

EMANUELE ARIELLI

# Sharing as Speech Act

Social media platforms allow users to perform different speech acts: status updates could be assertives, a *like* is an expressive, a friendship request is a directive, and so on. But sharing (or “retweeting”) seems to lack a fixed illocutive status: this explains why present controversies concerning the sharing of misinformation have been debated in legal procedure and discussed from the point of view of personal responsibility without reaching a general consensus. The premise of this paper is that the diffusion of false or unwarranted information could be better analyzed if we consider *sharing* a precisely definable speech act. I will describe some dominant interpretations of the act of sharing that are not, however, sufficient to fully explain it. As an alternative, it will be shown that there is a specific illocutive structure of the act of sharing, which not only consists in asserting the “shareworthiness” or the relevance of a content, but is primarily comparable to an “attention-orienting” directive.

**Keywords:** speech act theory; social media; attention; misinformation; defamation; sharing.

## 1. Introduction: How to do things with shared words

Sharing third party content in social networks is a widely practiced action that allows for content to flow freely in the Infosphere<sup>1</sup>. But what exactly do we do when we share something? Clarifying this point is crucial to issues like the diffusion of fake news and misinformation. Let us take as an example US President Donald Trump and his use of Twitter. In November 2015, as he was campaigning for the US Presidential election, he retweeted (that is, he shared someone else’s tweet) crime statistics categorized by race and showing data about the high percentage of black murders of white people (81%)<sup>2</sup>. According to the most recent data from the FBI, the numbers were grossly inaccurate (the rate of whites killed by

<sup>1</sup> Everything we post on a Facebook “wall” or in any kind of social network’s feed could be generally considered as “sharing” a content, but we will keep here the narrower sense of sharing as posting other people’s content.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2015/nov/23/donald-trump/trump-tweet-blacks-white-homicide-victims/> (accessed on April 19, 2018).

blacks was 15%). Despite all the criticism, there were no consequences for Trump, who, in his defense, simply declared that he believed the source to be reliable. In fact, the original sender (@SexyPatriots, later suspended) was neither an expert nor an official source at all.

Spreading false information may have legal consequences, as is the case with defamatory content. Defamation in digital communication is a complex topic, since legal decisions need to find a balance between protecting the accuser's freedom of expression and the accused's rights. Moreover, further complications arise when defamatory content is shared and spread out in the Internet by users that are not the original author of the content. The liability for sharers of defamatory content in social media is in fact uncertain, as we will see in the next section. Although the legal debate is not the object of this paper, these examples show that many uncertainties are due to different interpretations of what is actually done *when someone shares something*, which will be the main point of investigation in this paper. The question is, if "retweeters" (on Twitter) and sharers on Facebook and other similar social platforms are to be considered independent voices (authors that actively produce content), simply intermediaries, or something in-between.

Since Austin's seminal account on language (1962), we know that we can do things with words. Today, we can say that we can do things also with the different tools that digital platforms make available. Social media allow users to perform different speech acts or *illocutions*: status updates are, using Searle's terminology (1975a), mostly assertives. Putting a "like" or any other emoticon are expressives, friendship requests or flagging are directives, and so on. The act of *sharing* seems, on the contrary, not to be clearly definable. Of course, we have always shared information, both oral and written, as when we say «X said p», which would be a simple assertion (that is, a quotation) of what someone else said. But as we will see in details in the next sections, sharing in social networks could not be reduced to a simple reporting or quoting.

Moreover, it is not uncommon that when we share content – which may be a single statement by another user, a long article in a newspaper, a picture or a video – this is seen by the majority of people as an endorsement, and rightly so. If, in fact, I share the message «We must defend our civil rights!» by a political activist that I follow and support, it is plausible to see in this act not only an endorsement but also a repetition of the call of the activist. In this case, "sharing" not only means to "pass on", but also to "agree". However, as we shall see in the next section, this interpretation does not always hold. It is indeed possible to share without endorsing: in fact, the widespread disclaimer «Retweet does not mean endorsement» is sometimes used on Twitter by users, like journalists, who are sharing messages or articles from different sources without the intention to take sides.

