

Assignment I – CS 6474 Social Computing

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1. William H. Whyte conducted his study of the use and social life in urban spaces by installing time-lapse cameras at cross-sectional views at 14 plazas and 3 parks in New York City. The main technique his research group used was observation. In addition to analyzing the videos captured by the time-lapse cameras, researchers were also physically present at these places with the architectural plans, observing people's activities from different places within the urban space, and noting down data like where people were sitting, what they were doing, what the temperature at that time was, and so on. My views about the analogies between Whyte's approach and studies of people based on observations of what they do and share on social computing platforms are mixed.

On one hand, we have seen in the various class readings up to now that time and again researchers have drawn groundbreaking conclusions about social networks, both in the physical and the online world, by surveying participants of these networks and analyzing the data collected. The study of the small world problem[1] and the prediction of tie strength with social media[2] are a couple of examples. These studies would not have been possible without explicitly asking people to participate so that their data could be collected and analyzed in a lab. Just observing the activities of people in these networks would not have yielded any fruitful results.

On the contrary, it is also true that a social computing platform environment cannot be completely simulated in a lab, and direct observations are necessary. One area where I would say that Whyte's approach would be highly analogous with that for social computing platforms is where we need to ascertain people's behavioral patterns or alignment with different schools of thought. Since explicitly asking people to participate in surveys makes them conscious of the answers that they are providing, it can be said that observation of people's data would give more honest results. It is also true that many a times people are not even aware of what kind of usage patterns they demonstrate on a social computing platform. So, even if a person tries to be completely honest, it is not necessary that they'll be providing correct answers.

One example where I think the observation of people's use of social computing platforms would be critical to the results is the study of people's political inclinations. A person's political inclination can be something that they are not completely open about for various reasons. Hence, asking people to fill out a survey about their political leanings would induce a consciousness of action, thereby preventing them from being completely honest. A researcher would instead want to collect data about which politicians a person follows, what kind of political tweets does he retweet, what kind of political ideas are discussed in the posts that he likes, and so on.

2. Whyte observed that contrary to what it seemed like, the problem with urban spaces was not overuse but in fact underuse. For urban spaces like plazas, underuse can affect the space's popularity and business, and with social computing platforms, underuse can eventually lead to the

platform becoming obsolete, as has happened with many websites such as MySpace, Friendster, and Orkut.

The early 2000s were the time when many social computing platforms were coming into existence. MySpace was initially the most used social networking site, having more monthly visitors than even Google at its peak in 2006. But once Facebook took over MySpace in terms of the number of users, things never turned around in favor of MySpace again, in spite of several redesigns. It is interesting to wonder how different things would've been today if MySpace had taken up Mark Zuckerberg on his offer of selling Facebook to MySpace for \$75 million in 2005.

As with the plazas, the main features of MySpace and Facebook were the same. When Whyte set out to understand why some plazas failed and some worked, an interesting conclusion that he made was that the popularity of a plaza was proportional to the amount of sittable space it had. A sittable space allows for people to sit and have interactions with other people. What it means in the context of social computing platforms is that they should provide features that encourage people to have more interaction with others. According to Reed's law, the fundamental value of a social network depends on how well it facilitates the formation of groups, not just on how it facilitates connections between individuals[3]. Facebook allowed people to build groups and interact around their topics of interest, whatever that may be, rather than MySpace's strategy of allowing discussion around topics that it specifies.

Another observation of Whyte was that spaces that provided people more freedom regarding what they could do there were popular. For example, people liked to wade and splash about in the water, which was prohibited in many plazas. Food carts were stowed away by many places but places that allowed them saw more people. Similarly, while MySpace was bent upon building everything in-house, resulting in confusing, buggy and dysfunctional products, Facebook allowed outside developers to build applications, which in turn led to its increased popularity. MySpace also banned YouTube videos while Facebook allowed it.

The use of plazas as a place for social life was actually not the primary purpose of their existence, but still, this secondary use was every bit as important as the primary one. Similarly, although the primary purpose of Facebook was to help people connect with others, it was the presence of games like Farmville which made it hugely popular among youngsters. Other websites like MySpace did not have such features.

There are a few other analogies between the characteristics of successful plazas and Facebook as well. Like fountains served the purpose of white noise in the plazas, allowing people to appear offline while using the website is Facebook's version of it. Like William Whyte observed in his video that simple elements made a great urban space, Facebook's easy and user-friendly UI encourages people to keep using the website.

