When Technology Draws Society: Distributed Trust in Horizontal Infrastructure

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ABSTRACT

The authors present a research based in Spain and carried out between 2011 and 2014 on the social organizations and affective processes involved in social movements. Using extracts from narrative interviews, they explore how participants in social protests cross attachment and technology in order to develop trusting relationships. The way they propose to analyse the issue of trust in social organizations is to examine the discursive construction of the links between the attachment of actors and the use of different technologies. The narrative was recorded in an event that was organised in the city of Madrid in 2014. The analysis is organised in three parts. The first step is to introduce the first approach to constructing the horizontal infrastructure. In the second step, the authors show how good practice stimulates social organizations to create the perfect environment to distribute trust. In the last step, they present technology and society zigzagging together to achieve a common purpose. They consider technology as a marker of the emergence of new forms of cooperation and innovation constructed by shared trust among the actors involved in social organizations. They introduce a specific device, where expert knowledge contributes to the very definition and shaping of the trust within social organizations.

KEYWORDS

Distributed Trust, Horizontal Technology, Social Infrastructure, Social Movement

INTRODUCTION

A new space has been opened up by a series of negotiations and interactions between actors, which started from the indignados movement, born in 2011 to protest against the financial crisis and political corruption in Spain (Belli & Diez, 2014). It is a renewed institution of democracy that has been adjusted to the modes designed by the citizens. In this paper, we focus on citizen trust in this modality of democracy, and how this trust is managed during the occupation of the public spaces where these organizations are established. With this in mind, we examine the collective action through which new forms of sharing knowledge and authority between actors are designed and implemented.

In the following pages we present a case study, which is part of a research project based in Spain and carried out between 2011 and 2014. The project’s focus was on the social organizations and affective processes involved in what are usually referred to as social movements. Using extracts from narratives, we explore how participants in social protests cross attachment and technology in order to develop trusting relationships. For the purposes of this study, we consider technology as a marker of the emergence of new forms of cooperation and innovation constructed by shared trust among the actors involved in social organizations (Belli & Broncano, In Press). Thus, we argue that...
trust is built between the actors and devices involved in organizations of different sorts, including the emergent modalities of democratic action.

We observe trust taking shape through interactions between actors and technologies, assemblies and protests, in several social organizations, ranging from governance to social interaction and technology implementation. We have observed how the lack of trust in traditional institutions caused protests. We have seen several examples during the last decade of this kind of social uprisings taking place, and social movements developing, to a large extent with the active use of internet and social media: the orange revolution in Ukraine (2004), Arabic Spring, the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul: Takshim (2013). The research problem for us, therefore, is to understand how trust can be recovered in social organizations and, for this, we show different types of innovative and creative processes born from the social movements. Within the frame of this article we focus our attention on a specific corpus, that of interviews with experts (activists, hackers, communicators, journalists, etc.) belonging to an innovative and creative social organization represented by the movement, where actors design in their narratives a form of sharing knowledge through a dialogical process. The first-person perspective narrative offers an outline of the guiding principles for studying the technology of democracy. In narrative, the actor is located in networks where the relationships between actors and activities cross attachment and technology. For Schraube (2013), experience, emotions, thoughts and actions are present in narratives as a form of existence through language, others and the social and technological world.

In the first part of this study, we present the theory about social organizations and horizontal infrastructure situated in the sociology of innovation and science and technology studies, conducted recently on the topic of peer-to-peer (P2P) and horizontal technology (Musiani, 2013; Mallard, Méadel, & Musiani, 2014). The grounding of such a body of work is the actor-network theory (Akrich, Callon, & Latour, 2006; Callon, Méadel, & Rebeharisoa, 2002; Callon et al., 2013) and it works as the theoretical framework of this paper. In the second part, we show our methodology through a narrative extracted from an interview with a member of a social organization in Spain. In the third part, we present the analysis of the above-mentioned narrative. By following Akrich et al. (2006), we analyse the ‘stabilisation’ of the technology used with the establishment of a configuration in which the tool and infrastructures become transparent and invisible. Finally, we show the results of our research, introducing a specific device, dynamic or practice as being in some way related to trust; the expert knowledge contributes to the very definition and shaping of this trust within social organizations.

THEORY

Citizens engaged in the indignados movement have discovered a way to rethink and reformulate trust in contemporary institutions (Belli & Broncano, In Press; In Press). Faced with an economic crisis, people took to the streets and camped in urban plazas throughout Spain in May 2011. The indignados movement showed that many citizens in the developed world had reasons to take to public squares and show their dissatisfaction with the economic and political status quo (Castañeda, 2012). One of the most representative strategies is the horizontal dynamic strategy where participatory democracy is constructed by actors. Such a dynamic inaugurates an open/social system, where everybody can assist and participate in sharing concerns, ideas, and creative solutions to common problems. The outcome is communities which are based on distributed trust in which emotional identification with the polity is intensified. These communities are engaged and grow in a shared space with a heterogeneous group of citizens.
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