“Like a Real Friendship”:
Translation, Coherence, and
Convergence of Information
Values in LibraryThing and
Goodreads

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Background

• **Sociotechnical contexts** of digital libraries
• Experimental, promising **models, frameworks, methods** of study
• Remains a **continuing need** to improve our understanding
  – **Social phenomena** including behaviors, norms, values
Social Digital Libraries

• **Content, services, organizations** (Borgman, 1999)
• **Information, knowledge creation and sharing** (Lankes, 2009, 2011)
• **Socially constructed**
• Parallel **physical libraries**
  – “Link people to ideas and to each other” (Pomerantz & Marchionini, 2007, p. 506)
• **Share many characteristics of online communities** (Ellis, Oldridge, & Vasconcelos, 2004; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003; Rheingold, 2000)
Framework

Social Paradigm

Social Informatics

Social Worlds Perspective
(Strauss, 1978)

Boundary Object Theory
(Star & Griesemer, 1989)

Theory of Information Worlds
(Jaeger & Burnett, 2010)

Social Constructionism

Case study approach (Yin, 2003)

LibraryThing (LT) and Goodreads (GR)

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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)*
Research Question

As part of a larger study:

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?
Method

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

2. **Online survey**
   - 163 users from the 9 groups
   - SPSS

3. **Semi-structured qualitative interviews**
   - 11 users from survey takers
   - NVivo

- **Likert scaled questions**
- **Critical incidents**

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• **Personal, collective** opinions and thoughts
• Sharing **not** always explicitly acknowledged
  – “keep my paws crossed”
• **More explicit in interviews**
  – “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.” (Rachelle)
  – Ann shared values, interpretations of fantasy fiction with others (despite not all agreeing)
Coherence

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

• Impact of **existing** values, information worlds
  – Religious views “might [lead to] different opinions about a book … [with] a religious slant …” (Kevin)
Conflicts, Disagreements

- **Weaker / nonexistent** coherence, convergence
  - “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.**” (Jennifer)

- 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
  – “a happy surprise” (Lindsey)
  – “affirming, to know so many other people who like the same things” (Miriam)
  – compared to a “tavern” (Sam)

• 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.”
Survey Findings

• Younger participants felt information value played a greater role ($\chi^2(9) = 18.833; p = 0.027; n = 136$)

• Median score for information value not significantly different from a “neutral” response of 3 ($p = 0.709$)
  – Further holistic analysis discovered nuances
Values-Based Role

• **Strongest factor** in qualitative findings
  - May be **invisible** to community insiders

• **Perfect** coherence, convergence not required
  - Despite differences perceived, **communities form** that **users feel part of, value**
  - As in other virtual book clubs (Rehberg Sedo, 2003)

• **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 **common ground** literature (Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2003; Bechky, 2003; McLure Wasko & Faraj, 2000)
  – **Explain** circumstances that could reduce coherence, convergence
  – **Form** valuable **social ties** with others
Infrastructure, Invisible Work

- **Context** determines values, frequency of explicit expression (Koepfler & Fleischmann, 2011, 2012)
- Translation, coherence, convergence of information values as **invisible work** (Star & Strauss, 1999)
  - Without realizing, have interests, opinions to share
  - Evident in reflection (interviews), conflicts
  - **Sociotechnical infrastructure** – “vague” but simultaneously “quite useful” (Star, 2010)
Limitations

• Findings cannot be considered fully representative at larger scales, esp. survey
• Alleviated by deep knowledge of literature, mixed methods, nonparametric statistics
• Potential transferability quite strong
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

• **Further research**
  – **Invisible work** of value translation, coherence
  – Values in sociotechnical design **plus** information values in communities (fuzzy line)
  – **Longitudinal** studies over community **life cycles**
Thank you!

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Questions?