Given these differences, a common interpretation is that sharing is an act of spreading information without a fixed illocutive nature and whose communicative nature can only be established according to the specific context, the speaker's intention, or the topic of the shared content. As I will try to point out, however, by sharing something in a social media, "we do something" specific that can be defined as a well-defined complex speech act.

## 2. The problem of legal liability

The liability standards for the sharing of third party digital content is largely debated (Collins 2010; Stewart 2013; Allen 2014). A glance at contemporary legal verdicts shows that there is no clear agreement about the kind of responsibility we should ascribe to the act of sharing. Not only that, but legal pronouncements and rules vary widely in different countries, ranging from very restrictive stances (which make any sharing act problematic), to excessively permissive positions (freeing the sharer from almost any responsibility).

Two general and opposing stances on this problem can be pinpointed. The first one (a "sharer-as-author" view) is represented by cases where sharing content is considered sufficient to bear legal or moral responsibility for the sharer if the content is defamatory. If what is communicated is considered prosecutable or morally reprehensible, then not only the author, but also the sharer, are held as equally responsible. An example is the case of a US Senate candidate who retweeted a third party's sexist and racist message and was consequently pressed to backpedal and finally close his account. His defense that he had no intention to offend anyone and merely wanted to share other people's viewpoints was not considered tenable<sup>3</sup>.

Similarly, in the UK it would be a criminal offence to retweet something grossly offensive, according to Section 127 of the Communications Act. This Section outlaws messages in social networks that are «grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character». A well-known case was the legal action by Lord McAlpine, a politician and former Treasurer under Margaret Thatcher who was the subject of a false allegation of child abuse. Comedian Alan Davies had to pay £15,000 damages to Lord McAlpine after he retweeted a post which implied that the politician was a pedophile. McAlpine announced that he planned to sue about 10,000

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lohud.com/story/news/politics/politics-on-hudson/2014/04/16/senate-candidate-suspends-twitter-account-never-intention-offend-anybody/7784307/> (accessed on April 19, 2018).

Twitter users, of which 9,000 had retweeted the defamatory content<sup>4</sup>. Later, the libel claims against users with less than 500 followers were dropped, in return for a modest donation to “BBC Children In Need”. Other extreme stances of “sharer-as-author”-views are represented by legislation in countries where the bar for libel is much lower and the risk of being criminally persecuted by sharing content that is considered defamatory is high, as it appears to be in Jordan<sup>5</sup>.

A second, opposite interpretation (a “sharing-as-quoting” view) frees retweeters and sharers from most responsibilities related to the nature of the shared content. In the US, the Communications Decency Act was passed in 1996 with the aim to limit the liability of Internet service providers and websites for third party content. Section 230 of the law states that «No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider». This should extend also to retweet and sharing, provided they a) are not summarized or changed in a way that authorship could be attributed to the user, and b) that no new defamatory remark is added (Stewart 2013). These rules are not free of controversy, since Section 230 partly suspends the so-called “publication doctrine”, in which the propagation of defamatory or damaging material is sanctioned. Moreover, this can give rise to opportunistic behaviors, such as the creation of fake accounts or virtual “bots” operating in social networks whose messages can be freely retweeted without the risk of criminal charges.

An interesting case occurred in 2012 when a Swiss politician brought an action against a journalist that retweeted a tweet by an anonymous user that compared the politician to Adolf Hitler<sup>6</sup>. In January 2016, a court in Zurich issued a final sentence making reference to traditional legal views according to which only the original author is responsible for a message (even though in this specific case the author was not identified) and not those who spread it. The journalist was therefore declared innocent from criminal charges. However, the court decided that the retweet infringed upon the personality rights of the politician and the tweet had to be removed. The case attracted a certain media interest, since it concerned the question of how much freedom we should have when we use the “retweet” function without fear of legal consequences. It cannot be excluded that other federal courts could have come to different conclusions, since another legal provi-

