

From Interactivity to Interaction?

A Baseline Analysis of Websites as Communicative Affordances and Participatory Resources

Memorandum # 3

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INTRODUCTION

This memorandum outlines the empirical design for a quantitative content analysis of web sites from different sectors and levels of the social system, with special reference to their ‘communicative affordances’. The general research question that informs this stage of the project is: which concrete signs and genres do web sites offer as vehicles of communication *to as well as by* their users? The aim is to produce an empirically based overview of how different types of web sites conceive of and address the public, particularly the extent to which users are meant to ‘interact’ both with the site and among themselves. Depending on the actual resources that are made available on the web and in other media, media users may be empowered to act as publics across a wide range of social contexts of action, thus addressing, in their turn, the institutions by which values are generated, distributed, and legitimated in society.

Compared to the focus of the present project on sound as communication, this stage serves two purposes:

- A. A contextualizing analysis of the kinds of (multimedia) signs and genres (of communication and interaction) that web sites offer in a variety of configurations;
- B. A ‘quantitative pilot’ study that helps to delimit issues and categories for further analysis, in addition to identifying prototypical examples for qualitative analyses of the texts, images, and sounds of web communication.

EMPIRICAL DESIGN

Genres on the Web

Several considerations regarding data collection and data analysis can be summarized with reference to an understanding of the web as a configuration of different genres. In a broad sense, 'genres' refer to variants of how a given means of expression or 'semiotic vehicle' serves as a source of information and/or a medium of communication. According to Raymond Williams' (1977), genres can be defined in relation to three aspects of their characteristics:

1. Characteristic subject matter (the social sectors behind web sites and their characteristic concerns in presenting information and communicating with users, e.g., political vs. religious approaches to human rights)
2. Formal composition (the presence of different forms of expression, from written text via layout features to streaming video)
3. Mode of address (the degrees and formats of interactivity which a given web site anticipates)

In the present study, emphasis is placed on 'formal composition' and 'mode of address', both of which can serve as indicators of the specific mediated nature of the user-site relationship, and of the degree of user participation being invited. 'Characteristic subject matter' is taken into account to the extent that quite diverse social sectors are included in the sample in order to tap a wide range of communicative activities - from the individual to the national level - which have a bearing on institutionalized and institutionalizing debates and decisions regarding access to allocative as well as authoritative resources (Giddens, 1984). In short, also personal home pages may carry political implications and deserve study in a framework of 'media and democracy in the network society'. This is in spite of the fact that, for example, a search-engine sample of web sites relying on key terms such as 'politics', 'values,' or even 'democracy' would return comparatively few personal home pages. The preferred approach here, accordingly, will be to focus on web sites as *forms*, as resources of communication, or as affordances (Hutchby, 2001) with an open-ended set of social uses and implications. Paraphrasing McLuhan (McLuhan, 1964), one might argue that the communicative form is (part of) the political meaning.

Sampling

The analytical aims above pose at least two challenges for sampling. For one thing, no authoritative sampling frame exists regarding the population of web sites, even though approximations can be produced especially concerning delimited social sectors. For another

thing, in order to get a relevant range of social and political agents, several radically different offline populations must be considered. Major industrial corporations as well as non-governmental organizations, for instance, operate alongside nations and parties on the web to influence agendas and regulations in national as well as transnational contexts.

For the purpose of an exploratory analysis of communicative affordances, proportional samples will be drawn from the following five sectors of web sites:

- United Nations (sample drawn from current members)
- Political parties (drawn from the transnational ‘groups’ of the European Parliament)
- NGOs (drawn from accredited organizations affiliated with the UN)
- Private corporations (drawn from the Fortune 500)
- Individuals (personal home pages drawn from major national portals in at least four different countries)

Analytical categories

A pilot phase has helped to develop and delimit the following set of analytical categories, which serves as the coding manual. The purpose is to produce a basic analysis of the presence and copresence of these communicative features in the sample, and to compare the five social sectors accordingly. The presence or absence of features will be noted with respect to the three top levels of the domain in question, with index.html or similar as the top level.

Formal composition

Constituents

- Still images (graphics, drawings, cartoons): meaningful shapes, with/out color, which may or may not represent their referent naturalistically (example: logo)
- Image effects (activated by cursor movement or transition)
- Photographs: digital or digitally scanned images in any resolution
- Photographic effects (example: virtual tour)
- Video: photorealistic moving images (example: streaming video)
- Animation: non-photorealistic moving images (example: flash banner)
- Speech: human voice making a statement
- Music: audio sequence with a detectable melody

- Sound effects: other audio, including audio logo, ambient sounds, sounds activated by cursor movement or transition

Configuration of site **information**

- Clickable entities that are not verbal text (example: portrait with underlying cv)
- External links (beyond domain name of index.html)
- Other-language version(s) (approximated mirror of site): English/other
- Archive (text, video, audio; information specific to organization, perhaps via other servers, e.g., deep links)
- Intranet (password-protected)

Mode of address

Communication

- Exchange of delimited units of information via site with/out moderation (example: Wiki)
- Download of text, photos, audio, video
- Anticipated communication: information is specified as resource for communication in separate context (offline: local meetings; online: joining other fora)
- Offer of 'newsletter' (example: notify mails and other updates) (subsequent regularized communication, i.e. pulling a later push)
- Ready-made communication (example: e-cards, e-photos)

Interactivity qua site

- User-site (guestbook [write and/or read] + counter + contact details: webmaster, e-mail, phone, physical address, etc.)
- User-user (example: discussion forum, community)
- Anticipated action (reference to a potential course of action and/or a resource with no necessary relation to the organization or contexts which the site in question represents) (offline: document your local natural environment in this spreadsheet; online: volunteer to pay your individual Tobin tax to any of the following organizations)
- Voting (example: issue of the day)
- Quiz and other games of information
- Joining: membership / volunteering for specified action

- Sponsoring: support our cause!
- Working: 'job opportunities'
- Buying: e.g., online shop

Coding in practice

For the content analysis, the actual coding will be performed by two coders online in a spreadsheet. This means, first, that, for the quantitative phase, the sites will not be downloaded, but will be available for viewing, hearing, and coding in real time. Second, given the complexity of coding a dynamic entity such as a web site, the analysis will not rely on the standard procedure of independent coders working with identical coding forms and instructions. Instead, the outcome will be a consensual coding (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992:32) as well as a documentation of uncertain (as well as analytically interesting) instances. In addition to preparing for the qualitative phase of in-depth analysis of selected sites, this procedure generates an 'audit trail' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: ch. 11) that allows other researchers, to a degree, to assess the intersubjectivity of the coding procedure.

The analysis, thus, aims to produce an overview of the constituents of web communication and their prevalence in a socially differentiated range of web sites, noting as well their relative 'non-prevalence,' which may suggest an unexploited potential. It does so with reference to the three genre features that served as the point of departure above - subject matter, composition, and mode of address - which together constitute communicative affordances with political implications.

NEXT STEPS

- The process of sampling is in progress; the coding manual has been tested in pilot analyses. Following coding, the analysis of the results will aim to characterize the communicative affordances of web sites across social sectors and their implications for issues such as online interactivity and offline participation (and vice versa).
- Also pending is a more detailed review of previous research on web site analysis.
- Both of these activities lead into writing an article on findings and interpretations from the content analysis. Depending on the outcome of this analysis, it may be most

appropriate to reserve findings from the next, qualitative phase on the texts, images, and sounds of selected web sites for a separate article.

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