

**Media Anthropology Network
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)
E-Seminar Series**

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

**E-Seminar 60
Social Media as Practices: An Ethnographic Critique of ‘Affordances’ and
‘Context Collapse’**

**by
Elisabetta Costa
University of Groningen**

**Discussant
Christian Pentzold
University of Bremen**

10-31 May 2017

Dear All,

Our 60th E-Seminar is now open. As mentioned last week, we will be discussing the following working paper by Dr Elisabetta Costa (University of Groningen, the Netherlands).

Social Media as Practices: An Ethnographic Critique of ‘Affordances’ and ‘Context Collapse’ Drawing on data gathered during ethnographic fieldwork in Mardin, a medium-sized town in southeast Turkey, this paper examines people’s production of different online social spaces. The paper shows that social media users actively appropriate online platforms and change privacy settings in order to keep different social spheres and social groups apart. Social media users actively mould online social environments that largely resemble those existing in the offline world. Keeping different online social contexts divided from one another is the taken for granted way of using social media in Mardin. By contrast, social media scholars have extensively discussed the effects of social media in terms of context collapse (among others see Marvin 2013; Marwick and Boyd 2011; Marwick and Ellison 2012; Vitak 2012; Wesch 2008, 2009). This in turn has been described as a consequence of platform’s architecture and affordances. This paper shows that the theory of context collapse does not account for the uses of social media in Mardin. It demonstrates that the concept of affordance has been largely used to describe “intrinsic” properties of a platform and its architecture, which are instead the results of pattern of usage within Anglo-American contexts. The paper concludes by suggesting the importance of considering social media as an open set of situated practices, rather than architectures provided with unchangeable and intrinsic properties.

Our discussant, Dr Christian Pentzold (University of Bremen), will be posting his comments directly to the list. I will then give Elisabetta time to respond and once she has done so, will be able to open the discussion to all.

If you are new to the list, our E- Seminars run for a period of 2 weeks and they are vibrant spaces for discussion and confrontation on a specific paper. You can contribute to the discussion by emailing directly the list.

For those of you who haven't had the chance yet to read the paper, you can find it at <http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

Really looking forward to the discussion

Veronica

Dear all, dear Veronica, dear Elisabetta Costa,

Thanks for starting this conversation! I really enjoyed reading the working paper by Elisabetta Costa which brings up a set of questions worth of discussion.

In my comment, which I'll post below, I especially take issue with the notion of 'affordances'.

I look forward to your ideas.

Best regards,
Christian

A NECESSARY COMPLICATION: Towards a richer understanding of affordances

A comment on Elisabetta Costa “Social Media as Practices: an Ethnographic Critique of ‘Affordances’ and ‘Context Collapse’.” EASA Media Anthropology Network’s 60th e-Seminar

In order to capture the socio-technical scaffoldings that enable digitally networked communication and interaction, current scholarship typically resorts to the dubious though alluring notion of ‘affordances’. Usually, this choice of word comes with the idea that technologies make possible some activities while constraining others. As such, the notion is invoked in order to sidestep a technological determinism on the one side and a social determinism on the other.

In her ethnographic inquiry grounded in rich evidence from her Turkish field site, Elisabetta Costa does not denounce the commonly held belief that the hardware and software of the internet open up and close down possibilities for action and, more fundamentally, the possibility to act. However, her detailed analysis invites us to scrutinize the gross simplification to think that such (im-)material structuring collapses into the binary options of either constraint or possibility. Hence, by taking a close look at a setting besides the often studied metropolitan areas in the US and Western Europe, Elisabetta Costa is able question some household ideas, namely context collapse and affordances, of how to make sense of digitally networked social life.

Broadening and detailing the richness of prefigurations the dichotomy unduly covers, I would like to point to Theodore Schatzki (2002, p. 225f) and his theory of social practice. He argues that social practices are the central social phenomenon. Through the participation in practices, the ‘tissue of coexistence’ is woven, as Schatzki put it. Consequently, he suggests that our attention needs to be directed to the multitudinous ways that the mesh of doings and sayings in their entanglement with technologies make courses of action “easier, harder, or simpler more complicated, shorter, longer, ill-advised, promising of ruin, promising of gain, disruptive, facilitating, obligatory or proscribed, acceptable or unacceptable, more or less relevant, riskier or safer, more or less feasible, more or less likely to induce ridicule or approbation—as well as physically possible or impossible.”

Such view runs against what might be called the ‘received’ view on affordances. It takes them to be the enabling vs. constraining action possibilities which artefacts possess by virtue of their materiality (Hutchby, 2001). In this narrow understanding, the idea has been taken up in a variety of fields that have set out to map and take stock of all the action possibilities made available by certain technological artefacts. However, if we want to take the challenge posed by Costa’s perspective seriously, we cannot hope to find effective abilities, but a continuous, contingent, as well as contested accomplishment of socio-material enablements (Rappert, 2003).

In this regard, Orlikowski (2000) introduces the concept of “technologies-in-practice” (p. 407). It questions the thought that technologies embody inherent structures. The translation between material things is no one way process where human designers invent technologies whose construction goes hand in hand with the shaping and stabilizing of cultural knowledge, ways of handling and images of what an ideal user would be. Instead of assuming built-in arrays of fixed and embedded determinate structures that are somehow available to users, Orlikowski asks us to appreciate their structuring potential that need to be instantiated to become effective and only exist in conjunction with practices.

