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FORMATION AND OPERATION OF A BLOGGING COMMUNITY: A STRUCTURATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Blogging is popular. It has emerged as a formidable phenomenon that not only draws massive daily following but also shifts the paradigm of human interaction. As a new communication genre, blogging has no specific governing bodies to manage the entity. This raises interesting questions on how is a blogging community being formed and how does it function. Founded on Structuration Theory, this paper applies the concepts of structure and agency as well as signification, legitimation, and domination to explain the formation and operation of a blogging community. The framework is valuable in serving as the basis for understanding how rules and practices are produced and reproduced to govern smooth functioning and operation of a virtual blogging community.

Keywords: Blogging, Structuration Theory, Structure, Duality, Social Networking

Introduction

Blogging is popular. It has emerged as a formidable global phenomenon that draws massive daily following. According to technorati.com, a search engine that tracks blogs, since 2002, it has indexed 133 million blog records. About one million blogs are being created everyday in 81 different languages [13]. Blogpulse.com [7], another blog tracker, identified over 107 million blogs as of October 12, 2009 and reported that 70,663 new blogs were added within the last 24 hours.

With blogs, sharing and publishing of ideas, opinions, and thoughts become almost effortless. Everyone seems willing to assume the role of writers or journalists as well as that of listeners, freely expressing, communicating, sharing, collaborating, debating, analyzing, and reflecting ideas, opinions, emotions, and thoughts online. From the teenager next door to the grandmother down the road, from the hairstylist at the corner shop to the professor in a university, from an ordinary citizen to the premier in office, all are riding the wave of writing and reading blogs. Apparently, blogging is becoming a mainstream communication and interaction medium that permeates every inch of our society and defies

limitations of gender, age, and professions.

With virtually no designated governing authority on blogs, questions many are interested in knowing are how is a blogging community being formed, how does it function, how are rules and practices being enforced, etc. This paper uses Structuration Theory as the theoretical framework to explore the questions above. Specifically, it applies the concepts of structure and agency as well as signification, legitimation, and domination to the formation and operation of a blogging community.

Structuration Theory

Introduced by Anthony Giddens [4], Structuration Theory is a meta-theory that focuses on understanding the relationship between individuals (i.e., human agency) and society (i.e., structure). According to this theory, human agency and structure do not constitute separate realities. Rather, they form a “mutually constitutive duality” [8, p. 129] where human agents constantly draw on structure when they act, and at the same time, human actions will help to produce and reproduce the structure. This interplay between human agency and structure enables dynamic evolvement of both entities.

Structure

Structures are rules and resources that human agents draw on to direct their formation of meanings and beliefs, and guide their interpretations and actions. Giddens [4] differentiates between rule of social life and formulated rule. The former refers to “techniques or generalizable procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social practices” while the latter is “codified interpretations of rules rather than rules as such” [4, pp. 17-23]. As for resources, Giddens distinguishes between allocative and authoritative resources. Allocative resources are “transformative capacity generating commands over objects” while authoritative resources are “transformative capacity generating commands over persons or actors” [4, p. 33].

Since structure is made up of rules and resources, it may enable one’s actions. At the same time, it may also constrain one’s activities. When

functioning in a social setting, human agents draw on three types of structure: signification, domination, and legitimation. These three structures mediate three types of interaction (i.e., communication, power, and sanction) via three

modalities (i.e., interpretive scheme, facility, and norm). Figure 1 depicts the relationships between structure and human interaction through the mediation of modality.

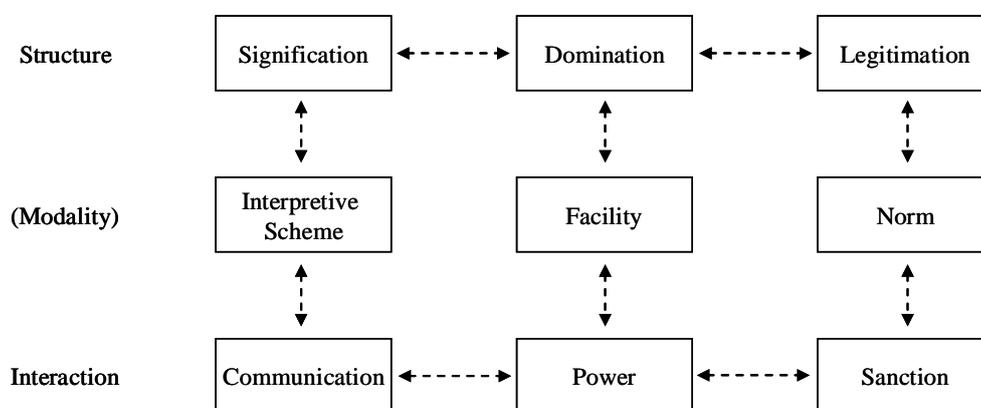


Figure 1: Duality of Structure (adapted from [4, p. 29])

Structure of signification informs human agents about the role of each individual in a social setting. It consists of rules, assumptions, and knowledge that define human interaction and assist human agents in making sense of on-going activities around them. The extent to which structure enables and constrains human interaction is exercised through interpretive schemes. In daily interaction, human agents draw on shared meanings from the structure of signification. At the same time, their interaction will produce and reproduce the structure of signification.

