

Beginning with Breaking Up

Date : August 23, 2010

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In the United States, there is a lot of talk about how people are able to communicate and connect in new ways because of innovations in communicative technologies. So what happens when people start using these technologies built for connection for a purpose they weren't designed for – disconnecting from people? To answer this question, I decided to interview people at my home institution about how they use new media when they are breaking up. This turned out to be a very productive starting point for asking questions about how people cobble together solutions to the social dilemmas new media can offer. For example, I was able to find out how wide a range of practices there are for finding out information about your ex-lover on Facebook that you might want to know, but don't want to let your ex-lover know you want to know. Beginning with breaking up is a methodological starting point. I want to discuss some methodological implications of starting with breaking up when analyzing new media.

I quickly realized that participant observation would be impossible. No one was going to say in the middle of a breakup conversation: "Wait a minute, are we breaking up? Because if we are, I know this researcher who would like to observe and take notes." Sometimes people would voluntarily send me the conversations in which they broke up with someone over IM or by texting. (And I should admit that I couldn't always tell without interviewing them why this particular conversational snippet was The Breakup Conversation.) I had to ask people to talk about their breakups after many of their disentangling conversations were over. Almost everything I learned I found out by interviewing people face-to-face. And in these interviews, people would tell me breakup stories that they had clearly already told their friends. I was collecting well-rehearsed narratives.

Not only couldn't I observe breakups, I also discovered I was not being told many stories about hooking up. I can think of only two accounts of hooking up, that is, accounts of people who would not claim to be in a relationship and yet were sleeping together occasionally. However, I know that people were hooking up all the time because of research my colleague Elizabeth Armstrong has conducted on IU undergraduates' romantic lives. I think few people told me these stories because one of the benefits of hooking up is that while you might hook up, you never break up. Hooking up is understood to be ephemeral enough that you are not obligated to have a break up conversation. Instead, you can just let things drift apart when you want to stop sleeping with someone. So when I asked people if I could interview them about their breakups, they tended to assume that I was only talking about "real" romantic relationships. I don't think that this seriously affected my analysis, but it is one of the methodological consequences of how I framed my research.

There were clear benefits to my starting point. By asking about breaking up, I learned a tremendous amount about how people used a wide range of communicative technologies. I also learned how they understood each medium in relationship to all the other media that they used. I don't only know about how people at Indiana University used Facebook throughout the course of a break up, I also know about how they used texting, voicemail and any other medium. If I had asked people about their texting practices, I might not have gotten the same insight into how their

understandings of one medium affected their understandings of all the other media they used, or refused to use. By starting with a social practice and not a medium, I was able to find out about people's complex practices of remediation. That is, beginning with breaking up encouraged people to reflect on their media ecologies.

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