The Social Meanings of Social Networks: Integrating SNA and Ethnography of Social Networking

Rogério de Paula
IBM Research – Brazil
Rua Tutóia 1159, São Paulo, Brazil.
+55 11 2132 3832
depaula@acm.org

ABSTRACT

In this talk, I examine the manifest, emic meanings of social networking in the context of social network analysis and it uses this to discuss how the confluence of social science and computational sociology can contribute to a richer understanding of how emerging social technologies shape and are shaped by people's everyday practices.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4. [**Social And Behavioral Sciences**]: Sociology

General Terms

Human Factors, Measurement.

Keywords

Ethnography, Social Network Analysis, Ethno-mining, Computational Socilogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this talk, I examine the manifest, emic meanings of social networking in the context of social network analysis and it uses this to discuss how the confluence of social science and computational sociology can contribute to a richer understanding of how emerging social technologies shape and are shaped by people's everyday practices. For the past year, I have been investigating the everyday work practices of a large service organization to understand the relationship between formal and informal ways whereby workers accomplish their work, looking particularly into the ways in which they manage and build "work social networks." Prior to this, I conducted a series of studies (ethnographic and otherwise) in the use of social networking system in people's daily life as means to understand the emerging practices around these systems. In other words, I have been particularly interested in understanding the emic meanings of social networking as such practices become increasingly mediated by information and communications technologies (ICT), or more recently, social technologies. These studies in particular revealed that irrespective of the technology, people engaged in highly complex social interactions and practices that resembled more their everyday face-to-face interactions rather than a particular form of "online" interaction stripped off of a local meaning.

This in fact resonates with ethnographic studies of social technologies. Miller & Slater's [6] ethnographic study of the Internet, for instance, shows how people use such technologies to reify traditional social values and practices. On a different note, Friedlander [4] describes how practices of portraiture on social networking sites resemble (and draw upon) the long-standing, traditional practices of self-presentation and identity making that date back thousands of years in the ancient Egypt and more modernly in the XVI Century. Hence, he shows that the same level of social complexities, care, and thoughts of traditional painted portraits carry over to today's self-representation on online social environments. Nafus et al. [7] on the other hand questions the very notion of 'voice' in the ways in which social technologies is often described in business settings, and the qualitative difference between the abstract ways that relationships are 'afforded' on social network sites and how Brazilians actually enacted social networking. In critical terms, technologies were the medium rather the 'enabler' of sociability. As we continue investigating the ways in which the uses (and adoption thereof) of these technologies evolve, we observe the fluidity whereby people appropriate, use, and dispose different technological solutions as means to support distinct social engagements, practices, and values. In so doing, we reflect on this issue as we attempt to reconfigure the ways in which social technologies are designed and ultimately used.

Research on social networking systems (SNS), let alone on social networking, is hardly a new site of investigation. Since late 1990's we have witnessed the rise (and occasionally the fall) of major social network enterprises in the mainstream public arena, such as, SixDegrees, Friendster, Orkut, and Facebook, to name just a few, that enabled the creation new forms of sociality mediated by information and communication technologies. Most notably, Wellman, boyd, and colleagues [2, 3, 5, 9, 10] have examined (ethnographically and otherwise) how social networking sites and technologies are appropriated and used by people as sites of sociability, identify creation and negotiation, and cultural production. In tandem, organizations became increasingly more interested in such "social technologies" to help them address critical, challenging business concerns: namely, internally, workforce and knowledge management, and, outside, customer relationship management. In a thorough review of the literature on social technologies in organizations, Treem and Leonardi [8] properly state that for the most part these studies take an "application focus," that is, they either focus on the effects of particular features on the use of these technologies or on providing insights about how the use of the technology affects particular work practices.

More recently, we have witnessed the reemergence of the field of computational sociology, which make use of computationally intensive methods for modeling and analyzing different kinds of social phenomena. With the widespread use and adoption of social technologies on the Internet, a plethora of 'social' data became available for research examination and scrutiny. This has allowed researchers to employ sophisticated statistical methods so as to investigate, develop, and test a wide spectrum of social theories. Social network analysis, for instance, lies in this field. While this has shown invaluable in describing broader social phenomena, it falls short of enabling researchers and practitioners as well to gain insights on how ordinary people actually interpret and employ social networks in their everyday affairs as a practical problem (as opposed to a conceptual one). In my recently research, I have been particularly interested in the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods that allows to gain deeper, qualitative insights on large quantitative data sets. Inspired by Anderson et al.'s [1] "ethno-mining," I have been investigating ways in which the use of visual representation of large data sets can help us better understand particular social contexts. In this talk, I thus present introduce this methodology as well as some of my recent work that attempts to better understand how the everyday practices of IT service delivery workers. In conclusion, I would like to encourage a debate on the ways that we, researchers, can take advantage of the increasing availability of social data – traces people leave behind on various systems they interact with daily – and our ongoing quest for understanding people's practices, behaviors, and the like.

2. REFERENCES

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3. Short Biography

Rogério de Paula is a research manager at IBM Research – Brazil, leading the Social Enterprise Technologies Group. He is also member of the Center for Social Business at IBM Research. Rogério has over 10 years experience conducting empirical qualitative research in the design, use, and adoption of collaborative technologies. He is particularly interested in models and patterns of social interaction in people's everyday life and work. At IBM, his research focuses on understanding the human aspects of large-scale service practices in order to devise new service models, technologies, and theories to shape and improve its social business solutions. Before joining IBM, he was for 6 years a research scientist at Intel where he conducted ethnographic studies and designed new technologies for the Emerging Markets Platforms Group in Brazil. His research focused on understanding how everyday practices and new media affect the design and adoption of computing technologies. Lately, he led a research and innovation initiative, which aimed of identifying new academic and industry partnership opportunities for Intel Brazil. In 2004/2005, he was a post-doc at University of California Irvine, where he investigated the relationship between privacy and security in people's everyday interaction with technology. He holds a Ph.D. in Computer Science with an emphasis on the social and cultural studies of technology, which investigated the design and adoption processes of a social-networking system.