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**E-Seminar 51
Assembling Blog Affordances**

**by
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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 described 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 develop 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.

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22 May 2015

Dear all,

To start I would like to thank Veronica for organising the e-seminar, and for Adolfo's time. I hope that I can do justice to his careful analysis and insightful comments. I am not able to respond to all his points now due to time constraints, and I hope nobody minds if I return to add more as the e-seminar continues. I have not been able to read the literature he refers to, but I thank him for the suggestions and will read them.

The first points addressed relate to “the theoretical framework for the study of technology”.

Adolfo asks how we can translate “ANT to media studies while maintaining an anthropological sensibility?” This is a good question, one to which I do not have a complete answer. I can say that one way in which ANT and anthropology meet is in what I see is a common focus on an inductive methodology and empirical data. I also find that Latour's (2005) emphasis on avoiding the “social”, in the sense of presuming bounded cultures (for example) is a goal that anthropology shares as it developed from the more classic cultural ethnography. Latour's prescription for “following the traces” helped me to keep an eye on the connections that translate into practices, rather than starting with assumptions about shared cultural meanings.

One area in which Latour did not help me so much was, as Couldry (2004) has argued, is that it is not so good at taking into account power differentials, which is partly why I also turned

to assemblage.

The second points relate to “the analytical value of affordances for the study of digital technologies”

A key point by Adolfo is when he takes to task the distinction I make between the “basic” and “emergent” affordances, and he notes that I may be failing to “take into account the role of technology through the theoretical sensibility of ANT.” He underlines and summarises this argument by saying 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.”

I have struggled myself with this same point, and I am not surprised that he has picked up on it. Others have made a similar point (in blind reviews). I am open to being proved wrong, but I shall try to explain why I have these two categories, and they still make sense to me.

When I say that the basic affordances are those that define the blog, I mean that when we think of what makes a blog, these are the components without which a blog could not exist. In ANT terms, they are “obligatory points of passage.” As a parallel, I suppose, the “basic affordances” of a car would be the internal combustion engine, wheels, an axle, a means of directing the vehicle, and a seat. If it has two wheels, then it is a “motorcycle”. This latter is purely a nominal difference (as in, it is a different name given for cultural-historical reasons), but nonetheless the world would look (architecture, town planning, etc.) very different if we only had motorcycles. The underlying dynamics (urban sprawl, megamalls, etc.) would be similar however.

However, these basic affordances (e.g. hyperlinking), are most definitely themselves a consequence of previous historically situated negotiations between human actors and technological actants. That is, Tim Berners-Lee invented hyperlinks in a particular context that could be investigated itself. This development depended on the preceding invention of microprocessors, etc. For analytical purposes, we can then “black-box” the level we want to focus on – this explicit and reflexive acknowledgment of a relatively arbitrary bounding of the object of study is an example of an anthropological approach.

That is why I call them “affordances” and not, for example, features, or properties. Because they arise out of an underlying level of sociotechnical processes. I believe that it is applying the logic of ANT and the acknowledgement of the agency of materiality. This is especially important to acknowledge when we consider that software are most definitely sociotechnical products – very abstract and human designed complexes of cause-and-effect chains that are developed in specific sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts – e.g. Castells and the relationship of the internet to United States neo-libertarian values (Castells 2001: 37, 54-8).

In practice, however, users have to engage with them as they are, as material and limiting means to translate human intention. This materiality needs to be acknowledged as different from other opportunities that blogs offer, such as being anonymous, or interacting with readers. These “emergent affordances” are not needed for the blog to exist, but become strongly associated with them and lead to a variety of textual genres and interpersonal practices, some of which I discuss later in the paper.

Following on, Adolfo mentions the accessibility emergent affordance, and asks why it might not be a basic affordance.

The reason I put accessibility as an emergent affordance is because it could easily be curtailed by political/state action. Also, most people in the world are not able to create a blog due to lack of access to the internet and/or the appropriate digital literacy skills. This is why I included the caveat “For any computer literate person with access to the internet”. Perhaps I need to re-label it or explain this better.

My point is that right now, the internet user encounters a blog as something easy to create. As Adolfo explains, there is a history behind why it is easy to create, but this does not directly affect the user experience now. As Adolfo says, software is developed by people, it is an affordance. But to the user a blog does not offer the same affordances as it does to a skilled coder who can delve into (for example) a WordPress blog and transform it. However, you could take away accessibility, and still have a blog, but you can’t take away “Perfect reduplication” (i.e. the capacity to share the digital files with multiple CPUs), and still have that blog (you would have to share it by printing it out I suppose). I think that the ways in which digital technologies such as social media platforms, which are explicitly designed with particular sociocultural relational outcomes (i.e. emergent affordances) in mind (e.g. Bucher 2013) are very important and deserve more attention, ultimately, than the “basic” affordances.

Another reason for focusing on the dual definitions of affordances is that I find that many accounts do seem to acknowledge a need for a distinction, but don’t spell it out. Hutchby speaks of “functional” and “relational” affordances (Hutchby 2001: 444), Sun speaks of “instrumental” and “social” affordances (2004: 57), and others are mentioned in my paper. I’m hoping that by including the non-human agency, and the blackbox/nesting idea, there is a way to resolve this. That is, at each level we can consider as “basic” affordances those that are relational outcomes of underlying processes, and these give rise to emergent affordances that we focus on in order to gain insight into (for social media) the ways in which the cultural impact of pervasive mediation of interpersonal interactions.

