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People, Profiles & Trust

*On interpersonal trust in web-mediated social
spaces*

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For more information please visit
<http://trustmojo.com>

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Abstract

As web-mediated social spaces become more commonplace on the internet, a need arises for understanding classical social phenomena in this new context. Trust is one of these phenomena. The purpose of this book is to study several aspects of interpersonal trust in web-mediated social spaces. More specifically, this book discusses questions on how predominant social orders, space design, and representations of user identity affect trust on the individual level.

In order to answer the research questions stated above, we employ an explorative mixed-methods approach. This approach consists of two parts: a literature study which discusses earlier sociological works on trust by Callon, Goffman, Lewicki, Luhmann, Mizralski, and Tönnies, as well as an interview-based case study of four San Francisco and Silicon Valley-based web companies, Opinity, RapLeaf, TN20, and Yahoo.

We draw several conclusions. First, that underlying tensions between different social orders affects the type of trust established online. Second, that the impression of a user, an important basis for interpersonal trust, is not only affected by the users' own expressions but also by the expressions of the facilitator of the web-mediated social space. Third, we conclude that user representations are, in profound ways, able to affect the trusting behaviours of individuals and thus change the nature of the trust established between them within a social space.

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PART I

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The web has a profound impact on the ways in which people work, collaborate and socialise today. Over the recent years we have seen a wave of new web services that are being used by hundreds of millions of people on a daily basis. As the “social web” is expanding, a plethora of questions concerning the intricate relationship between technology and society arise and deserve attention. One of these questions concerns the issue of trust. As Cassell & Bickmore (2000) puts it, “trust is essential for all kinds of interpersonal interaction; it is the loom on which we weave our social fabric”. Without the fundamental human ability of trusting, many services on the *new web* would simply collapse in an instant.

Understanding the “elusive notion of trust” (Fahrenholz & Bartelt, 2001) is key to enabling people previously unknown to each other to collaborate, to make online communities work, and to encourage sharing. Moreover, trust is crucial in maintaining any kind of relationship over time. Web companies hence face significant challenges as they craft and develop new mediated “social spaces”. Over the recent years we have seen communities emerge on an unprecedentedly large scale—they are in fact, nothing less than mediated societies. Tensions in trust can arise here on many levels: between openness and vulnerability, anonymity and reputability, and intimacy and transparency.

How, then, can we understand interpersonal trust in the context of the new web and its many mediated social spaces? Is the notion of interpersonal trust here different from in the offline world? Do we even need to change our very conception of trust in order to understand how it functions here? These are some of the questions we want to explore in this book.

CHAPTER 1

Studying Web-mediated Trust

LINES OF THINKING IN TRUST RESEARCH

In order to begin to understand web-mediated trust we must first look at how it has been, and currently is, studied. There are several ongoing discussions concerning trust in the academic as well as the commercial world. Firstly, there are several current technical debates around the problems of verifying and managing identity.¹ Issues on digital privacy and “computer-to-computer” trust are also frequently discussed.² Secondly, there has been activity in the interdisciplinary field of *web credibility* (Fogg, 2003), with its primary roots in experimental social psychology. Here the focus lies mostly on the business-to-consumer perspective (Fogg & Tseng, 1999). Thirdly, there is research in the area of “online” sociology and anthropology³, which often touches, yet rarely focuses on, trust-related issues.

This entails that simply referring to “online trust research”

¹ There was an intense discussion around identity technologies such as OpenID and Microsoft CardSpace at the time of writing.

² Authors such as David Brin (1998) have had an impact on the discussion on online privacy. Computer-to-computer trust is a field within computer science where cryptography and related topics are heavily discussed.

³ E.g. see research by danah boyd [*sic.*] or Fredric Stutzman

becomes problematic, since all of the above research fields, although all are concerned with trust, are at the same time radically different in their nature. One could say that the first area of computer science related trust research is rather irrelevant in our study since it does not attempt to understand trust itself, but treats it as a “binary” and rather trivial property of a relationship. It tries to answer questions such as “how can online trust-based or trusted systems be designed” (Resnick et al., 2000) in a pragmatic fashion without problematising the understanding of trust itself. The second, also highly pragmatic, field tries to separate out the concept of “credibility” from trust in order to make way for specific quantitative studies on what people generally perceive as being “credible” and “trustworthy” online, almost entirely without addressing the more fundamental questions around trust (Fogg & Tseng, 1999). Hence, we feel that the approach most relevant in our endeavour to understand interpersonal trust in a web-mediated social space is in line with the third field of research, namely to apply existing work of offline sociology to the online world. However, as we shall see, it is a highly difficult route to go down.