In the same vein, Bloomfield, Latham and Vurdubakis (2010) urge us to see affordances as being actively maintained. They come into being and are made to function not in smooth planned process. Rather they involve a considerable amount of negotiation and problematizing of human capabilities and machine capacities. “The ‘affordances’ of technological objects,” they write, “cannot be easily separated from the arrangements—that is the shared understandings, discourses and conventions, participant constellations, places and time, institutions and organizations—through which and amid which they are realised in practice.”

Rethinking, therefore, the idea of technological prostheses and the projection of bodies into durable objects, we could assume that neither of them is self-contained but placed in convertible arrangements. In consequence, we must not only ask what a given affordance is, but also where and when, and how and for whom and with whom an affordance is made.

References

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- Hutchby, I. (2001). Technologies, texts and affordance. *Sociology*, 35(2), 411–456.
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Elisabetta Costa elisabettacosta1@gmail.com

12 May 2017

Hi all,

I would like to thank Veronica and the other members of the EASA Media Anthropology Network for giving me the opportunity to present my paper. I also thank Christian for his insightful and fascinating reflections.

The literature introduced by Christian enriches the debate and adds theoretical depth to my ethnographic evidences and conclusion. I would like to build on his comments to extend the conversation in a provocative manner, and question again the significance of the concept of *affordance*. What is its theoretical and descriptive purpose? What is its heuristic value? Do we really need to use the concept of *affordance* to understand the tension between the structure of the platform and the agency of the users? The more I read about affordances the more I think it has become an empty signifier that has no agreed meaning.

Affordance has been used to grasp the *emic* perspectives of people in the process of understanding/imagining/describing/using technological properties of social media platforms.

This is what ethnographers of media, such as McVeigh-Schultz and Nancy (2015), or Medianou and Miller (2013) did. But *affordance* has mostly been used as an *etic* theoretical concept, and I believe that used in this way, it runs the risk to lose its heuristic value. In the '80s and '90s the concept of *affordance* enabled scholars to go beyond the dichotomy of social constructivism and technological determinism. But it has by now showed its inability to explain the tension between structure and agency. Scholars from different backgrounds use the concept in different ways. As I showed in my paper, a “narrow understanding” (Pentzold) of *affordances* does not account for the practices of usage in my field-site. A broader understanding of *affordances* does. I really like Christian’s quotation from Bloomfield, Latham and Vurdubakis (2010), “The ‘affordances’ of technological objects, cannot be easily separated from the arrangements—that is the shared understandings, discourses and conventions, participant constellations, places and time, institutions and organizations—through which and amid which they are realized in practice.” We can see affordances as contingent accomplishments of “Socio-material enablements” (Rappert 2003), which are always made and actively maintained through practices. This more refined definition of affordance can definitely account for the multiple and varied uses of social media around the world. But I am not sure I can fully understand the reason of this “necessary complication” (Pentzold). Is it really necessary to keep refining this concept? Do we need a richer understanding of affordances? Or can we find alternative theories? I believe that we can introduce a more straightforward concept. The concepts of media practices (Couldry 2004; Schatzki 2002) or “technologies-in-practice” (Orlikowski 2000) will better enable us to understand what people do with social media platforms. I think I will stop here for now.

I hope this might generate some debate. I am really looking forward to continuing the conversation.

References

- Bloomfield, B. P., Latham, Y., & Vurdubakis, T. (2010). Bodies, technologies and action possibilities. *Sociology*, 44(3), 415–433.
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Elisabetta Costa,

Veronica Barassi v.barassi@gold.ac.uk

12 May 2017

Dear All,

Thank you Elisabetta for the response and Christian for the comments.

I am forwarding Christian's comments again to make sure they have reached the list (please see below).

We are looking forward to engaging discussion.

Veronica

Jamie Coates jamie.coates@gmail.com

12 May 2017

Dear all

I'd firstly like to thank Elisabetta for a great paper, and Christian for some new references to add to the reading pile.

Christian mentions that affordances have been largely used to discuss how technologies enable and constrain certain activities or practices. Without debating the details of what defines an affordance, I'd like to hear a little more about your thoughts on the question of constraints, both within your ethnographic work Elisabetta and in relation to why we might or might not need an idea like affordance.

How does a technology as practice approach allow for situations where the battery runs out on a mobile phone and you miss an important call? Or you mms a friend but the mismatch between your devices means the message never arrives? Perhaps more significantly, how do we explain the divide between platforms which aren't designed to speak to each other? Although communications between the majority of social media forms seems ubiquitous and smooth, if you manage a life between Chinese social media worlds and other social media worlds (for example), the idea that it is merely practices that define social media isn't always helpful. There are a lot of constraints in trying to bridge these very different assemblages of practice and technology etc. and some things are simply impossible (like sending a Gif from WeChat to another platform)

From my simple understanding, the concept of affordances has allowed us to acknowledge constraints without having to give up on the idea of practices. I'm happy to get rid of affordances, but even if we decided the idea of affordances was no longer helpful, would or should we get rid of the idea of constraints. Other practice-theories, such as those of Bourdieu, rely on theories of external constraint (habitus and field etc.). Can we think of ways that allow us to rethink constraint solely from a practice perspective? Or will we still need something else? A field to our technology-as-practice.

I'd be interested to hear some more examples of when your informant's practices didn't work, and ask you to explain how you would trace this breakdown using the theoretical tools you lay out (wonderfully BTW) in the paper.

