

**Media Anthropology Network
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E-Seminar 60

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

**by
Elisabetta Costa
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**Discussant Comments by
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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 to 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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