Structure of domination conveys message about the power a human agent holds in a social setting. During interactions, human agents draw on the structure of domination to exercise their power. This is possible through the use of facility that provides power over the control of material products and people. Since power is mobilizable and transformable, in the process of interaction, human agents will produce and reproduce the structure of domination.

Structure of legitimation defines appropriate behavior in a social setting. It consists of norms that human agents draw upon during interaction to sanction their own and others' conducts. Hence, norms are made up of rules or standards of morality that govern legitimate conducts. In the process of sanctioning their actions, human agents produce and reproduce the structure of legitimation.

The separation of structure into three dimensions of signification, domination, and legitimation is only for analytical purposes [4]. In practice, these dimensions are highly interdependent. Every time human agents interact

with one another, they draw on existing understanding, resources available, and norms to help them define and shape their current instance of interaction. These processes constantly produce new structure and modify existing structure.

Human Agents

According to Giddens [4], human agents are knowledgeable beings. When interacting with others, they constantly watch their own actions and monitor the behaviors of others. They will also reflect on instances of interaction with others to make necessary changes to their subsequent actions. Even though human agents act with certain intended outcomes, their actions may bring about unintended consequences. Therefore, the production and reproduction of an accepted behavior by human agents in a social setting may uphold desirable manners. At the same instant, the process may also promote unwanted behaviors.

A Structural Framework of Blogging Community

The following applies the concepts of human agents and structure to the blogging phenomenon. It describes different groups of human agents that exist in a blogging environment. It also discusses the structure of the blogging environment.

Human Agents in a Blogging Environment

In the blogging environment, the primary role human agents hold is that of a blogger. Bloggers, in general, can be categorized into three groups based

on the level of activity in reading and writing blogs, (see Figure 2). The first group is “active players”. Active players regularly read and write blogs. They often write their own thoughts and opinions online. At the same time, they frequently provide commentary on others’ blogs. Even though active players may write and read individual blogs, their focus leans towards community blogs where there is high level of interaction among bloggers.

The second group is “passive on-lookers”. Passive on-lookers frequently read blogs. However, they neither write their own blogs nor comment on others’ blogs. Their goal of reading blogs is to extract and gather information. At times, passive on-lookers may treat blog reading as an entertaining activity and do so for the fun of reading what has been written by others.

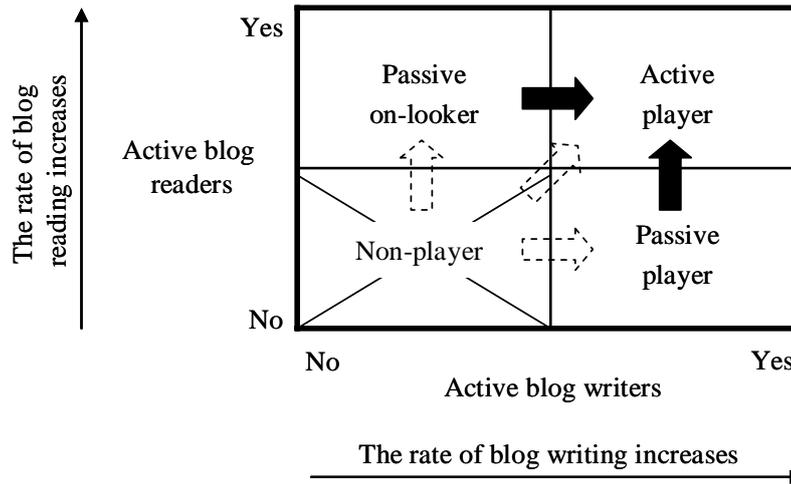


Figure 2: Categorization of Bloggers

The third group of bloggers is “passive players”. Passive players treat blogging as an electronic replacement of traditional diary writing. With diary writing as an agenda, the content produced by this group of bloggers is mostly personal in nature where they document their life, opinions, and thoughts [1, 9]. Even though passive players always detail their activities online, they seldom or never read others’ blogs. As such, they focus almost exclusively on their own blog sites (i.e., individual blogs).

As shown in Figure 2, there is an additional group of individuals called “non-players” who neither read nor write blogs. The categorization of bloggers into three main groups, plus an additional group of non-players meets Giddens’ view of human agents. According to Structuration Theory, human agents are strongly voluntaristic and “always have the possibility of doing otherwise” [5, p. 258]. This means every individual can choose whether they want to engage in the activity of blogging and how they want to participate in the activity. Non-players choose not to engage in blogging while active players take part vigorously in reading and writing blogs. Passive players and passive on-lookers choose different approaches to participate in blogging activities.

Since human agents are constantly evolving as a result of the production and reproduction of the structure of blogging, it is possible for bloggers to adjust the intensity at which they read and write blogs. For example, a passive on-looker may feel the need to express his/her disagreement when reading a comment that contrasts his/her belief. Similarly, the on-looker may feel the urge to support a position that coincides with his/her principle. As passive on-lookers begin to provide commentary on others’ blogs, they slowly move into the category of active players. Similar scenario may happen to passive players when they are attracted to read and comment on others’ blogs.

