

Social Ties in Video Sharing Services: Tactics for Excavating Virtual Settlements

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores excavation as a metaphor or conceptual lens for gaining insights into social formations and cyber-structures enacted in video sharing virtual settlements. The emphasis is on conditions for virtual excavations, techniques which could be used to support them as well as their analytical value to making sense (for academic, business-related or other purposes) of what people do online. Two case studies are used to provide baseline data for framing the notion of digital remains or traces of virtual settlements, the form they take in today's social web and the means through which they are revealed and made sense of using knowledge visualization techniques. It turns out that virtual excavations organized around cultural artifacts of practice can serve as 'gold mines' for business intelligence, providing a means for understanding, not only structural properties of 'social' technologies and the way in which they are appropriated, but also dynamic aspects of the enacted cyber-structures resulting from recurrent co-engagement in practice and online collaboration.

Keywords: Digital Traces, Knowledge Visualization, Making of Sense, Video Sharing, Virtual Excavation

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the emergence of Web 2.0, the proliferation of a wide range of supporting technologies and their rapid adoption turn users from passive information consumers (i.e., recipients of news) into active content producers. This is brought about by an improved capacity for sharing user generated content, either through

publishing own material, commenting on articles submitted by others or responding to third party contributions. In such settings, users may be individuals or groups with pre-established offline ties who decide to appropriate the benefits of social media so as to re-establish, extend or strengthen social connectivity. There are cases, however, in which connectivity is solely framed in the virtual setting where users come to know

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each other through their history of their recurrent online co-engagements. This time, social formations emerge as 'enacted' cyber-structures which in due course may also extent their connectivity into a variety of offline arrangements. In such cases, virtuality materializes into a kind of 'knowing' which spans boundaries to occupy multiple contexts, both online and offline.

Although recent research acknowledges the enactment of such social formations, the available scholarship tends to dismiss their socio-material aspects and the conditions characterizing their emergence either, online or offline. Thus, there are works that focus explicitly on how certain technologies are implicated in practice, while others emphasize practice itself and the means through which it is either reconstructed, refined and extended in virtual settings. For instance, micro-blogging is widely acknowledged as an effective practice that allows users to write short messages to describe their activities and opinions, or point at interesting content (Iacovi et al., 2011). Although, such data can be processed and analyzed to facilitate investigations of online social configurations (e.g., Gruzd et al., 2011), it is less obvious how micro-blogging re-frames and refines practices such as journalism. Similar observations can be made for other technologies and social networking services. Consequently, there is a need to study concisely and systematically what it is that enables or constrains configurations of people, artifacts and social relations, thereby gaining a better understanding on the entanglement of social and material agencies.

The present work aims to contribute to the above research question by recognizing that representations form the common bond between social and material agencies allowing analysis of social networks on the grounds of digital traces members leave behind in the course of online co-engagement. In effect, this approach follows the footsteps of virtual excavation (Jones, 1997) – a concept introduced to provide insights into enacted phenomena such as virtual communities by digging into the electronic remains of online human collaboration. The notion of digital traces is grounded on the conception that most activi-

ties in virtual settlements create remains. Then, by working with these remains researchers could re-construct or gain insights into online activities and the context within which they are conducted (Akoumianakis, 2010), just as archaeologists reconstruct and/or gain insights into a past culture by retrieving, working with, indexing and interpreting remains in conventional archaeological settlements (Fahlander & Oestigaard, 2004). Consequently, the value of internet excavation is that it allows tracing of digital remains of an online discourse so as to discover patterns in social data thereby revealing trends in the user communities (i.e., opinions, interests and beliefs), underling knowledge and how it is socially constituted. In serious virtual settlements, the added value of such excavations results from the capability to export large amounts of digital remains which can then be analyzed and processed to allow making of sense of otherwise meaningless bytes of data. For this purpose, recent work exploits a variety of methods including graph-based techniques and algorithms (Lin et al., 2006; Zhou and Davis, 2007), social network analysis (Daniel & Schwier, 2010; Chau & Xu, 2012) and advanced knowledge visualization (Akoumianakis, 2011, Akoumianakis et al., 2012a, Akoumianakis et al., 2012b) to provide insights to community practice by accounting for the members' digital traces and remains.

The present work concentrates on systematizing virtual excavation as a method for practice-based analysis of online collaboration. In this account, we propose a framework for (a) identifying artifacts that confine practice in virtual settings (b) studying how these artifacts are implicated by collaborators (i.e., what use is made, new possibilities created and what traces are retained as a result) and (c) appropriating these traces using social visualizations to make sense of enacted cyber-structures within a virtual settlement. The method is then applied in a virtual settlement, namely YouTube, which is representative of social networking services and social web sites. The focus is on revealing and making sense of various 'hidden' aspects of online social conduct. To this end, custom

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