I will have to leave it there for the moment. I hope I’ve provided enough to generate some debate and I will come back with more comment later, as there are more points that Adolfo made that I would like to be able to engage with.

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24 May 2015

Dear All, here is the second part of my response to Adolfo's comments. Thanks again for allowing me this space to share my work. I look forward to your opinions on what I have written, for there is no doubt that I have much to learn from this community of scholars. I have learnt a lot from past e-seminars, though not always contributed as much as I should.

Adolfo explains affordances as "emergent phenomena of particular forms of being-in-the-world; they are the effect of our relationship with environment; or with technology," and this enables "avoiding the need to attribute properties to technology or people."

He says it well. As I said, I have been struggling with whether or not to just consider the "basic affordances" as "properties" (in effect), and therefore leave them out of the picture. Adolfo's comments and engaging in this seminar has made me realise that I could probably write this paper without the "basic affordances," and encounter less resistance.

To me, including basic affordances acknowledges the place of software as a particularly "human" sociotechnology (if that is the right way to put it). It is "material" in the senses that it is not-human, but it is also an entirely human product – a consequence of abstract reasoning and synthetic manipulation of electrons into binary patterns. So, I feel that I have to both acknowledge its source in a chain of human endeavour, and also its constitutive force into the social behaviour that emerges from it.

Two iterations of this paper have been rejected, and I think the basic/emergent affordances proposition has a lot to do with that. I would sincerely welcome any advice on whether this is an avenue worth following any longer. I will look into the options proposed by Adolfo – the "script" and "program of action". Though, at first glance, these seem to relate more to the agency of the non-material – an important point, and one that I think is overlooked by some uses of affordances – rather than the "chain of affordances" idea I am suggesting. However, I will have to read more to understand better.

So this paper has two parts, and perhaps they shouldn't be proposed together. As Adolfo notes, the other part of this paper relate to an empirical discussion of blogs, and tries to integrate the use of affordances and assemblage. He also wonders about the permeable and boundaries of a blog and invites me "to expand on the anthropological problems that are posed by this particular mode of narrating and assembling the world."

Collier and Ong, whom he references, describe an "anthropological problem [as] an interest in the constitution of the social and biological existence of human beings as an object of

knowledge, technical intervention, politics and ethical discussion” (2005: 6). Perhaps where this overlaps with Adolfo’s comment is in the way that blogs, and social media more generally, provide the means for people to connect with and explore new ways of interacting as humans. The ubiquitous, embedded, nature of social media (where they are generally available), in a “media saturated” (e.g. Stanyer 2013) society does suggest that a blog can be seen as “more than just a media.” This was one reason why I found Lüders et al.’s description of genres useful: “Genres specify and generalize communication, ensuring coordination of specific practices involving many people, and contributing to the reproduction of social institutions and sectors in society” (2010: 950).

It suggested genres as assemblages, observable ways in which people influence each other and co-create conceptions of the self, identity, and cultural norms. The centrality of the (emergent) genres of blogs (and social media) here is evident in the ability of internet users to engage meaningfully and directly with other people. The medium, and the genre that emerges, are not clearly distinguishable from other more conventional patterns of social interaction and cultural formation. They form an assemblage.

Blogs have a potentially global audience through the internet (especially those in English), but in practice they are mostly not. Especially the Personal blogs – here local practices and discourses are essential in linking the readers with the blogger. The Lifestyle blog also, but it also becomes perhaps more globalised, in that it takes on a form that is reducible to capitalistic elements such as brand awareness, selling messages, etc.

Blogs may remind us of the malleability of human identity, and the overarching powerful forces of socioeconomic flows, but they also reinforce an understanding of humans as essentially social and bound to consider themselves through the eyes of others. The latter is perhaps a central role of anthropology, but it is also a human practice that becomes more visible given the opportunities to render as text those behavioural patterns in visual representations of databases and dynamic code that rest in repositories under commercial control. This modulation of human activity through coded structures, as Deleuze suggests in the “societies of control” (1992; see also Savat 2009), makes it all the more important to understand the ways in which software limits our interactions, hence – for me – the importance of understanding the affordances of the digital technology.

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27 May 2015

Dear all

A few quick comments on Julian Hopkins' working paper on blog affordances.

1. I have very much enjoyed struggling to get my head around the paper (working papers should not be light reading), followed by the terrific exchange between Adolfo and Julian.

2. This is an ambitious paper that tackles some fundamental issues in media and technology studies but that, in my view, is probably trying to do too much. After all, the paper brings together commodification, assemblages, affordances, genre, audience and more. Papers are like houses of cards: the fun part is when you start taking out cards (e.g. "basic affordances", as suggested by Julian) and realise that you don't really need all those cards to keep the argument from collapsing. (If it does collapse, then you may have to start again :)).

3. In the first half of the paper a series of intriguing claims are made, yet often without the support of empirical (or hypothetical) examples. For instance, the claim that the notion of assemblages can help us model change, or the related claim that "change is rhizomic". My instant reaction on reading this was: What does this mean? Is change always rhizomic or only sometimes? Any non-rhizomic forms of change? Could we have an example or two from Julian's – or somebody else's – fieldwork of actual processes of mediated change? The same goes for "affordances are relational", or "assemblages are... consequences of causally interrelated compounds". I'm not suggesting that Julian respond to all of these issues here, but that a future version of the paper should support these sorts of claims with real-world examples (wherever possible), or leave them out.

