BOOK REVIEW

Strategic Uses of Social Technology: An Interactive Perspective of Social Psychology

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Strategic Uses of Social Technology: An Interactive Perspective of Social Psychology
Zachary Birchmeier, Beth Dietz-Uhler, & Garold Stasser, © 2011 by Cambridge University Press
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The publication of Strategic Uses of Social Technology: An Interactive Perspective of Social Psychology (Cambridge University Press, 2011) has been of special interest to the authors of this review for two reasons. First, one of the reviewers (Guadagno) attended the Conference on Group Processes in Computer-Supported Interaction: Technological and Social Determinism at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio in April 2005 that has laid the foundation for this volume. Second, social psychological inquiry into behavior on the Internet is a primary area of research for both of the reviewers (see e.g., Guadagno & Cialdini 2002, 2005, 2007; Guadagno, Muscanell, Okdie, Burke, & Ward, 2011; Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008; Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012).

Strategic Uses of Social Technology reflects and builds upon research presentations given at the conference, and expands them to offer a thorough and engaging social psychological perspective on how individuals interact with mediated environments in the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and related processes and outcomes. Even though the resulting book is quite broad in themes, it remains concise.

Each of the ten chapters discusses concepts that are highly relevant to particular aspects of CMC, introduces original research questions, and highlights some of the most pertinent findings. Additionally, the authors provide necessary and interesting suggestions for future research. Most of the chapters integrate a comparison of face-to-face and CMC processes, which helps the reader to recognize those aspects in which the two modes of communication are similar or dissimilar. One surprising note for the students of technology-supported interactions is

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that there are indeed many similarities that one may not expect between computer-mediated and face-to-face communication.

*Strategic Uses of Social Technology* has been successful in introducing novel approaches, and revisiting them throughout the book, in addition to bringing specific examples of how person related and situational variables interact to affect specific social outcomes. Chapter 1 ("Introduction: A Social Psychological Analysis of Computer-Supported Social Interaction") by Birchmeier, Dietz-Uhler, and Stasser, Chapter 5 ("Social Interaction in Cyberspace: Social Construction with Few Constraints") by Abele, and Chapter 9 ("A Juxtaposition of Social Influences: Web 2.0 and the Interaction of Mass, Interpersonal, and Peer Sources Online") by Walther, Tong, DeAndrea, Carr, and Heide indicate that a common, unidimensional approach often employs a situational perspective (person X situation), that is, examining whether personality traits can predict how an individual will act in certain situations. The authors reveal that the relationship is more complex than it is commonly assumed. Important, with mediated interactions it is essential that researchers keep the nature of social interactions in perspective. This is stimulating given that a social psychological perspective typically takes a person X situation approach and applies it in one direction.

Several contributions to the volume incorporate the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE), a prominent theory in both social psychology and communication. Chapter 2 ("A SIDE Look at Computer-Mediated Interaction: Power and the Gender Divide") authored by Spears, Lea, Postmes, and Wolbert, Chapter 4 ("An Interactional Approach to Social Influence in Computer-Mediated Communication") by Sassenberg, and Chapter 8 ("Opinion-Based Groups: (Racist) Talk and (Collective) Action on the Internet") by McGarty, Lala, and Douglas not only provide extensive coverage of the model, but also illustrate how this theoretical approach can be utilized to explain much of the CMC findings to date. The use of theory is central to the social psychological perspective and thus the revisited SIDE model provides an effective way to link individual chapters to the main theme of the book and also explain why social psychological inquiry of behavior on the Internet is still relevant.

