulated to develop a suitable resource for analysis. Multiple researchers analyzed the data, and triangulated their understandings with those of the interviewees to determine the validity of the analysis, conceptualizations and researcher understanding. In order to minimize researcher bias and assure inter-coder reliability, multiple researchers coded each interview transcript, and purposefully raised alternate explanations to challenge one-another’s assumptions and understanding.

In the first exploratory stage, we analyze and put together the strategies employed by the organization and examine their components, identify the strategies of interest and their constituent tactics. In the second, theory building stage, we develop a firm theoretical foundation that is suitable for study of the phenomenon we explore in the first exploratory stage. This provides us the basis to engage the larger theoretically-guided deep examination of effective social media strategy for the organization.

Analysis of initial interviews reveals central elements of strategy that guide the search for appropriate theoretical foundation. The theoretical foundation, in turn, helps us develop a deeper theoretically grounded understanding of the phenomena and provides the basis for theory-guided empirical examination. In this study, we develop and explain a preliminary research framework to analyze the social media behaviors, goals, and strategies of our target case. Blending social movement theories with the insights which emerge from our initial analysis of this case, we cultivate a holistic understanding of how an organization can develop and utilize ideas-based analytics appropriate for social media and enlist them for brand management in social media, co-creation of value between an organization and its stakeholders, and other strategic goals. We describe the case organization and the nature of directed actions the organization deems important to its achievement of strategic directed action in social media.

In this research-in-progress paper, we present our preliminary case analysis and our development of the theoretical framework to guide the further data collection and interpretive analysis, within the size constraints of this venue. We expect to discuss our further data collection and its interpretation vies-a-vie our theoretical foundation at the conference. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of the study toward research and practice, with guidance toward future research.

3.0 Preliminary review of case: social media strategy at SocioSystems Inc.

The interconnectedness of people, technology, tasks and organizational strategy has been a focus of sociotechnical systems research for decades [3]. People and organizations are using technology and networks in novel and modular ways to create value working with various stakeholders including individual and organizational partners. Social media derives power from its ability to create and leverage network effects...
by attracting participants into social clusters that form around common ‘ideas’. Organizations recognize the potential of social media. However, many struggle to develop strategies that effectively engage the organization with key ideas in the social media. Organizations are increasingly aware of the difficulty in realizing returns on their social media investments, in terms of growth, demand generation and marshaling valuable intelligence from the community. In many cases, this leads to abandonment, stagnation and disillusionment with further investment. The expectation is that increased social media investment will be accompanied by commensurate returns. However, maximizing returns from investments in social media requires strategies specifically attuned to the characteristics of the media. The transformative character of social media requires organizations to understand the unique expectations of the media.

SocioSystems Inc. is a global leader in IT Services with expertise in building, executing and quantifying internet marketing programs, community building, social media marketing and e-CRM initiatives. Our multiple interviews with key social media and digital marketing strategy personnel provide understanding of social media strategy for SocioSystems Inc.

3.1 Managing Awareness and Presence in Social Media

A primary aspect of social media strategy at SocioSystems Inc. is to establish brand awareness. ‘Social media is very efficient in spreading word of mouth. If you [a participant] don’t like something, you broadcast – if you don’t like something you broadcast - you are expressing yourself - The middle space is usually vacant – people who love you will review, people who hate you will review ... nothing in between’ (Global Head of Digital Marketing). Many organizations treat social media as simply another traditional marketing communications vehicle. SocioSystems is motivated to harvest opportunities in social media. An early adopter of social media, it is strategically committed to engage with customers, partners, through influences and other key stakeholders in social media. In social media, SocioSystems is one peer among many, each of whom is equally able to interact, create, and share content. According to SocioSystems Inc., social media is highly interactive, peer to peer and is extremely efficient in electronically spreading word of mouth among participants – good or bad. Poorly formed or poorly executed social media strategy can have significant repercussions. Social media is a powerful medium to engage with strategically important partners. It is bi-directional, participative and dialogic. Engagement is not about ‘doing social media’. It is participative and multi-directional – unlike traditional media – “that creates the challenge”.

