“They Would Not Slag You Off At All”: Translation and Coherence of Information Values in Online Communities

Adam Worrall
Assistant Professor, SLIS

March 16, 2016
slag /slag/

NOUN
1 Stony waste matter separated from metals during the smelting or refining of ore
2 British informal, derogatory A promiscuous woman

VERB
1 Produce deposits of slag
2 British informal Criticize (someone) in an abusive and insulting manner

From Oxford English Dictionaries
https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/slag
Online Communities

• Popular sources for users **seeking, sharing information**
  (Fisher & Julien, 2009; Kraut, Wang, Butler, Joyce, & Burke, 2008)

• Greater sharing encouraged when users share **similar judgments** on **what information is of value**
  (Ardichvili, 2008; Haythornthwaite, 2006)

• However, **perfect agreement** (or **coherence**) **not required** for productive sharing, strong sense of community

Photo by flickr user Gage Skidmore, used under Creative Commons
https://www.flickr.com/photos/gageskidmore/8566717881
A Social Perspective

People

Social Informatics

Information

Technology
There remains a **continuing need** to improve our understanding of **social phenomena** including **behaviours, norms, values**

(Fischer, 1975; Kraut et al., 2008; Rheingold, 2000; Tuominen & Savolainen, 1997)
Values

• Value-sensitive design, values in design
  (Shilton, Koepfler, & Fleischmann, 2013)
  – Roles played by values in design of technologies, sociotechnical systems
  – Embedded social values in digital library design
    (Fleischmann, 2007)

• How value is created in online communities
  (Seraj, 2012)

• Information value in information worlds
  (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010)
Three Studies

1. Complete
2. Early stages of data collection and analysis
3. Funded but yet to begin

All three studies relate to information values in online communities, and their potential translation between users and coherence within and across communities.
Study #1
(Worrall, 2014, 2015, further publications in preparation)

Case study approach (Yin, 2003)

LibraryThing and Goodreads

Social Perspective

Social Informatics

Social Constructionism

Social Worlds Perspective

Boundary Object Theory

Translation

Coherence

Theory of Information Worlds

(Strauss, 1978)

(Star, 1989; Star & Griesemer, 1989)

(Jaeger & Burnett, 2010)
Framework

Boundary Object Theory
(Star, 1989; Star & Griesemer, 1989)

- Cross boundaries between multiple communities
- Used within, adapted to many simultaneously
- Weak structure across, strong structure within
- Support negotiation, translation
- Maintain coherence
- Potential convergence of new communities
**Framework**

**Translation**
- "The task of reconciling meanings" and understandings of objects, methods, and concepts across communities
  (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 388)
- People can "work together" and remain engaged with systems, communities
  (p. 389)

**Coherence**
- The degree of consistency between different translations and communities
  (Star & Griesemer, 1989)
- Convergence of new communities
Research Question

What roles do LibraryThing and Goodreads play, as boundary objects, in the translation, coherence, and convergence of information values between the pre-existing and newly emergent social and information worlds of their users?
Methods

1. Qualitative content analysis
   - 519 messages
     - 5 LT groups
     - 4 GR groups

2. Online survey
   - 163 users from the 9 groups
     - Likert scaled questions

3. Semi-structured qualitative interviews
   - 11 users from survey takers
     - Critical incidents
Coherence

• Some **aligned**, some **diverged**
  
  Author Will promoted his book
  
  Brian: “please read [the site’s author policy]. And when your message is flagged … do not take it too personally.”
  
  Will apologized
  
  Brian: “Good show! We’re a very forgiving group. :)

• **Impact of existing** values, information worlds
  
  For example, Kevin noted religious views “might [lead to] different opinions about a book … [with] a religious slant …”
Disagreements

• **Weaker / nonexistent** coherence, convergence

Jennifer: “you know you do have that one thing in common...”—a love of books and reading—“...but a lot of times that’s the **only** thing you have in common.”

Disagreement over info value led some people to “exit [a group] en masse” despite Betty feeling they were “some of the people ... [who] had the **most** interesting conversations about the books.”
Sense of Community

• Felt by many
  Lindsey: “a happy surprise”
  Miriam: “affirming, to know so many other people who like the same things”
  Compared by Sam to a “tavern”

• Differences, divergences OK
  Members of one of Ann’s groups “would not slag you off at all; not even if you went on there and said that you loved Twilight and said it was the best thing ever written.”
Convergence

- **Personal, collective** opinions and thoughts
- Sharing **not** always explicitly acknowledged
  Amelia: “keep my paws crossed”
- **More explicit in interviews**
  Rachelle: “and I’m like, oh! Here are people who read the same books that I read, and I can talk to them about it. ‘Cause I know nobody in real life who reads the same books that I do.”