Besides, the inclusion of the two-sided nature CMC effects, particularly those involving the anonymity factor, is worthy of special note. This notion is first introduced in the opening chapter by Birchmeier, Dietz-Uhler, and Stasser and continued in chapters by Abele (Chapter 5) and Walther and colleagues (Chapter 9). As these authors have noted, much of the CMC work began with a focus on the negative aspects of anonymity, but since then there has been a great deal of research demonstrating both positive and negative aspects of anonymity on the Internet, applying prominent theories, such as SIDE, and making sometimes conflicting findings more understandable. Chapter 6 ("Dynamics of Leader Emergence in Online Groups") by Hollingshead and Chapter 7 ("Ostracism in Cyberspace: Being Ignored and Excluded in Electronic-Based Interactions") by Wesselmann and Williams deal with the issues of leader emergence, consensus and cyber-ostracism in computer-mediated social environments.

*Strategic Uses of Social Technology* is a comprehensive text, addressing many areas that involve mediated interactions (such as: social influence, interpersonal relationships, online based groups, ostracism, information seeking), and even touching on the applied aspects (implications for business and corporate settings). At the same time, Chapter 3 ("Trust, Deception, and Identity on the Internet") by Green and Carpenter is one of the few that incorporate newer research to studying online behavior as it relates to social media.

While the book is successful in incorporating social psychological perspectives as they may predict or explain CMC processes, the focus on SIDE is slightly repetitive to the exclusion of other theoretical frameworks, which are only briefly mentioned or not incorporated as much as they could have been. Similarly, there is germane research that is left out. For instance, Chapter 5 ("Social Interaction in Cyberspace: Social Construction with Few Constraints")
by Abele spends quite a bit of time discussing CMC and the prisoner’s dilemma but does not mention an important Kiesler and colleagues’ paper on the subject (Kiesler, Sproull, & Waters, 1995). Also, Chapter 5 includes a long discussion of economic experimental theories but spends less time relating them to CMC. The concluding Chapter 10 (“The Virtual Social World: The Continually Changing Landscape of Social Interaction”) authored by Stasser, Dietz-Uhler, and Birchmeier skillfully reviews the rich texture of psychological aspects of computer-mediated interactions as they relate to the scope and goals of the book.

It might be beneficial to see more attention focused on a number of prominent CMC perspectives and topics that are largely relevant to the themes in the chapters but are not included. For instance, social influence processes such as social validation and contagion (e.g., Guadagno, Cialdini, & Evron, 2010), broader perspectives from the attitudes and persuasion literature, and social desirability and self-presentation – are heavily discussed, but other prominent social psychological research on these topics (e.g., Baumeister, 1982; Goffman, 1959) is not mentioned. For example, there is emerging work on online jealousy (see Guadagno & Sagarin, 2010 for an overview; Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009), and there is also growing literature on Internet contagion (Berger & Milkman, 2009). While there is little discussion of contemporary and future trends, additional emphasis could be placed on some of the most prominent and popular social media given the recent developments of Web 2.0. However, owing to the comprehensive nature of the book, there may not have been enough time/space to delve into some of these and other topics.

Strategic Uses of Social Technology is most appropriate for researchers, practitioners, and academics who already have some familiarity with experimental research methodologies in the fields of computer-mediated communication and social psychology, and their intersection. Introduced in the first chapter of the volume, the essential notion of multi-directionality is echoed throughout the rest of the book. Although an effort is made to define the key terms and illustrate them with examples, the professional jargon that CMC researchers use may be confusing to those unfamiliar with this area of inquiry.

Finally, this book brings a take home moment for everyone – laypersons and scholars alike – when it comes to research on communication technology, and particularly CMC: This field of knowledge is rapidly changing. Therefore, researchers should be open to new perspectives of analyzing technology-mediated social processes. Scholars must also be flexible in the ways they study social technologies, and be willing to use creative and innovative research methodologies, such as those presented in the book, in order to understand the complexity of social processes pertaining to behavior on the Internet. Overall, Strategic Uses of Social Technology: An Interactive Perspective of Social Psychology presents an important step forward towards understanding the new brave virtual world as a frontier of social behavior and, as the editors of the volume indicate, challenges the research community with a task of defining “socially relevant and psychologically meaningful” (p. 209) similarities and differences among communication technologies.

REFERENCES


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