

PhD Comprehensive Exam

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Question 3 – Kalyamaraman

This question requires you to offer a detailed conceptual perspective of impression-formation effects in mediated communication. As you think through your response to this question, I would like you to showcase your broad understanding of impression-formation frameworks from several different fields/disciplines, and then focus in depth on those frameworks that are especially relevant in the context of your dissertation. As you discuss these frameworks, draw out the salient theoretical propositions of each, compare and contrast them (as applicable), and most importantly, outline how each perspective (or perspectives) provides testable propositions in the context of your dissertation. While you have carte blanche in terms of how you can answer this question, I would like you to at least dwell briefly on impression-formation effects vis-à-vis concepts that are central to your interests (e.g., a sense of community, trust, identity, the self, and group dynamics).

Response

1 Introduction

There is a broad array of social, psychological, economic, media, and game theoretical frameworks applicable to the work that I am proposing to complete for my dissertation. Many assumptions underlie the simplicity of my current vision for the execution of Contextual Authority Tagging (CAT).

As a study in media effects and impression-formation effects, CAT may provide important insights into how we view ourselves, how we fit within a society, and how a society as a whole struggles to deal with an always-on connectivity and seemingly limitless amounts of continuously incoming information.

In section 2, I discuss a few frameworks in regard to how we interact with one another as individuals, within groups, and in society as a whole. In section 3, I cover where I see the most salient frameworks intersect with some of the specific questions I want to ask and answer as I move towards graduation.

2 Levels of Society

2.1 Individual

At the level of the individual, we struggle constantly with a definition of self – of who we are, what we stand for, and how we **present it to others** (Goffman). A remarkable explosion of technologies have become available in the last few decades that have forced us to redouble our efforts at comprehension and evaluation of what it means to “be” ourselves. The sheer volume of interfaces that we must navigate (and master) when interacting with others has increased. In addition to the sense of self we kept in our heads, we originally had one interface, face-to-face. Today, we have a multitude of media through which we must define,

groom, and vigilantly reevaluate who we are and how we present ourselves (phone, web, video, photo, chat, status update, away message, christmas cards).

As we work through these choices and these important decisions of impression management, we have to work with what is available. **Social information processing theory** tells us that while we seek information in times of need, largely we work with what is at hand, what is available to us at the time. We do the best we can with what we have and make decisions largely on (growing volumes of) imperfect information. We satisfice, since we have **bounded rationality** (Wilson). We cannot make perfect decisions as we do not have all the information we may claim we would like to have.

That said, **source selection theory** suggests that we are looking for the best sources of information to help us make our decisions. In large part, we go with what is available, but when asked, we claim that we want quality sources as well. In fact, quality becomes much more important when we begin to be flooded with information from all sides. Identifying *good* information becomes paramount.

Reeves and Nass tell us that we treat information sources like we treat humans with regards to emotional and empathetic responses. When a source is physically closer to us, we trust it more. When a mediated face is larger on a screen, we listen more intently. When a source is familiar to us, we trust it more. Understanding that we are not rational creatures when it comes to the information being conveyed, but are also susceptible to the medium and physicality of how it is presented, means we should be careful when creating new media and setting expectations as to how they will be deployed, used, and integrated with our lives. Another aspect of the **media equation** is that with a repeated reinforcement of faces and names and other attributes in a mediated environment, a familiarity sets in that may not be reciprocated by the other party. **Social distance theory** says that even though we may be apart, physically, when interacting or even simply receiving information, we feel a social closeness with or without the knowledge of the other party.

Interactivity also plays a major role in how individuals relate to media and the messages

and information being conveyed through it (Sundar). As interactivity goes up, affect goes up. We respond to motion and engagement; our lizard brains cannot ignore it. Understanding where and when to use interactivity is a key piece to deploying useful communication technologies. Done well, they increase memory and recall. Done poorly, they become blinking banner ads on webpages.

Within economics and computer science, the **prisoner's dilemma** is a classic game that approaches the question of how strangers interact when there are rewards to be won. Rationally, players should not cooperate and always take the biggest sure payout for themselves, but this is not what we see. Humans are innately cooperative, at least a little bit. Given a bit more information, known as an iterated prisoner's dilemma, participants begin to cooperate significantly more. With a knowledge of earlier behavior and a sense of potential future interactions, we behave much more cooperatively and less selfishly.

2.2 Group

Moving out away from the individual, humans begin to form small groups. We quickly form a sense of group identity and cohesion that could be based on any number of things that are determined to be similar – age, gender, education level, socioeconomic status, physical location, or a label applied by some external player. **Group forming** also comes with some well known effects. Within groups, norms quickly form and the individuals, according to **social comparison theory**, will predictably conform to behaviors and attitudes exhibited by the others in their group. An effect of “keeping up with the Joneses” is also seen whereby individuals do not want to be seen as falling behind or not having the proper social status within a group, lest they be labeled as not similar enough to remain in that group.

Within groups, individuals also exhibit behaviors concurrent with **social projection theory** – a constant reconciliation of what they think about themselves and what the group seems to think about them. They are constantly jockeying to convey to the other members that they are worthy and deserving of group membership. Interestingly, when the rest of the

group does not see these efforts as sincere, the individual may try harder, thereby making it that much more obvious that they do not fit in.