Typically, organizations are not ready for the level and nature of participation that social media demands. An organization is used to command and control. Social media breaks the traditional paradigms of the organization’s ability to ‘command and control’ interaction. The traditional rules of broadcast marketing do not apply in social media. The brand is no longer creating content - people are. Social media engagement requires that organizations ‘not simply speak, but also listen’. People read other people’s content and listen to others. The brand is a peer participant. Social media participants choose the rules of interaction. ‘The target audience is in social media – you have to be there. It is very efficient in spreading word of mouth. They evaluate your presence in media - not just on your site, but also on topic sites where you are the professed thought leader. So, you need to be on the topic’s social media’ (Head of Digital Marketing).

Extreme transparency in social media creates challenge and risk. ‘People need to see your face - they don’t want [to interact with] an intermediary’ (Global Head of Digital Marketing). Customers and potential customers expect to see you directly. They expect a two-way exchange with you - not just your marketing materials. ‘Today my blogger is not a spokesperson. He is a content expert – that is a big challenge. Your people have to learn the responsibilities – in some cases there are policies, some cases there are guidelines ... but right now it is a chaotic time’ (Global Head of Digital Marketing).

Engagement in simple terms is dialog. It ranges from the lowest form – awareness and likes on Facebook to co-development on ideas and insights. ‘Getting likes on Facebook is easy, the difficult part is to see if people engage with your ideas in their own networks – whether they propagate the content to other clusters in the social media’ (Practice lead for the Social Media and Technologies group). This may be for actual product or services or for branded content developed and dispersed in social media to generate awareness for the strategic position.

A principal strategy for SocioSystems Inc. is to manage brand perception through strategic engagement in social media. Managing awareness and perceptions of the organization in the eyes of current and potential customers is a primitive goal of the social media engagement strategy. The objective is to be perceived as a thought leader in its core competencies. ‘The key differentiator is ‘opinion’. Every competitor has similar services and offerings. So technology is not the differentiator. Experience – that is where Social Media
allows us to directly showcase the experience. We have had a lot of success using Blogs, and we use Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Slideshare’ (Head of Digital Marketing Strategy). The overall positioning strategy organization is perpetuated through social media using means that are similar to those used in traditional media, as well as unique strategies that seek to engage the organization with core customer segments - both current and potential.

3.2 Garnering collective intelligence in Social Media

The second strategic direction SocioSystems Inc. takes with social media is to generate new insights that are valuable to both the organization as well as to its current and potential customers. Topical analyses of conversations form the basis for development of content. This is used to engage audiences of strategic interest in deeper conversations which in some cases leads to co-creation of strategic innovations.

SocioSystems Inc. routinely scans relevant social media for key concepts to identify strategically important topics, conversations and conversants. They follow these key concepts to the conversations and conversants in social media to cultivate understanding and to develop business intelligence around important ideas. On identifying key ideas and conversations from social media, they invest their resources and talent to develop expertise and content around these ideas. Thus, SocioSystems Inc. strategically legitimate themselves to important ideas, rather than to individuals. Content developed around an idea is propagated in social media. Those peers interested in the content will be motivated to engage. The Head of Online Marketing in-charge of Products, Platforms and Communities observes: ‘The challenge is meaningful engagement to generate insight. Success is measured by Return on Engagement (ROE). We look at a range of things – visits from the target audience, visits from companies in our target market, repeat visits, whitepaper downloads? Are they contributing content, opinions, issues? The kinds of queries coming in based on content distributed? Are they identifying themselves and their willingness to talk to us or about us to others? Everything we measure is participation. It's a huge opportunity, but it requires very fast timing and requires us to commit to transparency’. Cultivating genuine expertise and fostering meaningful conversations with peers with similar interests facilitates the opportunity for co-creation. ‘For members, the most beneficial [take away] is validated information. Dedicated communities of peers who “know”, give you information with context and perspective that is useful. In our [social media] communities, value information is filtered, endorsed and validated across the borders. When the perspective is shared it has substance.’ (Practice leads for the Social Media and Technologies). Engagement strategy subsequently matches organizational engagement to audiences of demonstrated high potential value. This represents a transition from engagement to co-creation with current and potential customers.