4. Adolfo makes the point that the notion of affordances is useful because it overcomes the need to attribute properties to technology or people. Affordances, as he defines them, are "emergent phenomena of particular forms of being-in-the-world". But surely without understanding the specific properties/attributes of the people and technologies that shape concrete social worlds we can't really understand the emergent phenomena? Take for example, Coleman's (2014) Anonymous geeks/hackers and their IRC channels, Kelty's (2008) free software geeks/hackers and their mailing lists, my own local activists in Subang Jaya and their web forum (Postill 2011) – or this very network of media scholars and our medianthro mailing list. All these are unique, dynamic admixtures of different kinds of people (geeks, activists, academics...) and technologies.

Looking to comments from other participants

Best wishes

John

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Veronica Barassi (v.barassi@gold.ac.uk)

28 May 2015

Dear Julian and All,

Similarly to John, I really enjoyed engaging with this very theoretical paper, which draws on the concepts of affordances/assemblages to highlight the fact that whilst we need to avoid techno-deterministic understandings of technological use we also, at the same time need to be aware of technological structures.

I am very fond of this line of reasoning and welcome any reflection on how we can – as researchers, and ethnographers – make sense of this tension without falling into the mistake of reproducing dualisms. Thus I want to thank Julian for his paper and Adolfo for his comments.

There are a couple of empirical questions and theoretical thoughts that I would like to share with you.

1. Julian, in your paper you talk about blogs and social media in equal terms, but according to my understanding personal blogs are very different socio-technical environments in comparison to Facebook profile pages or other social media. Not only they have different structures and affordances (e.g. archive options/ hence memory, profiling technologies; data management etc.), but also to a certain degree they are very different web platforms, which are shaped by different political cultures (e.g. the way in which content is produced, managed or censored; the way in which the data is exploited for corporate purposes etc.).

Therefore I would like to know a bit more about your empirical work, and ask you to clarify what type of blogs or social media platforms your participants were using and whether their lived experiences can provide us with important keys of analysis not only on the social complexity of these socio-technical environments, but also on their difference.

2. The second point that I would like to make is more theoretical. In your paper, I was struck by the fact that in your discussion of affordances (and more specifically in the discussion on the monetisation of blogs) there was no real engagement with the political economy of these technologies, or a critical reflection on the social and cultural tensions that are brought forward by the “commercialisation” of web platforms.

Whilst I reject contemporary understandings that try to objectify the political economy of the web by referring to structures of capital or to essentialist and monolithic terms like digital

capitalism (e.g. see Autonomous Marxists, Fuchs, Schiller etc.), I believe that there is a way in which we can understand digital capitalism in a non-essentialist way, by looking at the fact that many web platforms are shaped by the cultural practices and discourses of corporate power, and how people are effectively negotiating with these social, cultural and political tensions.

It seems to me from your research that your bloggers were doing precisely that. In their processes of negotiation they were creating emergent technological structures, and I was hoping that you could share some thoughts on this. In particular I would like you to consider the power relationships (if you think there were any) that were involved in this process of negotiation.

Looking forward to your response and to comments from other participants

Veronica

Julian Hopkins (julian.hopkins@monash.edu)

30 May 2015

I'd like to thank John for the suggestions. The arguments in the paper make sense to me but John illustrates how they are not clear to the reader. With regard to "pulling out cards," it seems that the first and second part could be split and looked at separately. Actually the second half is intended to be an empirical development of the first half, but clearly it hasn't worked out as I intended.

Addressing the point about "rhizomic change". I understand it to be an alternative to a linear model of change. There are other alternatives, but what I like about the rhizome metaphor is the understanding of how each node (alternatively, an obligatory point of passage) is the potential budding point for a new assemblage.

This helps me to integrate the rhizome/assemblage with ANT framework that sees each actor-network as a generative source of agency.

Why add ANT to it? ANT and assemblage share a common root, but ANT's concepts of the "obligatory point of passage", and "translation" are very useful.

The rhizomic model understands that change is a constant, but its direction is not predetermined. Nonetheless, regular patterns can be discerned, and directions presumed.

Hence – affordances, and I wrote: "As Graves suggests, the 'real power of the concept of a technological "affordance" derives [...] from the way it hints that potential exerts its own pull' (2007: 335). The verb 'to afford' means that it is not the outcome alone that we look at, but we start from the technology and see what it allows and/or suggests. To focus only on what people do with the technology seems to be forgetting the other half of the equation." (This is relevant to John's fourth point).

Perhaps an example of this, and mediated change, is the blog itself, and the way in which the personal blog genre suggested particular form of advertising practices such as the embedding of advertising messages in personal blogs, and the enabling of this via branding events

(product launches, etc.) to which bloggers were invited. The first ones I went to were structured for the mainstream press – with a press kit, photo opportunity, etc. Quickly, they evolved more into events that bloggers could participate in and write about – so instead of more static photo opportunities, there were activities to participate in. This provided material for bloggers. Bloggers told me that they liked this, as it made it easier to write about. At the same time, these events and the work to produce them took time away from their usual blogging.

Now, many advertising campaigns will include an effort to produce “viral” material, that is developed for social media and intended to be spread by users themselves.

Online, a (basic) affordance that enables a blog to function is the hyperlink. This is central to a whole new vein of personal tracking and advertising. The fact that we have to navigate along and through predetermined lines and nodes has been at the centre of – for example – the fortune of Google or Facebook. Online human social activity is reproducible in databases and qualified in metrological instruments – I develop this argument from Callon et al. (2002).

