Online Place and Person-Making: Matters of the Heart and Self-Expression

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In recent years, there has been a substantial take up in social software, but other than translating the vocabulary and arranging suitable payment facilities, little or no account is taken of cultural sense-making in the global deployment of these systems. We report on two studies of social software, an online dating site and a social network blog. We show that people need 'places' because it is only there persons can meaningfully be (re)presented. Further, 'cultural' perspectives greatly influence and shape the metaphors and models of communication. In our recommendations, we suggest that multinational participants' metaphors about 'place' should be used as tools-to-think-with rather than be implemented literally, and thereby used to enrich a feature set for global services such as online dating and blogging tools.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a substantial take up in social software, a term that encompasses technologies such as, blogs, wikis, and social networks. For example, as of June 2006, Technorati catalogued approximately 44.1 million blogs. Global companies are providing social software on the basis that "one size fits all", where "all" refers to many, diverse cultures. Other than translating the vocabulary and arranging suitable payment facilities, little or no account is taken of cultural sense-making in the deployment these systems.

In this paper, we report on two separate and unrelated studies of social software that were carried out in a commercial context for a US company with global reach and a long-standing presence in Europe. The studies had clear business objectives aimed at understanding the promotion and payment of services across Europe, which were perceived as understanding the opportunities and potential barriers to their deployment.

The studies showed that consideration needs to be given to making online applications and services more appropriate for multinational users if meaningful relationships in online communities are to be created and fostered. Participants in the studies

directed our thinking by revealing their use of metaphors of place in order to make meaning of their interaction with each other.

In this paper, we reflect on the theory about notions of space and place to show that our findings are perhaps not too surprising. The common sense notions of space and place are conceptually laden and theory has much to contribute. We illustrate that the opportunity to reflect on theory would benefit technology design from the outset.

We begin by describing the two studies, and then we identify issues with the current systems, and illustrate how people make meaning of these environments. We reflect on the theory and show how closer consideration to theory would have benefited the design of such systems. Finally, we recommend a design approach for the development of social software in multicultural settings.

Studies

We discuss two studies, a study of online dating carried out in the UK and Germany, and a study of social blogging carried out in the UK. The studies were performed independently and with business objectives as the focus. Further analysis of the studies revealed how people used metaphors of place to make meaning of the online space.

We begin by outlining the objectives and methods for each study, before we go on to discuss the findings.

Online Dating Study

The overall objective of this project was to gain a better understanding of the goals and perceptions of an online dating site's users to improve the conversion of profilers to subscribers, and thereby, increase subscription rates to the online dating service. Specifically, we were asked to investigate the billing process as a potential source for improvement, given the different styles of payment known to be preferred in different European countries.

We made 12 home visits in the UK and 10 home visits in Germany. The home visits involved an in-depth interview and a walkthrough of the site. The interviews consisted of detailed questions about participants' experiences with online dating as well as their approaches to meeting people in more traditional ways.

Our findings revealed no major problems with the billing process per se, but outlined issues with the provision and placement of subscriber and billing related information. We identified a variety of key themes for positioning and information design on-site, but for this paper, the findings will focus primarily on themes of place-ness and self-expression.

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Social blogging study

The objectives of this project were to understand the most relevant marketing messages and propositions for a social blogging service in UK, France and Germany, and to gain feedback on the design and functionality in these countries. We use the term social blog because the service was effectively a blog and a social network combined, where the user could invite friends to look at their blog and to become part of their social network.

Fieldwork was carried out in the UK initially and consisted of 6 preliminary in-home interviews with participants in order to gain an understanding of the context of their home environment and their relationships with friends and family. We also probed on their relationship to technology in general and communications technology in particular. They were given a set of tasks to complete which included setting up a page on the site and inviting friends and family to connect with them over a period of three weeks. They were also asked to keep a diary, which they were asked to submit online at weekly intervals. We monitored their pages and diaries, and followed up on any problems they encountered using the site. We completed final interviews with 5 participants (one participant having dropped out). Participants attended a final interview to discuss their experience of using the product.

Subsequent to the fieldwork activities, we held two focus groups, each with between 8 and 10 participants. The objective was to bring together a wider sample of people to experience the product and to gauge their initial reactions before and after introducing the product. The focus groups were also used to test initial messaging propositions.

