

## **Reassembling Social Networks**

For some of you the expansive and organic growth of social software and social networking sites has come as a surprise. You may be wondering why people prefer mediated to face-to-face communication. Is it because portraying your digital self is considered to be cool/hip/necessary? Or is it because these social networkers haven't got anything better to do? Even though you may or may not understand the driving forces behind creating and maintaining social relationships online, you'll probably do understand what makes people behave this way: sociality. Humans are social subjects who live/work/eat/sleep in dynamic networks of information and association. Their behaviour is influenced by their habitat and when this habitat and other social dynamics change, so do the actions and behaviour of the human. Currently, the massive public adoption of social software has changed our habitat and has created shifts in our behaviour. While we know how to behave in unmediated publics (for example we know what is expected from us when we buy bread at the bakery), we don't know how to behave in front of an unidentified and indefinite audience (this is the case when communities are formed through and with digitally networked media). Social software recontextualizes ties between communities because it enables us to be released from geographical and temporal constraints. Whereas in unmediated social interactions contextual clues are given on how to behave, in networked social interactions it's almost impossible to determine who might read/view your online posts or pictures.

In this article I will not offer an accurate and comprehensive description of social software in general or its development, but I do want to illustrate how social software might affect the assembling of individuals in communities. By investigating the social networking site 'Scoutle', I will try to map how '*automated social networking*' might require us to interpret sociality in a different way.

### **Scoutle**

The Dutch Utrecht based start-up 'Scoutle' of Godfried van Loo delivers what they call 'automated social networking for bloggers'. Scoutle connects blogs and bloggers via webcrawlers they call '*scouts*'. A scout is a personal agent that 'walks' through the Internet to find other scouts of similar blogs. This 'walking' of the scout is enabled by installing a simple widget – a so-called Stage – on your blog. This stage permits a scout to meet other scouts with similar interests or profiles. When a possible 'match' between scouts has been found, you'll be notified and have to confirm the connection. It's also possible to create networks based on specific topics or personal groups, and to rank blogs. The aim of Scoutle is to create new networks of bloggers who share the same interests, so that a blogger can focus on his/her content instead of getting more traffic.

There are two aspects of Scoutle that I find worth investigating: the automation of social networking and the approach to solving the 'problem' of the unidentified public. The next part of this article will be devoted to exploring these aspects.

### **Automation of Social Networking**

Scoutle's computerized system (or scouts) takes control over the social networking process, thereby reducing the need for physical and mental activities of the human. Its automated social networking system tries to increase the quality and flexibility of building and maintaining networked communities, because little input of the users is required. Instead of trying to find old and new 'friends' in the ever expanding web, the user can relax and choose whether he/she visits the 'favoured' connections delivered through the personal scout.

Due to the lack of space in this article, I will not be able to thoroughly examine the social consequences and impacts of this development. But I will address how this development calls for a new understanding of community-building practices and social architectures. In 'Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to actor-network theory' Bruno Latour stresses the need to include the agency of objects in our understanding of sociality. Instead of interpreting society and social practices as human products, we should acknowledge that subject and object are co-equal partners in sociality. Subjects and objects both participate in social practices; they mutually create and are part of interwoven and dynamic links in our social reality. Latour's work could help us placing the automation of social networking into a broader perspective. In the case of 'automation of social networking' human actions are overtaken by objects. According to Latour, actions have always been 'borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, dominated, betrayed and translated' and that's why we shouldn't interpret action and social practices as some kind of material produced by humans, but rather as connections of associations (Latour, 2005: 46).

Drawing on Latour's findings, I think that if we want to be able to understand how automated social networking redefines our current notion of creating and maintaining social networks, we should trace the connections between the human and the object in this process. By tracing the actions of subjects and objects we will be able to study the content of assembled social networks and their effects more thoroughly.

### **Unidentified audiences**

In sites as Scoutle, and other social software, networked publics are formed by mediated interactions. In 'Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life' Danah Boyd provides a suited description of the term '*networked publics*':

"I am primarily talking about the spaces and audiences that are bound together through technological networks (i.e. the Internet, mobile networks, etc.). Networked publics are one type of mediated public: the network mediates the interactions between members of the public. Media of all stripes have enabled the development of mediated publics. The reason for differentiating networked publics from mediated and unmediated publics has to do with fundamental architectural differences that affect social interaction." (Boyd, 2007: 8)

Boyd's description explains how audiences and group formations are affected by the properties of mediating technologies. She continues by enumerating four distinctive properties of networked publics: *persistence* (this enables asynchronous communication), *searchability* (digital identities are recorder and can easily be traced), *replicability* (information is easily copied) and *invisible audiences* (unclear who the spectators/viewers/readers are). Thereby stressing that networked publics are less fixed when it comes to space, time, size and content. Boyd's findings could be used to describe how Scoutle tries to solve the problems emerging from the properties of networked publics; especially Scoutle's use of searchability to make invisible audience visible.

By automating personalised search Scoutle tries to help the user find blogs and bloggers with similar interests and help the user promote his/her own blog. The scouts track and map the *blogosphere* in order to supply the user with an overview of the incoming traffic which he/she can use in the content-building process of a blog. In comparison to other social networking sites (like MySpace, Friendster, Hyves et cetera), Scoutle supplies its users with meaningful contextual information on the user's blog. It is the providence of contextual cues that allow bloggers to understand their invisible audience more clearly. Having a clearer view on one's audience allows bloggers to recontextualize their blogs. It

enables the blogger to make assumptions of the potential audience and - based on these assumptions - implement meaningful contextual clues in the blog. This property of Scoutle is what I found the most striking, because it stimulates that users socialize and engage in context. The re-contextualisation of the blog will probably affect the potential audience and the blogger itself, because it allocates a more detailed understanding of how to behave and what to expect on the blog. In so doing, Scoutle contributes to making the invisible audience more transparent.

### **Repairing Social Networking**

Scoutle seems to eradicate the boundaries between biology and technology in order to supply the user with possible actions, thereby creating a collaborative view (between humans and machines) on community-building. In other words: the technology provides the individual with the opportunity to develop apart from the human mental and physical processes. Godfried van Loo has learned from the properties of unmediated and mediated publics and tried to mix them in Scoutle. Rather than complicating the way that people navigate and communicate online, it tries to simplify the social networking process by delivering contextual cues.

Scoutle gives the impression that it tries to reassemble online social networking by introducing new types of social architectures. These new social architectures have implications for societies and cultures, and future research should investigate the long-term consequences of these changes in sociality.

### **Biography**

Boyd, D. (2007). "Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life". *MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning – Youth, Identity, and Digital Media Volume* (eds. David Buckingham). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the Social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.