An Overview of Sociological Theory on Trust

Much has been written about trust within sociology over the last decades. There have been several attempts at constructing theories on trust, perhaps most notably by Giddens (1991), Luhmann (1979), and Misztal (1995). In political economics trust has been used to explain prosperity and competitiveness of societies

(Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000; Rothstein, 2005). Giddens, in his later works, has discussed trust on several levels of society, from the development of an individual's "basic trust" (1990) to the general shift in late modernity to the wide and unreciprocated trust in what he calls "abstract systems", or "expert systems" (1994) as a necessary condition for coping with modern everyday life. Luhmann's functionalist view of trust tries to explain it as being a "means to reduce social complexity" and also relates the shift towards late-modernity as a shift towards increased *system trust* (Luhmann, 1979). Misztal (1995) presents a "unified" theory on trust in modern societies where she draws on the works of Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber as well the works of more recent thinkers such as Parsons, Luhmann and Giddens. Her theory explores prevalent forms of trust that produce, and are produced by, a given social order. She in turn discusses what types of social practices there are that maintain different forms of trust. This results in a model of trust that encompasses several, if not all, of the relevant aspects of trust in modern societies.

What the above works share in common is that they put forward theories about trust as it appears and functions on the level of society—that is the primary unit of analysis. Some thinkers, most notably Giddens and Misztal, are concerned with the way trust is eroded, transformed, and renewed in societies of late modernity (Giddens, 1990), in part because of the way information technology and electronic communication has transformed society.

None of the above works, however, discuss deeply the impact of the web on everyday life in modern society. Hence, we must think carefully when using these theories to study the online world. One of the primary differences between a web-mediated society and its offline counterpart is that, to a great extent, the individual remains in control of *which* online society to be a part of whereas in the offline world, due to geography, that choice seldom exists. Hence web-mediated societies are radically different in the sense that they almost exclusively consist of committed individuals who made a conscious choice to join the society in question. Because of this fundamental difference we argue that an analysis of trust in the context of web-mediated “societies” proves more fruitful by taking an *interpersonal* trust perspective centred on the level of the individuals, rather than one focused on society as a whole. By starting from the trusting individual it is our hope that we can begin to understand some of the complexities surrounding trust on the new web.

Statement of Purpose

In our analysis we have tried to adopt and re-frame notions and ideas about trust that are established within sociological theory. We have in no way attempted to develop new models of web-mediated trust, nor to unify or discard existing theories. Rather, we have merely tried to bring forward earlier work with the hope of being able to better illustrate the dynamics around web-mediated interpersonal trust. Here we would like to take the opportunity to

formulate our primary research questions:

We want to explore and understand the inherent tensions surrounding interpersonal trust in web-mediated social spaces. Furthermore we want to begin to understand how trust on the individual level is affected by the design of a social space. And finally, we want to understand if, and how in that case, web-mediated social spaces transform the way in which we trust and our very notion of the concept itself.

CHAPTER 2

Theoretical Foundation

A SUMMARY OF THE CHOICE OF THEORY

In order to make possible a discussion of the questions posed above we have turned to a number of theories on trust in the realm of sociology. We have deliberately avoided adopting a single overarching theoretical framework for the analysis—instead we have borrowed fragments and concepts from several thinkers in order to create a theoretical ground from which we can begin a discussion. This inherently holds a certain risk of becoming conjectural yet we would argue that there is simply no other way to approach a phenomenon as complex as online trust. We open this chapter by describing Luhmann’s (1979) notion of *trust as a reducer of complexity*, and continue with his ideas on *system-* and *abstract trust*. Thereafter we discuss Misztal’s (1995) theory of *trust and its relation to social orders*. We then give a brief overview of Tönnies’ concept of *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* (Asplund, 1991), Parsons’ (1951a) elaboration on *pattern variables*, and Lewicki & Bunker’s (1996) related notion of *calculus-* and *identification-based* trust forms. Following this examination we introduce a few key concepts in Goffman’s (1959) *symbolic interactionism*. We conclude by discussing the notion of *performativity* as re-interpreted by French sociologist Michel Callon (1998).

