Rhetorical Functions of Hashtag Forms Across Social Media Applications

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the complex rhetorical practice of hashtag use across social media platforms and emphasizes the implications for UX designers and technical communicators working with social media. Specifically, we document and analyze the ways that users extend the function of hashtagging beyond findability toward meta-communication, effectively co-designing the hashtagging feature and helping social media designers develop new possibilities for hashtags as communicative tools. Qualitatively-collected data from five popular social media applications (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest) are used to investigate how users implement hashtags in different contexts in order to achieve particular rhetorical purposes. Using a grounded approach, we identify 5 primary categories of “metacommmunicative” hashtags and suggest how experience architects might incorporate them into future social media designs.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

Human-centered computing–Ethnographic studies · Human-centered computing–Collaborative and social computing design and evaluation methods.

General Terms

Rhetoric, Social Media, Design, Hashtags, Usability, Findability

Keywords
twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, Pinterest, Genre, Affordances, Metacommunication, User-Generated Content

1. INTRODUCTION

Semantic tagging has long been a feature of many digital media, as it is a useful and necessary method for sorting, finding, and organizing content. In recent years, however, the practice of tagging has changed in both form and function as its implementation has spread across social media applications. As a designed feature, tagging can allow users to label and retrieve data in a variety of ways, depending on an application’s UI. But a secondary function for tagging has also begun to take hold: metacommunication. Rather than tagging for findability, users now tag social media posts with words and phrases that are not necessarily intended to appear in a standard data search. Instead, these “meta-commentaries” offer a user’s own thoughts on the post itself. For example, a post might include both kinds of tags: a semantic tag (e.g., #SuperBowl) and a metacommunicative tag (e.g., #PackersGottaWinThis).

While some studies have examined the use of tags as tools for information organization and retrieval, none have tried to account for the ways that users have informally and organically re-thought the function of tagging, effectively helping designers and developers create new features. Here, we apply contemporary rhetorical genre theories to a qualitative data set of social media posts collected from five applications: Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, and Tumblr. Our analysis maps the rhetorical practices that continually recur across social media applications in an effort to account for how, why, and to what end these metacommunicative tagging practices are being used.

2. THE CHANGING FUNCTION OF TAGGING PRACTICES

2.1. From IRC to Twitter and Beyond

The traditional use of tags dates back to the early days of online communities like Internet Relay Chat, Delicio.us, and Flickr, where it was used as folksonomic (Vander Wal) system (as opposed to a taxonomic system) for making information more findable. Its form was varied according to site or application design. In mid-2007, that changed when Twitter users began denoting tags with a common form: the pound sign (Games). A pound sign in front of a word signaled to audiences that it was intended to be findable by anyone who searched for it (e.g., “#SuperBowl”). Because each user’s experience with Twitter is unique according to his or her “follow” list, this so-called “hashtag” allowed users to communicate about a common event or topic whether or not they followed one another. Because of the hashtag, users can perform a “search” for a particular word or phrase, and all the posted tweets using that hashtag will appear.

In the most basic sense, the Twitter hashtag form is closely tied to its content. Adding “#TheOscars” to a post means that the post itself is intended to be found and read by people searching for that specific term. Without the hashtag, an individual post might not be seen nor read by any Twitter user outside that person’s “follower” list or “feed.” Therefore the hashtag symbol (#) has become synonymous with the acts of sorting, finding, labeling, and clicking.

Although other social media applications have made use of tagging features for as long as Twitter has, the hashtag form (#) and the term “hashtag” have spread to Instagram, Pinterest, Vine, Tumblr, Img.ur, and now, Facebook (Lindley). Again, this is not to say that tagging wasn’t already a feature of each of these
2.2. From Design Feature to Cultural Genre

The data collected for our study of hashtag use across social media applications point to so many varying methods of deployment that we began to wonder whether there was any discernible pattern at all. Eventually, one conclusion from our data became clear: the use of hashtags as “metacommunity” (as opposed to using them to “mark topics,” organize, sort, and generate machine-readable classifications) is a distinctly rhetorical practice. Our early efforts to identify kinds of hashtags taxonomically had missed the point. “Metacommunicative hashtags,” as we began calling them, are not intended to be sorted, counted, classified, or labeled. Quite the opposite: their meaning lies with their function, not their form. What a “metacommunicative tag” does is more important than what it is.

We therefore chose rhetorical analysis to help us better understand how this practice of “metacommunicative hashtagging” functions as a rhetorical strategy for users of social media.

