Chapter VII

Digital Petri Dishes: LiveJournal User Icons as a Space and Medium of Popular Cultural Production

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Abstract

Internet applications such as Web-based blogging and instant messaging tools or social networking sites often provide their users with the possibility of displaying small graphic elements. Such “pictures” or “icons” allow users to represent and mutually identify themselves. This text is an analysis of user icons displayed on the LiveJournal blogging site. I treat such a user icon as a medium with particular characteristics and patterns of usage. LiveJournal users use such icons to participate in what John Fiske (1992) calls popular culture. A case study of user icons discloses the life cycle of the media form, during which a medium with initial characteristics coded by its creators begins over time to support a wide variety of uses, innovation in usage, and active participation in culture. In this chapter, I consider user pictures and practices that are tied to them as an example of the manner in which popular culture functions in the digital age.
Introduction

LiveJournal is one of the more popular blogging tools, a Web-based application that allows users to run an online diary or journal. LiveJournal at its nascence was itself a result of user innovation. It was written by a 19-year-old programmer named Brad Fitzpatrick as a tool that would allow him to stay in touch with high school friends after leaving for college. LiveJournal’s user base has been constantly growing and in early September 2005 there were almost 8.2 million registered journals and 1.4 million users who have updated their journal in the preceding month. Although the exact historical data on LiveJournal growth is not readily available, such data is for the purpose of this chapter insignificant, despite the general hype surrounding the growth of blogging. Neither are these numbers quoted to prove the importance of the site, as cultural significance cannot be easily quantified into statistical figures. It is the scale of the phenomenon, which involves hundreds of thousands of Web pages, users, and communities formed by them, that is important. It is the scale of a fair sized city, a size at which any phenomenon must be internally varied and heterogeneous.

As an online publishing system, LiveJournal is a tool that can be used for production, exchange, and reception of cultural content. Furthermore, this content and the interface with which it is produced forms an axis for communication and formation of social associations. LiveJournal’s architecture is designed to support interaction, in particular by enabling the creation of “communities.” These collectively written journals are spaces for discussion, similar to online forums. Each community, treated as a media form, is an anchor for a collective of users that expresses itself in the community’s online space and is commonly thought of as a community as well. Posts and comments are both instances of personal expression and traces of interactions between users. They are shared and public because they have been archived by the system, while other aspects of these interactions remain invisible, as they took place in private spaces and channels or even beyond the Internet. Although LiveJournal is constantly being accessed in the present, its public space has a historical, archival character as it consists of content stored in LiveJournal servers. A community of users communicating through LiveJournal constructs in parallel a community as a media form, a record of own interactions stored as the system’s content.

Defining LiveJournal as a blogging site has its consequences. Blogging is a phenomenon that is a prime example of what Woolgar (2002) calls the cyberbolic social studies of the Internet, based on “…synoptic, top-down (and often unexplicated) depictions of technical capacity and effect” (p. 4). We can instead think of LiveJournal as simply an online infrastructure for publishing content. It is a digital medium primarily designed to support textual communication and to remain open—it has few restrictions or even guidelines regarding the produced
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