Residency Report

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Introduction

Between the 28.06.-01.08.2009 and the 16.08.-22.08.2009 I visited Richard Rogers and the Digital Methods Initiative within the framework of an ATACD residency. The residency was scheduled to coincide with four weeks of the Digital Methods Initiative Summer School. The wider objectives of my residency were to get training in the research approach of the Digital Methods Initiative, to explore the possibilities of using digital research tools for economic sociology, to link a topological approach to the study of brand/consumer interactions and to investigate the possibilities of visualising and mapping heterogeneous research finings. The framework of the residency has been my current PhD research project "The productivity of brands. Issues, Subjects and Gender in co-creative brand management" supervised by Celia Lury and Angela McRobbie. Within this project I am investigating in the social and economic implications of brand management strategies that are based on the active participation of consumers. Core element of the project is the empirical analysis of three case studies by using multiple sociological and digital research methods. As brands increasingly use the Internet and its interactive social media platforms to involve consumers in co-creative campaigns, it was crucial for my project - but also for wider activities around measurement and value happening at Goldsmiths - to explore the possibilities of digital research methods.

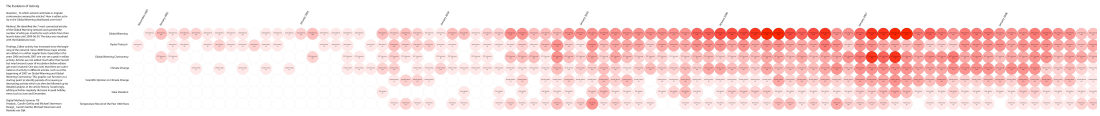
Digital Methods Summer School

My residency allowed me to take part in four weeks of the 3rd Digital Methods Summer School. The workshop-based summer course was organised alongside four key topics, each providing the framework for one week. The topics of the 2009 summer school were: media-formats, Wikipedia as a space for controversy, repurposing Google for Internet research as well as digital methods to study the Internet archive. The overall idea of digital methods is to study societal and cultural conditions via the Web by engaging with its medium specific devices (Rogers 2009). These medium-specific devices at the same time structure how Internet users can engage with particular spaces and how particular issues can be shaped within them. Throughout each week several empirical projects explored the possibilities of digital research methods in relation to the week's topic. Hence, participants got the possibility to work together with more experienced digital researchers, to organise and finish small empirical research projects and to learn about the approach and tools of digital methods by engaging with them.

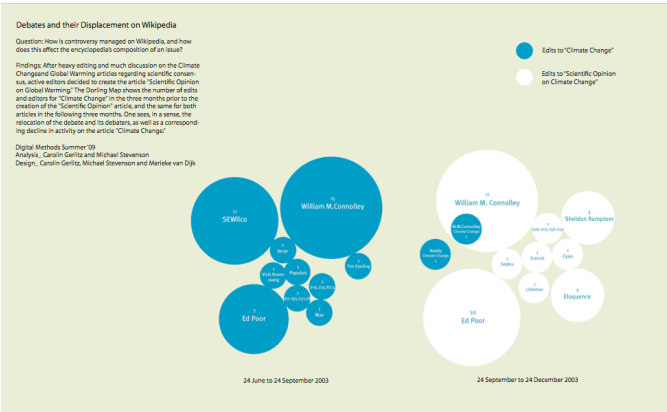
During the summer school I have been involved in four research groups:
1. Iran Crisis Platform Resonance Analysis
2. The Place of Issues- According to Editors and Edits
3. Nationality of Issues

4. Tracing And Mapping The Evolution Of The Early Blogosphere With The Internet Archive

Exemplarily I would like to summarise the results of the project "The Place of Issues (according to their edits and editors)" on which I worked with Michael Stevenson. The project inquired the composition of issues on Wikipedia by contributors, and consequences for the possibility of carrying out public debate and controversy by looking at articles around Global Warming. Using link analysis, we mapped a network (or ecology) of articles surrounding Global Warming, and performed further analysis on a number of significant articles within it. In particular, we were interested in activity measures for highlighting where in the network debates (might) take place, as well as activity measures over time, in order to discover whether debates had moved from one article to another.