Thanks again

Jamie

Ursula Rao ursula.rao@uni-leipzig.de

12 May 2017

Dear Jamie, dear all,

This is a lovely contribution and an exciting debate. I recommend Vertesi's brilliant article on "seamful spaces" in which she describes processes of tinkering through which multiple incompatible technologies/ infrastructures are made to communicate with each other

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0162243913516012>

regards, Ursula

Christian Pentzold christian.pentzold@uni-bremen.de

12 May 2017

Dear Elisabetta, dear Jamie, dear all -

Thanks for the great ideas and comments so far! They underscore the depth and insightfulness of Elisabetta's study and conclusions.

Regarding the problem Elisabetta and Jamie brought up – is there any particular purchase in using the notion of 'affordances' – I do think so, but I assume we could also opt for another name/idea (technologies-in-practice?) that would involve the same sensibilities towards a wider and deeper understanding of socio-material enablements.

That said, I hesitate, however, to substitute 'affordances' (despite all the problems we have in grasping its analytical value) with 'social practices' which to my understanding work on different theoretical levels.

Thus, theories of social practices as formulated by Giddens, Bourdieu, Reckwitz, or Schatzki aim to understand the constitution of social reality. As one aspect, they also offer to rethink the interplay of human agency and materiality while concepts of affordances usually only have a more narrow focus on technological design and action possibilities. Schatzki, for instance, employs the notion of 'prefiguration' so to sidestep the whole debate.

Why be niggardly in awarding prizes? I would be happy to hand out golden apples all round.

Best
Christian

Elisabetta Costa elisabettacosta1@gmail.com

12 May 2017

Hello all and many thanks for your comments Jamie, Ursula and Christian!

I will try and answer Jamie's stimulating questions. I think that constraints, like possibilities, take shape only through situated practices. I would not get rid of the idea of constraints. It is really important. And I think that the concept of practice, mediated practice or "technologies in practice" enables us to understand how the properties of technologies limit people's

actions. Theories of practices have always tried to capture the tension between (social) structure and agency. The concept of *habitus* by Bourdieu is a well-known example. Similarly, mediated practices can capture the relation between (technological/material) structure and agency. The same examples I gave in my paper are examples of constraints too. Young women from conservative backgrounds sometimes used Facebook profiles under fake name and profile picture not to be recognized by parents and relatives. These young women appropriated the platform of Facebook in such a way that didn't contradict the current principles of morality and the public social norms in the town. They might have desired a platform that was designed to be completely anonymous, but Facebook was not. Practices are always the results of technological possibilities and constraints. There is a long history of practice theories that have come to terms with the relation between structure and agency. We can draw from these theories to rethink the language we use to conceptualize the relations between technological constraints and human agency. Jamie, you mention that Bourdieu's practice theory relies on theories of external constraints... I am not sure I understood your point. I think that this is exactly what practice theory is about!

I will think more about the other feedback in the next days. Many thanks to Jamie, Ursula and Christian once again!

Elisabetta

Ella Taylor-Smith E.Taylor-Smith@napier.ac.uk

12 May 2017

Hi Elisabetta and everyone

I loved Elisabetta's paper and Christian's comments -really chimed with my own aims to start with what people are actually doing. Or, as Christine Hine says: "We want to understand what people think they are up to when they are using the Internet" (2015, p27).

The purpose of this post is to suggest that the reason the concept of affordances, within technology, became so popular, was because it enabled writers/researchers to talk about people's use of technology without being accused of technological determinism.

Elisabetta's research demonstrates the danger of this approach -that we can't, realistically, identify the affordances of technologies beyond our own preferences (i.e. within our own contexts -whether that's a noisy room or Western culture).

It's not quite clear to me, whether Hutchby believed that affordances are characteristics of an object which frame possibilities for action *independently of cultural interpretations* (2001)

He seems to hedge his bets, summarising Gibson's concept: Affordances may thus differ from species to species and from context to context. (Hutchby, 2001, p447)

But it also comes back to the weakness of technological determinism, as the people in Mardin create their own spaces, whatever the expected trajectories of media use

Hope this comment is useful

-Ella

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Hutchby, I. (2001). Technologies, Texts and Affordances. *Sociology*, 35(2), 441-456.

Gabriele de Seta otsaved@live.com

12 May 2017

Dear Elisabetta,

enjoyed your paper very much - ethnographic vignettes resonate very much with what I observed around China (to a certain extent, and on different media platforms), and of course I share with you the urge of brandishing media practices & practice theory against technological determinism and algorithmic structuralism.

But,

I'm not sure about taking issue with the concepts of affordances and/or context collapse, which your article seems to actually provide data in support of.

Re: affordances, Facebook's affordances don't just include the possibility of posting content and making it public as you seem to imply, but also the increasingly fine-tuned privacy settings, anti-harassment resources and account management mechanisms. Without these affordances (baked into the platform by developers) users would have very little options to make their content visible to restricted social groups, and - in the case of Mardinities - would probably just decide to rather not use the platform. While Zuckerberg's ideology of radical transparency is clearly embodied in the fact that "Public" sharing is the default setting, the fact that Facebook had to implement increasingly subtle privacy settings shows that affordances are a key requirement for social media platforms to be successful with global (and diverse) userbases. In short, the demand for being able to do certain things (media practices) forces designers to be sensitive to the affordances they have to include in their products. I suspect that it isn't really possible to ditch affordances when talking about contemporary platforms, since users have less and less control on the coding and design of the Internet, and hence have to do what they want (media practices) through what platforms allow (affordances). Maybe what could be interesting is including a short history of how Facebook privacy settings evolved in time under the pressure of user demand. Ok this ended up not being that short.