LUHMANN & THE FUNCTION OF TRUST

As one of the great German sociologists the prolific writings of Niklas Luhmann have been widely read and acclaimed within several academic disciplines. Luhmann's work stretches across a multitude of topics but the point of focus for this book is his thorough and heavily cited work *Trust—a mechanism for the reduction of social complexity*. Luhmann, a functionalist disciple of Talcott Parsons, remained rather distant to post-modernism and continued in search of grand-narrative functionalistic theories of many of life's major topics (trust, power, love, etc.).

As described in the introduction we reject the notion of all-encompassing grand narratives and adhere to a more post-modern stance, especially when studying a socially complex phenomenon such as trust. However, we would argue that Luhmann's work still provides a solid backbone for the functional aspects of the phenomena of trust within social life. Luhmann states that the trust itself is always situated and due to varying contexts virtually impossible to study as a phenomena in itself thus motivating his desire to instead focus on the underlying *functions* of trust. As we shall see in forthcoming chapters, we will attempt to use certain key concepts from Luhmann's sociology in conjuncture with those from other theorists in order to gain a richer and in tandem slightly less generalized view of trust in web-mediated social spaces.

For the purpose of our book we will mainly focus on three aspects of Luhmann's theory, namely; trust as a reducer of complexity, *familiarity* as a base for interpersonal trust and the notion of *personal* and *system* trust.

Situating Luhmann

The rise of the internet and social software has increased the complexity of our reality manifold (e.g. Castells, 1996; Fukuyama, 1995). Luhmann's work, dated 1979, focuses on the societal shift towards modernity and identifies social complexity as one of the main reasons for our changing conditions. Furthermore, from this Luhmann draws the conclusion that trust (functionally acting as a complexity reducer) is and will continue to be an increasing and prominent necessity within modern society. Thus, in light of recent global communications development and technological adoption Luhmann's focus on complexity prevails, according to our view, as more relevant than ever before.

Our case study (Part II) revolves around companies that are in the process of influencing online social spaces and who seek to design *technical systems* that best facilitate *social systems* around them. In this lies one of the major aspects of Luhmann's relevance for our study. Specifically, Luhmann's focus on the move from personal to social system trust highlights a movements that we see continuing and evolving even further with the increasing socialization through technologically mediated spaces. By looking at Luhmann's thesis of

increasing system trust in conjunction with his notions of familiarity as the basis of interpersonal trust we will attempt to examine the potential transformation, due to actions taking place within the online world, of trust as a general concept.

Reduction of Complexity

As the title indicates, the overarching thesis of Luhmann's book is the understanding of trust as a mechanism of reduction of social complexity. Luhmann, among others (e.g. Berg, 2003; Misztal, 1996; Giddens, 1991), states that the complexities of our everyday surroundings are far more intricate than anything we as rational human agents can ever grasp and fully negotiate. If we set out with the notion of dealing with the full scale of surrounding complexity we would simply drown in information and instantly render any decision making situation unbearable. Thus trust, acting as a combination of knowledge and ignorance (Simmel, 1950:318) allows us as humans to neglect a wide range of potential options in any given situation and therefore reduce the complex reality into a manageable one.

According to Luhmann, due to the increasingly fragmented and complex world, humans throughout history have never had as many options and choices as they do today. Beck even goes so far as to say our whole society of today should be seen as a "risk society" meaning that we have constantly have to make several decisions with different risks associated with them (Beck, 1992).

Indeed, the amount of choices to be made at any single moment in life has increased radically yet our cognitive capacity to manage these choices has remained more or less static. Thus part of Luhmann's thesis is that trust enables us to make these choices more effectively (on more or less grounded knowledge or emotions) and furthermore is becoming an increasingly prominent mean in our lives and will continue to gain importance as society moves towards even greater complexity.

Within this complex reality that we as humans have to negotiate the reliance on symbolic trust cues becomes greater. Symbols become "shortcuts" to inferences about trustworthiness and an essential means by which we can reduce the cognitive effort of a trust decision. Within an online social space communication via the browser is of course highly symbol oriented, thus the mechanisms of how these inferences are made and how symbolic values are established is highly interesting in understanding the formation of trust. As Luhmann states, within our world part of the increase in complexity is due to the differentiation of social systems and our inclination to be part several systems at once (Luhmann, 1979:46, Giddens, 1991: 2-3, 20). In tandem, the possibility to trust within a system is highly dependent on the possibility of learning how to trust (e.g. by learning the common understanding of symbolic values) thus the differentiated social systems ads further increased complexity due to the demand of learning multiple symbolic trust discourses.

