Methods for Re-imagining Social Tools in New Contexts

Clare J. Owens, David E. Millard, Andrew Stanford-Clark

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Digital exclusion refers to a lack of access to technological facilities, including the blossoming arena of social interaction. People without mobile phones or PCs cannot access email, SMS or social networking websites; this includes many groups, such as the elderly, who can become vulnerable without good social contact. These people could partake in such interactions if we could enable multimodal access to social networks through a wider variety of communication channels (for example, television and telephone).

This poster describes how we have used methods from HCI and Social Theory to better understand social technology.

Experience Deconstruction is a HCI technique that facilitates an in-depth understanding of a particular interaction or tool within a social site (for example, items of functionality such as 'photo sharing' or 'microblogging'). The deconstruction process, developed by Dix [1], involves teasing apart the strands which make an experience what it is, and which make it 'work'. Distilling the underlying experience of social networking simplifies the task of translating it to new communication channels. Dix used his deconstruction process to translate the physical experience of pulling Christmas crackers onto a website. Rather than trying to directly emulate real crackers, Dix captured aspects of the experience of pulling crackers through deconstruction, and translated those to the medium of the web. We describe the deconstruction methodology, and demonstrate its use - along with reconstruction - with aspects of the social networking experience.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is a sociological approach to understanding social networks that provides a process-based perspective on interactions between users across the network, and gives an insight into how the network is formed and evolves [2]. ANT models the flow of interactions and processes between 'actors' (which may be people, artefacts, text or graphics). We apply ANT to aspects of social networking functionality, and demonstrate its relevance to social networking sites overall, and to the achievement of specific goals within these.

Our aim is to use these techniques in order to deconstruct a digital experience so that it can be reconstructed into a new digital context, for example, taking the experience offered by a social networking site and reconstructing it using novel pervasive channels.

In parallel to this work, the authors have prototyped a messaging infrastructure which could carry this social data. This system decouples information from its original modality, for example allowing an email to be displayed on a screen, printed or vocalized on a phone.

Our hope is that by re-imagining social systems in this way and building them into a multimodal messaging infrastructure, we could provide the basis for a fully-fledged *Social Fabric* that could improve technology access, and help a wider range of people benefit from social technologies.

References

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