4.0 Review of literature

In social media, engagement is voluntary. It takes place among peers, absent the traditional command and control to which an organization is accustomed. Social media strategies for directed action must recognize how to motivate peer engagement to advance the strategic goals of the organization. Social media is dialogic. Conversations take place among participants around common interest. Ideas are the unit of exchange—the coin of the realm. Conversations are motivated by the needs-disposition of participants, comprised of various motives and value orientations of individuals, which in aggregate represent their relational orientation. Relational orientation explains an individual’s attraction to a given interest and their motivation to engage in conversation regarding that interest. Individuals with common interests converse more frequently with one another. This promotes the formation of interest-based collectivities around those common interests. Communicative acts establish and reinforce core ideas and understandings common to participants within collectivities. Ideas are exchanged and discussed, and new understanding and knowledge production evolve in the collectivity.

Figure 1 – Motivation and organization of collectivities

Social media are “open” social systems embedded in an environment comprised of other systems, the largest of whom is “the action system” consisting of all interrelated human behaviors embedded in the reality of the physical environment. Collectivities represent
We discuss the theories of knowledge, the well-established domain within social media to fullest advantage. Interaction in social media from principle that interaction between formational core for and unstructured, social media collectivities forms a logical focal point from which to formulate organizational social media strategy.

Parsons [11, pp.6] defines a social system as “a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to the “optimization of gratification” and whose relation to their situations, including each other, is mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols”. The holistic community of users associated with and interacting through a given social media platform comprise a social system. The social structure and behavioral rules of this social system form the environmental context in which organizations must strategize to motivate directed action. Strategy formulation requires organizations understand the social structure and rules which govern the target social system. Debate regarding the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of social systems has dominated 20th century sociology, engaging the likes of Weber, Durkheim, Marx, Parsons, Habermas and others. In this study, we develop socio-theoretic perspectives of social systems based on the work of Talcott Parsons and Jürgen Habermas, and apply these perspectives to understand how organizations might formulate strategies for social media engagement. The selection of these theoretic bases is motivated by Parson’s action-based treatment of social system structuration and communicative structuration by Habermas. Our conceptualization sits at the intersection of these views, interested in motivating directed action across a dialogic medium. We present the theoretical perspectives of Parsons and Habermas as oblique rather than orthogonal. Each provides an ontological and epistemological perspective of social systems useful to consider organizational strategies to motivate directed action from target populations in a social system. Based on useful advice of Coser [5] that sociological theories are neither: true nor false, apt or inept, clear or vague, fruitful or useless, we borrow these theoretical perspectives only to inform and enrich our analysis based upon their divergent perspectives.

From the theoretical underpinnings of interest-based homophily, action theory, and communicative action, we propose a conceptual framework and analytics to consider the question “how can organizations motivate strategic directed action from participants within social media to accomplish organizational goals?” We discuss the theories of interest-based homophilies to identify and explain how organizations can develop information-based analytics appropriate to motivate strategic action in social media using similar approaches to those utilized by social movement and social movement framing [6]. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, the well-established and seminal action theory of social systems of Parsons [7] and the theory of communicative action of Habermas [8] have not been used in information systems research to explain social media strategy. Moreover, social movements have never been identified as exemplars from which organization can learn diagnostic and prognostic actions for strategic engagement in social media. There is little theorization on the nature of and structuration in social media from which strategic action can be conceptualized. This paper presents novel theoretical foundations to understand and develop effective strategies to advance organizational interests in social media.

4.1 Interest-based homophily

Highly dynamic, unordered and unstructured, social media is not organized around the demographic analytics that form the informational core for traditional broadcast media strategies. Rather, it is organized around ideas of common interest among conversants. Consequently, social media strategies that rely on demographic analytics marginalize the dialogic potential of the medium, reducing it to just another communications vehicle for marketing and communication with current and potential customers. Analytics more appropriate to the medium are necessary to inform strategies capable of leveraging social media’s unique properties to fullest advantage.

