

Interstitial Dialogues: A Phenomenology of News-Comments

MJ O'Leary

Liverpool John Moores University, UK

m.j.oleary@ljmu.ac.uk

Abstract: This paper presents findings from a study that examined the phenomenological detail of the reading process involved in everyday encounters with news microposts. In recent decades, reading the news has become characterised by the micro-texts of social media, but the fine-grained detail of this encounter as a *reading experience* is often overlooked. In a series of reading exercises, long-form news articles and short-form news comments were shown to structure different experiences in terms of meaning and dialogue. These differences were linked to the specific layout of the texts within the website interface. The high volume of negative space surrounding the comments explained the dialogical mode by which the participant-readers made sense of these texts. The findings contribute to understandings of social media as phatic communication and challenge pessimistic accounts that link micro-texts to a decline in critical engagements with the news.

Keywords: Microposts, News comments, Reading experience, Phenomenology, Interface, News layout

1. Introduction

Today, almost half of British and American adults consume news in the form of a social media micropost (Pew Research, 2022; Ofcom, 2023). The micropost is, on average, only 300 characters long, yet it has come to define much public activity online. This paper aims to provide a phenomenological description of the reading process involved in encounters with digital micro-texts. By comparing the experience of reading news-articles with reading user-comments, it attempts to move beyond a concern for the linguistic content of these texts to the experiential structures underpinning our reading of them. The findings reveal how certain material aspects of media texts can enable or constrain experiences of dialogue and meaning while reading them. In recent decades, social media has become an important source of discursive, and often polarising power in society (Törnberg et al, 2016). For this reason, the discourses carried by social media microposts have received much attention (Bouvier, 2016; Papacharissi, 2012). Newspaper user comments are a well-established form of social media and provide a particularly rich source of data for discourse analysis. In an overview, Reimer et al, (2023), highlight the varied themes and linguistic patterns that characterise them, however, there is a growing interest in understanding the micropost beyond its semantic and deliberative aspects (Moore, 2019). In terms of the materiality of the micropost, much research points to a decline in the critical reasoning skills associated with long-form texts. Carr (2010) argues that short texts can only produce 'shallow' emotional reactions while Torppa et al. (2020) find that reading digital 'fragments' scores badly on recall and reflection. Likewise, Hakemulder and Mangen (2024) find the more a user reads short texts on screen, the less likely they are to find existential meaning in them. Nonetheless, collections of microposts (e.g. hashtags), are found to provide vital phatic and affective communication among marginalised groups (Papacharissi, 2014). Taken together, these accounts go some way towards explaining what microposts mean for individuals and for society. However, much remains unspecified about the fine-grained phenomenology of an encounter with the micropost in the digital everyday. Phenomenology is a philosophical method concerned with the ontological structures that undergird the quotidian human-world experience (Husserl, 1970). Phenomenologies of reading reveal the internal structures of the reading process in mid-flow. Wolfgang Iser (1993) identified the virtual gaps, or 'indeterminacies', in narrative detail that prompt heightened meaning-making in the reading experience. In a more material conception of indeterminacies, Genette (1987) identified the role that the negative space surrounding a text plays in conditioning the reading experience. The impact of 'gaps' on digital reading is a central concern in user experience (UX) (Bollini, 2017), but is often overlooked in media and news studies. In this present study, 'gaps' were identified as a central feature of the encounter with microposts via the in-screen layout of the news interface. Website designers aim to offer a 'smooth' user experience in which the interface only registers in the background of user awareness (Bollini, 2017). However, in this paper, the impact of the in-screen layout of microposts is brought into relief. The discussion, therefore, evokes medium theory and questions about the power of technology to determine perception (McLuhan, 1959). However, the position taken in this present study recognises the co-constitutive nature of human agency and technology (Healy, 2020).