<sup>4</sup> «Twitter is not just a closed coffee shop among friends. It goes out to hundreds of thousands of people and you must take responsibility for it» (McAlpine, source: <http://www.businessinsider.com/lord-mcalpine-sues-10000-twitter-users-2012-11>, accessed on April 19, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> <http://en.royanews.tv/news/12759/2017-12-05> (accessed on April 19, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nzz.ch/zuerich/aktuell/journalist-nach-verbretung-von-doelf-tweet-freigesprochen-ld.4504> (accessed on April 19, 2018).

sion of the Swiss Penal Code (§173) sanctions the simple distribution of defamatory statements (as in handing out leaflets). According to this rule, it is irrelevant whether the distributed content is endorsed, the awareness of its defamatory quality would be sufficient to make the spreader liable for defamation as well. The question is if retweeting is comparable to handing out defaming leaflets in public.

It should be noted that a simple “like” (an *expressive* statement, in the speech act terminology) could less ambiguously be considered an endorsing comment. In fact, the same court in Zurich fined a man in 2017 who liked a comment on Facebook that accused an animal rights activist of racism and anti-Semitism<sup>7</sup>. If a *like* indicates appreciation and endorsement, a further question arises in the case when someone likes not the original content but someone else’s sharing of the initial content. Would it be an appreciation of the content, which could be object of lawsuit if the content is defamatory, or should it be seen as the appreciation of the act of sharing the content, which appears to be free of potential legal charges?

These cases also lead us to distinguish between defamation (libel, that is, the untruthful attribution to a person of crimes, questionable behaviors or facts) and general cases of bullying, harassment, and degradation. The dissemination of content that has no necessarily propositional content (truth value), but has a shaming effect on the victim, is a responsibility of the sharer, not only of the original author. For example, if I share a photo or a video that ridicules a person and affects his reputation, it does not matter whether the photo is a simple digital manipulation or represents a real fact: it has no real truth value, but is something capable of generating reputational damage, attacking a person’s self-esteem, and threatening her personal and social integrity.

In defamation cases, a defense could be either establishing the truth of what has been stated or, as mitigating argument, showing that you reasonably and honestly considered the source as reliable. But in messages that are shaming and degrading the presumption of truthfulness becomes secondary, since the damage is simply done by diffusing the offensive content. In this case, the responsibility of a sharer is greater, since the simple diffusion of the content brings more publicity to it and more damage to the victim. This is the reason why the Director of Public Prosecutions in UK recently stressed that retweeting an offensive tweet should be persecuted in the same way as broadcasting one in the first place<sup>8</sup>. This means that sharing falsehood is less punishable or offers greater possibility for

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.gerichte-zh.ch/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Medien/Medienmitteilungen/Bezirksgericht\\_Zuerich/GG160246.pdf](http://www.gerichte-zh.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/Medien/Medienmitteilungen/Bezirksgericht_Zuerich/GG160246.pdf) (accessed on April 19, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/9633278/DPP-issues-warning-over-grossly-offensive-retweets.html> (accessed on April 19, 2018).

defense than sharing content that has no truth-value but is offensive and detrimental to a person's dignity. Of course, defamatory statements could be considered offensive and degrading too, but for this reason they should be analyzed as having two components, namely a false proposition and a humiliating effect, with the sharer being potentially liable for the latter.

### 3. Different accounts of sharing

In the present analysis we do not expect to resolve a complex legal ~~debate~~, but rather to suggest that this debate partly originates in conflicting accounts of what is done by sharing, from a semiotic and linguistic point of view. I identify at least *four* prevalent views (or a combination thereof) concerning the meaning of sharing, which could be interpreted as a) a full repetition / republishing of the shared content, b) an affirmative linguistic act (that is, an *endorsement*), that expresses validity or approval of what has been shared, c) an act of quoting, d) an ostensive gesture, that is, an indication towards content (that is, a *pointing*).

I will argue that, albeit every interpretation could be partially linked to the act of sharing, actually none of them captures its meaning in an exhaustive way.

#### *a) Is sharing the simple replication of the original content?*

The legal debate about the distinction between the author's and the sharer's responsibility already showed us that sharing is not identical with making something public for the first time. For the same reason, discussion around ownership (e.g. of an article or a photograph) often investigates if a sharer is violating copyright laws in the republication of third party material.