Social media is dialogic. Conversations among participants are the mechanism through which individuals identify with, and are attracted to, others with similar values, interests or common goals. Dynamic collectivities form within social media around these homophilic commonalities. Collectivities are sub-ordinate social systems within the larger social media. Communications within each collectivity facilitates the evolution of negotiated understanding and co-orientation among its membership around its interest-based homophilic core. For organizations seeking to motivate directed action within social media, it is critical they understand the role of common interests in the formation of social media collectivities. Homophily is the term commonly used to describes the degree of similarity among pairs of individuals along some set of shared attributes [9]. Homophily is the principle that interaction between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among...
dissimilar people. Homophily is a basic organizing principle of social systems, and has implication toward their structure. “Homophily implies that distance in terms of social characteristics translates into network distance, the number of relationships through which a piece of information must travel to connect two individuals” [10]. Thus, information exchange tends to localize as forming the structure of interest-based collectivities.

Homophily is useful to explain the characteristics of a group in terms of the similarity among its members. Lazerfeld & Merton [11] describe two types of homophily, status-based homophily, which is based on formal, informal, or ascribed status, and value-based homophily, which is based on values, attitudes, and beliefs. However, regarding its salient dimension, Brown, Broderick and Lee [12] find that homophily of an interpersonal nature is not particularly relevant in an online social context. Rather, they find that shared group interests and group mind-set drive online homophily. Individuals are attracted to social collectivities with interests which match their own. Therefore, the conceptualization of homophily of strategic interest to organizations hoping to engage online social media collectivities is interest-based homophily. Since the principle of interest-based homophily is key to social media collectivities, we use it as an organizing concept to explain their boundaries.

Following the reasoning of Brown, Broderick & Lee [18], one would surmise that various ideas germane to the communal interest of the collectivity are part of a shared core of ideas which perpetuates the collectivity’s structure. The notion of core ideas within a domain of interest is not novel, and is well understood across a variety of disciplines. In social media ideas are the coin of the realm. Therefore ideas, the most atomic element of exchange, must form the analytic core of organizational strategies capable of harnessing the dialogic power of social media. To the degree that the idea is mutually interesting to an organization and one or more interest-based collectivities, that mutual interest creates a natural homophily between the organization and its peers—a commonality around which all might co-engage. Strategies formed from this organizing core promise organizations a far richer palette from which to motivate directed action in social media.

4.2 System-theoretic view of social systems

Social systems are “open” systems, embedded in an environment comprised of other systems, the largest of whom is “the action system”, consisting of all interrelated human behaviors embedded in the reality of the physical environment [7]. We adopt the system theoretic view of social systems advanced by Simon, Lazlo, Churchman, and others, which suggests the purpose of a social system is distinguishable at three levels; that of the system, its sub-systems, and the supra-system of which it is a part. Through abstraction, certain details and structure can be conceptually explicated from otherwise complex entities to allow concentration on the dynamics of the system that define its characteristics, functions, properties and relationships internal and external to the system. From a system-theoretic perspective, we model interest-based collectivities within social media as social systems, whose organizing forces are the common interests among their members. The social media are conceptualized as super-ordinate systems, whereas the dyads and individuals within each collectivity comprise its subordinate units and parts. The utility of adopting a system-theoretic tri-partite view of social systems lies in the power it affords us to differentiate analytical treatment of strategies aimed at individuals in social media, social media collectivities, or the entire social media. We model interest-based collectivities in social media as social systems to better understand the structuration, relationships and dynamics of these social systems as they related to motivation of directed action by organizations.

