
Historicizing Microblogging

Lee Humphreys

Assistant Professor
Dept. of Communication &
Program of Information Science
Cornell University
305 Kennedy Hall
Ithaca, NY 14850 USA
lmh13@cornell.edu

Abstract

Identifying similarities and differences between microblogs and earlier communication technology situates microblogs within a longer history of communication technology. In this paper, I compare the audience, content, style, and format of historical diaries from the 18th and 19th centuries to that of microblogs today. The similarities suggest a long-standing desire of people to chronicle and share everyday life events.

Keywords

microblogs, history

ACM Classification Keywords

F.m. Theory: Miscellaneous.

Introduction

Communication technologies and services are typically characterized by their “newness”. Research often compares “new” communication technologies such as microblogs with their immediate predecessors (e.g. blogs and social network sites). It can be revealing, however, to make comparisons with communication practices from even earlier historical periods. Placing microblogs into a longer historical context helps to reveal what is truly new about microblogging services and what future services might learn from historical behavior and use.

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Recent analyses of microblogging suggest that the brevity and broadcastability of messages are important affordances of microblogging [4,5,8,10]. However, one can look beyond blogs and social network sites to find other historical examples that demonstrate remarkable resemblance to microblogs.

Historical Diaries

Due to their publicness, content, narrative style, and limited length, historical diaries from the 18th and 19th centuries share many characteristics of modern microblogs.

Semipublic nature

Diaries from the 18th and 19th centuries were semi-public in nature and often considered a kind of public record [3]. Diaries, particularly by women, were shared during the diarist's lifetime to maintain family and communication networks. These journals chronicled the life events of the family and could be mailed to extended family members who lived far away. For example, when young women would marry and move away from their families, some would keep journals and then send them to their families as a way of maintaining kin ties [4]. Sometimes husbands would keep journals while traveling and send them to their wives as a way of staying connected [10]. In rural areas, diarists shared their journals with friends who visited [8]. The idea of diaries as personal and private did not emerge until the late 19th century; prior to that, diaries were much more public and shared forms of communication [4]. The degree of publicness of diaries in the late 18th and early 19th century was of course more limited than the broadcastability and accessibility of microblogs today. Nevertheless, even today some

Twitterers selectively choose who can see their microblogs and limit access to only a few.

Content

The content of diaries during the 18th and 19th centuries often focused on life events such as births, deaths, marriages, travels, visits, illnesses, and work. It was not until the end of the 19th century that diaries became much more introspective and confessional in nature [3]. Particularly for women diarists, the content of their journals could be characterized by their mundane and even repetitive nature, often reflecting the activities of their everyday lives [4]. The distinctions between home and work or public and private were still very much blurred during the early 19th century and the content of the diaries of that time often reflects this. For example, Elizabeth Fuller wrote about her work spinning fabric, as well as visits from friends to her family in 1792:

Sept.6- I spun three Skeins.

Sept 7- Fidelia Mirick here a visiting to-day.

Sept 8- I spun three skeins to-day.

Sept 9- I spun three Skeins. Pa & Ma went to Mr. Richardson's a visiting.

Sept 10- I spun three skeins. [4]

Fuller's diary chronicles her work and social life like many microblogs today. Content analyses of Twitter messages find the majority of messages describe the activities and experiences of the Twitterers themselves [5,9]. An example tweet of this kind is: "Ran 3 miles today. Time to eat, then study and work on website." This suggests that people throughout history have chronicled their everyday activities.

Narrative style

The narrative style of diaries in the 18th and 19th centuries was often matter-of-fact and truncated. Early diarists did not often write their feelings, thoughts, or beliefs into the narratives of their journals. Instead, these diaries had brief and episodic entries that used terse and concrete language [9]. The narrative style of these diaries reflects a matter-of-fact chronicling of life events. For example, below is an excerpt from Mary Vial Holyoke's diary from 1770 in Salem, Massachusetts:

Apr. 7. Mr. Fiske Buried.
 23. Went with Mr. Eppes to Mrs. Thomas. Took Down Beds.
 26. Put Sals Coat in ye frame.
 27. Made Mead. At the assembly.
 May 14. Mrs. Mascarene here and Mrs. Crownsheild. Taken very ill. The Doctor bled me. Took an anodyne. [3]

This curt style of narrative regardless of topic is similar to kinds of narratives we see in microblogging today. Holyoke chronicles the death of eight of her own children in the same perfunctory manner as the excerpt above [3]. Similarly, a young active microblogger Twittered that she was having miscarriage in an equally terse narrative [2]. Mundane and tragic life events are chronicled through daily writings of historical diarists and microbloggers alike.

Limited length

One of the distinguishing technological affordances of micrologging is the limited length of messages. Historical parallels suggest that this technological

limitation is a welcomed restriction for many chroniclers of life events. With advancements in paper production and printing, small leather-bound journals called pocket diaries became popular in the mid-19th century [6]. About 2x4 inches in size, these small journals could easily be tucked in a pocket or in a waistband; and were thus more mobile than earlier journals had been. Because of the physical size of the diaries, users were also limited in how much they could write, typically keeping their entries to only two or three sentences. For example, on January 26th, 1873, Jane Fiske wrote in her pocket diary: "Cold disagreeable day. Felt very badly all day long and lay on the sofa all day. Nothing took place worth noting," [6]. The limited size of pocket diaries was not necessarily a liability for diarists of the 19th century; instead the limited size was a welcomed constraint. Historian Molly McCarthy writes:

The space afforded by the pocket diary may have been limited, but it saved journalists with only minutes to spare from having to write long entries. And diarists appeared thankful for both the opportunity pocket diaries offered as well as the limitations they imposed. [6]

Pocket diaries technologically limited writers to brief prose, much like microblogs do today [10]. In the mid-19th century, when leisure time was still something only afforded to the very upper classes, pocket diaries imposed a welcome limitation on the amount of writing that literate middle class diarists had to record events and activities.

Important Differences

Although a brief description of 18th and 19th century diaries suggests a similarity to microblogs in

publicness, content, style, and length, important differences remain. The social interactivity on microblogs does not have historical parallels in 18th and 19th century diary writing, although letter writing of that time may. Social interactivity is seen in Twitter's conversational nature [4] and through retweeting practices [1]. The concept of "following" on microblogs also reflects this social interactivity made possible through networked computing. The breadth and rate of which microblogs can be shared also does not have historical parallels. Nevertheless, the similarities between historical diaries and microblogs are apparent.

Conclusions

By historicizing microblogs, we can begin to understand why Twitter has become so popular. The chronicling and sharing of mundane and tragic life events through brief but regular writing allows everyday people to keep records of their lives and can help to maintain social and familial relations. Both historically and in modern times these kinds of life writings serve an important personal as well as social function.

More research is needed to explicitly compare microblogs to historical diaries. Content analyses and network analyses can identify characteristics of microblogs, which may reflect historical practices. Unfortunately the corpus of historical diaries is limited so direct quantitative comparisons cannot be done.

The social practices of microblogging are not entirely new. Style, content, publicness, and length are better understood through historical comparisons. One of my goals for this workshop is to engage in a dialogue about how drawing historical parallels can help inform current research and design around microblogging.

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