Why is this rhizomic? In the personal blog, hyperlinks mostly functioned first as a way for bloggers to connect to each other and share information. It was a means for accumulating (sub)cultural capital. Eventually, it also became a way to monetise their affective and emotional labour.

I think this demonstrates “rhizomic change”. We could just say that change is not linear, and leave it at that. But the metaphor of the rhizome just helps me to visualise the flows and concentrations of agency throughout the dynamic structures of nodes that are connected because they affect each other (hence they are “consequences of causally interrelated compounds”). At each moment the assemblage is resonating, it is held together by all the components acting upon each other. Take away one, or change one, and the whole assemblage changes.

The contribution to empirical anthropology is that we have to be able to point to these nodes, describe them, and explain how they affect other nodes.

I’d be very happy to hear anyone’s opinions on this, and for help in picking out the holes in my argument.

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First of all thanks Julian, for sharing this interesting paper with the list and thanks to Adolfo and other contributors for expanding the debate.

There are also many other issues in this paper related to how we understand blogging practices nowadays. Yet, my issue here is a minor question related with the ethnographic work. The fieldwork seems to include some bloggers and their blogs, but the author explains that fortuitously a company that wanted introduce advertisements in blogs started at the same time as the research. It is not clear to me the role that that company plays in the research and the relationship between the company and the researcher. On the one hand, I wonder if the question of monetizing blogs was introduced because of that, and on the other hand, I am curious if the fact that one person of the company is mentioned in the text is because she has been also interviewed for the research (and if the company has been included as part of the fieldwork and how).

Regarding the last post of Julian, I would like a further explanation about the contribution to “empirical anthropology” of this analysis. Perhaps I am wrong, but I must say that I do not see this paper oriented to get an anthropological understanding of blogging and monetizing practices, but to explore the concept of “affordances” in the context of an ANT approach in media studies. The use of ethnographic methods as a way to collect data does not imply automatically an anthropological interpretation of them, neither that an anthropological understanding is necessarily being sought by using anthropological materials. On the other hand, transoriented research can be very productive to enhance our vision of technology.

yours,
Elisenda

Julian Hopkins (julian.hopkins@monash.edu) 31 May 2015

Thanks Veronica for the thoughtful comments – here are my responses. I hope that I am engaging sufficiently with the points you wish to raise.

1. I focused almost entirely on their use of blogs. At the time, Facebook etc. was growing, and Twitter was in its infancy (they usually took longer to get to Malaysia). By the end of my fieldwork, it was clear that personal blogging was being superseded, in terms of popularity of use, by Facebook and Twitter. Now, people with similar interests and patterns of behaviour will distribute themselves across a variety of social media sites.

Most of the bloggers I followed and interviewed were early adopters, some had been blogging since 2002. One couple of well-known bloggers had met via ICQ, and the interviewee explained how a core of bloggers actually went back to pre-blog, ICQ, days.

One aspect of their lived experience that I found interesting was how many had started out of a personal desire to explore the technology and/or to use blogs as a diary – a means of self-reflection. When their audience grew, they usually had to change how they blogged. For example, one reported how her mother – a school teacher – was impacted when her students read her (the daughter-blogger’s) blog. Moving from being a student to a working life was also often an important transition, with the realisation that their audience could include

colleagues/bosses and the need to partition off these offline social areas from their online activities.

When the audience became a means to generate an income, the new audience of potential or actual clients also impacted what they wrote. For example, one blogger explained that he would no longer review fast food “for free”, whereas that had been a common thing for him to do before.

Now, some of these bloggers have children and are blogging about nappies, and so on.

Their blogs follow their lives, and at each stage they understand their audience in a different manner. Their blogs are their lives also, often, as it is also important to note that the successful lifestyle bloggers received a significant income and participated in events with free wining and dining and so on. In that sense, their blogs changed their life opportunities, but in order to take full advantage of these they also had to change their blogging to reflect the industrial need for specific types of stories, behaviour, and so on. As some of them now have children, these children also become props in their professional performance.

The question about the different affordances of the different types of social media is a good one, to which I don't have a good answer right now. A fundamental difference between e.g. Facebook and blogs is that the latter requires reciprocal pairing and a sociality that depends upon sharing and connecting to others (e.g. Bucher 2012, 2013). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) have a very useful way of seeing social media, along two axes of Self-presentation/Self-disclosure and Social presence/Media richness. For example, a blog is higher than virtual game worlds in terms of self-presentation, but lower in terms of social presence. It is a useful table, but could probably be developed more.

Blogging probably requires more work than other platforms. The crafting and writing of a post requires a couple of drafts, editing pictures, and posting. Bloggers find themselves to be always on the lookout for new topics, and gather experiences on or offline. The way to present these experiences may become formulaic. Social network sites are much easier to maintain than a blog, and whereas bloggers may have started blogs as a way to keep in contact with family and/or friends (e.g. when they moved away from their hometown, or went overseas to university), Facebook provided this service much better. Therefore, the adoption of blogging diminished substantially once Facebook and Twitter came along (why Friendster or MySpace didn't have the same impact is a good question, to which I don't have an answer – but Facebook did better than those alternatives in other contexts too).

