Chapter 2

Conceptualizing Social Interactions in Networked Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues for the rigid dichotomies between online and offline in current discourse on social interactions to be reconsidered. By identifying that space is produced by the intersection of interactions, it can be said that online and offline narratives are situated relationally rather than dichotomously.

Drawing on the concept of affordances (Gibson, 1977, 1986; Norman, 1988; Hogan, 2009) and the work of Doreen Massey (1994, 2005, 2009), it can be shown that subjects act on perceived affordances in narratives of online and offline relations, which intersect to produce the spaces in which social interactions are situated.

This chapter proposes the concept of “networked spaces” as a strategy for resolving the problematic binary of online and offline. Networked spaces are dynamic, and the contexts or narratives within them, relational. It is through the lived experiences of interactions in these spaces that the contexts of social interactions are suggested to be best examined.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter argues for a blurring of the hitherto rigid dichotomies between the terms online and offline. Early studies of the internet considered online phenomena to be separate to that occurring offline (Sveningsson, 2004; Wellman, 2004), a convention which has not yet been fully overcome given that many more recent studies continue to give little consideration to offline contexts in the studies of online practices (Beer, 2008; Orgad, 2009). By considering how space is produced in the intersection of relations it can be shown how online and offline, while remaining distinct, are not separate but work together to produce the space in which social interactions occur.

Drawing on the concept of affordances (Gibson, 1977, 1986; Norman, 1988; Hogan, 2009) and the work of Doreen Massey (1994, 2005, 2009) it can be demonstrated that subjects act on affordances in narratives of online and offline relations which intersect to produce the spaces in which social interactions are situated. These spaces are neither online or offline specific, but are produced in the intersection of multiple relations across digital and material domains.

BACKGROUND

Digital interactions cannot be considered in isolation from social frameworks (Parikka, 2007). In their study of Trinidadian internet users, Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2000) identify that the internet is in fact embedded within existing social practices (p. 2). They argue that: “we need to treat internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness” (p. 5).

Similarly Lori Kendall (1999) argues that awareness of the offline context of online social interactions is important to the analysis of such interactions (p. 71). While this conclusion has been reached by researchers repeatedly over the past decade, it appears that there is still a continuing inclination to separate online activity to offline (Beer, 2009). There is a historical and disciplinary inclination for online/offline activities to be divided while a synergistic approach is what is required. Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone (2009) argue that the challenge to the discourse of online/offline division is still there to be had (p. 4).

Far from being distinct singular activities, interactions that occur online have synchronistic contexts offline. The relations between synchronistic activities produce the spaces in which social activity is situated. Increasingly then, new media scholars are questioning the strict binary of ‘online’ and ‘offline’. Situating social interactions discursively as online or offline is problematic because people are always one and often both at the same time. I argue that there is a need to reconsider the spatial context and the embodiment of interactions in current discourse to account for this.

Although this chapter seeks to transgress the online/offline divide it does not dismiss or ignore that there is a distinction between online and offline. Taking into consideration existing literature on the internet in everyday life (Haythornwhaite & Wellman, 2002; Bakardjieva, 2005), it seeks to situate the everyday practices of subjects so that the relations between online and offline contexts can be identified. Taking a phenomenological approach enables actions or interactions to be examined in context with attention given to the embodied condition of all interactions. Examining in context means to identify the intersecting relations that also bear on interactions taking place and contribute to producing the space in which interactions are situated.

Space is produced socially (Lefebvre, 1991). Space is an on-going production of spatial relations. It has a symbiotic relation to that which it is produced through: “Social space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced
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