

21A.506 Midterm Essay

The Kula and Twitter: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Two Social Networks

Introduction

According to an article in the Harvard Business Review, “Social media are fundamentally gift economies. People are there to cultivate relationships, not conduct transactions. They exchange social currencies, not financial currencies. And status is earned not bought” (Boncheck, 2012). Social media is an exchange where one party will “share” posts online, and the other will gift a like, retweet, or favorite in response.

The Kula, also known as the Kula exchange, is an intertribal circular exchange in the Trobriand Islands, famously documented by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, which he published in 1978. At its core, the Kula is a series of transactions among lifelong partners where one partner gifts necklaces (*soulava*) to the other partner, and receives bracelets (*mwali*) in return. The gifts, or *vaygu’a*, travel in a circular network in the Trobriand Islands where one item is always exchanged for the other. Through these exchanges, participants aim to establish social status and prestige, even though neither item has monetary value.

Both the Kula and social media are social networks – social structures comprised of dyadic ties between individuals. Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa in *#Ferguson: Digital protest, hashtag ethnography, and the racial politics of social media in the United States* zoom in on hashtags, and how hashtags can serve as a place of ethnographic exploration.

The worlds that the Kula and Twitter live in both utilize sweeping connection networks which straddle vast distances. Those in the network participate in voluntary exchanges with trading partners in the Kula, or their followers on Twitter, in order to gain prestige and a sense of belonging. However, the Twitter world is technological and connections are effortless, whereas in the Kula, participants have to cross miles of treacherous sea to forge connections. The Kula is also one uniform community, where people participate in the Kula, whereas Twitter is comprised of microcommunities and movements, each demarcated by different hashtags. Malinowski describes the Kula from an outsider’s perspective, curious of its workings and sometimes misunderstanding its meaning. Bonilla and Rosa on the other hand are in the world themselves, thus able to understand its inner workings, but may potentially miss analysis of behaviors an outsider might find important.

Comparing Two Social Worlds

Twitter and the Kula demonstrate how individuals utilize social networks to capture the attention of others both in and outside of their community. #Ferguson is a movement on Twitter that started in 2014 in response to a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri killing Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager. #Ferguson allows Twitter users to express their anger with how

police officers, and the state as a whole, treat people of color in the United States, by posting tweets using the hashtag “#Ferguson”. Bonilla and Rosa explain that, “#Ferguson...allowed a message to get out, called global attention to a small corner of the world, and attempted to bring visibility and accountability to repressive forces” (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015: 7). It is a natural desire for individuals to want their experiences, voices, and frustrations to be heard. #Ferguson participants turned to Twitter in order to broadcast their message to a global community, hoping to get the attention of the wider world about the injustices they faced. In the Kula, Trobrianders hope to gain fame and prestige by possessing particularly impressive objects. Malinowski explains how Trobrianders will know if their trading partners, both in their community and overseas, possess unusually good arm-shells or necklaces (Malinowski, 1978). In this way, the owner of the *vaygu’a* will achieve fame for possessing outstanding valuables. Through the Kula, participants can gain attention and admiration in a far-reaching network.

The globalized technological world is divided by ideology, whereas the Trobrianders of the Kula are divided by geography. Kula participants are heterogenous and contiguous Kula communities are separated from each other by sea. However, the Kula connects these insular communities with each other, forming a wide reaching network that connects Kula participants across varying geographical distances together. On Twitter, geographic distance is not a divider, but ideological lines are. Some individuals may interact very little, if at all, with those across their ideological boundary. Bonilla and Rosa explain that hashtags are not just an indexing system, but also can be used to filter out other content, which can create a potentially, “distorted view of events, such that we only get the perspective of the people who are already in our social network” (Bonilla and Rose, 2015:6). The insular communities on Twitter are potentially much less likely to interact with each other than the tight-knit Kula communities. Crossing ideological lines on Twitter is not considered honorable, unlike in the Kula where crossing boundaries over sea is celebrated with rites and ceremonial feasts. The technological world that uses Twitter has the means to interact effortlessly with anyone in the world, but may not possess the inclination to connect with others outside of their community. In the Kula, resources of connection are limited, but the desire to connect to those far away pushes Kula participants to risk their lives in order to form ties with individuals outside of their community.

The Kula and Twitter both connect individuals separated by seemingly insurmountable geographic distance. Trobriand society devotes a lot of time and resources to participate in the Kula. Malinowski states that, “If we realize that at times the exchange has to take place between districts divided by dangerous seas...it becomes clear at once that considerable preparations are necessary to carry out the expeditions” (Malinowski, 1978:76). He goes on to enumerate preparatory activities such as canoe building and ceremonial rites associated with Kula expeditions. Connecting with others overseas is an essential element of the Kula and the Kula motivates individuals to travel and connect with those far away. Likewise, Twitter participation allows users to feel connected even if they are separated by vast geographic distances. Bonilla and Rosa explain that, “Twitter allows users who are territorially displaced to feel like they are united across both space and time” (Bonilla and Rose, 2015:7). Both Kula and Twitter

participants feel like they are participating in the same public space and time, though distance may typically separate them.