4.3 Social structure derived from action

Action theory [4], [7], is a theory of voluntaristic action. Action theory perceives social systems as open systems whose order is achieved through the social actions and interactions of their members. Parsons maintains that human action is elaborated across personality, cultural, and social systems. He describes personality systems and social system as “concrete systems of action”, with cultural systems not themselves organized toward action but holding influence over the other systems [13]. Action theory seeks to integrate the dual perceptions of social system and actor, the latter being developed from attributes drawn from the personality system. Voluntary actions undertaken by actors within the social system are seen to arise from and be governed by human motivations, orientations and ideas. Actions (unit-actions) are attributable to actors, individuals or “collectivities” within the social system, in a membership role. Individual and collectivity cross-cut one another, as “a collectivity is by definition composed of a plurality of members and the individual has a plurality of roles in different collectives” [20, pp.93]. That an actor has a plurality of roles suggests any particular system isolated for analysis never stands alone, but is always articulated with a plurality of other systems in which the same actors have other roles. Parsons offers the
example of kinship units and occupational organizations in our society.

Parsons describes voluntaristic action as arising from actors in a social system who: (1) are goal seeking, (2) possess alternative means to achieve their goals, (3) are confronted with internal and external situational conditions which influence their goals and means, such as their biological position or ecological situation, (4) are governed by values, norms, and ideas such that ideas influence goal and means selection, (5) are making subjective decisions regarding goals and the means to achieve them, constrained by ideas and situational influences [21, pp.40]. Subjectivity toward an action is manifest in the ordering of the actor among their many possible orientations, the actor’s ability to satisfy their needs using alternative objects, and the alternative judgments or interpretations regarding what objects within the social system are, or what they mean.

Parsons uses the term relational orientation to describe an individual’s motivational and value-based orientation toward their situation (see figure 2). Relational orientation predicts and explains an individual’s propensities toward any given action. Parsons argues that through their actions, individuals within a social system seek to fulfill their own needs, while the system must also have its own needs met in order to be perpetuated. The need-disposition of the individual toward a particular situation can be ascribed three types of motives; cognitive (need for information), cathetic (emotional need), and evaluative (the need for assessment). Cognitive motivation focuses on the patterns and ways in which an individual’s orientation toward the world is organized, and what they mean to the individual. Cathetic orientation is concerned with the gratification-deprivation balance of an individual’s personality, and focuses on what an individual might get out of an interaction and its’ associated costs. As actions are not discrete and are organized and integrated across motivational dimensions, evaluative motivational orientation concerns the need to order various cognitive and cathetic considerations to select the most appropriate among different motives. Need-disposition plays the critical role of explaining the motivational basis for voluntaristic action, and is particularly salient to the discussion throughout this paper of motivating directed action in the open social systems that are social media. However, no human relationally orients only in terms of their own self-interests. The value-orientation of an individual involves cultural and systemic norms. In that regard, Parsons offers the following: “Concretely, value orientations are overwhelmingly involved in processes of social interaction. For this reason consistency of normative orientation cannot be confined to one actor in his action in different situations and at different times; there must also be integration on an inter-individual level. Rules, that is, must be generalized in a manner to apply to all actors in the relevant situations in the interaction system. This is an elementary prerequisite of social order.” [19, pp.165].

Thus, normative orientation recognized that individuals within a social system share symbolic systems of meaning which itself imposes an element of order. Individuals hold a mutuality of expectation regarding that order. Similarly, culture provides standards for evaluating the universal logic or correctness of a given action. Thus, norms and standards form the underlayment against which the individual applies their own criteria for choice regarding their value-orientation toward a particular action. Three types of values are associated with the choice criteria of the individual: cognitive (objective evaluation), appreciative (aesthetic evaluation), and moral (evaluation based on personal moral strictures). Cognitive value orientation must evaluate the relative importance of the empirical, factual information being received. Appreciative value orientation is concerned with standards of beauty and art. Moral value orientation deals with the absolute standards of right and wrong.

Action theory supposes that four types of action might result from the relational orientation of the individual (see table 1). That is, the relative salience of a combination of motive and value-orientation will facilitate a particular kind of action. For example, if cathetic motivation toward a situation is strong, and the appreciative value orientation most dominant, the corresponding voluntary action will most likely be expressive, though it will still be partially influenced by the other value-orientations. The various permutations of orientation and motivation will produce voluntary action predominantly corresponding to their associated type of action. Instrumental action is concerned with realization of explicit goals. Expressive action is intended to fulfill emotional goals. Moral action is concerned with satisfying morally strictures. Intellectual action seeks to satisfy an informational or factual goal.

