

Title: “From one link to another. Web communities and the epistemology of online opinion”

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Abstract

Describing and measuring public opinion has always been a mediated process which performs the existence of social groups in the public space. In fact, it is impossible to objectify an opinion trend without simultaneously saying “whose” it is, that is to say reattach it to categories of the social: “the workers”, “the urban middle-class”, etc. For half a century now, actors willing to identify public opinion have been using the traditional socio-demographic characteristics, whether to know consumer preferences, electoral forecasts, or audience shares. This variety of goals relies on a same categorization of the public, which tends to be monopolistic.

Yet since around 2006, a group of innovative start-ups have been popping up in Europe and North America, which considers the high volumes of online conversations as an opportunity to know about public opinion in a new way. For this purpose they gather with the appropriate software large quantities of social posts, mainly from blogs, forums, and social network sites, claiming to measure a more massive and spontaneous opinion than with traditional polling. At the same time, as people are mostly anonymous when posting and interacting on the Web, these companies have to face a major issue, having to describe decontextualized opinions, without using the usual socio-demographic characteristics like age, gender, occupation or location.

From a sociological and STS perspective, we aim to study how these actors reconstruct the online social space, attributing opinions to groups that they call “online communities” (Latour 1993). We focus on the link between theoretical inspirations and the material tools and algorithms they use to objectify these communities. By doing so, we try to understand how they shape an alternative epistemology of opinion, performing new social configurations and then reconfiguring the public space (Gillespie 2013).

Today the word “community” is overused and unquestioned in fields like marketing, communication, or even social sciences, and we wish to deconstruct both its theoretical implications and history. For this purpose, we have to explain first how the concept of “community” was redefined in the 1990’s by academics and new technologies activists including H. Rheingold (1993) or S. Jones (1995). Then, we will focus on the case of a French

start-up, drawing from interviews and on the documents they produced, to understand how they embedded these theories into procedures and tools to produce their own epistemology of opinion, based on fluid and action-centered collectives called “communities”.

Title: Sharing and the boundary between the public and the private

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Abstract

My paper offers a close analysis of the rich and emotive notion of ‘sharing’ to discuss the shifting relationships between the public, the private and the commercial. It centers around Web 2.0 and social network sites, but draws on the polysemic nature of the word ‘sharing’ to discuss the increasing public-ness of contemporary social life. Sharing can be an apt response to increased social alienation or atomism, or to the (mythological) shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, while recognizing that the platforms for many practices of sharing are privately owned and very often state monitored.

Sharing today has three main modalities: it describes our participation in Web 2.0; it is a way of distributing goods; and it is a type of communication, or a category of speech. In these modalities, a common set of values is enacted: openness, mutuality, commonality, trust, and reciprocity. For each of these modalities, ‘sharing’ refers to practices that sit squarely astride the boundary between the public and private—however socially constructed and unstable that may be—and nudge the boundary to reduce the space occupied by the private.

In the context of Web 2.0 platforms, sharing often means making public that which had previously been private (‘public’ may be the whole world, or one’s Facebook friends). Echoing criticisms of TV talk shows (1980s and 1990s), popular criticisms of Web 2.0 platforms have given rise to the notion of ‘oversharing,’ a concept that implies the pollution of the public sphere by the private sphere.

In the context of the distribution of goods (the Sharing Economy), the flagship enterprises are those that unequivocally blur the boundary between public and private: the practices of couchsurfing and lift-sharing, for instance, entail offering the private spaces of our living rooms or cars for (some kind of) public consumption. As a category of speech between intimates (and even when the speech is not between intimates, when we call it ‘sharing’ we enact a sense of intimacy).

Sharing encapsulates many aspects of the tension between the public and the private. By implying connectedness, it seems to offer a way to overcome the oft-stated alienation of modern life and the lack of community. However, despite being an ancient practice, at least in its distributive sense, sharing is increasingly mediated by commercially-owned platforms,

such as Facebook or Airbnb, raising questions about the feasibility of a public sphere untainted by commercial interests or state surveillance.

