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E-Seminar 51

Assembling Blog Affordances

by
Julian Hopkins
Monash University Malaysia

Discussant Comments by
Adolfo Estalella (University of Manchester/Open University of Catalonia)

Dear all,

First of all I'd like to thank Julian Hopkins for the opportunity to discuss his paper and to Veronica for inviting me to start the debate. I have always thought that the Media Anthropology Network e-seminar series is a paradigmatic example of the reinvention of our discussion genres in academia, an admirable effort. I am attaching a more readable version of my comment in PDF.

The paper by Julian Hopkins proposes a theoretical discussion of the notion of affordance that is illustrated by his ethnographic research with bloggers in Malaysia. His proposal is intended to serve as analytical resource for the study of digital technologies; more specifically, he contends that the notion of affordance helps to theorise non-human agency. The concept of affordance goes in the paper hand in hand with the notion of assemblage through which Julian mobilizes the theoretical framework of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Both concepts combined allow, in Julian's argument, for a kind of analysis that "integrates materiality, social interaction, and agency – the theory of assemblage". The paper introduces in the first part the theoretical discussion of these two concepts (affordance and assemblage) and then proposed in the second part a distinction between two different kinds of affordances: basic and emergent.

My comment addresses three topics that I think the paper triggers for discussion: First, the theoretical framework for the study of technology; second, the analytical value of affordances for the study of digital technologies; and third, I engage with the empirical description of the paper to highlight that it expands our conception of blogs using the notion of assemblage.

The paper refers to Actor-Network Theory as the theoretical domain and sensibility to dialogue with in the analysis of blogs. This choice sits the paper in a wider discussion developed in different domains on how to account in our analysis for materials, materiality, technology and non-humans (you can choose whatever concept best fit your sensibility). In relation to the anthropological study of the Internet, I am tempted to say that while during the first decade of the XXI century one of the

main topics was a certain methodological anxiety, now theoretical issues, like this one, are growing in relevance.

This interest in the theorization of materiality has been addressed from different approaches in the last years. The ontological turn has been translated to the ethnographic study of things renewing traditional approaches in anthropology; the import of the analysis of material culture has produced insightful accounts of digital technologies (we have excellent examples in this list) and the theories of practices have addressed the issue of materiality in an elegant way (again, we can find examples in the list).

Julian tries to translate the analytical sensibility of ANT to the study of media through the notion of assemblage. His choice of ANT is not odd, for the first ethnographies of the Internet published at the turn of the century referred to ANT and Science and Technology Studies as valuable theoretical domains to dialogue with (Hine; 2000; Miller and Slater, 2000; Hakken, 1999). ANT has evolved in very different directions since then; it has been translated to new empirical domains, its scope has been extended and its sensibility has been transformed. We can find one paradigmatic example of this trend in the import of ANT to the field of urban studies; the recent discussion on “urban assemblages” (Fariás and Bender, 2009) has opened a fertile debate in this field.

Certainly ANT and Anthropology share many things, but they have striking differences too: in their empirical sensibilities, narrative genres and methodological preoccupations. In any case, I would like to say that perhaps it could be productive to engage in a thoroughly debate in media anthropology similar to the one that urban studies have maintained: How would be translating ANT to media studies while maintaining an anthropological sensibility?

My second comment addresses the central topic of the paper, the notion of affordances and the explicit attempt highlighted by Julian to bring for discussion the issue of technology’s agency. The paper proposes to distinguish between basic and emergent affordances:

- “Basic affordances are those that are intrinsic to the blog medium itself, and derive directly from particular programmed aspects” (p. 9)

- “emergent affordances are enabled by the interaction of the components of the blog, but are not reducible to any particular programmable code. They emerge through interaction with other affordances and/or components of broader social assemblages” (p. 10).

Examples of basic affordances are storage, multimedia and hyperlinking; examples of emergent affordances are anonymity, disembodiment and accessibility. The concept of affordance seems promising as Julian evinces in the introductory literature review of the paper; yet I would say that the distinction he makes between two forms of affordances seems to contradict its attempt to take into account the role of technology through the theoretical sensibility of ANT. Examining the distinction between two categories of affordances reveals that it reproduces the conventional dichotomy between technological/social. While basic affordances are described as “intrinsic” attributes of technology, emergent affordances are mdescribed as consequences of the relation between users and digital infrastructures. I do not intend to discuss the value and scope of these categories (technological/social), in analytical or ontological terms; I just try to underline the fact that the distinction between basic and emergent affordance reproduces the same analytical framework that the paper tries to overcome mobilizing the concepts of affordance and assemblage.