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<th>Type of Action</th>
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<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Standards</td>
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<td>Expressive</td>
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Table 1 – Parsons’ four types of action
In Parsons’ view, actions undertaken by individuals to fulfill their needs are repetitive and become habitualized as norms within the social system. As norms are adopted by others, they become inculcated into role-based archetypes through which social structuration is made manifest. Systemic norms influence the future expectations of members within the system, thus perpetuating the system’s structure. Social system structuration thus takes the general form of: relational orientation → type of action → action/interaction among oriented actors → institutionalization as norms → role-based archetypes → social system of roles and norms [15].

Parsons action theory provides a useful and appropriate theoretical base from which to consider the super-ordinate social media system as the product of the relational valences of its membership. Similarly, it offers theoretical explanation for voluntary actions within a social system from the perspective of the individual, for whom action is motivated through need-dispositions. In the case of social media, Parsons’ perspective suggests the relational valence of the individual has a formative relationship with the superordinate social system regarding relational orientations toward a particular action. Therefore, strategies to affect individual relational orientation have direct implication toward management of brand awareness and perceptions, as well as the creation of environmental munificence in the larger social system toward the organization. These strategies must consider the motivational and value-orientations of the individual within the target social media to achieve the desired strategic outcomes.

4.4 Social structure from communicative acts

Social media is a dialogic medium. Therefore, social media constitute a specific instance of social systems in which all actions and interactions among members are necessarily communicative. Habermas [8] theory of communicative action extends Parsons’ conceptualization of social systems to consider the role of communicative acts governed by practical rationality in their structuration. In Habermas’ view, through communicative actions, differentiated lifeworlds evolve within super-ordinate social systems. Lifeworlds constitute an experiential realm of informal, culturally-informed meaning, understanding, and mutual accommodation manifest through cultural traditions, social groupings, institutions of socialization, etc. Practical rationality evolves within a social system as a product of discursive interaction. Shared understanding is achieved through a cooperative search for understanding, and is realized solely through the force of the “better argument” [14, pp.25] freely expressed in a normatively regulated “Idea Speech Community” governed by dictum, such as: every individual who wishes to participate in the discourse is allowed to do so, every individual is allowed to offer any proposal, every individual is allowed to question any proposal, and no subject is coerced by forces either inside or outside the discourse with regard to any of these rights.

Mutual understanding requires sufficient shared background knowledge and assumptions among the actors for communicative action to be normative. Communicative actions may be instrumental, strategic, communicative, and discursive [8]. Instrumental and strategic communicative actions are purposive, intended to achieve rational and measurable objectives. Instrumental acts are directed against inanimate
constraints to manipulate them to advance goals. Strategic acts are directed against other rational opponents, either co-operative or conflictual. Communicative acts deal with defining consensual norms and mutual expectations in the social system, while discursive action concerns co-operative search for truth, clarification and agreement. Collectively, these criteria establish the validity claim of a communicative act.

5.0 Summary

Organizations seeking to motivate directed action in social media must identify the informational core common to them and their audience of interest. The informational core helps segment the collectivities of potential interest to the organization’s strategies. Once identified, each collectivity presents its own norms and relational orientations that the organization must understand and evaluate against its own objectives in order to establish which collectivities to engage and how. For example, effective engagement in some collectivities may involve understanding the critics and champions of the organization and working to change the relational orientations of the critics through communicative actions, including changes to the organization when appropriate.

In this research-in-progress, we develop an analytic framework to understand organizational strategies for directed action in social media. We offer idea as the key analytic in the formation of these strategies, arguing the strategies for engagement and co-creation can be derived using this analytic. We inform our analysis with data gathered from preliminary interviews with an organization with demonstrated success in social media strategy. Our ongoing work will further develop this case to improve our understanding how to effectively execute organizational strategies in social media.

6.0 References