Re: context collapse, I agree with your warning against assuming it happens everywhere as it does in the US. But I also think that danah boyd originally used the concept to describe a very specific, situated event (was it American high school student's use of social media? I forgot). Her ethnographic observations might have captured a peculiar moment in time in which the arrival of a new form of online sociality (social media platforms with default public visibility) caused an unforeseen and unpleasant experience of exposure (context collapse) among a certain population of users. At that time, Facebook might not have had privacy settings as evident and as refined as today's, and new users might have lacked the necessary literacy to mould their online fronts appropriately to pre-existing social mores. What you describe in Mardin seems like a very skilled use of affordances deployed to defuse the possibility of context collapse, always looming around the corner, in a perhaps even more threatening way that what experienced by American teens - here it's about mistresses and lovers, gossiping and honor, that all have to be kept at bay through alternative and fake accounts, private and hidden posts, and even occasional deletions. So I wonder if perhaps Mardinities experienced

context collapse on Facebook in the past, and have by now learned very well how to defuse it, or if perhaps the training provided by attending wedding ceremonies (the context collapse occasion par excellence, it seems) might have made them more sensitive to the need to carefully manage their online fronts.

This said, I'm looking forward to see this published. Hope I haven't misunderstood or mischaracterized your arguments!

Gabriele

Jamie Coates jamie.coates@gmail.com

13 May 2017

Hi all, thanks for some great reading suggestions and clarifying points

Just to clarify what I meant by Bourdieu in terms of constraints (and of course Bourdieu's emphasis changed over his career). Bourdieu's concept of field is defined as the product of competition over various forms of capital (social, cultural, economic, symbolic). In his definition of economic capital he includes material conditions within a given field (1986), and states that in most fields economic capital is the dominant form of capital (when all is said and done). Considering this, Bourdieu had a concept of 'social' reality, that depended on a substructure of material life (in a fairly marxist fashion), and you occasionally see slippages of technological determinism throughout his work. I mentioned Bourdieu, not to say we should all be doing what he was doing, but rather to suggest that many of the major practice theorists still depended on an idea of the material world having a life outside of social practice that defines the constraints and possibilities of social practice. As I always read it, practice theorists' major argument was that practice should be our primary unit of analysis (rather than the approaches of the structuralists or the hardcore historical materialists)

The practices presented in Elisabetta's paper, show how important social practices are, and how, methodologically speaking, they are central to our understanding and researching media. However, I don't think they foreclose the need of something that takes the capacities of material life seriously (whether we subscribe to affordances, or prefiguration is a different question). We don't want to fall into sociocultural determinism either. Perhaps I was envisioning more of an ANT approach that traces the occasions when a thing acts as an agent in chains of social interaction/practice when I asked for more examples Elisabetta. That was what I was curious about, in terms of extra examples of 'constraint' from your field Elisabetta. Rather than sociocultural norms as constraints within media practice, I wanted to know whether there were any occasions where a smartphone or PC or some other piece of tech or code etc. broke, or did something unexpected, or whether anyone complained about the lack of a particular capacity within a certain platform. These sorts of conversations and problems are rife in my own research among Chinese migrants in Japan.

I'm getting the sense that maybe your paper is strongest as a methodological critique, rather than a critique of the concepts of affordances and context collapse. I really like Ella's summary 'that we can't, realistically, identify the affordances of technologies beyond our own preferences'

Thanks again, I now have a lot to read and think about. Hope you publish this soon!

Jamie

Hi Elisabetta and list

I keep wondering about the extent to which the people in Mardin respect each others' privacy across these various accounts.

For example, in the UK, I'm aware that someone could screenshot something from a more private account and post it into a more public one (probably more common with young people posting personal pics that within my networks).

It seems that there's a high level of communal consent to use Facebook this way.

What do you think?

Do people share other peoples' posts across boundaries?

-Ella

Dear Elisabetta and The List,

Thanks for the very interesting paper, you're doing something that I'm trying to do in my own research, understanding social media as a social practice. Though I am focusing on a particular sub-practice of social media, and understanding it alongside its links to the practice of migration. I agree with much of what you say, but in the form of practice theory that I am working with (see below) I still have the need to analyse and consider (in your own words) "properties that shape, constrain or generate practices" in material objects (including websites and applications), and I'm wondering if there is a good term for this.

Christian has mentioned Schatzki and Reckwitz, but I'd also like to draw attention to Elizabeth Shove's understanding of practice theory (the form I am using), which makes use of Schatzki and Reckwitz. Shove et al. (2012) consider social practices to be made up of 3 interlinked elements; material, competence and meaning. The elements may exist outside of the social practice, and the social practice occurs when the elements are linked together. So, the material elements of the practice of social media (computer, phone, code, website, app, etc.) can exist separately from the social practice of social media (and can be used for other social practices), but when linked with the competences (bodily actions) and meanings (for Shove, mental actions, mental drive and meanings created), the social practice we are defining as social media occurs. Now, it is in considering the material elements that I desire a term to explain the "properties that shape, constrain or generate practices" through the material elements. Importantly, it is only when describing and understanding the material element of the social practice that the term affordances is used, the other elements of the social practice are not covered by this term.