Just to follow with my argument, “accessibility”, for instance, is described as an emergent

affordance because “the barriers to starting and maintaining a blog are minimal”. Accessibility for humans is low (now) because of the specific technological infrastructure that blogs platforms have developed in the last decade. However, the first blogs created at the turn of the century (before Blogger platform was launched) were only elaborated by people with HTML programming skills. Only now these skills are unnecessary because blog infrastructures have incorporated in its material design certain attributions that were previously the responsibility of users. Considering the case of accessibility and the historical transformation of blog infrastructures and the skills needed to elaborate a blog, I find it difficult to establish whether the accessibility affordance is the result of a particular technological design (a basic affordance) or the effect of our relation with technology (emergent affordance).

Indeed, I should say that what the notion of affordances usually does, as put forward by Gibson, is cutting this Gordian knot, avoiding the need to attribute properties to technology or people: affordances are emergent phenomena of particular forms of being-in-the-world; they are the effect of our relationship with environment; or with technology, for this case. In this sense, affordance resonates with the conception of agency common in many ANT scholars, when they describe agency as a compound property of heterogeneous collectives composed of human and not humans; agency, in this case is a compounded property (the discussion on the agency of guns or gunman in Latour (1994) is a paradigmatic example).

Despite its problems, I think that the notion of basic affordances does a valuable work because it evinces the infrastructural condition of blogs; it makes visible its material dimension and forces us (analysts) to expand the number of entities we should take into account in our analysis. My suggestion to cope with this dichotomy is simple: The notion of “emergent affordance” is close to the original notion of affordance and the notion of “basic affordance” could be substitute for any of two ANT concepts that resonate with it, these are the concepts of script, proposed by Madeleine Akrich (1992), and “program of action”, proposed by Bruno Latour (1994). Akrich describes the script in the following terms: “when the technologists define the characteristics of their objects, they necessarily make hypotheses about the entities that make up the world into which the object is inserted. Designers thus define actors with specific tastes, competences, motives, aspirations, political prejudice, and the rest, and they assume that morality, technology, science, and economy will evolve in particular ways. A large part of the work of innovators is that of ‘inscribing’ this vision of (or prediction about) the world in the technical content of the new object. I will call the end product of this work a ‘script’ or a ‘scenario’” (1992).

The script allows us to include the participation of material entities in the configuration of our social practices. It captures the tension of the encounter between humans and non-humans and it makes present those who are not: technology designers. At the same time, “script” and “program of action” avoid the discussion on agency and displaces it to an empirical domain: how is technology materially inscribed with a particular program of action and how people follow, subvert or reconfigure it in their own practices.

In my third comment I refer to the empirical discussion in the paper. When Julian steps into the fieldwork vignettes the paper takes a different shape. His ethnographic description shows a third and fundamental element of blogs and the blogging practice that has been absent in his previous discussion: readers. The paper explicitly highlights their importance: “when we analyse a popular personal blog, we need to understand it as more than the creation of a single person – it is shaped by three main actants, which can also be understood as nested or connected assemblages: the coded components, the blogger, and the audience” (p. 14).

The reference to readers is only the first step in unveiling the entities that are entangled in the blogging practice: search engines, legal regulations, technical restrictions – it is difficult to establish the clear boundaries of a blog and under these circumstances, blogs become many different things: They are topics of discussion, repositories of intimacy, offensive forms of expression and objects of censorship... in each case the blog gets entangled with state regulations, moral norms, family practices... and then it turns out to be more than just a media, challenging us to consider it beyond a communicative genre. I think that this is what the paper of Julian suggests in his final part and I find it especially fertile. I tried a similar attempt in my PhD dissertation when I described certain type of blogs written by passionate bloggers as hope assemblages (Estalella, 2011).

I think that it is precisely the notion of assemblage what opens productive ways for the analysis of blogs, in the way that Stephen Collier and Aihwa Ong (2004) have conceptualized the notion (global) assemblages: “sites for the formation and reformation of what we will call, following Paul Rabinow, anthropological problems”. I would like to invite Julian to expand on the anthropological problems that are posed by this particular mode of narrating and assembling the world; and I hope we all enjoy the debate, as usually.

References

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