An author and a sharer may do things that are different, but they are not completely separate. They have, in fact, a common aspect that I consider essential in defining what a sharer does, namely they both make the same content *public*, that is, they call the public's attention to what they published. This becomes clear in the particular circumstance when the original author directly addresses potential users, soliciting them to "share" or "retweet" his message. If a user does so, we would have strong reasons to say that in this case he is replicating the first author's message and not simply quoting or endorsing it, since he is most probably responding to the explicit request for republication.

#### *b) Is sharing an endorsement of the original content?*

In the case of propositional content, such as an affirmation that can be true or false, an endorsement would mean that the sharer holds it to be

true. In the case of other speech acts like *directives* (questions, requests or calls), an endorsement would mean that the sharer considers the directive as legitimate, backing the original writer in his request. Sharing *could* be an endorsement and this needs to be assessed in every individual case and depends on contextual factors: who is the author, what relationship does he have with the sharer, did the latter share a piece of content that is coherent with his general views and so on. If a person who is notoriously active in helping immigrants shares a violently anti-immigrant post by some activist at the opposite end of the political spectrum, this act will be likely interpreted by his contacts as an expression of outrage, not as an endorsement (although some contacts might ask themselves if he went crazy).

No matter if sharing is interpreted as an endorsement, or on the contrary as a refusal or criticism, these conclusions are the product of inferences that are drawn in a similar fashion as indirect speech acts or Gricean implicatures. The statement «It's cold here» is an indirect request if it is stated to persuade another person to close the window, or the statement «You're really brave!», if clearly ironical, is said to convey the opposite meaning. Those inferences do not belong to the core meaning of the speech act and are thus "cancellable" or detachable (Searle 1975b; Grice 1989; Levinson 1983). So it is possible to say «It's cold, but I am not asking you to close the window», or «You're really brave. And I do not say it in an ironic way». On the contrary, what belongs to the illocutive nucleus of a speech-act could not be suspended in the same way. In fact, I cannot say «It's cold, but I do not believe it», or «Close the window, but I'm not asking you to do it».

The popular disclaimer «Retweets do not equal endorsements» by Twitter users is an example of the attempt to cancel any inference leading to the assumption that the sharer could endorse what he retweets, avoiding implicating the sharer in legal disputes in cases of misinformation or libel. Although the disclaimer would not be sufficient to always protect someone from liability, it is a legitimate move from a pragmatic point of view.

*c) Is sharing the same as quoting?*

Sharing has also been equated to an act of *quoting* (Oomens 2017). Quoting is a complex topic in the philosophy of language that includes the problem of *how* quotations work and *what* they refer to (Cappelen 1997). Traditionally, quoting deals with the basic distinction between *mention* and *use*, which bears resemblance with the question of whether shared content is simply displayed or used by the sharer in the first person. But the sharing-device is freed from semantical and pragmatical complications of linguistic quoting, because it is not comparable to using quotation marks that refer to some expression, since it simply consists of resubmitting to the public the very same utterance or content that has been published in

the past, no matter if in the form of an automatic retweet, a quoted tweet (RT in Twitter), a shared post or through copying the link of someone's post in one's own status update window in Facebook.

Albeit having relevant similarities, there are some essential distinctions between sharing and quoting. First of all, a quotation is an assertion that could be true or false («John said "It is cold"»), while sharing is simply the display of preexisting content in the social network *feed*. If John did not say those words, the sentence «John said "it is cold"» would be an assertion about something that did not happen, but it would still be an assertion. A false or mistaken retweet (RT @John «it is cold») is not a retweet about a communication that did not take place, but it is simply not a retweet at all, since you cannot share something that has never been said in the first place. It looks like a sharing act, but it is not.

On a practical level, this means that quoting, also in the context of social network communication, appears to be less compromising than sharing. Writing in a post «John said "X is an idiot"» maybe shows little sensibility toward X, but is primarily a description that draws attention to what John allegedly said. On the contrary, taking John's post «X is an idiot» from his feed and sharing it is a republication of his words and not an assertion about what he said. This facilitates a stronger interpretation towards an implicit endorsement or acceptance of John's words.