So I must agree with Christian when he says "I hesitate, however, to substitute 'affordances' (despite all the problems we have in grasping its analytical value) with 'social practices'". In my understanding of practice theory, I do not think they work on the same theoretical level, the social practice is above all else, and the things that affordances describe are merely a part

of the material element, designed or discovered by actors. Perhaps affordances can become a way, not the only way, to understand the material elements of a social practice? But it is not a straight swap, as social practices include much else, from knowledge, to bodily action, to the emotions that drive action (Reckwitz, 2002).

Reckwitz A (2002) Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A development in culturalist theorizing. *European journal of social theory* 5(2): 243-263.

Shove E, Pantzar M and Watson M (2012) *The dynamics of social practice? Everyday life and how it changes*. London: SAGE.

-Carwyn Morris

Erkan Saka sakaerka@gmail.com

14 May 2017

If I have time later this week, I will write another post praising Elisabetta's ethnographical work in Mardin. I really liked it!

For the "affordances" debate; I tend to find the concept a bit too trendy and as it is overused, the concept seems to be losing its intellectual power.

Still, it seems to be a connection to remind researchers materiality of social phenomena in a sense Bruno Latour aims to carve out. I agree with Carwyn. "Perhaps affordances can become a way, not the only way, to understand the material elements of a social practice?" Without that connection, practice theory may turn into a similar position that some culturalist explanations in postmodernist framings had...

Cordially,
Erkan

Julian Hopkins julian.hopkins@monash.edu

15 May 2017

Elisabetta's account of how the public Facebook page reflects the wedding-related practices is an excellent example of how the online reflects the offline. It's the kind of example I can imagine using to illustrate what her paper highlights, that social media will be used in many different ways and that in the first instance, we need to gather data on situated practices to develop ethnographical accounts.

It seems to me that most people acknowledge, as Elisabetta does, the reality of opportunities and constraints of any technology and/or materiality. The question then becomes, how do we conceptualise it and integrate it into analyses of society, culture, and interpersonal interactions?

I feel that affordances gives us that concept. I agree that it could probably be subsumed within a discussion of 'technologies in practice' – but we still need to account for the place the material/technology occupies. I feel that affordances doesn't detract from understanding media as practice, but adds a useful label to integrate the material into the analysis. As long as it is understand as relational.

Like a table in a room, or a television becoming a focal point of a living room, social media

are adapted as components of everyday relations that people need to negotiate. This relates to what some others have mentioned with regard to ANT. The additional significance of social media is that it is becoming an intrinsic part of the social interaction that makes us human (and which is also the fundamental focus of anthropology).

Maybe the objective limits of technologies allow us to suggest that the same technology may promote similar affordances in different sociocultural contexts. If we ignore this possibility are we positing a relativistic relationship with materiality where only the abstract and symbolic relations that define human interaction are to be taken account of, suggesting an infinite number of potential affordances could emerge from any technology?

Humans do often use symbolic objects – such as an idol – where the physical properties may be irrelevant, but affordances relate in some way to tangible properties that enable action. However, where technologies do not have similar uses in difference sociocultural contexts, something that can easily happen, this can be used to as leverage to explore particular cultural patterns. So I see it as one vector by which to understand more about human culture.

In Elisabetta’s example, by seeing how different cultural practices have reacted to the possibility (affordance?) of context collapse, we can understand more about the different cultures (issues of family honour, etc.).

Understanding affordances with relation to perceptions of utility that derive from our human ability to reflect on our situation, set ourselves a goal, and recalibrate our actions as we advance towards it, reemphasises human agency and helps to explain both how users may adapt new technologies to existing practices, as well as follow new practices suggested or framed by these technologies.

By accounting for some form of agency for the technology, we can incorporate it into the ethnographic account and use it as one relative measure by which to situate other practices. Likewise, the other practices situate the technology and together they make up the overall picture.

The TL;DR version: Affordances is an additional conceptual tool that helps compare cultural practices, and it reminds us not to ignore material limitations.

Hope this makes sense, and thanks to all for this discussion,

Julian

Elisabetta Costa elisabettacosta1@gmail.com

15 May 2017

Dear all,

Many thanks for your contributions and the rich discussion.

Below are some responses. I start with Gabriele’s questions.

1. I was not really implying that the platform of Facebook’s does not include privacy setting options. Of course it does. I will make sure that this will be clearer in the paper. I was rather criticising the fact that many scholarly accounts on the uses of Facebook emphasize “the

public by default” mode and underestimate the others. Several academic papers describe a specific way of using the platforms as the only possible one. Also, I was not arguing that users are free to do whatever they want on the platform. My critique towards the concept of affordance didn’t aim to claim that the platform does not contribute to shape users practices. It certainly does. I was rather criticising specific interpretations of the concept of affordance. As Christian brilliantly explained in his comments, we need to have a richer understanding of affordances, which questions the idea that technologies can be described out of the situated practices of usage.

2. Many works on social media tend to assume that their findings can be generalized from a single case study based in the US or Europe. For example, Boyd does not put any effort in making clear that her discoveries are limited to a specific social group in a specific country. Western-centrism in media study is certainly not a new issue. In my paper I wanted to emphasize that in social media studies there has not been yet a serious reflection on this.

Said that, I agree with you that it would interesting to clarify the history of privacy settings on Facebook. I will include it on my paper. Thanks! Yet, the social media practices I describe in my paper are not only about changing privacy settings. They include creation of fake profiles and different strategies of anonymity, the presence of multiple Facebook accounts, etc. Thus, I would not attribute the difference between boyd’s findings and mine to the difference between Facebook’s privacy settings in two different years. Furthermore, “It’s complicated” builds on a research that was carried between 2006 and 2012. There are not significant differences between privacy setting options in 2012, and 2013/2014 - when I carried out my fieldwork.