2. As I started my research, I hypothesised that personal bloggers generated cultural and symbolic capital through being “authentic”, and that as some began to be paid, there would be a split between the “sell-outs” and those who stuck to the original “authentic” tenets. In the event, this did not happen, and most were happy to take the money. This was mostly negotiated through a debate about “disclosure” – that is, making it clear which posts were paid for (advertorials) and which were not. In practice, this mostly happened via the tags where bloggers would use explicit labels – e.g. “advertorial” – or euphemistic ones – e.g. “lunch money”. In the interviews, bloggers usually strongly maintained that they would never write something that they did not believe, and they also felt that their readers could easily see when it was paid content and were welcome to ignore it. Eventually, it seemed to me that the bloggers were able to use the tags, and the modularity of the blog – separating advertorials from other posts – as a way of separating the commercialised parts of the blog from other

parts. It led me to consider whether this was an example of the “partible person” (Strathern 1990: 324) or the “dividual self” (Deleuze 1992), suggesting a way to understand how bloggers can detach aspects of themselves into their blog, without thinking of this process as inauthentic alienation (see also Foster 2011: 15).

Bloggers never revealed everything online, so recalibrating that performance in order to get some income was not difficult for most. They learnt over time what topics worked best to attract readers, how to game the search engines, and added to this an ability to translate the branding messages from the advertisers to their readers. Thus, as their personal expression and online interpersonal interactions flowed through the affordances, they had to learn the limits and opportunities offered by these. The subsequent practices were intimately connected to the affordances. In this sense, they were “creating emergent technological structures,” and I found the most useful way to understand this was in terms of the genres I referred to earlier, following Lüders et al. (2010), where genres are assemblages of technological and sociocultural practices.

One aspect of blogging that struck me as closely related to the accessibility affordance, and also relates to a critical political economy approach to media, was the way in which anyone who is reading a blog, can also create a blog. The mainstream media have a gatekeeping role with regard to information essential to the functioning of a civil society, and the relatively small number of media outlets justifies some controls on what they can say with regard to requirements for balanced news reporting and so on. However, blogs are not subject to this, and a common response to any criticism of a blog was: 1) Don’t read it if you don’t like it; and, 2) Make your own one if you want to see something different. This is related to what I called the “independence principle” – i.e. “It’s my blog and I can do what I want with it.”

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1 June 2015

Thanks Elisenda for reflecting upon my paper, and for taking the time to post your questions.

Monetising blogs was already occurring before the company “BlogAdNet” (pseudonym) started. Some bloggers were dealing directly with clients, and/or using Google AdSense. The latter was generally not suited to personal blogs because of the diversity of their content (i.e. a tech blog, a car blog, would generate more relevant keyword-related advertising and audience). Two companies started around the same time that I started the research (a bit after I wrote my proposal if I remember correctly), and one of them (BlogAdNet) was more successful. For the fieldwork I maintained two blogs, signed up to their services and offered myself at any opportunity to attend events, participate in competitions, etc. Amongst others, I interviewed two people from BlogAdNet, as well as having many informal chats and so on. I also followed and attending blogmeets of the “Social-Political” bloggers, as a way of getting some perspective on the personal bloggers.

The fact that BlogAdNet was local was important. The personal blogs have a mostly local audience due to their content matter – i.e. local readers identify with the experiences of local bloggers. Also important was the ability of BlogAdNet to track the local audience through geolocation and therefore deliver to the clients potential consumers from within their own geographical market area. This demonstrated one way in which locality still matters in spite of the globalised use of blogs and the ubiquity of advertising.

BlogAdNet did consolidate and influence the move to monetisation, making it easier for bloggers, but something like it would probably have happened anyway. At the time, they were one of the first such companies I was aware of, but there have been similar moves elsewhere.

If Elisenda is referring to the “she” as in the Brand Manager at “a launch of a new line of breath mints” – actually that person was a client whom I managed to talk to at one event. That company was not a part of the fieldwork in any other sense. I was mostly not able to talk to clients overall.

It’s true, this paper is mostly focused on affordances and media. I think that the theorising of media technology is essential for anthropology because of its ubiquity and interweaving with so many areas of our life. However, my initial interest was with regard to the monetising of previously non-monetised (sub)cultural practices. In that sense, I started out with a metaphor of an isolated group on the margins of the world economy suddenly having to deal with this new source of power and influence. One way in which this played out was how prior to monetisation, the key source of cultural/symbolic capital was readership, and a good way to attract this was to be controversial and spark a “flame war” with other bloggers. This practice virtually disappeared once monetisation spread, probably mostly because of a desire not to

put off potential clients (based on what some interviewees said to me).

I apologise but I am not familiar with the term “transoriented”. I assume it is similar to “multidisciplinary”? If so, I agree that it is useful at times to forego consideration of disciplinary boundaries and to try to take one’s inquiries wherever they lead you – however, this can also be a weakness in terms of communicating with specific scholarly communities.

For myself, I do wonder at times if what I am doing is “anthropology” – my academic background is a bit chequered, and the nascent field of internet studies draws upon many disciplines. However, one way in which I understand anthropology is in terms of its method, whereby the researcher draws empirical data from sustained lived experiences. I also see anthropology as having a philosophical take on what makes us human, which is why I get interested in thinking of what media technology can imply when it integrates into our daily shared cultural and interpersonal experiences.

I found that through experiencing the reactions of others to what they posted online, and experimenting with different textual self-representations, bloggers were often led to a place where they reflected on what selfhood truly was. This is a question of relevance to anthropology, and as more people use social media in a daily fashion, interacting with representations of others and seeing themselves reflected through digital mirrors, I wonder how we should integrate these new socialities (e.g. Pink 2008; Postill & Pink 2012) into models of culture and change. Underlying these changes is a powerful strand of commercialisation, whereby our shared spaces are becoming increasingly modulated by organisations driven by a profit motive.