The different focus between sharing and quoting is evident if we consider the 2011 AP's (Associated Press) Social Media Guideline<sup>9</sup>. While a direct and uncommented retweet such as: «RT@jonescampaign smith's policies would destroy our schools» could be seen as a sign of approval and an endorsement of what is being relayed, and should consequently be avoided, the Guideline states:

However, we can judiciously retweet opinionated material if we make clear we're simply reporting it, much as we would quote it in a story. Introductory words help make the distinction. For example: "Jones campaign now denouncing Smith on education. RT @jonescampaign Smith's policies would destroy our schools".

Another difference between quoting and sharing is the fact that quoting doesn't allow for indirect speech acts to be endorsed by the person who is citing (cfr. Yamanashi 2001). Suppose that John, a co-worker, says «It is cold», as an indirect speech-act requesting that the heating should be turned on. If I quote his words («John said "it's cold"»), I'm only reporting what *he* said. On the other side, if this happens in an online conversation, simply sharing his post («It's cold») could be easily interpreted as the fact

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.scribd.com/document/72536651/Social-Media-Guidelines-Associated-Press>. See [http://corp-live-bypass-ap.cphostaccess.com/assets/documents/social-media-guidelines\\_tcm28-9832.pdf](http://corp-live-bypass-ap.cphostaccess.com/assets/documents/social-media-guidelines_tcm28-9832.pdf) for the 2013 update (accessed on April 19, 2018).



that I am also implying and endorsing the same indirect request. Sharing, here, is comparable with cases of “mixed quotation” (Davidson 1979) in which a sentence, depending on context and interpretation, seems to be simultaneously mentioned and used.

A further consequence of this is shown by the different degree of liability in the case of a *solicited* re-posting or retweet (Allen 2014), as in the following example: «RT @John “Smith is guilty! Please retweet”». It should be noted that in this specific case of solicited sharing, the retweeter could be clearly accountable for libel due to what is contained in the original content. If I retweet the message because I was asked to do so, it is more difficult to deny my endorsement of the author’s will. The common rule that only ascribes the full responsibility of a message to the original author would not be applicable in this case<sup>10</sup>. On the contrary, following the aforementioned AP’s Social Media Guidelines, using a quotation would avoid this consequence. Asserting «John wrote this: “Smith is guilty! Please retweet”», should be interpreted as a neutral description of what John just wrote and asked.

*d) Is sharing similar to pointing?*

A more specific interpretation is that by sharing something we have the intention that other people watch / read the shared content, without thereby wanting to affirm or endorse the illocutive intention of the original author. In other words, sharing could be compared to a kind of pointing, that is, an ostensive or indicative gesture. An ostensive gesture is aimed at attracting the attention of someone to certain content and at the same time is an “overt” action (Sperber and Wilson 1986), that is, the intention to attract the attention is openly displayed. On the contrary, simply placing something in the environment in order to direct someone’s attention at it (as in stealthily putting a compromising picture or a defaming text on the sidewalk for others to see) is not an overt action and therefore could not be considered a pointing or a sharing, but a manipulation. On the contrary, pointing to the picture on the sidewalk or even emphatically standing in front of a person and putting the picture in front of her eyes is an overt statement (through body language and gestures), analogous to saying «Look at this!».

On one hand, it looks like sharing is a kind of pointing. On the other, we saw how the sharing or retweeting of controversial content is not immune from criticism or even legal consequences. This would rule out the identification between sharing-acts and pointing. If I come across a

<sup>10</sup> «The single publication rule should not be applied given the publisher’s role in actively soliciting for the retweet such that the retweet is a reasonably foreseeable publication by a third party» (Allen 2014: 96).

(defamatory or humiliating) text and point at it with a gesture to friends (without expressing anything that could be interpreted as an endorsement or amusement), I would hardly be considered liable for this, at least in our common understanding of pointing, even though there are significant exceptions, like the more than a century old case of *Hird vs Wood* (1894). In this case, a man sat by the side of a road all day and pointed to a placard with a defamatory statement. There was no evidence as to who had really placed the placard there, but the court decided the man's behavior was equivalent to publishing the libel.

