14 October 2015

4th Innovation in Information Infrastructures (III) Workshop
October 13–15, 2015, Warwick Business School

The Generativity of the Social Web:
A Multi-case Enquiry into Generative Patterns of Social Media Platforms

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A positive twist to the slightly out-of-control nature of contemporary IT…

Generative systems have an *"overall capacity to produce unprompted change driven by large, varied, and uncoordinated audiences".*

Zittrain (2006, p. 1980)

Motivation

Generativity could explain the new economics and social value created in digital ecosystems

Information systems generativity is still relatively under-theorized and lacks empirical validation

Social media is often taken as a testament to generativity, but are common users really innovators?

Social media today

A huge variety – social production, crowdsourcing, social networking, social consumption, etc.

Combinations of user participation and system functionalities generate value through social data procurement and analysis

—> Generative processes underpinning social media may be quite varied, resulting in different social and economic outcomes

Generative mechanisms in critical realism

Mechanisms are causal powers that emerge from underlying structures and produce change in the world (events) upon actualisation

But conceptual ambiguity persists – "mechanism", "causal powers", "generative mechanism", "causal mechanism" are often used synonymously

—> We define a generative mechanism is as a type of mechanisms that shapes its underlying structure

degenerative

/dɪˈdʒɛn(ə)rətɪv/ 🔊

adjective

adjective: **degenerative**

(of a disease) characterized by progressive deterioration and loss of function in the organs or tissues.

- of or tending to decline and deterioration.
  "the young generation had fallen into a degenerative backslide"

We expect to find **generative** social media configurations but also **degenerative** configurations and, maybe, some **non-generative** systems.

Multiple case analysis

Develop a theoretical framework from a few cases which is then replicated (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Yin 2003)

Employ replication/pattern matching logic to calibrate a theory to observed patterns of generativity (Trochim, 1989; Yin, 2003)

Use negative (degenerative, non-generative) cases to further refine the theory)

Cases

	User participation	Social data	Systemic change event	Observed pattern
Wikipedia	Content production and social curation	Conversations and page edit histories	The emergence of a governance system	Generative, maybe also degenerative
Social shopping platform for fashion products	Social content curation only	Consumption data	?	Generative?
Music discovery service (Last.fm)	Social content curation only	Music consumption and interactions	Change from music streaming to discovery	Non-generative
Advertising-funded teleoperator	Content production	Interactions with subscribers and the company	Business model change	Somewhat generative

Content = the subject matter of the platform (encyclopaedia articles, clothing, music, P2P communications)

Some concerns

Do four cases provide enough variation to fully develop a theory of information systems generativity?

What are feasible rival explanations?

+ probably many others…

Projected contribution

Clear understanding of generative mechanisms in social media platforms

A theory of information systems generativity as a specific type of causality

An operational model of information systems generativity to support quantitative modelling

Thank you!