Interim analysis was carried out at each stage so feedback from one activity informed the questions we asked at the next stage. We concluded the UK research having identified 6 propositions with the results of their evaluation, and a set of product design recommendations. The fieldwork in France and Germany was delayed.

Findings

In the dating study, people made comparisons with their favoured sites and used metaphors of place to explain the differences.

> *Michelle (UK) felt that the competitor site helped to create a playful environment. She says that the site's communication options, coupled with its overall look makes her feel as if she has entered a warm and welcoming café where she is free to meet people, flirt and make friends. She is allowed to be as serious or as playful as she likes.*

> *Katrin (DE) explains: "I like [a competitor site] better because there is more user action, it's a lively place."*

The overall sense was that an online dating site needs to be perceived as a lively place to meet people rather than a large database of daters.

The rituals and behaviours surrounding romantic encounters may be altered but not completely abandoned when people decide to meet potential partners using the internet. For example, many of the women participants expected men to approach them and to pay for any expense involved. For example it was suggested that only men should pay for the subscription fee to the site.

> *Jonathan (UK) says he is old fashioned and likes to treat women and pick up the bill for dinner and he is happy to make the first move.*

Participants wanted a way to express interest which is open to interpretation and entails less emotional commitment on the part of the giver. Analogies might be extended eye contact, or with more commitment, buying someone a drink. Participants wanted to know that their expression of interest had reached the other person. As expressions of interest were generally expected of men, men said they expected a sense of politeness, specifically in rejection. Participants expected some form of courting, though the length of time expected varied.

Ways of enacting these rituals need to be possible for romantic encounters to take place partly on a site, or else people take these activities offline as soon as they can. The activities are subtle and culturally nuanced, and consideration needs to be given to the form of technology proposed, rather than bluntly implementing the facility to ask someone out.

Cultural perspectives also had a role to play. People wanted to interact in places in which they could be social but the UK and Germany also highlighted subtle differences. UK participants seemed to have a more casual and relaxed attitude to going out, whereas German participants adopted a more serious approach. For example, UK participants would be happy to meet up with someone for a coffee and to see how it went, whereas German participants preferred an encounter to be recognized as a potential relationship under assessment. A further example was given by German participants' acceptance of the formality imposed by pre-written messages and e-mail only contact, whereas UK participants wanted more room to flirt and communicate, offered say by integrated chat facilities. In addition, from previous research that looked at dating terminology and therefore local perceptions of dating in social life, we had learned that the Germans preferred 'dating' terms that took on a more purposeful tone.

The profile is generally understood as the primary way to represent oneself on the dating site and as a result, took on significant importance for the participants. All participants agreed that completing a questionnaire, which was the current facility provided, was not easy, enjoyable, or particularly representative.

> *Regine (DE) explains, "I find it hard to describe myself; you feel different everyday and people always see you differently."*

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> *Konrad (DE) describes the free text as a challenge because "it's the only way to present you and stick out of the mass." Konrad said: "I needed two evenings, because I wanted to do it right."*

> *Toby (UK) completely rewrote his profile 3 or 4 times and changed his picture(s) a few times as well. He wanted to make the profile 'look active'. He feels women seem to find it a bit odd when he is honest about saying he is 'looking for love' in his profile, even though this is what they want also. A standard question he is often asked by women on dates is 'do you think I am like my profile?'*

Participants wanted innovative ways within the system to present themselves.

> *Terry (UK) wanted to change the look and feel of his profile, such as the colour scheme.*

> *Marlon (DE) took a photo a certain way but the dating site had changed it.*

The issues of honesty and trust were important factors and some participants intentionally left out information about themselves in order to increase the chances of meeting people. Nadine (UK) did not disclose her Multiple Sclerosis and Rose (UK) never talked about her "body type". So clearly strategic choices are made, but the profiles themselves provided the medium for clear and honest representation. Dishonesty is not so much perceived as problematic, but as natural behaviour:

> *"I think you are as honest as you are in real life, when you meet someone. You show your personality step by step" said Katrin (DE).*

> *As Regine (DE) explains: "You build your own image in your head while communicating online which often differs from reality."*

In the social blogging study, participants related to the space as something they would like to envision as their "own space" or "own piece of the web" or "my place online". The space itself appears to be representative of them, and participants used metaphors of place to explain this. Participants talked about it being like their living room or sitting room where they could invite people to come and hear their ideas or look though their music, films, books and comment about what they see.