Title: The ontology of media use in the age of geo-local and space-based database audience address

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Abstract

Intelligence on audiences in the mass media age was founded on representative statistical samples (surveys) or people meters, analyzed by statisticians at the market and research departments of media corporations. The techniques for aggregating data on media users in the age of pervasive and ubiquitous personal media (laptops, smartphones, credit cards/swipe cards and RFID), build on large aggregates of data analyzed by algorithms that transform data into commodities. While the former technologies were built on socio-economic variables (age, sex, ethnicity, education, and media preferences), the new technologies build on consumer choice, geographical position, web movement, and pattern recognition (detection of non-representational correlations), privileging relational rather than social qualities, and extending the areas of surveillance to digital space (in addition to physical, social space).

While there seems to be tenacious structures within the advertising industries (and their customers among producers of consumer goods and services) that prevent the technological capacities to be fully taken advantage of, we can see an increase in ‘database marketing’ within the surveillance industry. We need to ask which consequences this has for the perceptions of the audience (as statistical, algorithmically generated aggregate) and the identity of the media user (as social subject submitted under the surveillance technologies). Our previous research indicates a shift in media production, where media producers gradually rethink the character of their target audiences in light of new surveillance technologies. However, it also indicates a shift among media users, who take advantage of the affordances of the new digital media platforms while at the same time reflect on -sometimes worry- about the implications of their surveillance capacities.

Based in qualitative research on media producers (interviews) and media users (focus groups) this paper discusses the implications of perpetual surveillance of the media user as a ‘digital consumer’ in public as well as private spaces, and how the emergence of a ‘digital

self', produced by user movement in digital space, adds to the complexity of the audience as target of the media industry and as self-perceived identity. What are the changed perceptions of media users implicated by changes in data gathering? What consequences would this have for the perception of self as citizen and/or consumer? What are the consequences of geo-local surveillance for our thinking around the audience subject as acting in public space? How is our understanding of social and material space altered by the rise of algorithmic and geo-located surveillance (if at all)?

Title: Beyond differences. The Use of Empty Signifiers as Organizing Device in the #Occupy Movement

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Abstract

The relationship between social processes and technology has long been study in communication, political and social science (Marx 1976) More recently, several authors have shown the material aspects and organizational power of the human communicative processes (Latour, 2005; Marres and Lezaun, 2011). With the advent of the Internet, there has been growing interest about the impact of online global networks of communication on political and social change. During the Middle East uprising, with the diffusion of real-time communication through online social networks, the world has witnessed ‘the capabilities of services such as Twitter in allowing dissidents to communicate not only to the international audience and news services, but amongst themselves in order to protest and organize effectively’ (Gaffney, 2010: 2).

As shown by Garrett (2006), existing studies mostly emphasize how social movements emerge, develop and achieve their goals by mobilizing resources, taking advantage of political opportunities and framing issues in useful ways (McAdam McCarthy and Zald, 1996). However, as recently pointed out by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), these traditional theories seem to fail to account for new organizational logics that are emerging from the ways social movements make use of online social networks. As a remedy, they have proposed the concept of connective action. In their investigation of 15M and Occupy, they observed how these movements present peculiar characteristics in contrast with many conventional social movements.

However, by focusing mainly on the digital medium as organizing principle and on the individualization/personalization of communication, Bennett and Segerberg largely ignore the material organizing device new social movements activate by engaging in the creation of empty signifiers (e.g. ‘we are the 99%’). What they identify as ‘easy-to-personalize action frames’ rests on the well-known properties of loosely signified concepts that allow multiple interpretations of the same word, and in so doing permit the re-composition of fragmented subjectivities.

Drawing on a study of the US Occupy movement, this paper makes use of network analysis to investigate how this movement found a way to create a global movement by using

empty signifiers, signifiers with vague signified as organizing device that act as glue of very diverse situations and identities shared through online personal social networks. We argue that US Occupy movement achieved this by employing two main processes: the creation of shared 'nodal points' that take the form of universal affective communication in social networks and the development of floating signifiers or particular communication that allow articulating particular claims and practices, expression of the singular subjectivities at the individual and group level.