

USER GENERATED CONTEXTS: THINKING ABOUT CHANGES IN MASS COMMUNICATION IN TERMS OF AGENCY, INNOVATION, TRUST AND RISK

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Abstract

Ongoing structural changes in mass communication affect the agency of the user and their relationship with other users, traditional media and new media. Participants in new mass communications are now actively engaged in generating their own content and contexts of practice. For example, consider Twitter, which is widely available on mobile phones: by carefully selecting who you follow on Twitter, by judiciously responding to requests, by commenting and by feeding in tweets that are germane, it is possible to build a powerful community for professional practice (and of course to build a network for socialisation). This all points to technology mediated agency. Pachler, Bachmair and Cook (2010) view agency as a capacity to act on the world in terms of: formation of identity and subjectivity; where the environment is a potential resource for learning; where different habitus of learning and media attitudes are emerging; and where a new habitus of learning is one of the characteristics of at-risk learners.

The term User Generated Contexts was coined in May 2005 by a small group of researchers called the 'Two Johns' [link 1] that included myself. In an attempt to capture emerging 'new media' agency and practices, i.e. user led innovation, Cook, Pachler and Bachmair (2011, p. 187-188) provide a considered definition of User Generated Contexts:

“users of mobile digital devices are being ‘afforded’ synergies of knowledge distributed across people, communities, locations, time (life course), social contexts, sites of practice (such as socio-cultural milieus) and structures. Of particular significance for us is the way in which mobile digital devices are mediating access to external representations of knowledge in a manner that provides access to cultural resources”.

This definition used as a basis various conceptual considerations, particularly: Giddens' (1984, p. 17) notion that social systems, as reproduced social practices, do not have “structures” but rather exhibit structural properties; Dourish's (2004, p. 6) determination that context cannot be made a priori but is an emergent feature of ‘embodied interaction’, determined in the moment and in the activity, ‘context isn't something that describes a setting’; and what Vygotsky (1978/1930) called a zone of proximal development: “It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential problem solving as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86).

However, I feel that this definition is incomplete because, for example, it misses notions of trust and risk in practice. In this talk I re-examine User Generated Contexts with the goal of providing new

concepts for thinking about ongoing changes in mass communication. My current areas of research focus are illustrated by the two examples below; I will use these to drive my reconsideration of User Generated Contexts.

Example 1: I have recently moved to the Department of Creative Industries and am starting to work with the journalist and broadcasting colleagues. Colleagues have drawn my attention to Storyful (<http://storyful.com/>), which claims to be “the first news agency of the social media age. We help our clients discover, verify and distribute the most valuable content on social media platforms”. News stories can arise through the agency of ‘participatory journalists’ (users) from around the world. But how do innovative media platforms like Storyful deal with trust (e.g. ‘authenticating a source in live blogs’ [link 2]) or risk in the work-place (e.g. ‘the ethics of live-tweeting’ [link 3] or ‘attorney general publishes guidance on Twitter to help prevent social media users from committing contempt of court when commenting on legal cases’ [link 4])?

Example 2: Learning Layers (<http://learning-layers.eu/>) is a large EC co-funded project (FP7 IP) which investigates scaling the use of Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) in workplace informal learning where users have previously been reluctant to use TEL for learning (i.e. Healthcare and Construction). I lead on a work package that explores the co-design for an Opinion/Help seeking tool for Personal and Shared Learning Networks (see Cook, Bannan, Santos, 2013, for detail). The construction of locally trusted Personal Learning Networks involves designing an environment where, for example, Health Sector staff can seek collaborative support by interacting with their peers. As a worker’s (or group’s) trusted connections and confidence grow, I envisage that they could then go on to build what I am calling a Shared Learning Network. Thus the first stage of collaborative work for me is the building, maintaining and activating Personal Learning Networks (trust and risk avoidance are key concepts here). The second stage is where professionals move from local trusted personal networks out into wider networks that can potentially include anyone. For the Opinion/Help seeking tool we have built on the work by Jessen and Jørgensen (2012) and what they call a model of aggregated trustworthiness in which perceived credibility (degree to which we believe the information presented) = social validation (the more people acknowledge a certain piece of information the more trustworthy it is perceived) + profiles (baseline for identity online e.g., LinkedIn profile) + authority and trustee (known brand or authority on the matter e.g. New York Times, but also trustees verifying lesser known sources, e.g. social network ‘friends’). Ethnographic and co-design work with Doctors, Nurses and other Health Professionals has confirmed that trust is important when it comes to seeking opinions and help but that we need to expand conception of trust (a full literature review has been conducted).

I conclude this abstract by proposing a debate in the Symposium around the following new definition of User Generated Contexts, an 'idea' in mobile learning as it were:

Users of new mass communications systems and devices are now actively engaged in generating their own contexts of practice and meaning-making; a key emergent feature being the formation agency in terms of identity and subjectivity. These user led innovations are providing access to external representations of knowledge distributed across people, resources, conversations, trusted and wider networks, communities, locations, time and social contexts. Along with agency, key mediating concepts enabling or hindering the emergence of User Generated Contexts are trust and risk.

References

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Links

1. From Content to Context - a snapshot of our debate, blog post by John Cook, May 2005, <http://twojohns.pbworks.com/w/page/22557825/From%20Content%20to%20Context%20-%20a%20snapshot%20of%20our%20debate>
2. Matt Wells article on Live Blogging, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/mar/28/live-blogging-transforms-journalism>, accessed 18/11/13
3. Trending: The ethics of live-tweeting a break-up, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-24986416>, accessed 18/11/13
4. Social media users warned over court case comments, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-25210867>, accessed 04/12/13