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Discussant's Comments

by

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on

Webcam and the Theory of Attainment

by

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Danny is locating the debates on both human nature and on the determinant effect of technologies, particular media technologies, within the unfolding practices of life histories, and the modifications to both that these involve. This seems like a really solid approach to a series of longstanding debates.

As such, the theory of attainment seems like a valid vehicle for decentering and historicising notions of humanity, a welcome departure from dichotomy between radical deconstruction and stubborn essentialising, but the difficulty is that one is left wondering how far that vehicle can go, at least without examining the territory further.

The nature of the problem emerges once you examine Danny's contention that the new usage of technology is as much shaped by issues faced by humans in the savannas as by the newness of technology. Once that is said then there is an explanatory gap: If the theory is of attainment, of a constantly shifting set of human agencies (that then loop back to form and reform human subjectivities), what then provides continuity in all of this, all the way back to evolutionary time?

- 1) Is human subjectivity solely determined by the encounter between agency, technology and practice, or are their longer term [emergent] characteristics of being human and social which shape these encounters?
- 2) For instance, does the book go into how the agency of being able to use webcams and other forms of media, how this inflects their membership of what has been termed "communities of practice"?

Without getting hung up on the term, does the very day to day ebb and flow of activity and establishing membership in groups with shared goals enter into the analysis? (see Wenger's very interesting Doctoral thesis in the references, it touches on some interesting ideas about information and transparency also).

It seems valid to make this demand of Danny's explanatory frame, since the tone of what he is writing seems to be talking to towards the epochal in framing the use of webcams.

I would hold with this, and I am sure many others on this list would, since the combination of overseas travel, and keeping in touch with loved ones does often resolve around rather remarkable powers of Skype, and this is indeed now often definitive of the relationship between travel and intimacy in ways unimaginable even a decade or two ago. The relative accessibility of the technology means this is probably a widely held experience.

3) Indeed perhaps Danny might furnish us with a quick overview of Skype / Webcam usage, as a rough starting point to considering its social significance.

With such curiosity in mind, one looks forward to seeing the ethnographic material and analysis on offer, which may also go some way to answering the questions posed below.

However, to return to the theoretical, if we have a theory based mainly in notions of change and progress, indeed perhaps even a sort of theory of personal progress somewhat at the level of humans as collectively cyborg :), then perhaps what is key is to disaggregate the degrees and kinds of progress, attainment, and personal change involved, in order to be able to disentangle how continuity in change might work within this theoretical approach.

The horrible feature of change as an idea is that it's shifting core tends to blind one to how it is spread out, variegated, and overlapping / nested in both temporal and spatial terms: Ironically change can become a locus of assumed unity and stasis very easily, through the implicit positing of assumed symmetries within and between types of change.

4) So I would ask Danny how he would unpack the notion of attainment to take into account how changes in what it is to be human are spread out.

This might range from notions of change in evolutionary time, to notions of epochal change, for instance in terms of shifting material practices over time, something explored in modes of production debates (see a non-deterministic take in references), to decadal changes in technological practices and so on, which is what tends to absorb us rather more these days.

4a) Indeed, to unfairly inject a note of my own interests, might not also environmental changes figure in this somewhere?

4b) I am not saying that any of these are necessary features of a theory of attainment, but really questioning how does a theory of attainment avoid implying some sort of hermetic theory of change at one locus?

5) How are personal / technological changes to be articulated within a wider set of contexts, and is that possible in both material and discursive terms?

Of course the main enquiry mode aimed at seems to be the ethnographic, with it's often rather immediate temporal frame, but perhaps such considerations might also help in disaggregating and unpacking the moment, something Danny seems interested in within this paper.

6) So, what steps did he and his co-researchers take to overcome the temporal immediacy of

ethnography in a piece of research seeming to aim at tracing out some part of a slightly wider arc of social change? Did this help him in unpacking the material gathered?

At the moment, whilst the ethnographic detail provided in the paper allows a compelling comparison of two distinct life histories, a comparison which supports the thesis of performative subjectivities, I find it hard to locate this within a wider landscape of change or attainment.

7) Indeed, is this a necessary weakness of an theory aimed at supporting ethnographic approaches, with their short time frames, when that theory centres on changes?

To be slightly more provocative, Danny has had a great deal of success at disseminating his consistently well crafted research to a wide audience. This following on from some very in-depth work on consumption and branding.

8) So to provoke, gently, to what extent does he feel that the act of locating a narrative of change at the very attractive nexus of technology, intimacy and personal change is related to the requirements of publishers for a wider audience, and does he feel that there is a process of commodification going on in that? What is gained and what is lost in this process?

Which is not to be taken as only a provocation, obviously we all face questions of clarifying our work for a wider audience, and rendering it popular and persuasive (at least to some extent) so perhaps Danny can take this also as an inquiry into the thought process of arriving at a compelling framing of his work, as well as an account of the decisions and compromises that go along with doing so.

9) Is it possible to disseminate widely a discussion on the decentered character of human / technological interaction in accessible terms?

References:

For non-deterministic accounts of modes of production debates:

Theory as History: Jairus Bannerjee

<http://goo.gl/mpUoR>

Wenger, Etienne: Towards a Theory of Cultural Transparency: Elements of a social discourse of the visible and invisible

<http://goo.gl/yU4wc>