Forwarding Behavior among Youth Using Traditional and New Media in the Middle East and the West

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Abstract

Today’s youth actively use IT-enabled platforms to share information with members of their personal and professional networks. Information sharing on IT-enabled platforms includes forwarding of content on traditional (such as e-mail) and new media (such as Facebook and Twitter). Compared to authoring original content, forwarding of existing content represents a relatively low-cost way of establishing rapport with the recipient by demonstrating shared interests or views, and/or improving the well-being of the recipient (e.g. through a useful lead, or an inspirational message). However, forwarding can sometimes have negative consequences as well. Forwarding of the “wrong” type of content could lead to lowered standing in a community, unintended disclosure of prior correspondence, unlawful use of intellectual property, and reputational or even material damage to the recipient.

In our research, we investigate who forwards what to whom and in what form. We start with the social and psychological characteristics of social media users, and how these characteristics influence their forwarding behavior. Theories of social influence and personality are used to hypothesize how community values and individual differences might affect forwarding behavior. Next, arguments from communication theory are used to examine the targets of forwarded messages (one or more individuals, or a pre-compiled list of recipients), and the common modes of forwarding (text and/or links to images, audio, and video). Finally, we investigate how forwarding behavior among youth differs based on their cultural context.

We have collected primary data from an online survey of university students in the Middle East and the US. Preliminary analyses of responses show that

• there are significant differences in forwarding behavior across media (e-mail / Facebook / Twitter), while
• there are substantial similarities in the forwarding behavior of youth across the two research sites,

suggesting that the characteristics of different IT-enabled platforms affect forwarding behavior more strongly than cultural differences do.

We also found that social influence and certain dimensions of personality influence forwarding behavior significantly. We are currently classifying the content of forwarded messages to explore the interaction of medium and message content on forwarding behavior.

Our findings about forwarding behavior on multiple IT-enabled platforms hold implications for organizations, which can manage the spread of information through forwarding by paying attention to the interaction of sender, recipient, content and medium characteristics.