

The Threats of Misinformation on Discourse Communities: How the Internet Ruins Everything!

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Introduction

In this WRS class, students were asked to propose a research project that would extend the understanding they already have about writing. Using John Swales' work "The Concept of Discourse Community," Evan Hirst examines how perceived hierarchies influence the integrity of discourse communities, and how the internet's democratization of information influences dynamics of discourse communities for novice members.

Keywords: discourse community, John Swales, misinformation

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In a paper published in 2011, John Swales sought to further operationalize the concept of a discourse community. He attempted to refine the definition by outlining six criteria for the establishment of such communities. While Swales achieved his objective, it has become a fool's errand to attempt to establish this type of discourse community in the present day. The parameters he set forth do not explicitly account for the rise of what I call pseudo-experts who are common in the blossoming age of the internet. Deliberately or not, the presence of pseudo-experts undermines the integrity and validity of discourse communities with the use of misinformation. Within Swales' framework for discourse communities, there are novices, who are openly learning, and experts, who are recognized for their knowledge. Pseudo-experts insert themselves into this framework, blurring the line between the two by presenting themselves as authoritative despite lacking the necessary expertise. This society-level paradigm shift necessitates the reframing of these definitions. Concepts like Swales' 2011 discourse community must adapt to the societies they serve; otherwise, they risk becoming obsolete.

Background

Swales' sixth and final criterion argues that for a discourse community to be established, a minimum number of members with a suitable degree of expertise must be met. Additionally, maintenance depends on a suitable ratio between novices and experts (2011). The dawn of the internet has exponentially expanded the potential audience for all forms of content and media. Consequently, there is a growing divide between the number of novices and experts in discourse communities today, driven by the disproportionate influx of novices entering into these conversations (wink, wink).

Take football as an example. The concept of a Monday morning quarterback refers to individuals who critique the plays and strategies of their favourite football team after a game is completed, as if they possess the training and awareness of a professional quarterback. This is a result of people who lack genuine discoursal knowledge, yet their opinions demand an audience and authority. They participate in football discourse with confidence yet without credibility. This example extends to all discourse communities, where people shoehorn themselves into discussions that reach beyond their expertise. Now, the internet has amplified this dynamic, giving the voices of Monday morning quarterbacks a far wider reach and influence.

The traditional hierarchy of expertise has been undermined by the democratization of information on the internet. Previously, it was only the esteemed publications that dogmatically and systematically established the "truth." Today, however, in a world where you can manufacture legitimacy through platforms, likes, and followers, people have become disillusioned with this notion of expertise. As a result, society has experienced a recent shift from empirical reasoning to pragmatic thinking, which is evident in the escalating polarization among these communities.

Misinformation is hardly a new concept; however, its prevalence has become overwhelming in recent years. An internet-based study by Del Vicario et al. found that misinformation spreads primarily in homogeneous groups, sometimes referred to as echo chambers. These groups form on the basis of shared narratives (2016). This is problematic because discourse communities operate on similar principles. The diffusion of misinformation poses a threat to the novices in a community, who often lack the experience and knowledge to realize falsehoods. This is precisely where the notion of a pseudo-expert originates: echo chambers provide the conditions where they can thrive and gain influence. These conditions could lead to the propagation of misconceptions and a false sense of understanding within one's own community. Echo chambers are breeding grounds for pseudo-experts. A cycle of misinformation occurs, which, at best, causes confusion and, at worst, could drastically affect individuals beyond their original discourse community.

Some misinformation comes with underlying malicious intent, seeking to stir division, while other cases arise from simple misunderstandings. In either case, it is critical that discourse communities seek to eliminate or minimize these threats to their integrity. The prevalence of misinformation, paired with the exponential growth of the creation of new information, imposes the necessity to revise these concepts.

Proposal

This study will explore how perceived hierarchies influence the integrity of discourse communities, and how the internet's democratization of information impacts the novice-expert dynamic of discourse communities. To explore these ideas, qualitative methods will be used due to the subject's social nature. Through a combination of literature reviews of specific discourse communities (case studies), content analysis of online discussions, and interviews with community members, these questions may be addressed. This study will also seek to provide insights and methods on how to identify and address these pseudo-experts within one's own community.

Semi-structured interviews will form the basis of this study. These interviews will aim to determine whether or not the current operationalization of discourse communities requires revision.

Participants will be asked to reflect on their own position within the hierarchy of their own discourse community. They will also be asked to review and reflect on other members of their community and their contributions to their conversations. A ranking system (using a scale from 0-10) will be used to rate the level of expertise of these peers to determine perceived hierarchies within communities. This data will be used to construct a spectrum of expertise

within a discourse community. Comparing these responses will shed light on how the internet has transformed the landscape of discourse communities.

Given its social nature, participant confidentiality and informed consent will be prioritized throughout the study.

The proposed research methods are designed to generate insights into these challenges to discourse communities. The implications of this data may be profound for our understanding of this phenomenon.

Implications

Results of this study will determine whether or not Swales' six criteria require modifications in the context of modern digital discourse. Scholars will need to consider whether to accept and embrace the presence of pseudo-experts and misinformation in these communities, or to redefine discourse communities in a practical way that deliberately excludes these individuals. Directed by the findings, this study will attempt to provide actionable insights for both academics and community leaders about how to move forward with respect to the changing landscape of discourse communities as a result of the internet. These recommendations will include strategies to assess, address, and identify various forms of misinformation. These results will also contribute to the broader understanding of how the internet has reshaped traditional perspectives on expertise and authority.

References

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