

Chapter XXIX

WebCom:

A Model for Understanding Web Site Communication

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a model (WebCom) for understanding and analyzing Web site-mediated communication, also referred to as Web site communication. The model combines three theoretical approaches—communication, medium, and activity theory—into one generic model that benefits from each of the approaches' strengths. Furthermore, it is discussed and shortly demonstrated how WebCom can be used for analytical and design purposes with YouTube as an example. The chapter concludes that WebCom is able to serve as a theoretically-based model for understanding complex Web site communication situations in their entirety, and that such thoroughly approach is required for successful computer mediated communication (CMC) when communicating across cultures and contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Designing successful Web site communication, here defined as communication mediated by a Web site, requires certain media-specific considerations due to the special characteristics of Web sites. Web sites differ from other mass media in the characteristic of for example interactivity and the ability to simulate all known communication patterns (Finnemann, 2001; Jensen, 1996). Moreover, Web sites differ from traditional computer applications due to their mass media

characteristics. The design of Web site communication implies knowledge of the user contexts and the problems of communicating meaningful messages or framing the communication on the Web site in understandable terms. Depending on, for example, the educational and organizational background of the designer, these areas can be viewed from different theoretical perspectives. Nevertheless, the different theoretical fields seem to be lacking focus on one or more of these communication elements resulting in inadequate models for analysis.

The fields of human-computer interaction (HCI), communication studies, and media studies each have their own, fully developed tools for mapping and analyzing communication or use situations. Unfortunately, these tools have often proven too narrowly focused and limited to the communication elements of each individual field, resulting in an analytical gap and thus making it difficult for in-depth mapping and analysis of the entire Web site communication situation. This is a shame, since the different sciences have different focus, strengths, and weaknesses and could potentially supplement each other for a more comprehensive analysis.

This chapter is an attempt to bridge the fields of the activity theoretical approach of HCI represented by Kaptelinen et al. (1999), Korpela et al. (2000), Bødker (1996), and Bertelsen & Godsk (2004) based on the theories of especially Engeström (1987), Vygotsky (1978), and Leont'ev (1978), the communication theory represented by Roman Jakobson (1960), and the media theory represented by Joshua Meyrowitz (1994). Our purpose is to present a theoretically-based, easy-to-use, exhaustive communication model (WebCom) for understanding and analyzing Web site communication based on the strengths of each approach.

We are aware that this is a minefield with a great risk of overlooking important theories, theoreticians, and methods, and with risk of having questionable interpretations and deployments. Nevertheless, our aim is not to ground the model interpretations of these theories, but rather to be inspired by and draw on the theoretical approaches.

BACKGROUND: ANALYZING WEB SITE COMMUNICATION

Since the mid 90s, researchers have been discussing how Web site communication should be understood, how it could be compared to

traditional mass media communication, and how it would be useful to combine different theories and theoretical approaches (Morris & Ogan, 1996). Nevertheless, not many concrete Web site communication models have been developed in which different theories and perspectives are combined. However, an attempt to combine different perspectives to understand computers and the Internet is suggested by computer communication theorist Paul Mayer in the book *Computer Media and Communication* (Mayer, 1999). He suggests that a fruitful perspective on computer mediated communication would be a combination of human-computer interaction, research in artificial intelligence, and media studies. He argues that these approaches are related via “the user-interface nexus” (Mayer, 1999, p. 328), where on one hand AI and HCI provide “standards of interactivity and ideas and concepts for future advances” and on the other hand media studies contributes with the understanding of computer communication practices in “discursive social and cultural worlds” (Mayer, 1999, p. 333). In this chapter, we argue that this is partly still the case, though his view on the scope of HCI seems to be obsolete. Some traditions within HCI, such as the activity theoretical approach (see Bødker, 1991 and others) and some other user-centered approaches, also seek to incorporate complex contextual understandings of the user, the interface and its use situation. Similar tendencies can be seen in communication and media studies. With inspiration from among others computer science, these research areas tend to focus more on the complex character of the computer and Internet compared with other media-user relations, especially in the case of interactivity as a focal point. In spite of these convergences in disciplines, we will argue that the three perspectives still have each their special field of interest which makes them unique in the analysis of Web site communication. These fields of interest will not be exhaustively described, but only exemplified in the following sections, and at the end of

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