2. Interpretative Phenomenology and Reading Case Studies

The findings presented in this paper emerged from a set of reading exercises conducted with participants involved in a wider phenomenological project. The project entailed four participant-case-studies and examined

the relationship between media devices and inter/subjectivity in everyday life. The study spanned four years, involved field work in several countries, and was undertaken in English and Spanish. Further information can be seen in Figure 1. As part of this research, ten individual reading exercises were set up to capture the phenomenological elements of 'in-the-thick-of-it' encounters with news microposts. They involved participant and researcher sitting in one of the participants' own everyday settings (at home or at work) and reading newspaper articles and user comments together on one of their usual devices. Each exercise lasted between two and three hours. Situational and embodied data was captured in field notes and the ensuing dialogues were audio-recorded.

The broader project was guided by the principles of an interpretative form of phenomenology. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 2004), is a methodological perspective inspired by the philosophical writings of Husserl (1970), Heidegger (2010) and Gadamer (2013). It requires a focus on the fundamental categories of existence such as *space, time, materiality, and embodiment*, while also accepting the positionality of both researcher and researched, as well as the provisional nature of research findings (Gadamer, 2013). In its empirical mode it therefore pursues something of an anti-method method in its commitment to naturalistic, immersive, and participatory research (Gadamer, 2013). Consequently, the reading exercises in this study were deliberately informal, conversational, and exploratory.

During these exercises we read a selection of news articles and user comments drawn from the participants' own regular news reading habits. 'News' was conceived of broadly as the thematic content within both the news articles and reader commentary published on the newspaper websites. Texts were selected from popular national newspapers in the participants' home countries. The newspapers exist as paper broadsheets as well as websites, and range from the centre left to the centre right in political orientation. It is important to note, however, that the political meaning of these newspapers and their articles are not central to the analysis, where *medium* rather than *press-media* is key. At the same time, however, to allow for some thematic coherence, and to avoid more inflammatory posts, we chose articles discussing the topic of housing (Harlow, 2015). Preliminary examination of the newspapers showed that the news and user comments tended to share some basic tenets of liberal capitalism and a vocabulary of 'civil' debate when discussing housing. Each article ran between 500-2000 words in length and offered at least five reader comments.

Participants/ Social and situational contexts	Maggie	Lola	Alice	Jed
Gender, Sexuality, Family	Cis, heterosexual woman, married, pregnant at time of research	Cis, heterosexual woman, mother of young children, recently divorced	Cis, heterosexual woman, mother of young children on maternity leave at time of research	Cis, heterosexual man, widow, grown-up children
Age	35-55	35-55	35-55	35-55
Ethnicity & Interaction Language	White, Irish (Living in Australia); English	White, Spanish (Living in Spain); Spanish	White, Spanish (Living in Spain); Spanish	White, Irish (Living in Ireland); English
Social Class / Background	Parents in manual labour	Parents in manual labour	Parents in manual labour	Parents small-business owners
Education & Profession	MA - Public Servant (Health)	PhD - Scientist (Chemistry lab)	BA - Secondary School Teacher and fiction writer	MA – Builder and Property Developer
Reading exercise settings, newspaper, and devices	<i>The Irish Times</i> , at home, at work office, on laptop	<i>El País</i> , at home with young children, on mobile phone	<i>El País, El Mundo</i> , at local cafés, at home, mobile phone	<i>The Irish Times</i> , at office, on desk top computer

Figure 1: This figure presents the relevant social and setting aspects of the participant-case-studies

Figure 1 illustrates various aspects of the case studies. The participant-case-study approach is recommended in IPA because the huge volume of contextual data required for analysis precludes larger samples (Smith, 2003, p. 54). Participants were recruited through the researcher's own extended personal networks based on the IPA criterion that some minimal shared lifeworld understandings of what *reading microposts means* is required as

a starting point for inquiry (Gadamer, 2013). The Jefferson Transcription system was used because it captures subtle verbal, setting and embodied details that go unnoticed in other styles.

3. Finding 1: Microposts and Body Talk

In this study, reading the micropost was an experience of heightened embodied and verbal expression. During the reading exercises, each participant lifted, touched, and moved their devices while reading the comments; they also continuously moved around in their seated or standing positions, and frequently invited the researcher to read and respond to the comments. Likewise, they expressed several emotional responses and several different verbal commentaries while reading them.