The insistent directing of attention in this particular case could be compared to the active *spreading* of a message, like in handing out leaflets we did not write or making copies of a text or a picture and, without saying a word, passing it on to other people or hanging them on walls and in publicly visible spaces. Constant and repeated pointing could be considered as a proof of the desire not only to momentarily direct attention to a message, but also to persuade others to accept the message's content. Briefly pointing and making a reference to something is a momentary action, whereas continued pointing is an *activity*, something that has a significant duration in time.

In the same fashion, the question is whether sharing is a momentary action like normal pointing, taking place and ending when it is executed, or if it is instead a permanent state or activity where a user "keeps sharing" and referencing something, since the user's feed (or "wall") keeps track of this sharing-act. This would lead to the philosophical question around the nature of a social network feed: is a feed simply a digital "past" that records what has been posted (but is not a current act anymore), or is it comparable to a permanent "present", where all posts, if they are not deleted, maintain their actuality in time?

A similar conundrum concerns the liability for content referenced through website hyperlinks. In the domain of digital communication, hyperlinks are usually considered pointing devices. The *Hird vs Wood* case was in fact mentioned in a 2010 libel charge<sup>11</sup> as analogous to linking on a website to third party sites where defamatory content was expressed. It was actually an uncommon decision, since it is more common to consider references to third party's content by hyperlink not as an act of publication of that content, in order to safeguard the Internet's freedom of expression and protect service providers like search engines and newspapers from legal consequences. On the other hand, when the hyperlinked material is presented in a way that actually repeats and endorses the defamatory content, the hyperlink is considered libel as well (see Collins 2010).

<sup>11</sup> <http://swarb.co.uk/islam-expo-ltd-v-the-spectator-1828-ltd-and-another-qbd-30-jul-2010/> (accessed on April 19, 2018).

#### 4. Sharing as an “attention directing” act

A conclusion of the last section’s analysis is that sharing is something halfway between simple pointing and actively spreading. In the research on language evolution, pointing is considered a “proto-speech act” (Bates *et al.* 1975; Tommasello 2003) or, when clearly conventionalized, a full-fledged request aimed at directing attention to something. This allows us to suggest that sharing incorporates an imperative (i.e. a directive) component, as when we command «Look here».

Here we need to point out the fact that every content made public is aimed to attract attention. But there is a central difference to the act of sharing in the degree of explicitation of the user’s communicative intentions: directly posting someone else’s link on my webpage or social network feed leads others to recognize my intention to refer to that link. But referring to the link through an explicit act of sharing is an expression of the intention to refer to the link, that is: “sharing” is a linguistic act in which the intention to refer to a content is itself intentionally made explicit. In other words, while publicly posting a link to a content simply means to *show* that content to other viewers, explicitly sharing that link exhibits also *of* this showing-intention. As a consequence, “showing that I would like to show you something” could be interpreted also as an assertion about the fact that I consider that content shareworthy<sup>12</sup>. This difference, in the context of digital communication, is often subtle and can be described as the difference between casually hanging an article on a bulletin board and actively signaling (with signs, gestures, or by saying «Look here!») that you should read it. Sharing is therefore reducible to this component of indicating the intention of attracting your attention. It is a directive calling for other people’s attention and, at the same time, an assertion about the relevance or “shareworthiness” of what is pointed to (a sort of individual “content advertising”). *An act of sharing is therefore a speech act whose aim is to direct the attention of other people to a content, stating (or expressing) its shareworthiness.* In the same way that an assertive declares the fact that the propositional content is something to be believed and an order declares something to be done by the hearer (Searle 1989), sharing is a declaration that attention needs to be paid to a specific content.

Sharing is thus an “attention directing” speech act with its own illocutionary structure<sup>13</sup>. Although a thorough analysis would go beyond the

<sup>12</sup> Any utterance, when enacted, calls for attention and directs it. When I say «It is 3 pm», that directs my audience’s attention to that assertion. But sharing calls not only for attention toward the shared content, but also to the very intention of calling attention to it. In other words, it is a case of second order (indicating) intention.