Jamie, many thanks for your observations. I have been thinking about your question, but I cannot remember of any specific example of complaining about the lack of capacities that were only “strictly material”. The complaints in my field-site were parts of moral and social concerns. For example, someone complained that he had lost some friends because of WhatsApp, because WhatsApp shows when the message is read. Thus, in Mardin either you answer your friend’s message immediately, or the other person gets seriously upset. Again, this is about social norms ruling mediated interactions between people. But I don’t want to minimize the role played materiality and technology. Then, I agree with you that my paper can be seen as a methodological critique. But it is also a critique of a certain interpretation of affordance, and a reflection on how this concept has been misused (methodology and theory are related I think!). And it’s the confusion around the concept of affordance that led me to wonder whether we should keep using it or not. I was not questioning the capacity of materiality and technology to shape practices.

Ella, Thanks for your question. In Mardin people tended to respect friend’s privacy across various accounts. The contrary would have been seen as a serious affront. The violation of boundaries was sometimes used to damage people’s reputation indeed.

Carwyn, thank you very much for your reflection. I am not familiar with Shove’s theory, but I will definitely look at it. Carwyn and Erkan, many thanks! I will think further about your point.

I also thank Julian. His comments will be food for thought in the next hours.

Thanks to all again.

Hello all! Thanks to Elisabetta for this thought-provoking paper and the excellent comments so far — I'm especially glad to be discussing the limits of affordances and context collapse in understanding social media.

Some of my comments reprise themes already discussed, with a few additional points.

Elisabetta's discussion of affordances, and how notions of context collapse don't explain her ethnographic findings, point to the inadequate ways social media are often theorized (though that's changing in recent anthropological literature). Her findings also decenter western and Anglo-American practices that reflect culturally specific ways of living with and on social media.

The paper raises a number of questions for me, some of which others have touched on already. First, it rejects the notion that people in Mardin simply resist a fixed architecture to circumvent designers' intentions, and shows that, instead, they understand their practices as obvious and normal, "not practices of resistance to a rigid architecture that constrains and limits its users." The paper goes on to say: "Rather, in Mardin these are the natural and taken for granted way of using Facebook. The majority of my research participants didn't envisage any other ways of using this platform." I wonder, with Jamie, whether they ever encountered hurdles or challenges to adapting the technology to their layered approach to creating publics. For example, Facebook increasingly offers some continuity of experience to improve user experience across multiple devices. Similarly, most devices have mechanisms to save passwords, cookies, and so forth, which require more effort for users trying to manage multiple accounts. It also seems very time and labor intensive to manage Facebook's privacy settings with such care. How were such experiences understood? To put it another way, the fact that people had to maintain, and often delete, so many accounts suggests that, as Gabriele points out, Facebook isn't designed for their ways of creating and maintaining publics and identities, even if this didn't create difficulties for them. Those who create a single Facebook account, as its designers imagine, will run into the problem of "collapsed contexts;" this seems like the very thing users in Mardin are successfully avoiding. In my research in Berlin, I similarly found people managed diverse publics and audiences on social media through numerous means, from language practices to privacy settings and creating different groups. But they still had to manage the risk of "collapsed contexts."

Second, if Facebook in Mardin primarily serves to reproduce existing social orders and publics, does it make a difference? What's new or consequential about social media for the people studied? Is Facebook just a new site for enacting prior practices? It seems that what Facebook does is make very visible how people in Mardin understand and manage multiple spheres of public and private life. This raises the further question for me, though, of what publicness means to people in Mardin. A few hundred known friends and family, for example, is a very different public from the media publics comprised of strangers outlined by Michael Warner.

I appreciate the discussion about whether there are still technological/material constraints that must be addressed, and whether we should put aside the notion of affordances or define it in a

more theoretically developed way. What I take from Elisabetta's paper, however, is that "features" of a given technology are not as fixed or obvious as they come to seem. I hesitate to frame technology as material constraint, however, because it suggests that social and semiotic practices are immaterial, despite a wealth of literature critiquing the material-semiotic divide. But I find it very helpful reconsidering social media practices as socio-technical arrangements. There are, I think, technical capacities that shape social practice, but as Elisabetta's work demonstrates, these capacities are not given or obvious, and are constituted through practice. This approach forces us to ask what difference these technologies and platforms make in human social worlds, and is therefore key to theorizing what social media are as an emerging practice.

As a final note, I especially appreciate the resonances between weddings as a site of performing public identities in Mardin, and weddings as primary sites of context collapse in the US. This comparison intrigues me as something that might be developed further in exploring what kinds of social spaces weddings create, and how those spaces and forms of sociality take place online.

Jordan

Veronica Barassi v.barassi@gold.ac.uk

25 May 2017

Dear All,

Just a quick note, following Jordan's comment to say that we have decided to extend the seminar for another week.

All best

Veronica

Maria Schreiber maria.schreiber@univie.ac.at

26 May 2017

hello everyone,

thank you so much for the wonderful contribution, the thought-provoking comments and the stimulating discussion, which to me raised the following three points/questions:

- yay for relationality! but methods?