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Veronica Barassi (v.barassi@gold.ac.uk)

2 June 2015

Dear All,

We have decided to extend the seminar for another week. The seminar will now end on Tuesday the 9th at GMT 00:00.

We look forward to your comments and thoughts.

Veronica

Dear List,

Let me first of all thank everyone involved in the discussion so far. The debate has been very rich and I have followed it with great interest, since I am working with affordances as well for my PhD research.

Allow me just a little comment. Julian's responses have really clarified problematic areas of the paper and I believe the text would improve very much if some of those contextualizations are included. In the last response, Julian speaks of authenticity and of bloggers generating cultural and symbolic capital. I wonder if the concept of affordances (and maybe its seemingly unavoidable dichotomy) can be set in relation to socio-cultural and symbolic capital. I am trying to do something similar when looking at photographs in the context of transnational families and I believe that the dialogue of the two has potential to encompass well the question of materiality/technology, sociality/place and temporality.

On another note, Adolfo asked how to marry media studies and ANT without losing the anthropological sensitivity. I am not an ANT expert by any means, but I believe transdisciplinary projects that explore spaces beyond borders in theory, method and narrative, afford us to transcend constrictions and thus produce human relational accounts that are both specific/grounded and transferrable/big-picture-able. Two examples are: Ian Russell's Humedia project (<http://iarchitectures.com/humedia/what.html>) and the LEEDR's Energy and Digital Living one (<http://energyanddigitalliving.com/credits/>). Perhaps Julian's paper would benefit from incorporating bloggers' and readers' voices into it. Perhaps even the very concept of assemblage can be a template for the presentation of findings.

Apologies for my schematic English at times.

Best,

Patricia

Really enjoyable discussion and paper. I agree with the point made by John regarding the pack of "cards" and the ambitious nature of the paper. I think the use of affordances does have its point in anthropological sensibilities dealing with new media.

Where I am less clear about is the dichotomy between affordances (basic and emergence – I think a point also raised by Alfonso) and their link the need to emphasise the also dichotomous nature of agency/non-human agency, precisely given the fact that affordances, cut across these divides. I do take the paper's point that this dichotomy is partly the result of having to deal with the many labelled affordances (social/instrumental) and that there is – very well argued in the paper – a point in claiming for going beyond the assumption than only "human" (or organism) are classified as affordances. I also take the point that in order to resolve this tension, the paper turns to assemblage theories. At this level, the paper does resolve some of the complexity of bringing together the ambitious role of affordances in

being several things at once (affordances as interface, affordances as components, affordances as constitutive to translation). I think I would have liked to read more about these elements of affordance and how these cut across the basic/emergence breakdown in the figure. To address this, I like Ong and Collier (2005) broad understanding of assemblages in that they refer to assemblages as formations of the result of disarticulation and re-articulation that emerge in lines of change and mutation (they use it in relation to globalisation, here I am extending the metaphorical possibility to try to point out the issue of disarticulation/re-articulation that blogs themselves carry out). In other words, if I take assemblages as points of new formation from moments of intense breakage and reconfiguration (regardless if it is actor-human/software/electrical board) then I would agree with the paper that blogs are not a single creation moment (in assemblages theories, as well as in altermodern theories there is quite a discussion of multiple authorship). If the point you are making is that blogs are created in a composite relation between “connected assemblages” you would need to explain a bit further the points of relatedness in the intersection in the cases of the blogs you describe.

I am not sure, from the point of the description in the paper on how bloggers, statistics and hyperlinks translate so directly into the market. I think this is a point raised earlier as to how we understand what has impact on the market. I am not sure that we know well what actually impacts on a market, for blogs that aim to a market and those that don't. Marketing is an over constructed domain in itself as to the kinds of power it has/hasn't. I don't disagree with the principle that brands are 'situated as nodes...' and depend on flows. I am not sure that it is the successful enmeshment “with corporate preference” that brings about success to these blogs. Here I would like to see some more examples of this. I follow the “mint example”, but what the example tells me is that the Brand Manager has fallen “trap” of the many assumptions and believes around media marketing and what is that “we see” when we “click” and “see”. I agree in your example, that is seen as a desirable space, but there are many examples of companies that have joined “desirable spaces” and not been able to secure a marketing platform and success, for many reasons. An example of this is luxury brand management marketing, where luxury brands have tried to join “desirable spaces” and their own design (web and blog design, weight of image and software) have not been able to occupy those spaces easily. Here I mean the case of several well-known luxury brands that tried to expand their marketing presence through web/blog space, where their software interface could not meet the needs of mobile reading (their blogs and webs were too heavily constructed around the notion of luxury to be accessible through mobiles and their marketing – very expensive ones – failed when these blogs/sites were applied to mobile visibility – used in mobiles as opposed to desktops). Whilst I don't have an issue with the theory linkage you are proposing, I think the ethnographic detail would need further, more dense detail for me to understand where the assemblages and affordances occur and their impact on monetising. Finally, this is an issue I myself struggled in other contexts, here I feel you use affordances to contain many different positions of linkage, both simultaneously as affordances taken as an analytical dimension, and affordances as a material dimension (blog affordances), as affordances (in Deleuze's sense) and that gives a certain opacity to what you want affordances to do in your theory.