3. One factor that Whyte mentioned as being responsible for the popularity of a plaza is "*triangulation*". According to Whyte, triangulation is that characteristic of a public space that

brings people together, and usually is an external stimulus. Musicians and entertainers are an example of that. What brings people together is not the quality of the music or the tricks, but the fact that this activity is happening at a place where it is not ordinarily supposed to happen, and people are intrigued to see what that activity is. Once many people are gathered at a place, social interactions inadvertently occur.

Whyte also says that sometimes, a really bad act works even better than a good one. A funny example is how cricket fans of India and Pakistan come together on Twitter and other social networking sites to bash the Pakistani cricket team every time India beats Pakistan in a World Cup match. These are people who are otherwise completely socially disconnected. Although some anti-social elements from both countries might be posting negative content about the other country given the history of trouble between the two nations, there's not much that would've otherwise aided interaction between the two social groups.

Another example of an agency that was bad but still drew millions of people together to bond and support each other was the #MeToo movement. This movement began to spread virally in October 2017 as a hashtag on Twitter in an attempt to demonstrate the widespread prevalence of sexual assault and harassment, especially in the workplace. It originated with sexual-abuse allegations against a Hollywood producer. Now, Hollywood is just one industry in one part of the world. But, as the movement started gaining momentum, scores of people from all types of workplaces, nationalities, and genders came forward with stories of their experience with sexual harassment. Once the victims started coming forward, support started pouring in. Even I, a person who likes to keep her interactions with people on social computing platforms to a minimum, found myself trying to extend support to the victims, whom I hadn't really ever interacted with before. People on social computing platforms who don't know each other are like passersby in a plaza for one other, who don't come together if not for an external stimulus like an act. Although an extremely negative and unfortunate agency, the #MeToo movement did bring socially disconnected people together. It didn't just make people interact with one another, but also made them feel solidarity for others.

4. Whyte's counterintuitive insight about the handling of social undesirables is very interesting. Social computing platforms are places where even the most careful or innocuous person can be exposed to social undesirables such as cyber bullies and trolls, as deception is so easy[4]. In such a case, handling the problem of undesirables becomes very critical to them. Whyte suggests that the best way to handle the problem of undesirables is to make a place attractive to everyone else. As per Whyte's findings, outright banning the social undesirables, continuously monitoring their activities for violations and removals, or restricting them to specific online communities would be less effective. One example of why this holds true for social computing platforms as well is the case of online trolls. The primary motive of these people is to incite reaction from other people, and by banning them or giving them warnings, social computing platforms are basically fulfilling their motives, telling them that they're being noticed.

Let's take the example of question-answering site Quora. The undesirables, in this case, are people who are not subject matter experts but keep answering questions about some topic, or people who aim to spread misinformation through their answers. The approach that Quora algorithms currently take to handle this is collapsing answers that don't seem content-rich or useful, or answers that are reported. Although this might seem like a good enough approach to keep undesirables in check, what happens is that quite a few times even good answers get collapsed, deterring people from making the effort to answer a question, even if they have relevant knowledge. There have been so many cases of resourceful people, deciding to stop answering questions or even going as far as to delete their accounts. Not only is this a loss to Quora as a social computing platform, but also to the people who rely on the site to get their questions answered.

According to me, the approach here that would be more useful is to stop collapsing answers, and letting users decide what kind of content they want to see in their feed. Just today, I saw an answer by a lady which included topless photos of her, depicting her body's transformation with the detection and treatment of breast cancer. Now, not only was there nothing wrong with her answer, but the way her words and photos had explained her journey was in fact enlightening, but her answer was almost collapsed because someone had reported it to Quora. While I understand that it could've been undesirable for a few people, even more people most probably appreciated the answer. Thus, Quora should allow users to just filter content according to their preferences, allowing people to mute other people, rather than just blocking undesirable people. Another feature that the website could have is misinformation markers for answers, where an answer marked as misinformation by 'n' number of people appears in the feed of other people with that tag. It could work the same way upvotes work positively towards the credibility of an answer. This would lead to a better experience for people, without outrightly disallowing use by other people, thereby being inclusive of everyone.

On a side note, Whyte observed that social undesirables like muggers and dope dealers are mostly present at places that are cut off from the street. In the online world too, the extremely undesirable people, people making and spreading highly grotesque content, are present in the place where most other people are not present, that is, the dark web. Being hard to access and not welcome to all, it is the place with the highest number of undesirables.

References

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