> *Kingsley clearly articulated this when he said, "My web site, my issues, my music, my design, my life. See, interact, download, chat".*

Interestingly, in the focus groups, the proposition of an online living room did not appeal.

> *They said, "it suggests you spend all your time online", "it is not a viable alternative" and "rings of geek".*

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So the literal translation of a space that resembles a living room would not be appropriate; it was clearly a sense of place rather than the place itself that needs to be conveyed.

In order to make this feel like their own space, participants wanted the ability to customize and personalize the space to represent their own personality. The ability to create an environment and to change the look and feel was seen as very important to their sense of ownership.

> *James asked if it was possible to change the colours and customize it to be more like your own space to express your personality. He said, "It would be like painting your living room a different colour. You can always have more things that make it feel like you own personal space. If you come there and it is very bland it gives the impression that the person is bland. It's not like everyone's living room is the same."*

They compared it with other sites that allowed them to change colours and hide unwanted or unused features.

Participants raised privacy issues. They wanted a place that they could control access to and make parts of it accessible to different people at different times.

> *Jim said, "I would not share photos of my nights out with his parents, but I probably would not share family holidays with my friends."*

In summary, from these studies we are able to identify the following themes. People refer to spaces in which they interact with others online by using metaphors of place. Rituals and behaviours are altered but not abandoned in the online environment and the subtlety of these rituals needs to be considered to understand the type of features needed. Cultural perspectives were apparent in people's attitudes to dating and these impacted directly on the communication features required. People wanted personalized ways to represent themselves and features that supported self-expression.

Reflection on Prior Work and Theory

When we compared our findings with the previous literature on online dating and blogging we found little evidence that people raised the importance of place-making and online identity 'creation'. Fiore and Donath (2004) present a survey of the current styles of online personals but do not raise the issue of place-making or the importance of the online environment for adequate expression of user's sense of self. Terveen and McDonald (2005) present a research agenda for social matching. From work in cooperative interaction, they say that developing real, trusting relationships requires that "people must be able to see and understand past actions of others and must have the expectation that their current actions will be visible in the future". They suggest an approach in which users are dynamically

clustered into ephemeral groups but these groups are linked to one or more closely related persistent social places.

From a technical perspective, research on blogs has looked at exploring how blogs connect with each other (Herring et al 2005a, Kumar et al 2004), how information travels through the blogosphere (Gruhl et al. 2004), blogger demographics and the types of content prevalent in blogs (Herring et al., 2004). From a social perspective, research has looked into the reasons people blog (Gumbrecht 2004, Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht 2004, Nardi et al. 2004, Reed 2005), the nuances of conversations (Lilia & Aldo, 2004), the nature and content of blog posts (Bar-Ilan 2004), and the blog lifecycle (Gurzick & Lutters 2006).

Even though previous studies of the immediate settings reveals little reference to the notion of place and issues of emergent identity construction within those places, e.g. personalizing the blog space, we chose to explore theoretical writing that could be relevant.

The attention to 'place-making' has a long tradition in anthropology (see e.g. the recent collections of Bender 1993, Feld & Basso 1996, Hirsch & O'Hanlon 1995, Gupta & Ferguson 1997). On the whole, anthropologists have argued that it is more than just the cultural imagination or the phenomenological experience of people that 'make places'. Particularly they stress that other powerful interests, both political and economic, are involved in the continual process of the construction of 'place'.

For our purposes, we took Ingold's theorizing about landscape (1993) and Gupta & Ferguson's (1999) concept of place-making as our starting points. Ingold conceptualises landscape as a taskscape that is a network of the interconnections of the activities, while Gupta and Ferguson draw attention to the ongoing process of generating perceptions of location, and the relationships within and between them. Whether these locations are imagined or geophysical, people are using spatial metaphors to describe them.

We suggest that 'place' is the area around a person within which that person can meaningfully interact. 'Place' is around subjects who create social relationships that allow behavioural framing that is familiar, where as 'space' is about objects and their spatial relationships. We base this on Husserl's idea that "every experience has its own horizon" (1973:32). This means that place is constituted not only by the visual constraints with which we can see, but as much by the possible trajectories of what we can do. In spaces, meaning is attached to things, and in 'places' it is gathered from them (Ingold 1993:155). In other words, in spaces one can relate only to the objects within them, but in places one can have a connection to the whole.