Maggie is sitting with her feet up on the bed and the laptop in her lap. After reading the news article, she begins eating a biscuit, dropping crumbs on the mouse pad. She brushes the crumbs away and points to the screen about something she 'loves' [a micropost about EU legislation]: "And then I love this kind of detail as well, that goes back to, for example, bits of policy or legislation." She sits up higher on the bed and tilts the laptop towards me to emphasise her point, nodding, chewing, laughing, and pointing.

Fieldnote memo, Melbourne

The significance of the activity described here is underscored by its comparison to the restrained mode in which each participant had read the preceding news articles. Just moments before reading the comments, each participant read the corresponding news article in almost total silence. Some held their breath, others sighed loudly - each physically constrained their movements until they reached the end of the article. The below fieldnote captures Jed reading news about a housing shortage in Ireland:

Jed leans into his computer screen, squints his eyes, holds the mouse lightly, his index finger hovering, holding his breath. He reads quickly and impatiently, appearing to skim along the lines, finally sitting back in his chair, folding his hands in his lap, he swivelled around on his chair and looked at me, waiting for something.

Fieldnotes memo, Cork

This difference suggests that the readers were enacting a *dialogic* experience while reading the comments, and a *monologic* one while reading the news. Understanding texts is described phenomenologically as a type of dialogue, one involving a sharing of meaning (Gadamer, 2013). Theories of dialogue define it as a mutual, open and polysemic interaction (Wegerif, 2007), while embodiment is that pre-verbal aspect of dialogue that communicates understanding through gesture and kinetic movement (Fletcher, 2014). A monologic encounter is underpinned by one authoritative voice and exclusion of alternative perspectives (Wegerif, 2007). In these terms, Maggie's corporal activity suggests a dialogue in motion, while her comments evince a sense of meaning being shared. The silent and constrained article readings on the other hand, suggest that the readers were being addressed in a uni-directional manner by a journalist-expert who did not invite response.

4. Finding 2: Existential Meaning

Analysis also suggests that reading the microposts was underpinned by an experience of existential meaning, understood as a full sense of meaning and relevance to core values (Gadamer, 2013). This was evident in the many anecdotes, verbalised reasoning, and descriptive and emotional narratives that the participants offered at different points *while* reading comments. Below is the opening sentence of one of many longer anecdotes provided by Lola.

Lola Last summer we were visiting J's [husband] best friend in Mallorca. We were talking about the children when she started to say [...] her husband works, and that her husband's colleagues leave the office 'on time', 'they leave work on time!' [...]

The above anecdote spanned over one whole page of the transcriptions and was offered by Lola in the middle of her reading news comments about the eviction of a family from their home in Madrid. It suggests she is attempting to make-sense of the eviction based on the evictee's income and work-life practices. The emotional excitement and colourful narrative offered here, as well as the many other instances in the transcripts, suggest that the readers were undergoing a full 'sense' of significance and core values while reading the comments. By contrast, as mentioned above, each participant read the news articles in almost complete silence. Moreover, each participant showed signs of struggle when asked for a summary or an

opinion of the article, even just after reading it. Below Alice attempts to summarise a news article in *El País* after I had to press her to offer a response:

Alice *Eh, yeah, it's about [...] it's about evictions, it tells the real-life story of a woman, but it's about evictions. There is a charity to help these people. They also talk about the price of renting, it has completely sky-rocketed in Madrid, and also, em, there is another property bubble forming, because the rent is so high that you just get a mortgage instead. But it also talks about things I don't understand.*

But Jed's response perhaps sums up the experience best:

Jed *To comment on the whole tone of the article, it's blah blah blah.*

These quotes suggest that in the absence of a sense of any perceived *existential* meaning, the participants' struggled to translate the news texts into any coherent *discursive* meaning. Since the news articles and comments on housing were selected for their tonal, linguistic, and political similarities, these findings beg the question, What aspects of the texts can account for this difference in reading them?