<sup>13</sup> This speech act does not create a new general illocutive category (assertive, directive etc.), but it is structured as a combination of them according to the new kind of conventionalized act of sharing.

scope of this paper, we could outline the characteristics of a sharing-act following Searle and Vanderveken's (1985) analysis of the factors that uniquely identify a speech act<sup>14</sup>. The first factor is the *illocutionary point*, which describes the aim of a communicative action. As stated, the aim of a sharing-act is to direct the addressee's attention to something and to express the relevance or shareworthiness of a specific piece of content. A comment added to the shared content («look at this!», «that's interesting!» etc.) could vary the *strength* of the illocutionary point.

A sharing-act also has a specific *mode of achievement*: it is possible to share content using mostly social media's tools. The introduction of a "share" or "retweet" function not only facilitates this action, but, for the first time, makes it possible to literally "pass on" content and make it public without physically copying it. Similarly, *preparatory conditions* are necessary for the non-defective performance of an illocutionary act. In order to share content, it is necessary that the link or tweet to which one refers is real, or it should be assumed that a shared text is in a language that at least someone among my connections is able to read.

Also, illocutions can only be achieved if their content follows specific conditions (*content condition*): for instance, I can only promise what is in the future and under my control. In the same way, I can only share some content that has been already produced and posted somewhere in the past. Sharing brand new content is not a real act of sharing, but is simply a new publication.

The *sincerity condition* defines the necessary psychological state of the person expressed by a speech act. The explicit negation of this condition is incoherent or paradoxical: for instance, an assertive that denies the intention to describe a fact is incoherent («The cat is on the mat, but I do not believe it») or «The cat is on the mat, but I do not intend to assert it»), and the same applies with a directive that negates its intention («I order you to open the window, but I do not mean for you to open the window»). The condition of sincerity of sharing consists in the intention of directing others' attention to this content. Therefore, it would be incoherent to say «I share *p* but I do not have the intention that *p* gets noticed» or «I share *p*, but I am not expressing the *shareworthiness* of *p*».

All other inferences that derive from this speech act, such as the sharer's potential endorsement of what has been shared, are context-dependent perlocutionary effects that are not an essential part of the illocutionary structure of the sharing-act.

<sup>14</sup> Illocutionary point, strength of the illocutionary point, mode of achievement, content condition, preparatory conditions, sincerity conditions, degree of strength of sincerity condition.

## 5. Conclusion: sharing content, misinformation and the Spinozian view

Many ambiguities in defining what we do when we share something, as shown in the variability of accounts in the legal debate (Collins 2010, Stewart 2013, Allen 2014), are in part dependent on a murky view of what kind of communicative act “sharing” is. This analysis is an attempt to clarify a practice that is relevant in the dissemination of information in social media and plays a non-minor role in phenomena like misinformation.

Sharing is an attention directing act toward information that is normally regarded by the sharer as interesting, shareworthy, curious, but not necessarily truthful. As we saw, from a legal point of view sharers seem to be more accountable for content that could be degrading or humiliating (as in cyber-bullying) than for content that could be false. A sharer could feel that his responsibility in verifying the validity of a specific piece of information is diluted in two respects: first, in the domain of social media, only the original author is usually considered liable for publishing false or unwarranted information. Secondly, a sharer often leaves the task of a deeper verification of a piece of information to the community of his connected users. The ease in pressing the “share” button meets the classical psychological phenomena of the diffusion of responsibility, encouraging a “crowd epistemology”, namely the tendency to attract other people’s attention as a device of verification in case we are interested in content but we have little time to check for accuracy. But since most people have little time to do the fact-checking work, they in turn re-share, leaving this task to others and setting a potentially unrestricted flux of partly-attended content in motion.

Commanding attention is easier than exercising attention. This phenomenon is particularly prominent when information overload is the rule, like in social media communication. As Gabelkov *et al.* (2016) showed, 59% of shared articles and news is never read, neither by the sharer nor by the public, among which many eventually share again without reading. A consistent part of the digital flux of information could be therefore described as a huge flow of attention-directing signals against a much smaller number of users who are willing to focus. This means that signals of shareworthiness and command of attention assume a key epistemological role in their own rights, since information is weighted according to its propensity to direct attention rather than its content (Wu 2016).