Furthermore, anthropological reports suggest that the vision of 'space' as a fixed, objectifiable and measurable description of a surface, not affected by the project of its representation and remembrance (see e.g. Küchler 1993) is particular to Western Euro-American thought. Further, even in Western Euro-America, it is the dominant discourse

(Lefebvre 1991, Kirby 1991) rather than the experiences of people (Ortlieb 2000, Hine 2000).

We believe that humans experience the environment not as a 'blank slate', but rather as a structured set of affordances in the context of current action whether this is in a 'virtual' or 'real' setting. The meaning that allows activity is gathered from the surrounding objects (Tuan 1977, Ingold 1993, Casey 1996). Through attaching meaning, space becomes place (Harrison & Dourish 1996:69).

We believe online communication spaces are about social relationships, and we need to consider a sense of place if people are to create meaning within them. Judging from both the theoretical writing and our own data, we conclude that 'virtual spaces' may be not grounded by tangible sensory experiences, but instead that people can only act in 'places' whether these actions are accompanied by those tangible sensory experiences or not.

As online services and activities become embedded in people's lives (Reed 2005, Herring et al 2005b, The Economist 22/5 2006), our data suggests that the distinction between the 'real' and the 'virtual' online worlds is becoming less pronounced for its partakers, co-creators and participants. Recent theoretical writing was concerned with the difference (see e.g. Haraway 1985, Carrier 1998, Miller 2000) between the two spheres, but we saw users merging their online and offline experience realms for the imagination, construction and understanding of their and others' identities (see Wellman & Haythornthwaite 2002). We argue against such an ontological separation (see e.g. Reid 1995, Turkle 1995, Rheingold 1993)[1].

Data in the anthropological literature implies that if a re-configuration of spatial relations has been made possible by the spread of information and communications technologies around the world, then this is as much about the interplay between the experience, imagination and political-economic construction of physical space as it is about 'digital space' – or, rather, they are probably both part of the same thing" (Green et al. 2005:806). Our findings therefore support recent theorising about identity construction[2] which depicts identity not as fixed and stable, but as emerging from the self-representations in specific contexts (Ewing 1990, Lutz 1988)[3].

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[1] This is supported by Slevin who criticises them for "cordon[ing] off these forms of association from the real world. Rheingold refers to them as self-defined electronic networks; Reid regards them as an alternative virtual world where social boundaries have become deconstructed; [and] Turkle sees them as occupying a space that we can only reach by a ladder which we must later disregard" (Slevin 2000: 107).

[2] We treat the analytical concepts of 'the person', 'the self' and 'the individual' as different dimensions, or aspects, of identity (see LaFontaine 1985, Poole 1991, Whittaker 1992)

[3] Ewing (1990) stresses the organisation, contextualisation and negotiation of *multiple* self-representations: Selves – as an expression of identity – are inseparable from context. Lutz's cross-cultural studies of emotion (1988) emphasise the emergent and *contested* natures of identities and emotions. It does not reveal a concern with boundaries and oppositions, but rather a social forging of emotions as cultural (de-essentialised) experience.

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Persons are thus not essential individuals, but fluid entities that construct and negotiate various identities according to changing situations and contexts (Goldstein & Rayner 1994, Kellner 1992). According to our findings, we should view identities generally as rhetorical assertions, framed by linguistic conventions, which we narrate and perform for each other. "Evolution of identity …does not mean absolute self-control, but the establishment of a communicative relationship between the person and the world" (Joas 1997:243).

Nonetheless, we need to be aware of the genres in which imaginations of identities find expression. In our case we mean both the Internet and the online interactive communication environments in which we conducted our studies as well as the specific offline (cultural) environments that shape the perspectives through which users construct (online) aspects of their identities (see Miller & Slater 2000). "Each of us experiences a wide variety of …ideological hailings, calling us to different social identities. The way we react to these hailings makes us what we are and locates us in the world" (Tierney 1996:20).

Behaviour online is therefore shaped by behavioural forms and conventions that exist offline and that represent cultural perspectives, so we can expect cultural differences in these behaviourally framed places. In other words, culture bears on online place-making behaviour[4]. We mentioned above that people can only meaningfully act in places, and those places are shaped by behaviour. It is not surprising, therefore, that we found in our studies that people make meaning by using metaphors of place.