3. “METACOMMUNICATIVE TAGGING” AS RHETORICAL GENRE

Rhetorical analysis seeks to help us understand texts in terms of what they do, not just what they say. In that sense, we are less concerned with the content or representation of words in a social media post and more interested in how they fulfill a purpose or respond to a perceived context. A sub-field of rhetorical studies that emerged in the late 20th century sought to do the same for genre. Responding to traditional literary studies that focused on texts’ forms, the “new” genre studies emerged to emphasize the ways that texts are socially constructed with particular purposes. Studies of genres that arise from situated discourses (e.g., the scientific report, the medical history form, etc.) have shown the importance of understanding genre as a result of many contextual factors, including exigent circumstances (a perceived “call to action”), recurring forms of discourse, and the affordances of a designed medium.

Our study begins with an assertion that social media posts (e.g., status updates, tweets, check-ins, etc.) meet the criteria for what counts as genre under the new framework described above. If we can agree that social media posts are indeed rhetorical genres, then “metacommunicative tagging” is a sub-genre, arising from specific needs or demands perceived by users and determined (in part) by what the medium makes possible. In other words, there are enough generic qualities to this cultural form of tagging to warrant rhetorical analysis.

3.1. What Recurs?

Contemporary genre studies are known for documenting the social actions and perceived “prompts” that writers respond to when they write. Our analysis asks similar questions as we seek to identify the rhetorical actions or strategies that recur when social media users deploy metacommunicative hashtags as part of their posts. Over a period of 18 months, we became participatory observers and regular users of the social media communities we studied: Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, tumblr, and Twitter. Taken together, we collected more than 500 examples of metacommunicative hashtag use across these social networks, gathering screen grabs of each post and metacommunicative hashtag as we came across them in that 18-month period. (Note:

we did consider non-ethnographic, “big data” approaches to data collection but learned that interpretation of meaning was indeterminable without knowledge of context, timing, affordances, and personalities of each social media network we studied.)

The first round of coding occurred at the data-gathering level as we randomly sorted through our social media feeds and inductively pulled examples of any metacommunicative tag use we could find. A second round of coding helped us determine the posts’ rhetorical functions within the contexts of their respective communities and networks: that process confirmed for us that these metacommunicative uses of hashtags could be considered “generic” enough to warrant the application of rhetorical genre theory. Next, we asked the following question of each example collected during the study: “How does the metacommunicative hashtag function in this post?” Answers to that question were then grouped into the following codes, refined over time: Emphasizing, Iterating, Critiquing, Identifying, and Rallying, which are described below:

Emphasizing - used to add emphasis or call attention to something in the post or something the post describes or refers to; usually expressed without judgment as a comment or reflection. Examples: #evidenceofspring; #lateafternoon.

Critiquing - used when the purpose of the post is express judgment or verdict regarding the object of discussion (a described experience, an image, etc.). Examples: #chefdamianisawesome; #whatIsitthinking.

Identifying - used to refer to the author of the post; functions to express some identifying characteristic, mood, or reflective descriptor. Examples: #ihatemyself; #diabeticinshape

Iterating - used to express humor by referring to a well-known internet meme or happening in internet culture (or popular culture, depending). Might also be a parody. Examples: #hashstag: WhatDoesItMean (attached to image of a “double rainbow).

Rallying - functions to bring awareness or support to a cause; also could be used in marketing campaigns to gain publicity. Examples: #pitbullisnotacrime; #ASUfallwelcome.

We note that there are complicated methodological questions still left unanswered by this study. For example: how do we account for the relatively unscientific sampling of the data? How can we explain the ways that each post might carry multiple metacommunicative tags? Some of our data require analysis of both text and images: are there better ways to treat those examples? For the longer paper, we plan to explore these questions after some careful analysis using CAQDAS software, which allows us a more robust treatment of the data.

4. IMPLICATIONS

Some metatagging practices are innocuous, deployed for the sake of a single user’s identity performance (e.g., the #selfie or #GPOY metatag is used when a user posts a photo of herself). Others have the effect of bringing large quantities of strangers together around a single (often tragic) event, as was the case when “#Bostonmarathon” was suddenly paired with “#prayforboston.” There are political implications, too, as described by researcher Katy Pearce in her writings on Twitter users’ attempts to “hijack” the hashtag “#armenian genocide” by rendering them useless, sometimes by including commentary that is “unrelated to the spirit” of the original tag.

The data presented in this poster show how a design feature can transform communication across multiple contexts and media, but that user-generated ideas can help generate new functions for old forms. Furthermore, these user-generated ideas can find ways to
move across platforms, audiences, and affordances, which communication designers must take into account as part of their development process.

We anticipate that the poster presentation at SIGDOC 2014 will provide the opportunity for the authors to solicit feedback from communication designers interested in practical uses of these findings. We plan to incorporate that feedback into the writing of the longer paper, currently in progress.

5. REFERENCES


