Beyond Thick Description and Self Report: How Should Organizational Audiences Be Studied?

Jennifer Thom-Santelli
HCI Group, Cornell University
301 College Avenue
Ithaca, NY 14850 USA
jt17@cornell.edu

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites provide users with the opportunity to craft a particular image to project to an audience, particularly when anticipating future social interaction. By actively choosing what type of information appears on these sites, users of social networking sites often engage in impression management in attempt to influence how other social actors perceive them [9]. In the context of social networking sites deployed within organizations, users of these systems may have existing working relationships with one another, where exchanges and interactions take place within a known context and common ground through shared membership. For these reasons, impression management may be particularly important for reasons of career advancement and in projecting a certain professional identity [4,5].

Much of the HCI and CSCW literature on impression management with respect to social networking sites focuses on the strategies of the sharing side of the equation. One proposed reason for this imbalance relates to methodology and measurement; it may simply be easier to make claims regarding the intentions of the managers, particularly when these strategies are actively and consciously pursued. However, this seems somewhat shortsighted with respect to the body of research observing that sharers are aware of a real audience who forms impressions using these cues.

In an organizational context, the role of the audience is especially relevant as those who may be forming impressions can have an impact on one's career advancement and professional development. As a result, I propose that the lack of empirical measurement of audience motivation and interpretation with respect to organizational social software contributes to a lack of understanding to what the true value and benefit of these systems may be. If the goal for organizational social software is a generalized notion that users will form more positive attachments to an organization or identify more strongly to the enterprise that employs them or learn something about the organization, figuring out more precisely how the social information shared on these sites is interpreted by viewers is a methodological challenge that should be addressed.

In this position paper, I draw from various fields to describe a few existing approaches to studying one's audience and highlight the advantages and disadvantages to each. To be clear, I currently make no claims as to which may be the best one. Recent critiques have suggested that appropriation of interdisciplinary methodology is one that should be examined carefully with respect to underlying epistemological assumptions [3,11], particularly in the study of emerging social technologies that are embedded with the structure of an organization.

THICK DESCRIPTION

The difficulty of measuring the role of the audience has been an issue that I have encountered in a number of research projects that have attempted to address the role of the viewer in organizational social software systems [13,12], primarily through a qualitative framework influenced by both [7]'s notion of 'thick description' and [8]'s grounded theory; that is, observations about audience motivation are generated from bottom-up discovery through participant observation and open-ended interviewing. More broadly, ethnographic approaches of media use (ie. [10]) present a descriptive picture of a small group of audience members and content viewers. To grossly over-generalize, this type of inquiry present a narrow but deep portrait of a small slice of users.

However, in the context of an enterprise, it may be difficult for informants to verbalize and express exactly how they are interpreting the content that is presented to them on a social networking site, particularly when discussing issues of hierarchy or gender. We observed this phenomenon to some extent in our study of enterprise photo viewing [12] with respect to images falling in the most-viewed category as well as those depicting executive-level gatherings.

SELF-REPORT

Traditional mass-media approaches to studying audience with respect to television viewers or newspaper readers have been based in self-report through scales and surveys [2]. Scales, based on psychological measurement and often in conjunction with an experimental methodology, can provide support to an individual-level model of how an audience member interprets a piece of information. Surveys, more indicative of a sociological approach, are employed to assess the effect of macro-level variables, such as demographics (e.g. length of tenure), on how audiences perceive the content that is presented to them. With respect

to an organizational setting, this type of methodology has its advantages in that surveys, for example, may be relatively easy to deploy to a large group of people and shared organizational commitment may lead to higher response rates.

On the other hand, liability issues within an enterprise may deter the linking of key demographic variables with measures that may prove controversial (e.g. satisfaction, salary, age). In the case of organizational social software, users may be easily identified by their viewing and sharing behaviors, particularly when one's name and professional identity are so tightly bound to online presence, and perhaps even monitored by those deploying the systems within an organization. The question is then, what are the ethical implications of studying audience behaviors within this context?

More broadly, from an epistemological standpoint, this tradition of media research assumes that the audience is a passive consumer of content, which is not always the case with respect to online social systems. As a result, this approach may ultimately impose an artificial barrier in how researchers understand audiences when its members slip between roles of producer and consumer.

MOVING BEYOND
In the previous paragraphs, I have presented a heavily over-generalized analysis of the social science methodologies that have been appropriated in the HCI and CSCW literature to study how audiences might form impressions of what they view in social software, with particular attention paid to the measurement challenges faced in an organizational context. However, I propose that alternative approaches, grounded in existing literature, may allow researchers might observe organizational audiences in non-traditional ways while more deeply reflecting on the assumptions and tradeoffs made when choosing the methods that I have already described. Cultural studies, for example, conceptualize the audience as an agent to be critiqued [1], an approach that has been utilized in regards to research observing the external public relations messages utilized by corporations in organizational impression management [6]. By engaging with these measurement and methodological issues, researchers who study social systems within an organization may be better prepared to assess the benefits of these systems, particularly if there are more appropriate and novel ways to observe how exactly content is being viewed and interpreted.

REFERENCES
1. Confessions of an Aca/Fan: Nine Propositions Towards a Cultural Theory of YouTube. http://www.henryjenkins.org/2007/05/9_propositions_t owards_a_cultu.html.

2. *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*. L. Elbaum Associates, Mahwah, N.J, 2002.

3. Boehner, K., Vertesi, J., Sengers, P., and Dourish, P. How HCI interprets the probes. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human factors in computing systems*, ACM (2007), 1077-1086.

4. DiMicco, J., Millen, D.R., Geyer, W., Dugan, C., and Brownholtz, B. Caring, Climbing, and Campaigning: Motivations for Social Networking at Work. *Proc.CSCW2008*, ACM (2008).

5. DiMicco, J.M. and Millen, D.R. Identity management: multiple presentations of self in facebook. *Proceedings of the 2007 international ACM conference on Supporting group work*, ACM (2007), 383-386.

6. Elsbach, K.D. and Sutton, R.I. Acquiring Organizational Legitimacy through Illegitimate Actions: A Marriage of Institutional and Impression Management Theories. *The Academy of Management Journal 35*, 4 (1992), 699-738.

7. Geertz, C. *Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, 2000.

8. Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Aldine Transaction, 1967.

9. Goffman, E. *The presentation of self in everyday life.* Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1959, 1951.

10. Jones, M.O. *Studying Organizational Symbolism: What, How, Why?* Sage Publications, Inc, 1996.

11. Leahu, L., Thom-Santelli, J., Pederson, C., and Sengers, P. Taming the Situationist beast. *Proceedings of the 7th ACM conference on Designing interactive systems*, ACM (2008), 203-211.

12. Thom-Santelli, J. and Millen, D. (In submission) Learning by Seeing: Photo Viewing in the Workplace.

13. Thom-Santelli, J., Muller, M.J., and Millen, D.R. Social tagging roles: publishers, evangelists, leaders. *Proceeding of the twenty-sixth annual SIGCHI conference on Human factors in computing systems*, ACM (2008), 1041-1044.