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Kind Regards,
Ángels

Fausto Barlocco (fbarlocco@yahoo.it)

5 June 2015

Hi all, first of all I would like to thank Julian for his very interesting paper, and for bringing out and explaining concepts that become clear and appealing even to people who, like me, are quite new to some of the theoretical issues and tools connected with ANT. Contrary to what said by John, I don't think you are trying to do too much here, but it seems that you are arguing for the usefulness of applying the concept of affordances (in their two forms) in association with that of assemblage, therefore proposing an ambitious but limited programmatic argument. Similarly to John, but in a way reversing his point, I would like to know a bit more about how you think that those concepts were (more) useful (than possible alternative ones) in order to explain what you found out in your experience in the field. Also, is there any aspect in which you felt they were/might not be so adequate and/or a different approach might have helped? I think you did well not to overburden your mainly theoretical paper with too much ethnographic detail, but then it is to ethnography that us anthropologists always end up to. Thanks Best
Fausto

Julian Hopkins (julian.hopkins@monash.edu)

6 June 2015

Thanks Patricia for your comments. It's interesting that you are also looking at affordances, and I find that there are increasing amounts of people working with affordances, which is one reason I feel that there needs to be a bit more clarity in its use. When I first came across it – in Wellman et al. (2003) I think – it immediately struck me as useful, but I had to spend quite a lot of time tracking down a clear definition and explanation. There is a useful debate that goes between Hutchby and Rappert (Hutchby 2001, 2003; Rappert 2003), and Dant (2005) also critiques Hutchby. The trail goes back through Norman (1999, 2013) to the originator of the term, Gibson (1977, 1986).

Setting the “concept of affordances [...] in relation to socio-cultural and symbolic capital” is an interesting idea to which I have no careful response at the moment. It made me think of a phrase by Gibson, where he states that the “richest and most elaborate affordances of the environment are [for humans] provided by [...] other people.” (1986: 135). He elaborates more, saying: “Behavior affords behavior, and the whole subject matter of psychology and of the social sciences can be thought of as an elaboration of this basic fact” (1986: 135). I read this as meaning that to afford something is to enable and suggest something, so acting in one way towards another human opens up possibilities for reciprocal interactions – “what the buyer affords the seller cannot be separated from what the seller affords the buyer” (ibid.).

He also goes on to state that “these [...] affordances are properties of things taken with reference to an observer but not properties of the experiences of the observer. They are not subjective values; they are not feelings of pleasure or pain added to neutral perceptions” (ibid., original emphasis). This is where the psychological discipline is evident, the search for objective causes of human behaviour. One wonders if “neutral perceptions” are possible.

So, it seems to me that affordances has spread well beyond its original home, and is in need of a reconsideration. Is there a need to extend it to interpersonal relations? Possibly, but it should be thought about carefully.

Regarding photos of transnational families, I can imagine ways in which imaginaries (family and/or ethno-cultural) become oriented around these photos, and thus the question of what the photos show or don't show becomes important.

Regarding using the "concept of assemblage as a template for the presentation of findings", this is a challenging idea that I can't get my head around right now, but it is interesting. At one point, I spent a lot of time trying to visualise assemblage – which readers can see if they are interested (<http://julianhopkins.net/index.php?/archives/311-Visualising-assemblage.html>). Its dynamism makes it very difficult to schematise.

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Ángels poses a challenging question with regard to different manifestations of affordances and how they may cut across the basic/emergent dichotomy. It makes me wonder, if something cuts across them, does it then refute the idea of the basic/emergent? I have to think about that.

The point about affordances being “constitutive to translation” is possibly my key argument. What attracted me to affordances was the way in which they do allow for material constraints, and also suggest agency for the material. Maybe it is when they translate, and thus become a potential “line of flight” (in terms that Deleuze & Guattari use), that they cut across the dichotomy? This is similar to the point made regarding Ong and Collier. (I will have to re-read them as it has come up a couple of times). Angels argues that points of connection are central to understanding the “disarticulation and re-articulation” of phenomena is what I hope to do with affordances – they enable flows but filter and redirect them too.

I guess it is ambitious (but there’s no harm in trying) but I want to take the concept of affordances and make a theory out of it, where theory is understood as an explanatory statement that can be used to make predictions. Thus I would like to use to explain why particular sociotechnological configurations (or assemblages) tend to produce certain outcomes. As a theory, it would also integrate non-material agency and human agency, and provides tools to analyse specific media and the differences between them. It would also be a theory that addresses some of the challenges of understanding software as material (but I am the first to admit that I have not engaged in depth with that whole debate of code-as-material-or-not).

Regarding the success of the blogs, I think that this primarily depends on them enlisting, or enrolling, an audience through the deployment of various skills that relate to the performance of authenticity and the congruence of particular interests (e.g. food) that the local audience and the local blogger share. Having gathered that audience, those who are the most successful in terms of income generation will weave brand messages into these personalised performances without alienating too many of their existing audience.

The breath mints example is perhaps not well-used, maybe it is one of those “cards” I can remove. What interested me most was what Angels points to, the way in which the manager saw the presence of the brand phrases in Google as evidence of a “community” engagement with the brand. For me, it seemed like a self-fulfilling prophecy – induce enough people to use certain phrases online, and it will become more prominent.

The bloggers were generally much more aware of the ways in which blogs can be used to give a very limited, although appealing, presentation of any particular topic. They were usually quite skilled in search engine optimisation. They were mostly somewhat cynical with regard to the effectiveness of advertising, and nearly all of them rejected ideas of a meaningful “blogger community”.