Like some others, I never understood the concept of affordances as techno-deterministic approach, and also in Elisabetta's paper the 'relational version' of affordances is described as meaningful way "to develop a middle-ground between technology determinism and social constructivism, and to overcome the duality of objects and subjects". So this does not automatically mean that affordances have to be analysed "outside of their situated uses" - maybe it is, in the end, really more of a method(ological) question that Elisabetta's intriguing analysis raises?

To me it does not seem to be about /either/ affordances /or/ practices but rather about asking, how can we theoretically AND empirically conceptualise affordances/technologies-in-practice? if we understand affordances as active participants in the practices we are researching, can they be interviewed and observed? how can we systematically integrate them in our analyses? I think McVeigh-Schultz/Baym is a very nice example of how affordances-in-practices can be analysed in detail as it combines concrete practices with affordances on a micro-level. but also:

- alternatives?

nevertheless, I personally found ANT-oriented concepts like Latour's 'hybrid actor' more inspiring and helpful for (my) empirical research and analysis. any kind of practice is understood as situated and constituted by 'programs' by both social and technical components, these 'programs' may intertwine in a variety of ways (translational, blackboxed, etc...) and result in new, combined/hybrid 'programs' (patterns, habits,...). Regarding context collapse, I actually came to a similar conclusion in a comparative analysis of picture sharing practices (on different platforms): contexts don't seem to be collapsed but rather crafted - but I found them to be crafted in a close entanglement of (technical) affordances and (social) practices (Schreiber forthcoming). therefore:

- plea for complexity.

I think many of the comments and especially Jordan's and Gabriele's elaborations show that there actually might be a need for a more fine-tuned understanding of the entanglement of social and material/technical components in social media practices. But how rough or fine-tuned affordances should be analysed or if they should be conceptually integrated at all is, in the end, also defined by the research question. and I think there is and should be wonderful research about social media practices with different foci and priorities.

Thanks again for the opportunity to discuss this!

Maria

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Maria Schreiber

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26 May 2017

Thanks Jordan and Maria for your helpful comments. I found them very insightful.

I start with Jordan's notes. I have been thinking about the hurdles that research participants encountered in my field-site. People were occasionally challenged by technologies. For example, a person could post an improper image on a friend's Facebook wall. The owner of the page would immediately delete it and hope that nobody saw it. This was an issue especially for women, who could run into serious consequences if photographs of themselves behaving inappropriately (e.g. setting next to a man, wearing inappropriate clothes, etc.) became public. Social norms ruled the boundaries between private and public spaces on social media. Most of the time people knew what was appropriate for the public and what was not. Yet, sometimes the norms were broken. The possibility that private images could

spread and circulate publicly was a serious concern indeed. But these episodes were rare. They were the exception. *Context collapse* also occurred when a young woman from a “modern” family shared on the public-facing Facebook images of herself well dressed for a dinner. Her dress was considered acceptable by her family, and not by the boyfriend’s conservative family. The young woman was not able to keep the photos out of the gaze of the boyfriend’s family, and eventually she had to delete them. This is definitely an example of context collapse.

I agree with Jordan and Jamie that looking at hurdles is interesting and important. But I am not sure I understand how to use this information. The ordinary uses of Facebook in Mardin are not accounted for by the concept of *context collapse*, although the risk of context collapse was there. When I eat an apple I run the risk to be suffocated by a bite that can go into my trachea, but I do not describe an apple as a fruit that can threaten my life. Why should we focus on the potentialities that are not realized? It’s impossible to know all the potentialities of a technology. We can only acknowledge the actual practices. On the other hand, people’s concerns about the unexpected consequences of Facebook reveals insights about the perceived threatening technological potentials. And I see how this information is relevant for understanding the process through which potentials become ineffective...

Moving on to Jordan’s second point, in my book (Costa 2016) I have argued that in Mardin social media have facilitated a social change that is nonlinear and contradictory. Social media have switched the boundaries between private and public, and have increased opportunities of both visibility and privacy. Yet, this social transformation cannot be reduced to any intrinsic quality of social media.

Maria, thank you very much for your comments. I will reply soon.

Thanks all again for the discussion.

Best,

Elisabetta

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27 May 2017

A terrific e-seminar, thanks everyone! I have a couple of quick comments:

1. Like other participants, I don't see the need in social media studies (or media/comm research generally) to shift from a focus on affordances to one on practices. For a start, the focus was never there in the first place. Also, both are potentially useful conceptual tools (depending on the questions being asked) in their own right, among many other concepts, not paradigms holding together the field. We need more conceptual vocab, not less.

2. Speaking of tools, Elisabetta wrote: "Why should we focus on the potentialities that are not realized? It's impossible to know all the potentialities of a technology. We can only acknowledge the actual practices."

Yes, it's impossible to know **all** the potentialities but it's crucial to an understanding of the material aspects of any given practice (e.g. Facebook tools and clandestine courtship in Mardin) to take into account the **likely or probable uses** of a technology. It is highly likely that keen tennis players in Mardin will use tennis rackets, not baseball bats, to play tennis on a regular basis.

The same principle applies to digital tools: their design and materiality make some uses more likely than others, but it never entirely predicts them, and there will always be some surprising uses. As Carwyn Morris mentioned earlier in connection to work by Shove et al, all regular practices come with certain material elements (and these are hardly random).

It could be that the problem is a reading of the notion of technological affordances as the **total** limits and possibilities of a given tech. Instead, we should read affordances with our probabilistic hats on: what are the **most likely** practical uses of tennis rackets by keen tennis players during a tennis match? (to play the game). What are the most likely uses of smartphone weather apps by Melbourne residents? (to check the weather), etc.