The above visualization show the editing activities of the key articles in the article network over a period of several years. At first instance the bubble line appears to indicate generic Wikipedia editing trends, such as the overall increase over the years, or the relative decrease in activity in the months of June and December, as well as an 'incubation' period between an article's creation and its maturation, with initial editing and a period of inactivity followed by more regular editing. More importantly for the analysis at hand, however, the heat map may be used to signal significant moments in Wikipedia's 'management' of the issue of Global Warming. For example, the high levels and subsequent decline of activity for the Global Warming and Global Warming Controversy articles in the first half of 2007 correspond to edit wars and the 'protection' of both articles (where protection refers to varying degrees of disallowing edits). Meanwhile, the creation of the article Scientific Opinion on Climate Change in September 2003 was followed by a decline in activity in the articles Global Warming and Climate Change.



Additionally, we were interested in the issue commitments of individual editors - the various Wikipedia contributors highly active within the larger Global Warming network. Do editors stick to a single article, or do they have preferred sets of articles? Such preferences would perhaps make it possible to 'profile' articles within the larger network, and offer a way to track the movement of debates across articles. Might the activity of a group of editors across a number of articles indicate a coordinated effort, or perhaps a particular distribution of the debate? The full results of this as well as of the other projects can be viewed here: http://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/ThePlaceOfIssues

Topology & brand value

Attending the summer school and taking part in this and other research projects allowed me to familiarise myself with digital methods and to explore their use for my own research. To elaborate on this, let me start with the role of topology for studying co-creative branding practices. Within my research I argue that the co-creation of brand value is not only based on social interactions between the brand and consumers or between consumers themselves, but also on spaces and complex topologies that structure and frame this co-creative sociality. Drawing on topology, the mathematical discipline focused on the study of spatial properties of continually deforming objects, allows for introducing space as a frame for action in brand management and allows for arguing that the co-creation of brand values is based on social interactions fostered across spaces. Celia Lury and Liz Moor understand topology in relation to DeLanda as "the study of structural invariance under deformation" (Lury and Moor 2010). They claim that a topological approach considers spaces as embedded in dynamic relations rather than fixed properties.

The topological space that brings a brand into being and that is brought into being by brands is constituted by the numerous touch-points at which consumers can engage with the brand, engage with each other or negotiate their idea of the brand, for instance a flagship store, brand events, the company website, factories, headquarters, encounters with brand communication in the media, with the owner/management of a company or spaces where consumers use the products of brands such as clubs or bars. These spaces are not discrete but deeply interlinked with each other. They form a set of nested spaces, or a continuum how DeLanda (2002) would call it, that is constantly reconfigured. The spaces resemble each other, link to each other and have the capacity to create connections to new spaces outside of the set. On the one hand there are spaces that are created and controlled by corporations such as the flagship stores, headquarters and corporate websites. On the other hand there are environments that have not been set up by brands but provide platforms to discuss, purchase, use or negotiate brands such as clubs, social media, news-sphere or blogs. The brand, but also the population of consumers and other stakeholders, circulate through these spaces at different speed, engage with the space or with each other and are affected just as they affect the spaces themselves.

In this dynamic setting the resonance between the individual spaces are not fixed but are constantly reshaping in relation to each other. With the resonance between two spaces I am referring to their qualitative relation to each other, the way they resemble each other and the way an action in space one affects space two. Especially controversial events can reconfigure the order of spaces and the resonance between them. They can unleash the virtual capacities of the brand and reshape the topology through processes of contraction, bringing certain spaces closer together and expansion, making them more distant.