Overall, I have long been interested (I used to work in various low-level sales and marketing jobs) in how in the advertising and marketing sectors generate somewhat self-fulfilling discourses of meaning. There is the adage in advertising that “Only half of your dollar works, but we don’t know which half.” Thus an underlying anxiety that is often resolved to some degree by referring to commonly held assumptions (such as the existence of an influential online “community”). This anxiety revolves around attempts to divine the causal intersections

of cultural and personal agency – similar matters are I think discussed in e.g. deWaal Malefyt & Moeran (2003) or Moeran (1996, 2005) – but I can't remember exact references right now.

Apologies if I am not able to engage sufficiently with the complex points that Angels is making, but I am certain that they are planting seeds (or rhizomes) that will help to develop my thoughts on these matters.

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I would like to thank again Julian not only for the paper but also for strating (his and others') new reflections through it. I find it interesting to debate on Julian's statement "I want to take the concept of affordances and make a theory out of it, where theory is understood as an explanatory statement that can be used to make predictions. Thus I would like to use to explain why particular sociotechnological configurations (or assemblages) tend to produce certain outcomes." I wonder to what extent and in which way we anthropologists agree with such a view of theory. Personally I don't believe in the ability to predict, but I think an anthropological spirit is more that of looking at a number of (ethnographically documented) instances, in this case "sociotechnological configurations" and compare them and find connections, similarities and explanatory hypotheses with them. That seems very much like a historical approach from a certain point of view, what do people think (I know it's a bit too late for a general discussion, but the theme should hopefully come out again in one form or another) For what concerns Julian's idea that his theory "would also integrate non-material agency and human agency, and provides tools to analyse specific media and the differences between them." I would like to recommend considering also Eduardo Kohn's critique of Latour's ANT approach, based on criticising the way in which the approach reproduces the Cartesian dualism between thinking mind and non-thinking matter (and objects) by thinking that agency can take place only in a relational way based on principles derived from the (uniquely human) model of language. Just a suggestion. Best
Fausto

Reference

Kohn, E. (2013) *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dear All,

I apologise for the delay in answering, and I appreciate that this seminar is technically closed by now, but I would like to be able to respond to Fausto's two emails.

Regarding alternatives – I started out with a Bourdieuan framework, conceptualising a field of personal blogging with a “fundamental law” of authenticity that would enable the production of symbolic and cultural capital. As I explained before in this e-seminar, and based on Bourdieu's discussion of the field of 19th century French artists (1993, see also e.g. 1998), I assumed there would be debates and splits once some people “sold out”. But in the event that did not really happen, and I reasoned that this was because of the openness of the field in terms of not having agents control – e.g. art galleries – and also because any blog reader could open their own blog.

In the end, I found that trying to fit what I learnt into a “field” did not work, and that is what led to me to assemblage, as a dynamic model of iterative and relatively stabilised social patterns – DeLanda (2006) develops the idea of “social assemblages”. ANT was with me from the start, and I liked the empirical methodology it leads to and the ability to integrate non-human agency. However, ANT does not deal well with power I felt, and hence this led to assemblage also.

In the more classic anthropology, I was inspired a long time ago by Pfaffenberger (1988, 1992), who proposed the concept of sociotechnology. In his 1992 paper he discusses a plain bench in a Victorian hallway and proposes that the “Master Function” is the need to remind servants of their status (1992: 504). He argues successfully against technological determinism, and in the example of the bench, he privileges the ritual function of the bench; in that regard, one can argue that it would have been just as possible to let the lower status visitors stand in the hallway, or even stay outside. Therefore, the bench is also used to allow people to sit and rest their legs – this affordance persists, and the same bench one hundred years later, now an antique and still used to enhance the status of the owner, continues to afford sitting upon.

If we think of how some companies anecdotally ban chairs from meetings to speed them up, we understand how this affordance of chairs has a role in administration.

Yes, perhaps the predictability part is overdoing it. I guess that what I really aim for is a reliable and somewhat testable (in that another person would reasonably come to a similar conclusion, given the same data) explanation of relatively stabilised sociocultural patterns. However, a good explanation does inherently contain predictive value, as long the stabilised patterns do not change dramatically, or in Deleuzian terms, a “line of flight” occurs and new assemblages form.

I agree that anthropology is history in many ways, which doesn't make it less alive but only emphasises the dynamism of society and culture – i.e. history starts a second ago, in fact, and everything is always changing. Collingwood said something useful about this, but I can't track it down right now.

Thanks for the suggestion of Kohn (interestingly I think that it was through Kohn that I learnt of Collingwood) and I will get hold of it.

Finally, many heartfelt thanks to everyone for your attention and help. Doing this e-seminar has been challenging in terms of needing to digest and respond to the many incisive and detailed comments. I hope I have been able to answer everyone, and I would be happy to continue any discussion off-list.

I'd like to thank Veronica again for the organisation, and all the commenters for their valuable insights. It's rare (for me, anyway) to get so much careful and useful comments on a paper.

References

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DeLanda, M. (2006). *New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. London & New York: Continuum.

Pfaffenberger, B. (1988). The social meaning of the personal computer: or, Why the personal computer revolution was no revolution. *Anthropological Quarterly* 61, 39-47 (available online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3317870>, accessed 13 September 2010).

Pfaffenberger, B. (1992). Social anthropology of technology. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21, 491-516.