By participating in the Kula, individuals feel connected and part of a larger group with those who are also in the Kula. Twitter on the other hand, does not have an all inclusive global community. In the Kula, Malinowski describes a saying that “once in the Kula, always in the Kula” which means that once a person is involved in the Kula, they will always be in the Kula, trading with their trading partner over the course of their lifetime (Malinowski, 1978:62). The Kula is one cohesive group comprised of many trading partners. One does not participate “on Twitter”, however as Bonilla and Rosa explain, one can participate in #Ferguson, feeling as if they are a part of the protest or social movement in real time as a collective group (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015:7). Hashtags are not what is exchanged, but rather mark different communities on Twitter that are more likely to engage amongst each other. Twitter users feel more of a belonging to their communities – the people they follow and the hashtags they use – then to some wider community encompassing all of Twitter. This reflects the different society in which Twitter and Kula exist in, where Twitter’s world is divided and disparate, whereas the Kula is cohesive and more willing to overcome geographic and ideological distances.

Whereas exchanges on Twitter are commonplace and embedded in everyday life, Kula exchanges are decorated and formalized with celebratory rites and rituals. However, both exchanges are embedded in the way each society functions. Twitter exchanges occur incessantly and casually, where a person may tweet about important philosophical ideas or her normal day-to-day life. The casual nature of Twitter also means that codified marks, such as hashtags, are not used uniformly. As Bonilla and Rosa explain, “#STL” could mark a tweet about racial disparity or a social event in St. Louis (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). Twitter is a much more varied landscape that is less formalized and therefore more difficult to analyze from an anthropological perspective. Furthermore, Twitter’s impact exists both on and offline. Twitter can impact public opinion and serve as a site for protest, and the conversations that occur on Twitter can seep into public discourse. The Kula on the other hand, is a much more formalized system of exchange. As Malinowski explains, the Kula is a ceremonial exchange that follows prespecified rules. It is pre-planned and occurs in public spaces, where the direction of circulation for each good is specified (Malinowski, 1978). Therefore, anthropological study of the Kula might seem easier, because the exchanges themselves are more formalized. However, the exchanges in the Kula, like Twitter, extend beyond the gifting itself, because trading partners are friends or patrons and carry out mutual duties. The Kula exchange itself is a clear and obvious ritual, but it has profound impacts on the structure of Trobriand society, motivating ship building and agriculture for celebratory feasts in the Kula.

Comparing The Observers

A fundamental difference between Malinowski and Bonilla and Rosa is that Malinowski, as an outsider, is unable to grasp the importance of the Kula in the way Bonilla and Rosa understand the significance of Twitter exchanges. Bonilla and Rosa discuss how hashtags on Twitter can be utilized to gain social power. They claim that by using “#BlackLivesMatter”, “racialized young people...are able to re-materialize their bodies in alternative ways...they seek to...transform their quotidian experiences by simultaneously asserting the fundamental value and the particularity of their embodiment both on- and off-line” (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015:9). The utilization of the hashtag, and its associated use on tweets that are exchanged, gives Twitter users a voice that can be wielded for their own empowerment. The hashtag is not simply a tool for indexing content, but attaches meaning, and potentially power, to tweets themselves. Like necklaces traded in the Kula, the hashtag itself seems purely functional unless considered in context. Both *vaygu'a* traded in the Kula and hashtags on twitter are anthropological objects that possess meaning in context and after circulation. Malinowski struggled to grasp the importance of objects traded in the Kula, as the exchange was so different from western notions of exchange to gain monetary revenue. As an outside observer, Malinowski may fail to understand the importance of objects traded in the Kula, unlike Bonilla and Rosa who are extremely culturally competent concerning the ethnography of Twitter.

On the other hand, certain advantages come with being an outside ethnographer. As an outsider, Malinowski is able to put a spotlight on practices that a Trobriand native might find unimportant. Likewise, Bonilla and Rosa might gloss over important aspects of the Twitter social landscape that an anthropologist unfamiliar with Twitter would find strikingly important. The balance of insider and outsider perspectives are an important consideration when analyzing these works because the observers themselves are subjects, and shape their own documented perceptions.

Conclusion

It is important to identify that *Argonauts in the Western Pacific* and *#Ferguson*, are written by authors of vastly different relationships to their subjects. Malinowski is a complete outsider to Trobriand society, whereas Bonilla and Rosa are Twitter users themselves. These biases are important to consider when analyzing the observations of these authors. On a superficial level, the world Bonilla and Rosa discuss cannot be more different than the Trobriand society Malinowski observes. One involves no human communication, relies on computational technology, and is ideologically divided, whereas the other exists solely in the physical world where participants are divided by geography but united by a will to forge connections. However, upon further examination, it becomes clear that both Twitter and Kula are social networks. Although the social graphs may have different topologies, they both represent connections between people separated by geographic distances motivated by a desire to participate in public space and time, and establish a name for themselves outside of their small community.

Citations:

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Malinowski, Bronislaw. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge, 1978. 2005. Accessed 2019.

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