Another very interesting evolution is when non-players start to move into any of the three blogger groups (see Figure 2). Such shift is evident from statistics reported by blog trackers such as technorati.com and blogpulse.com that show an increasing number of blog sites in recent years.

As more individuals join the blogging community and as more human agents become active players, there might be a need for third-party monitoring agents – i.e., the hosts of blog sites. These hosts play important roles in maintaining standards, ethics, and quality of their blog sites. For example, when a controversial topic with

undesirable consequences is being discussed or when a blogger repeatedly broken the policies of ethical posting, blog site hosts will intervene by removing those undesirable postings and by blocking future participation of the particular blogger. When comparing community blogs and individual blogs, blog site hosts seem to play a more prominent role in the former blog type.

Structuration Theory also contends that human agents are knowledgeable, therefore "every member of a society must know...a great deal about the workings of that society by virtue of his or her participation in it" [3, p. 250]. This means by being a member of the blogging community, bloggers know the *modus operandi* of blogs. They understand their role as bloggers. They know the topic focus of a particular blog site and they are aware of what an acceptable post is and what is not.

As knowledgeable agents, bloggers will reflectively monitor their own actions as well as others' blogging activities. This monitoring effort is evident from activities such as bloggers updating their blog sites, reflecting on others' write-ups, commenting on others' blogs, and changing their opinion after reading others' posts. Even though bloggers often write their blogs with certain intended outcomes, their articles may create unintended consequences. For example, an innocent expression of personal viewpoint may create uproar within the blogging community as well as to the structure external to the blogging community.

The Structure of a Blogging Environment

A blogging environment, bounded by its rules and resources, constitutes the structure in which the community operates. This structure is distinct from most other social structures in two ways. First, the interaction in a blogging community takes place only via texts (i.e., information posted on blog sites). This is different from traditional social structures such as that of an office setting where a group of employees work or a family setting where relatives live. In traditional structure, interaction among human agents takes place mostly face-to-face. In blogging, action and meaning are accorded primacy only through texts. This interacting method requires bloggers to have the ability to clearly and skillfully script the content of their posts in order to convey their intended messages. It may also require bloggers to read between lines in order to grasp the meaning of the writers.

Even when comparing blogging with other online text interacting media such as webpages or chat rooms, the style of interacting in blogs still constitutes a unique communication genre [2, 6, 10,

11, 12]. Specifically, the communication acts of blogs are asynchronous and asymmetrical [6, 12]. They are asynchronous because communications do not occur in real time and they are asymmetrical because communications do not occur in dyads [6, 12].

Second, the blogging community does not have any designated governing authority to formulate and impose rules and regulations. It adopts a self-regulated operating mode with very minimal if not non-existent intervention from blog site hosts. This is true especially for individual blogs. Together, the unique communication method of blogging along with its lack of governing authority shapes the three structures of signification, domination, and legitimation in the blogging community.

In a self-regulated blogging environment, members understand their own role as well as the role of other players. They recognize the responsibilities of blog site hosts, blog owners, writers, and readers. They also know the topics and contents that are appropriate for a particular blog site based on its objectives. Accordingly, bloggers will publish only suitable write-ups on the site. The knowledge bloggers have toward blogging and blog sites forms the structure of signification. This structure will evolve over time. For example, the contents of a blog site may shift from one topic area to another. Similarly, the ideology of a blog site may change from a conservative position to a liberal stance.

Structure of domination conveys message about the power of different parties in a blogging environment. The most evident one being blog site hosts who have the power to remove an inappropriate post and stop an undesirable blogger from continue participating in their blog sites. Among bloggers, opinion leaders are able to draw on their persuasive writing power to gain reader approval. They are the authoritative figure in content discussion. When they promote a message, it diffuses faster compared to the one promoted by a non-leader [9]. Thus, opinion leaders are able to draw on the structure of domination to champion their course and strengthen their position. Since power is mobilizable, it is possible for another opinion leader to emerge and replace the existing blog leader.

Structure of legitimation defines appropriate and ethical blogging behavior. It informs bloggers what is expected of blog contents and what type of language is acceptable. Whenever a blogger violates this expectation, the members will react. For example, they may express their disapproval with the blogger. In a worse case, they may censure the blogger.

As bloggers interaction, existing structures of

signification, domination, and legitimation will be produce and reproduce over time. At any point in time, the structure available represents the most up-to-date system recognized and abided by the community of bloggers.

Conclusions

Blogging is an emerging phenomenon that draws massive followings. Considering the popularity and the pervasiveness of blogging activities, it is essential for us to understand how the community is being formed and operated despite the lack of specific governing bodies to formulate and impose rules and practices. As a widely cited theory in information systems research, Structuration Theory serves as a useful framework to understand the formation and functioning of a blogging community. The theory also explains how a blogging community evolves over time in terms of its structure and content.

Such an understanding is valuable to organizations. Specifically, organizations can ride on the popularity of blogging to establish dialogues between management and employees so as to improve the relationships between both parties. They can also use blogs to educate and garner employee supports toward organizational policy change and implementation.

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