*Passing on* content without feeling the responsibility for its truth-value is exacerbated by the fact that false information tends to be easily believed. How people engage with information is well described by the traditional philosophical contrast between Descartes’ idea according to which we accept or reject information after considering its truth or falsehood and

Spinoza's view according to which people accept by default all encountered information *prima facie* and only subsequently reject it, if proven false. Empirical evidence seems to support the Spinozian account (Gilbert, Tafarodi and Malone 1993): people tend to initially believe the information they are exposed to and they eventually verify or reject it only at a later stage, if they have an interest to do so at all. This could explain the tendency people have to share information they have encountered without particular attention to its reliability.

Free circulation of information and opinion is an important feature of the digital age, but at the same time it would be important to be aware that every content we pass on has an effect on the "ecosystem" of our minds (Arielli and Bottazzini 2017). In the same way, as we learn to understand how our physical actions have an impact on the natural environment, there should similarly be the awareness that content we share leaves a mark on our cognitive and cultural environment. Signaling interest for some content becomes an active production of content in itself: in the context of digital communication, we are all "authors" that are able to influence, through sharing actions, the degree of dissemination and impact of content on other people's minds.

**Emanuele Arielli**

IUAV University  
Santa Croce 191  
30135 Venice (Italy)  
emanuele.arielli@gmail.com

## References

- ALLEN, A.A.  
2014 "Twibet retweeted: twitter libel and the single publication rule", *Journal of High Technology Law*, 15, 1, pp. 63-96.
- ARIELLI, E. and BOTTAZZINI, P.  
2017 *Idee virali*, Bologna, Il Mulino.
- AUSTIN, J.L.  
1962 *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- BATES, E., CAMAIONI, L. and VOLTERRA, V.  
1975 "The acquisition of performatives prior to speech", *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 21, 3, pp. 205-226.
- CAPPELEN, H., and LEPORÉ, E.  
1997 "Varieties of quotation", *Mind*, 106, pp. 429-450.
- COLLINS, M.  
2010 *The Law of Defamation and the Internet*, 3rd edn, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

- DAVIDSON, D.  
1979 "Quotation", *Theory and Decision*, 11, pp. 27-40.
- GABIELKOV, M., RAMACHANDRAN, A., CHAINTREAU A. and LEGOUT, A.  
2016 "Social clicks: What and who gets read on Twitter?", *Acm Sigmetrics / Ifip Performance*, pp. 179-192 (<http://www.sigmetrics.org/sigmetrics2016/>).
- GILBERT, D.T., TAFARODI, R.W. and MALONE, P.S.  
1993 "You can't not believe everything you read", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65, 2, pp. 221-233.
- GRICE, H.P.  
1989 *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- LEVINSON, S.  
1983 *Pragmatics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- OOMENS, M.N.  
2017 *New illocutionary acts on social media*, <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/56005> (Accessed on April 19, 2018).
- SEARLE, J.R.  
1975a "A taxonomy of illocutionary acts", in K. Gunderson (ed.), *Language, Mind and Knowledge*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, pp. 344-369.  
1975b "Indirect Speech Acts", *Syntax & Semantics*, 3, pp. 59-82.  
1989 "How performatives work", *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 12, 5, pp. 535-558.
- SEARLE, J.R. and VANDERVEKEN, D.  
1985 *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- SPERBER, D., and WILSON, D.  
1986 *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell.
- STEWART, D.R.  
2013 "When Retweets Attack. Are Twitter Users Liable for Republishing the Defamatory Tweets of Others?", *Journal of Mass Communication Quarterly*, 90, 2, pp. 233-247.
- TOMASELLO, M.  
2003 *Constructing a Language: a Usage Based Theory of Language Acquisition*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- WU, T.  
2016 *The Attention Merchant. The Epic scramble to get inside our heads*, New York, Knopf.
- YAMANASHI, M.  
2001 "Speech-Act Constructions, Illocutionary Forces, and Conventionality", in D. Vanderveken and S. Kubo (eds.), *Essays in speech act theory*, pp. 225-238.

