Online Friction: 
Studying Sociotechnical Conflicts to Elicit User Experience

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ABSTRACT

This article presents conflicts as a central unit of analysis in investigations of online social media sharing. Social media sharing services generate interesting sociotechnical problems as they often make social structures explicit, resulting in observable user experience conflicts. As such, they also present a genre of services where theories of social structure become highlighted and, at times, challenged. Three examples of conflicts, from three different types of networks, are presented. The conflicts were elicited through online, ethnography-inspired, methods. It is argued that the conceptual conflicts help researchers and designers to postulate, find and examine concerns and intentions of users who try to resolve the conflict or move from one end of the conflict to the other. The article also demonstrates three viable ways to communicate analytical conflict insights, intended to inform interaction design, namely use qualities, analytical dimensions and design patterns. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Conflicts; Discussion Forums; Interaction Design; User Experience

INTRODUCTION

End-users are increasingly discussing their experiences of applications and services in online forums and discussion boards. These experiences can be in the shape of preconceptions, solutions to sociotechnical problems or innovative ideas for development. This article presents an approach to eliciting user experiences (UE) from forum data by emphasizing the conflict as a unit of analysis. Social media sharing is a particularly interesting sociotechnical genre of services and applications, because it often comes to emphasize “hard” social problems. That is, the transition from unmediated to mediated social activities requires many previously vague and implicit social signals to be made explicit (e.g., “are you my friend or not”). This often creates frictions and conflicts, that from a research perspective, form viable and rewarding targets of study in terms of user experiences. These conflicts are sociotechnical in nature as they occur in the intersections between users, the mediating technology and yet other users. As such, the user experience needs to be considered from a sociotechnical perspective. This means to concurrently consider emerging social practices as well as specific design features as these are very interwoven. That is, the conflicts between people, in the context of social media systems, are always mediated by specific design features and thus hard to separate from the related design features themselves. Nevertheless, this article mainly analyzes conflicts between people as a
INTERNET FORUMS AND
USER EXPERIENCE
CONFLICTS

Finding conflicts between individuals, activity details, groups and technology is not a new focus for research into human-computer interaction (HCI), computer-supported collaborative work (CSCW) or interaction design (ID). However, online discussion forums provide a novel source for discovering conflicts and subsequently eliciting user experience and user requirements. As these emerging data sources and accompanying elicitation techniques have only begun to be explored in UE research, and then often in the shape of moderated and prompted “virtual focus groups” (Kuniavsky, 2003), there is great opportunity to examine the viability of such resources and methods for future UE research. This article uses the term UE as an enveloping concept including the overall combined user perceptions of, in this case, social media sharing systems, but more importantly, UE conceptually puts the end-user and his/hers subjective experience at the center of analysis, design and development efforts. UE in the context of social media systems is particularly interesting as the development of systems that mediate social activities, particularly on the massive scale that many current social media systems are, highlight certain social phenomena and social structures in a more clear and marked ways. This often happens as design features sometimes deliberately, sometimes by accident facilitate or bar certain social intentions or concerns.

Internet use is often distributed over and supported by different communication genres (e.g. discussion groups, instant messaging conversations, file sharing, member profiles) and is capable of leaving many ‘traces’. The inclusion of such sources of data in the collection and eventually analysis of social practices can be very rewarding for scientists and designers with an interest in social activities on the net. Forums and discussion boards are becoming a particularly vital and growing source of user experience data. Further, from an end-user perspective, these venues provide rewarding, and sometimes also exclusive, ways to discuss and share opinions about features and uses with temporally and geographically distributed peer users of the same network or application.

The mass of user opinion expressed in internet forums is substantial and continuously growing. As it is a naturally occurring data source that is unprompted by researchers, the level of reported detail can vary. However, the provided information is many times exceptionally detailed. In fact, many forums, directly or indirectly, encourage the expression of in depth opinions and information. For example, a user may express an intention, a social/technical problem causing concerns about the intention and a request for potential solutions. The more detail that is revealed, the less helping users have
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