Ann shared values, interpretations of fantasy fiction with others (despite not all agreeing)
Values-Based Role

- **Strongest factor** in qualitative findings, but not **significant factor** in survey \( (p = 0.709) \)
  - May be **invisible** to community insiders

- **Perfect** coherence, convergence not required

- **Infrastructure** (as boundary object) sufficiently **rigid and flexible** to be common, valued, yet allow differences
Translation

• Important for **negotiating, reconciling interests, values** from existing communities

• **Co-construction**  
  (Seraj, 2012; Rehberg Sedo, 2011a)

• **Bridging, translating → greater info sharing**
  – As in knowledge management literature
  (Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2003; Bechky, 2003; McLure Wasko & Faraj, 2000)
Invisible Work

- Translation, coherence, convergence of information values as **invisible work**
  
  (Star & Strauss, 1999)
  
  – Without realizing, have interests, opinions to share
  
  – Evident in **reflection** (interviews), **conflicts**
  
  – “**Vague**” but simultaneously “**quite useful**”
    
    (p. 607)
Study #1 Conclusions

• **Significant roles** in translation, coherence, convergence of information values
  – Understanding differences, willingness to translate allowed for community existence, emergence
  – Similar to *maintaining “a real friendship”* (Melissa) – **emerges** from invisible background

I gratefully acknowledge funding from a Beta Phi Mu Eugene Garfield Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship and a Florida State University Esther Maglathlin Doctoral Research Scholarship.
Study #2
(Worrall & Hyduk, 2016; ongoing)

• Information sharing particularly important for new immigrants to, expatriates in a country
  – “Likely to ask other individuals for help” first
    (Caidi, Allard, & Quirke, 2010, p. 507)
  – Rely on social ties, both strong and weak, to find informational and social support
    (Fisher, Durrance, & Hinton, 2004)
  – Boundary spanners especially important ties
    (Caidi et al., 2010)
Immigrants’ ICT Use

- **ICTs** a significant source of information for immigrants (Mehra & Papajohn, 2007)

- In settlement.org (ON), asking questions, “responding to others’ postings,” and “sharing personal information and experiences”—including emotions and feelings—were most common uses (Chien, 2005, p. 127, 157)
Immigrants and Cultural Memory

- Immigrants bring existing cultural memories and may create new ones through information sharing.

- Much cultural memory creation, information sharing seen in everyday information behaviour (Savolainen, 1995)
  → community belonging, more likely cultural memory creation (Nikunen, 2013)
Framework

- Cultural Memory
- ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies)
- Online Community
- Information Worlds
  - Information Values
  - Information Behaviour
- Boundaries

Interactions:
- Cultural Memory influences Immigrants
- ICTs support Online Community
- Immigrants engage in Information Sharing
- Information Sharing may create, propagate
- Information Sharing may cross Boundaries
- Information Worlds relates to multiple
- Online Community uses ICTs
- ICTs part of multiple influences?
Research Questions

How do the information and communication technologies (ICTs) used by immigrant and expatriate members of Twitter interact with

a) the information values of community members,

b) the information those members share and exchange within and across community boundaries, and

c) the cultural memory established by their communities?
Methods

1. OBSERVATION
   - Ethnographic
   - Unobtrusive
   - Info Value Negotiation
   - Information Sharing
   - Cultural Memory

   Select hashtags and keywords
   Guide codebook

2. CONTENT ANALYSIS
   - Information Worlds
   - Info Values
   - Boundaries
   - Information Sharing
   - Cultural Memory

   About 500 tweets

3. INTERVIEWS
   - Semi-Structured
   - Critical Incidents
   - Info Value Negotiation
   - Information Sharing
   - Cultural Memory

   At least 15 users, until saturation

- Observations in progress
- Content analysis begins late March / early April
- Interviews in May – June
Initial Findings
(very preliminary!)

Valued and Shared

– Canadian *culture, connections* (or lack thereof; incl. articles, jokes)
– **Experiences** of expats (self-authored, interviews)
– **Moving to Canada** (opinions and facts; political elements)
– Scenic *photos* of Canada
Initial Findings
(very preliminary!)

Boundaries

– **Physical**: countries, provinces
– **Languages**: English (dialects), French, German, etc.
– **Communities**: geographic, political, media-based, expatriate, follower, hashtags
Initial Findings
(very preliminary!)

Cultural Memory

– Experiences of new immigrants
– Attending events (e.g. concerts)
– Life events (e.g. births)
– Supportiveness of Canadians
– Homesickness
– Becoming permanent residents

I gratefully acknowledge funding from a Faculty of Education Start Up Grant.
Study #3
(funded: Faculty of Education SAS grant, 2016-17)

• Social and emotional support
  – Important motivations for online information sharing, including on social Q&A sites

RQs
  – What social and emotional factors motivate users to ask questions, answer questions, and share information with others in social Q&A?
  – Of these, do any contribute to coherence of community, social norms, social types, information values, and information behaviours among users? How?
Setting and Methods

• **StackExchange Academia**
  – One of the largest, most popular Q&A sites
  – Familiar topic, moderately popular sub-site

1. Qualitative content analysis
   - 100 Qs, As, comments

2. Online survey
   - ~150 users
   - Likert-scaled Qs

3. Semi-structured qualitative interviews
   - ~15 users
   - Critical incidents

- Socio-emotional motivations
- Social norms
- Social types
- Information values
- Information sharing behaviours
- Boundaries
Conclusion

• **Translation, coherence** of information values (and other phenomena, too!) have **great significance** for
  – **information sharing** in **online communities**
  – provision of **informational, social, and emotional support** to users

• “**Do you know where you’re going to?**”
  Sociotechnical interactions between
  – information-centric **online communities**
  – ICTs that support them
  – users’ **information behaviours**
  – socio-emotional motivations
  – information value judgments

within and across boundaries