Online ‘Tells’ with Cultural Bindings: Understanding Connectivity in the Absence of Cultural Participants

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the explanatory value of digital traces, especially for gaining insight to ‘cultural’ settings in the absence of cultural participants. We consider digital traces as the ‘matter’ of online social phenomena which can be revealed through transformation, re-alignment or re-configuration of data. In this vein, the notion of ‘imbrication’ is used to provide a conceptual lens for organizing inquiries in which digital traces should be re-arranged so as to act interdependently with other digital representations to provide posterior insights into designated virtual settlements. Empirical insight is sought by two case studies addressing different digital settings and different social accomplishments in the absence of ‘cultural’ participants.

KEYWORDS

Connectivity, Cultural Settings, Digital Materials, Digital Traces, Imbrications

1. INTRODUCTION

For many people, the term ‘cultural past’ coins a prehistoric social formation – a society or community – that existed for a certain period of time and vanished through the years. In the absence of cultural participants, gaining insights into and understanding of such cultural past relies almost entirely on material remains of culture. Contemporary archaeology serves this purpose by committing to an analysis of artifacts in situ and in relation to other artifacts to evoke particular understandings of the culture these artifacts existed within. According to Fahlander & Oestigaard (2004) this is conducted ‘… not so much to reconstruct what once was, but to make sense of the past from a viewpoint of today’ (p.44).

Nevertheless, a cultural past need not always reflect a society that vanished through time. It may also coin a social phenomenon which is interesting from an anthropological perspective (Hall, et al., 2001) or an organizational setting where culture is frequently revealed by artifacts such as myths, language systems, metaphors, ceremonies, rewards, etc., and the knowledge they embody or enact (Higgins, et al., 2006). In such cases, ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) provides a powerful method to study human behavior and social organization in living societies by necessitating that analysts become engaged in the setting, and come face-to-face with the natives such that a deep understanding of the practices of that setting is gained.

With the advent of web 2.0 and the wide uptake of social networking services, media sites, micro-blogging services, etc., both archaeological inquiry and ethnographic research have developed ‘digital’ constituents (Markham, 2004) aiming to analyze online social aggregations and cultural life in networked spaces, frequently coined as virtual settlements (Jones, 1997). In this vein several...
neologisms, such as cyber-archaeology (Jones, 1997), virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) and netnography (Kozinets, 2002), have been used to anchor a collection of techniques for online field work intended to study communities and cultures created through computer-mediated social interaction.

These trends indicate that the relationship between culture and technology may be disentangled by focusing either on how broader social contexts shape technology or how technologies are implicated in such contexts (Wise, 1997; Sterne, 2006). A commitment to the former brings to the forefront the focus on material remains of societies which are revealed through technological artifacts and constructions. The latter emphasizes the study of cultural practices that evolve through prominent (and frequently overlapping) technological trajectories. For instance, Wellman (2001) provides a useful analysis of how ‘place-to-place’ networks are being replaced by ‘space-to-space’ networks through the appropriation of new technologies. What is important for our purposes is that with each transition in prevalent paradigm of use, novel artifacts emerge as a result of new technologies, and as these artifacts become common, they implicate improvements in cultural practices. This is clearly evidenced when reflecting upon the transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. Specifically, whereas Web 1.0 relied on device-dependent mark-up languages such as HTML and web sites to anchor users as ‘audience’ or passive consumer of information-based products, Web 2.0 appropriates device-independence, sharing and ubiquity to foster user-created content and new primary beneficiaries (Gochenour, 2006; Kim et al., 2010). As a by-product of this transition, a ‘digital’ materiality emerges anchoring not only what people do online (i.e., their routine work and practices), but also what is retained of their activities in the form of digital trace data or online remains.

The present work is primarily concerned with the appropriation of such digital traces for understanding the cultural past in the absence of cultural participants. Our interest is two-fold. On the one hand, we are keen to assess the extent to which digital traces can be used to (somehow) revive, recreate or enhance a cultural past, thus offering a novel (digital) material for re-constructing practices of cultural participants. On the other hand, we also seek to understand intrinsic properties of digital traces and (some of) their affordances that ascribe performative capacity (or material agency) to digital technologies.

We approach these issues through the conceptual lenses provided by cyber-archaeology (Jones, 1997; 2003, Harrison, 2009) and remediation (Lanzara, 2010). Cyber-archaeologies constitute a research strand concentrating either on reconstructing and making sense of a past phenomenon or unfolding cultural aspects of social formations enacted in virtual settings. Remediation focuses on how certain practices are aligned and re-aligned to certain (new) media. Combining the two concepts leads to a formative claim, that under certain conditions, activities of a cultural past can be remediated so that they are revived or recreated or enhanced (for future reference) through virtual excavation. On this ground, we then advance a design proposal for imbricating digital materials to make sense of the digital remains of a cultural past in the absence of cultural participants. We concentrate explicitly on digital materials such as cloud services for file-, photo- and video-sharing, Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), client- and server-side digital traces and visualization libraries. At core, the concept proposed is that different digital materials when imbricated (so as to function interdependently) can improve the transformative capacity of representations for the benefits of human intellect. Then, using two case studies, we claim that, as a result of such improved transformative capacity, cultural activities such as threaded discussions and collaborative music making may be revealed and reconstructed (even temporarily) in the absence of the human partners who created them.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section motivates the present research and establishes links with related works and theoretical frames of reference. Then, an attempt is made to justify the need for a method that enables analysis of artificial (social) phenomena through their material remains and develop a design scaffold for building interactive software by imbricating different digital materials. This scaffold is then validated using representative case studies reflecting different social encounters across different virtual settlements. The paper is concluded with a summary of key findings and recommendations for future research.
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