Each of these spaces can further be considered as affective in the sense Massumi (2002) as they engage consumers in processes of entanglement and mutual affection in which the brand, social relationships and the spaces both affect and are affected. The surfaces of the spaces and the way people interact with it define the space/medium-specific affective capacities: The way a store is designed, how the staff encounters consumers, which people are attracted and what kind of emotional atmosphere is created. This also applies to spaces that are not created by brands, such as social media. The way Twitter enables particular

forms of communication, interaction and socialisation is defined by its design, the program code of its interface and the ongoing collective dynamics of the active users.

To sum up, from a topological perspective brands are evolving alongside multiple vectors which are shaped not only by a population of n-stakeholders, but also by the n-dimensional spaces in which they interact with each other.

3. Digital Methods for research on brands

The main objective of using digital methods for tracing consumer/brand interactions is to trace and map consumer interactions in Web spaces and to make sense of the endless and numerous comments, links, images, posts and conversations in relation to brands online. Within this cross-spherical analysis I have tried to identify the key actors that shape the debate around the brand and analyse the content of the debate. These spaces comprise: the social bookmarking platform Delicious, blogo- and news-sphere, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Youtube as well as the corporate websites of my case studies and their co-operating partners. The preliminary results have shown that there are different spaces for different debates in relation to particular brands. In the case of *American Apparel*, the blogosphere was more interested in products and so called "hot and slutty adverts" whereas in the news-sphere business reports and immigration policies found more resonance. Within Twitter new jobs at *American Apparel* as well as an interest in the advertising imagery of the company mainly informed the tweets, whereas Flickr seemed to be the space for consumer based re-negotiation of the *American Apparel* advertising campaign. The use of digital research methods has allowed tracing a number of issues that are related to the case studies and their circulation across spaces. It was possible to investigate the speed at which particular issues and posts resonate in communities, as for example the massive resonance of the *American Apparel* job announcement on Twitter.

My involvement in digital methods also allowed my to critically asses and discuss corporate approaches to study brand/consumer interactions online, especially social media research. The increasing mainstreaming of social media has fostered a rising research demand in business which aims at quantifying and clustering consumers' qualitative activities as "within social media, people's discourse leaves a digital trail, making it available as a way to infer how people order their environment." (Bentwood 2009, 6). The objective of corporate social media research is therefore to explore what consumers do and say across multiple spaces online, how they discuss and engage with brands, which particular topics and issues attract their attention and how online social dynamics are structured. For this purpose I have studied corporate social media metrics, buzz- and influencer research which all trace the formation of issues/brands across multiple spaces and actors. Despite the numerous interfaces and tools developed, corporate social media research can mainly be described as tool-assisted manual analysis as the final results are based on the content analysis skills of the researcher. Social media measurement tools can further be considered to have a post-representational quality (Thrift 2007) as they produce the very brand value they attempt to research, just as they constitute the spaces they want to map. This does not mean that social media research becomes purely self-referential and is measuring a value that it has produced itself, but that it has a performative dimension to it. Social media research tools generate insights

into consumers' activities, believes and social interaction. These information function as a feedback loop as they give direction for consumer centered further brand development. Further, social media research is not only concerned with measuring the current meaning of a brand, but is also projecting its future, tracing potentially valuable issues, actors or spaces that might become important at a later point in time. Overall one can argue that there is a strong but immanent focus on the virtual in social media research, on detecting and unleashing virtual potentialities of brands.

Conference presentations

The involvement with both digital research methods and topology has led to several conference presentations. First, I have presented a paper on the impact of social media research on what counts as worth and value at the *Evaluation Practices in Art Worlds* conference at the WZB in Berlin in November 2009. Secondly, I gave a paper on topology for the study of co-creative branding at the *Changing Cultures, Cultures of Change* conference in Barcelona in December 2009. And finally I have been invited to present my use of digital methods at the Digital Methods Initiative mini-conference in Amsterdam in January 2010 and will develop a proposal for the *Affective Fabrics in Digital Cultures: feelings, technologies, politics* conference at the University of Manchester.

To conclude, I would consider the residency as successful but also incredibly inspiring for further work as my engagement with both topology and digital methods has opened up new directions for my own work, but also for overall projects happening at Goldsmiths.

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