Facebook posts not easily forgotten

Casually generated, gossipy language in microblogs is particularly memorable

Facebook posts resonate significantly more with human nature than books or even human faces, according to a new study by Laura Mickes and colleagues from the University of California San Diego in the US. The difference in memory between these microblogs and actual published words from a page is as striking as the difference in memory between amnesiacs and healthy controls. The work is published online in Springer's journal *Memory & Cognition*.

Online social networking is very popular, and allows people to post their thoughts as microblogs, an opportunity that people exploit on Facebook alone over thirty million times an hour. Contrary to what some might think, such 'trivial ephemera' does not vanish quickly from memory - in fact quite the opposite.

Mickes and team investigated memory of microblogs. In a series of experiments with undergraduate students, they compared the memorability of Facebook posts compared to either human faces or sentences from books. They also looked at whether Facebook posts might be memorable because they stimulate social thinking i.e. create links to other people or situations, such as "that is something my friend would post."

Results of the first two experiments showed that participants' memory for Facebook posts was strikingly stronger than for either human faces or sentences from books. And this difference was not attributable to social elaboration i.e. mentally linking posts to other events, situations or people.

The authors also looked at whether Facebook posts were particularly memorable because they constitute coherent and complete ideas. To find out, they compared memory for both news headlines and sentences from stories with reader comments on news or entertainment articles. Their analyses showed that it was reader comments that were most memorable.The remarkable memory for microblogs is thus not due to either their completeness or simply their subject matter, but more likely to some combination of the two and also to the comments being the spontaneously generated natural language of ordinary people.

The authors conclude: "Our work introduces and investigates a new phenomenon - incredible memorability of microblogs. These especially memorable Facebook posts, generated by ordinary people, may be far closer than professionally crafted sentences to tapping into the basic language capacities of our minds. Perhaps the very sentences that were so effortlessly generated are, for such a reason, the same ones that are so readily remembered."

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