Facebook Has It: The Irresistible Violence of Social Cognition in the Age of Social Networking

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ABSTRACT

Over the past years, mass media increasingly identified many aspects of social networking with those of established social practices such as gossip. This produced two main outcomes: on the one hand, social networks users were described as gossipers mainly aiming at invading their friends’ and acquaintances’ privacy; on the other hand the potentially violent consequences of social networking were legitimated by referring to a series of recent studies stressing the importance of gossip for the social evolution of human beings. This paper explores the differences between the two kinds of gossip-related sociability, the traditional one and the technologically structured one (where the social framework coincides with the technological one, as in social networking websites). The aim of this reflection is to add to the critical knowledge available today about the effects that transparent technologies have on everyday life, especially as far as the social implications are concerned, in order to prevent (or contrast) those “ignorance bubbles” whose outcomes can be already dramatic.

Keywords: Facebook, Gossip, Relevance, Reputation, Self-Gossip, Social Cognition, Social Networks, Violence

1. INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, “rumor has it that…” was the typical way of introducing the latest gossip heard over the vineyard: today, the old adage seems about to be changed to “Facebook has it that…” since social networking websites are becoming the prime source for information about our social connections. That is, gossip.

Over the past few years, mass media increasingly identified many aspects of social networking with those of established social practices such as gossip. This produced two main outcomes: on the one hand, social networks users were described as gossipers mainly aiming at invading their friends’ and acquaintances’ privacy; on the other hand the potentially violent consequences of social networking were legitimated by referring to a series of referring to a series of studies in anthropology, evolutionary psychology and sociobiology stressing the importance of gossip for the social evolution of human beings.1 In this paper, I mean to explore the differences between the two kinds of gossip-related sociability, the traditional one (which can also rely on technological artifacts as means of communication) and the technologically structured one (where the social framework is determined by the technological one and coincides with it, as in social networking websites).

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Following the approach to the relationship between technology and knowledge undertaken in Magnani (2007), the aim of this paper is to act seminally and foster new reflections about the effects that transparent technologies have on everyday life, especially as far as the social implications are concerned, in order to prevent (or contrast) those ignorance bubbles whose outcomes can be already dramatic.

2. GOSSIP AS SOCIAL COGNITION

The revaluation of gossip, which started in the past century, is indebted towards two main disciplines: anthropology on the one hand, evolutionary studies on the other hand. Anthropologists focused on gossip as a means of social regulation (Gluckman, 1963; Yerkovich, 1977), but the mechanism often maintained a sense of otherness, both geographical and chronological: gossip could be indeed more than mere idle talk, but that was true as far as other people, at a different stage of development, were concerned. Conversely, evolutionary psychology and sociobiology immensely boosted gossip’s reputation (no pun intended) by showing its relevance as far as it concerns the dawn of language and sociality (Dunbar, 2004; Wilson, Wilczynski, Wells, & Weiser, 2002). Partially because of the hard-to-die naturalistic fallacy, which reverberates in the moral justification of whatever is hypothesized to have been part of our evolutionary heritage, these studies managed to obtain a massive dissemination in public opinion: the result was a widespread acceptance of the common utility of gossip as “social hygiene”, which came with a complete obliteration of its violent nature.

Gossip and Its Evolutionary Dignity

One of the most quoted and successful approaches on gossip is that of evolutionary psychologist Dunbar (2004). His main take is that gossip evolved along the lines of grooming to allow hominids the possibility to cope with life in large social groups: in his view, the necessity of gossip is strictly connected with the development of language itself.

According to Dunbar, Homo Sapiens’s close evolutionary relatives – anthropoid primate societies – do indeed display an uncommon degree of sociability, notwithstanding the fact that apes and monkey are not considered eusocial species (i.e., ants and bees living in colonies). Living in large groups gave to primates and hominids a great deal of benefits: the main ones can be individuated in hunting and foraging, and as far as the protection of the individuals is concerned.

One key factor underpinning this kind of organization is the use of something similar to trust and constraints to protect and ensure the functioning of the social relationships. Actually, for all the benefits, living in interactive groups larger than many of any other non-eusocial animal exposes primates and humans (and therefore hominids, too) to an increased number of stresses, likely to trigger hostile behaviors among members of the same group. These stresses include disturbances when feeding, harassment by stronger and eager-to-dominate individuals, and more simply the uncomfortable effects brought about by the need to coordinate each other’s behaviors with a result that’s often less than ideal for every individual.

Primates’ solution to this issue, connatural with high sociality, is the constitution of alliances by structuring a “sense of obligation” between individuals. This is achieved with the practice of social grooming, which “consists mainly in one to one activities involving physical contact, making the receiver to release endorphins and thus feel a sensation of well-being” (Dunbar, 2004, p. 101).

Research suggests that primates can live in groups counting up to 80 individuals: this number requires each of them to spend about one fifth of the day in social activities, that is, chiefly grooming. Humans have an average group size of 150 individuals (Hill & Dunbar, 2003), which is nearly the double of the primates’ one. To break the ceiling of group size humans must have developed a new and more
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