5. Finding 3: Interstitial Dialogue

The research analysis suggests that the structure of the digital *interface* played a key role in defining the kind of experience a reader had when reading the news online. The prevalence of short sentences used in microposts, together with the gaps between individual posts, resulted in a higher volume of negative space in the interface. This layout facilitated what I call an *interstitial dialogue* between reader and micropost and was key to the activation of the heightened embodied activity and sense-making in the reading exercises. Much like Iser's (1993) gaps, my interpretation is that the negative space *between* the comments enforced spatial and temporal pauses in the reading process which in turn provided opportunities for reflection and sense-making by the readers. This finding was especially evident in the relationship between the participants' utterances and silences in the audio recordings. Figure 2 is an attempt to visually represent this relationship. The brackets and straight arrows show *when* verbal and embodied expressions occurred during the reading, as well as their corresponding 'spaces'. This *when* was estimated based on the detail in the utterance that suggested which comment it is responding to thematically – the *what* - and is shown by the dash-line arrows. Silences, understood in the context as reading time, are underlined. The 3D rectangles try to bring the taken-for-granted negative space into the foreground to illustrate its relevance to the unfolding dialogue. Linking these different points throughout the transcripts revealed a dialogic 'to and fro' meshwork of arrows in the sections dedicated to the comments, but little to no arrows in the sections related to the news article. Thus, Figure 2 demonstrates the emergence of meaning and dialogue from the interstices between the microposts, rather than from the posts themselves. The low volume of negative space in the long-form article explains the constrained and meaning-less experience in reading it.

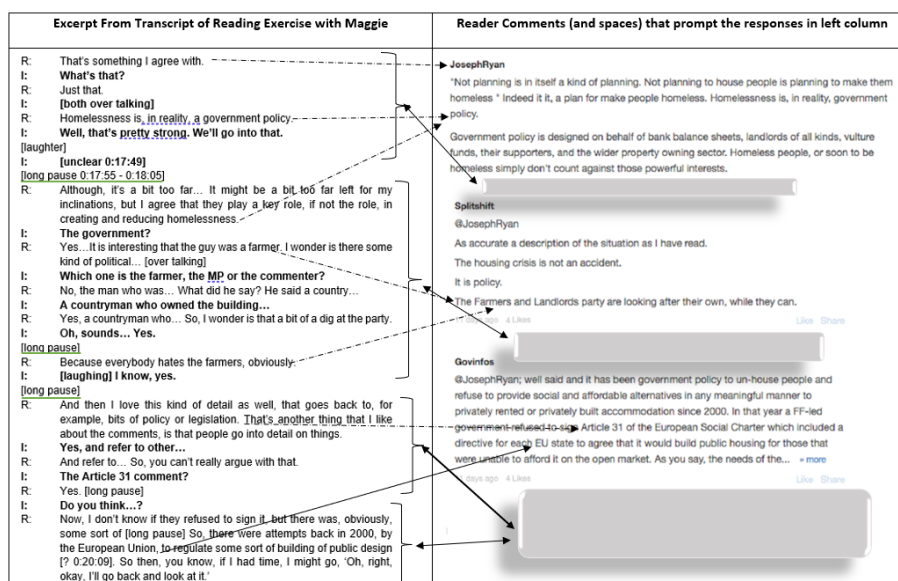


Figure 2: This shows the interrelations between space and participant utterances

6. Discussion – Conclusion

The phenomenological descriptions provided here offer new insight into various claims about the micropost. The embodied dialogue that the participants experienced extends our understanding of 'phatic communication' (Papacharissi, 2014) by showing how connection first manifests as an individual reader's kinetic, emotional, and verbal engagement with the *form* of the micropost, rather than its content or social features. Secondly, the experience of meaningfulness evident in reading the microposts refutes the findings by Hakemulder and Mangen, (2024) that readers of shorter texts are less likely to seek and find existential meaning. By utilising a lens that investigates the experience *subtending* content-level engagement, this study found exactly the opposite case and can hopefully supply new questions for quantitative researchers of digital meaningfulness. Equally, the findings challenge the claim that microposts play a role in the loss of critical reasoning by showing the complexity and nuance in the sense-making that occurs while reading news posts. Finally, the study suggests that official news content may benefit more from a redesign of negative space than from a shift towards more 'sensationalist' content to facilitate a meaningful reading experience.

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