When people turn off the TV sound during a football match and put on the more exciting radio commentary of the same match instead, like we used to do at home when I was a child, they are switching off one of the key tech affordances of TV (audio) in order to enhance a given practice, namely watching football on TV. These 'tricks of the practice' tell us about the specificities of both the practices and the technologies in question. We could only turn off the sound of the telly because this possibility was built into it. Its makers had correctly anticipated that viewers may sometimes wish to turn off the sound, even if they could not predict (and did not care) exactly for what reasons.

Best

John

Patricia Prieto patriciaprietoblanco@gmail.com

29 May 2017

Dear all,

This has been a very interesting discussion. There are a few thoughts I'd like to share and I apologise in advance for not having been able to engage with your comments before but it is that time of the academic year ... These E-Seminars provide much food for thought and, to me, are a catalyst for theory work. So many thanks to all of you for your contributions as they have pushed me away from the teaching bubble and into research mode :)

On the question of methods - "need to account for the place the material/technology occupies. I feel that affordances doesn't detract from understanding media as practice, but adds a useful label to integrate the material into the analysis. As long as it is understand as relational." (Julian Hopkins in this e-seminar) -> if this material layer is added not only to the analysis but to the research design, then affordances can be observed. We might not be able to

interview them per se, but we can certainly trace the socio-political implications of its (non)existence. Is that how affordances raise their voice?

For example, When deleting a picture, whether on camera or not, a dialogue box appears asking if we are sure we want that picture to be deleted. As Rammert explains, this features of agency force users to think of the non-human agent in terms of a relation, as if the non human side of the equation had some control over the process. When this happens, “interactive-communicative relations” (p.9) emerge and technologies are perceived beyond their instrumental character.

Wright and Parchoma have reviewed the concept of affordances and they also propose a focus on situated practices and an ethnographic approach whereby the researcher observes existing practices rather than choosing to explore concrete technologies and designing specific settings of use (p.256). In my own research, I set the focus on observing how transnational families share photographs, rather than opting for highlighting specific mediations (such as FB, Whatsapp, paper copies, etc.) [Shaun Moores has called this a non-media centric media studies approach, but that is, for now, just food for thought.

On the conceptual discussion of affordances – I’d like to go back to a working definition of affordances proposed by Julian Hopkins in 2015 in another of these e-seminars: “emergent phenomena of particular forms of being-in-the-world”.

While affordances are inherent in objects, they are also relational and thus, subjected to the personal experience of the perceiver, which can vary from time to time or from person to person. However, when the experiences of the perceivers are framed by a practice variations should be minimised because practices are structured and participation responds to the ability of acting (in)appropriately. This is why affordances and performatives work so well together. Both are contextual. They are both culturally established and essentially repeatable. Furthermore, they are both intrinsically linked to agency. Affordances are opportunities for action and performatives are actions in themselves. Performatives acquire social meaning through emplacement and embodiment as part of the habituses of a particular social group. The frame of practice provides both performatives and affordances with a structure which, while dynamic, is also grounding. It is the interaction between people and things that precipitates change and ensures continuity at the same time.

Others might find Hennion’s work on attachment more productive or more suitable. It is definitively more appealing to social scientists, but as pointed out in the ongoing discussion, it is worth considering at which point are we falling onto social determinism. In any case, attachment opens the discussion to both the process of being attached to something as well as to the “specific object of attachment” (2012, p. 1). The exploration of attachments considers the attachment itself as well as the experience of being attached. In this way, Hennion’s work delves into the concept of habitus by situating sociotechnological practices in concrete experiential contexts. Importantly, his work also acknowledges the problems of the binary opposition between agency and non-agency. Attachment can reveal relations between people and things as well as among people. These relations can be both potentialities as well as hurdles/constrains, as attachment is also “signified as a bind, restriction, restrain and dependence” (ibid.,p.4). In terms of methods Henion argues for a holistic approach to research that can only be delivered by being attached to research (Henion, 2012, p. 8) possibly through ethnography and narrative inquiry.

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And my own phd thesis, which is unpublished but I am happy to share.

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1 Jun 2017

Thanks all for the wonderful discussion. All your insightful comments have given me plenty to think about.

I would like to add one more thought. John argues that the problem is “a reading of the notion of technological affordances as the total limits and possibilities of a given tech.” I agree with it, but I also think that the concept of “likely uses” of a technology might be risky. The “likely uses” of a technology are likely only within a specific social context and historical period. I didn’t know what that likely uses of Facebook in Mardin were until I observed them. And the likely uses of Facebook in Mardin are different from the likely uses of Facebook in California. We cannot assume what the likely uses are, unless we do situated research. If we assume that the likely uses of a technologies are those envisaged by the designers, we would end up describing the ordinary Facebook uses in Mardin as less likely than the ordinary uses in California. But this was not the case.

That said, I also believe that some uses are more likely than others. But how do we know them? Like Maria and others I believe that this debate has raised important methodological issues. I would suggest that we can only observe a multiplicity of diverse situated practices (or affordances in practices/technologies in practices, etc.) and formulate hypothesis and generalisations, which will be necessarily contingent and limited.

I would like to thank all again for the amazing discussion.

Elisabetta Costa,

Veronica Barassi v.barassi@gold.ac.uk

1 Jun 2017

Dear All,

The seminar is now closed. I would like to extend my heartfelt thank you to Elisabetta, Christian and all of you who have contributed to this vibrant discussion.

all the best

Veronica