2.3 Society

Farther out among the concentric circles, we have society – larger, more diverse collections of people made up of many different types of groups and organizations. Societies have diverse motives and diverse interests, and yet they remain a collective unit worthy of study and investigation. Larger questions around **social capital** and trust become interesting at this level. With regards to mediated communication, social capital has largely been the realm of attempts at counting activity and connections. There is little agreement about the effectiveness of these types of attempts at this time, but I feel that with better understanding of trust and confidence in larger social systems, we will be able to create stronger models around social capital. Measuring **trust** is equally elusive at this point, as it is built on perception which is also hard to study empirically.

Also interesting at the societal level are questions around surveillance and visibility in our new mediated reality. Danah boyd's *Networked Publics* beg many questions around hidden audiences, searchability, replicability, and the persistence of recorded conversation and media. When people know they are being watched, their behavior improves, their productivity goes up (to a point), but their morale goes down. What we have not yet seen is whether, if given tools to watch the watchers, morale goes back up. Visibility and transparency breed trust and at a societal level, trust is one of the most difficult things to facilitate and maintain as, largely, most people are unknown to any individual person.

3 Application of Frameworks

My proposed research into Contextual Authority Tagging, or expertise location via social labeling, will offer many opportunities to investigate and reflect on existing theory and

impression-formation frameworks. Some of the most interesting are related to the self and a sense of identity reflection within a group; questions around trust, confidence and information quality; and larger issues involving transparency and visibility.

3.1 Identity

With regards to how tagging each others' areas of expertise may affect one's own understanding of identity and identity formation, social projection theory is the most relevant framework for interpreting what CAT may show us. As the participants struggle to navigate the uncharted waters of seeing what their peers think about their working knowledge, the participant's levels of confusion, reflection, reconciliation, and justification would be interesting to see. The framework would suggest that as better (more, current, traceable) information is available to the participant, they would have less ability to hold a dichotomous view as compared to the group's apparent collected opinion. This being the case, CAT predicts that over time, the opinion of the individual and the opinion of the group should look much more similar than before the experiment begins. I plan to test this explicitly by having third parties rate the similarity between the self tags and the group tags as the experiment moves forward. Social projection theory suggests the similarity between the two will increase.

Secondly, as an individual begins to gain insight into how their group members perceive their own strengths (and apparent weaknesses), the individual will try to conform, within bounds, to what they feel is acceptable. As a form of social comparison theory, the participant will continually gauge what others have been tagged with and make sure that their own tags are within acceptable norms. Aberrant interests and/or skills may invite unwanted comments or teasing or even potential reprimands from those in higher positions of power. As a testable proposition, I think participants will largely stick to using workplace-related tags and refrain from using too many personal insights that are not work-appropriate. This behavior particularly could be attributed to their knowing the system is widely-visible and if

they tag out-of-norm, then they may be tagged in an out-of-norm manner themselves which they would not want. Looking at the development of social norms around this new form of mediated information will be very interesting, in and of itself.

3.2 Trust and Quality

As far as trust between participants is concerned, I believe in the context of CAT trust will be constructed on participants' confidence in the integrity of the system and the manner in which it consistently reports the information stored within. As long as the system behaves in a consistent manner with regards to aggregating tag counts and protecting the anonymity of particular taggers, trust in the system will grow.

That said, trust between participants will increase based on the information that is stored and projected back out of the system. If the system provides on-going quality, spam-free, relevant and topical information, the participants will view it as a high quality source of information regarding each others' areas of expertise.

By being a high quality source, source selection theory suggests that individuals will prefer the information coming from CAT over other sources that are not as vetted or social or current. If so, then the ratings from participants regarding the confidence they have in the tags, the confidence they have in one another's abilities, and the confidence that they are making better informed decisions regarding team formation and job assignments should be higher with CAT in place than without.

Additionally, I would expect the sense of closeness between participants to increase. As they become more familiar with one another and their areas of expertise, they will create stronger bonds and rate accordingly.

3.3 Transparency

This part of the proposed research is the least well-defined. This is in part because of the scope of the current proposal. CAT is being proposed within the single organizational unit,

a firm, an office, so that some simple fundamental questions can be assessed at the group level. Looking more broadly, CAT could be implemented on the discipline level or even at web-scale where anyone in the world could participate. Obviously, this is a much more generalizable pool from which to make statements about human nature and behavior, but at the same time, the logistics to running CAT at that scale have not been the focus of my work, yet.

Caveats aside, I think there are interesting social questions at this level of analysis. Given a global identity layer on the internet (which does not yet exist), I believe something like CAT could revolutionize how we make decisions as we interact with previously-unknown actors in a mediated environment.

Given good information about the person or program with which we are interacting, given good visibility and transparency, I would expect trust and confidence measures to go up. Privacy concerns, related to the internet, are largely rooted in two things, the lack of knowledge of what is being collected, and the lack/loss of control in how and by whom the collected information may be used. CAT provides insight into the first. I will argue that by extension, since we know what is collected and we know who can see it (everyone), we do not sense as great a problem concerning privacy and control. This could be tested through perception measures of control and “creepy factor”.

The transparency of the system provides a layer of confidence in that as long as the integrity of the system is in place, we know that we can watch the watchers as much as we are being watched. There is incentive for good behavior and social norms will keep the free-riders and miscreants in line. At least, that’s the prediction.

I would also expect usage to be correlated to confidence at the organizational level. As usage increases, confidence in the system would go up. As confidence increases, usage should increase. I expect there to be a leveling period where the novelty of the information and system wears off, but confidence would remain high as long as the tags did not lose their timeliness or currency.