

Reciprocity as a Key Concept for Social Media and Society

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Seth C. Lewis

Abstract

The concept of reciprocity, particularly in the pro-social sense of mutually beneficial exchange, presents an opportunity befitting the start of a new journal on social media. Namely, how might a concept of social exchange help us understand a mediascape increasingly dominated by social exchange—where the sharing, receiving, and recirculating of information “gifts” is central to the very social and technical frameworks on which these media function? In essence, what might reciprocity, analyzed more purposefully, reveal about social media and society? The case of “reciprocal journalism” briefly described here is but one of many avenues for studying social (media) interactions and their implications, whether positive or negative.

Keywords

reciprocity, participation, journalism, community, social media

Reciprocity refers to exchange between two or more actors, generally (though not always) for mutual benefit. In social life, positive forms of reciprocity, such as kindness in response to previous kindness, are considered the very “starting mechanism” through which personal relations are established (Gouldner, 1960, p. 177). Such reciprocity contributes to the development of community cohesion and interdependence, in contexts both offline (Putnam, 2000) and online (Pelapat & Brown, 2012). Reciprocity, I would argue, is also at once both obvious and elusive: Obvious because the Golden Rule social norms associated with it are so widely recognized and accepted; and elusive precisely *because* of that taken-for-grantedness. Like background noise, the particular contours of reciprocity can seem hard to detect apart from other features. Reciprocity, in fact, means many things to many disciplines, from the social sciences (e.g., international relations) to the natural sciences (e.g., electromagnetism) and even mathematics (with its quadratic, cubic, quartic, and other laws of reciprocity). In communication research, the concept of reciprocity is often subsumed within and sidelined by related questions of trust and social capital. This relative neglect of reciprocity, as a distinct object of focus, points to an opportunity befitting the start of a new journal on social media. How might a concept of social exchange help us understand a mediascape increasingly dominated by social exchange—where the sharing, receiving, and recirculating of information “gifts” is central to the very social and technical frameworks on which these media

function? What might reciprocity, taken more seriously, reveal about social media and society?

Consider, for example, the case of journalism. Digital media technologies and the generative possibilities they afford for audience participation have created new contexts for journalists to rethink their relationship with audiences (cf. Lewis & Westlund, 2015). Yet, research thus far suggests that journalists across many countries are mostly reluctant to bring audiences into the news-making process, preferring to keep them at the margins or in the one-way service of news organizations (Singer et al., 2011), even as social media spaces like Twitter become recognized as ambient news networks (Hermida, 2014). Amid this fundamental tension between professional control and open participation (Lewis, 2012), reciprocity offers a conceptual and practical entry point for re-imagining the dialectic between journalists and audiences. It illustrates the potential for greater shared benefits, even stronger community dynamics, which may emerge through more purposeful and persistent interactions. Such outcomes are not easily achieved nor uncritically assumed: After all, can journalism, one-to-many by design, actually accommodate peer-to-peer modes of reciprocation?

University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, USA

Corresponding Author:

Seth C. Lewis, University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, 111 Murphy Hall, 206 Church Street SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA.
Email: sclewis@umn.edu



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Nevertheless, conceptual developments in reciprocity point to intriguing possibilities for rethinking journalism. Previously, Avery Holton, Mark Coddington, and I argued that reciprocity may be a key part of journalism's evolution in a networked world (Lewis, Holton, & Coddington, 2014). Building on Molm's (2010) structural theory of reciprocity, we conceptualized "reciprocal journalism" at three levels: *direct* (i.e., exchanges between journalists and audiences in a one-to-one fashion), *indirect* (i.e., exchanges that are witnessed by others and intended for community benefit, in a more generalized one-to-many fashion), and *sustained* (i.e., exchanges that occur continuously over time, suggesting future interactions and benefits). This approach repositions journalists in the network. It sees them (potentially) as community-builders who might catalyze reciprocal exchange—directly with audiences/users, indirectly among community members, and repeatedly over time, altogether encouraging the kind of social norms associated with reciprocity writ large. In a separate empirical study, Borger, Hoof, and Sanders (2014) found support for the reciprocal journalism model as they examined participatory news projects from the perspective of participants. Users, they noted, expected reciprocity from journalists—something in return for their contributions—and the success or failure of such projects often hinged on reciprocal relationship-building (or lack thereof).

A conceptual focus on reciprocity thus opens up diagnostic questions for journalism (and media work more generally) in a social media world: How might a reciprocal-minded journalism actually function and promote shared benefits, if at all? Indeed, could such an approach even work within traditional structures and institutions? At the individual level, might beliefs about reciprocity factor into how journalists recognize and respond to opportunities for greater engagement with audiences?

More broadly, reciprocity's emphasis on relational exchange, positive *and* negative, can have a role in interpreting both pro- and anti-social interactions on social media. On the one hand, how might different forms of reciprocity (*direct*, *indirect*, or *sustained*) contribute to the development of enduring community dynamics, even in spaces of ephemeral content-sharing? On the other hand, given that many social media exchanges are far from "mutually beneficial," how might reciprocity help explain forms of hate, trolling, and revenge? Additionally, reciprocity may provide insight into problems of homophily on social media and the general reluctance that people have to reach beyond their social networks to encounter new people and ideas in online settings (Zuckerman, 2013).

Altogether, reciprocity, applied more purposefully, may help us better conceptualize both the micro interactions and macro consequences of social media and society.

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Author Biography

Seth C. Lewis (PhD, University of Texas at Austin) is a professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota (USA). His research interests include journalism, social media, big data, and the conceptualizing of media work and innovation processes. He is co-editor of the 2015 book *Boundaries of Journalism: Professionalism, Practices and Participation*.