Our reflections on theory illustrate that people need to have creative input into their environments to make themselves feel at home in their environments. In this way, the environment is shaped, acted upon, made into a place, and in such a setting, people can develop their identity. Neither place nor identity is ever fully finished; the control sought is not about fixing either, but about the kinds of changes effected on them.

Even though we only carried out studies of two particular products in the social software category, the theory suggests that perhaps we can extend our findings more broadly to other products and to other types of product within the social software category. However, to be clear, we are not saying that people do not make meaning from social software currently. After all, people compared the products we studied with the competitor products that they preferred. What we are saying is that products are more likely to be successful if they support meaningful behaviour and if people are able to construct a more appropriate sense of self.

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[4] It would lead too far to discuss the literature and discourse on the concept of 'culture'. For purposes of this paper, we view culture as repeated behavioural patterns by different actors in specific locations. We refer to Brumann (1999), Gerholm (1993), Brightman (1995) for further reading about 'culture' and the discourse about it in anthropology.

Designing the Online Place Rather than the Online Space

Given the understanding that people can only meaningfully act in places that they can shape and develop their identity, the issue becomes how we design for this. We know that developing a spatially-organised system does not inherently support meaningful behaviours, and so do our findings inform design?

From our data and the theory, we propose that the metaphors that people use about 'places', and the ways people interact with them, could help to inform the design of social software. Our approach is to use the metaphors as tools-to-think-with and not to take these metaphors literally. People do not mean they want a system that embodies a lively café online. People want aspects of a café that makes it conducive to meeting people and where they can (re)present themselves. For example, people want an environment with a sense of liveliness, with the possibility to "bump into" people they do not know, to indicate they are interested in another and perhaps the opportunity to chat. It is important to remember that people refer to the place-ness and not the space-ness of a 'café'. The focus groups reflected this view in the social blogging study. When we proposed the social blog as an "online living room", one participant said, it "rings of geek". The metaphors of place should be used to define particular attributes and communication features for a system.

We could adopt several approaches to the deployment of the system. Given the influence of culture, one approach would be to develop specific solutions for particular markets. Pragmatically, this is not on the agenda for global organisations, though one could argue that it should be. An alternative approach – and the one we propose – is to create a global toolkit from which users can select or even develop the features they find most appropriate. This approach has several benefits.

A global toolkit would act as an enabler, to give people the opportunity to create their own places and express their own identities in a variety of ways. It would support the representation and interaction differences exhibited by individuals and sub-cultures. It would also support the cultural transitions people are making. For example, in the two studies, even though people were recruited in either the UK or Germany, some of the participants had relocated in recent years from France, Poland, Nubia and Angola.

A global toolkit would also open up the possibility of enabling new behaviours to emerge. The tools we use shape our sense of self, whether digital or in the wider environment (Turkle 1995). No doubt the forms of courtship pursued online and offline are shaped by the facilities people have available. Given new possibilities, different sub-cultures might adopt different feature sets and create different types of place.

In summary, we propose that designers use metaphors of place to identify features that support the nuanced behaviour supported by places, and to build those features into a global toolkit to enable people to use them as they want to create a sense of identity.

Conclusion

In this paper we report on two studies of social software, an online dating site and a social network blog. We show that people need 'places' because only there persons can meaningfully be (re)presented. Online dating sites need to consider how people represent themselves to others. Social blogging sites need to provide features and tools to customise spaces and enable people to create **personal** places to which they can invite their friends, the metaphorical "living room." Further, 'cultural' perspectives greatly influence and shape the metaphors and models of communication. Given prior theoretical work in this area, our findings are perhaps no surprise, although previous studies of online dating and blogging do not report them.

In our recommendations, we suggest that multinational participants' metaphors about 'places' should be used as tools-to-think-with rather than be implemented literally, and thereby used to enrich a feature set for global services such as online dating and blogging tools.

This paper aims to offer three contributions to the EPIC community:

1. To provide a case study of social software in an international context
2. To show that common sense notions of space and place are conceptually laden and that subtlety of listening is required in the work that we do in order to fully appreciate the implications of such subtlety
3. To illustrate the connection between theory and practice

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