However, these symbols are not easy to study. According to Luhmann trust is the opposite of rational arguments and explicating the often tacit symbolic meaning of trust cues runs the overarching risk of instantly shifting their symbolic power as signs of trust into signs of distrust. Thus trust is a highly fragile phenomenon, often exceptionally sensitive and suspicious to inquiry (Luhmann, 1979:29).

Familiarity

Trust can be thought of as an attitude towards the future (Luhmann, 1979:19-20, Misztal, 1996:24). By trusting one *places a bet on the future* and thus acts as if this future only contained a certain possibility of action. According to Luhmann these decisions on how to expect the future are at large based on our knowledge and experience of the past (Luhmann, 1979:18-21). He explains this with the notion of the past having “already taken place” and thus the potential set of choices at every singular moment in time have already been made (resulting in the ultimate reduction of complexity). Therefore we look to the non-complex past in order to guide our decisions in the complex now as to place bet on the future. The understanding of *the current* based on *the past* is what Luhmann refers to as familiarity and thus a crucial precondition for trusting.

However, as the complexity around us- and the number of relationships we engage in increases the possibilities of direct

familiarity with a person decreases due to our limited time. Instead we move towards a familiarity, not of a person directly but rather, according to Luhmann, of their presentation. Thus we become familiar with symbolic values and as Luhmann describes our predominant form of trust appears to be shifting emphasis from of personal to (social) system trust.

Personal & System Trust

Luhmann distinguishes between personal and system trust with the motivation of personal familiarity becoming increasingly rare in the complex modern world yet at the same time the need for trust is increasing (Luhmann, 1979:20, 52). However, Luhmann regards the system specifically as a social system where trust is placed in the system but additionally in the trust of other members (i.e. I trust in others' trust). As previously stated, Luhmann's thesis is that personal trust is subsiding in favour of system trust. In the case of the web-mediated social space the question of the role of personal and system trust takes on a new dimension since it is in fact taking place within a technical system.

System trust is considered "faster" than personal trust, yet at the same time it is harder to control due to the many parties involved (Luhmann, 1979:50). In order to function across all these people symbolic values are often standardized and based upon explicit rules. Personal trust on the other hand, as we have noted previously, is often directly threatened by this standardization and

shift from personal to universal qualities.

As Luhmann indicates the move towards system trust raises the question of whether we are dealing with trust or rather something acting as a functional substitute (Luhmann, 1979:88; Sztompka 1999:115). That is, something displaying the same qualities as we would expect from trusting behaviour yet being based on something other than “trust”. This becomes especially relevant in the discussion of how technologies based on metrics and probabilities relate to trust.

MISZTAL & FRAGMENTATION

Misztal attempts to understand trust in modern societies by synthesizing earlier work in sociology on social orders (Primarily Tönnies, Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber) with theoretical assumptions about a number of key *functions of trust* (Misztal, 1995:95). For example, trust can be integrative (Parsons, 1951b), it can reduce social complexity (Luhmann, 1979), it can act as a social lubricant (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997) or it can act as the emotional basis of cooperation (Barbalet, 1996:77).

Every society employs ordering principles and rules that govern the living together of its citizens, which implies dominant social orders within these societies. Misztal's theory of trust is an attempt to understand the interplay between social orders and the different forms of trust within them through the synthetic approach mentioned above (Misztal, 1995:95). Her theory is structured by a distinction of three types of social orders that promote stable, cohesive, or collaborative societies respectively, and their corresponding trust forms of "Habitus", "Passion" and "Policy". Trust forms perform constituent functions and reinforce different types of social orders within societies. A trust form, in turn, is produced and reproduced by the social practice within a society. Misztal distinguishes three major practices within each trust form, so that e.g. the trust form Habitus relates to the social practices of "Habit", "Reputation", and "Memory".

The fundamental question Misztal is asking is, in our interpretation, “What are the foundations for trust in modern societies, and what form does trust take on within a particular social order?” Although her theory does not concern trust in web-mediated social spaces, we would argue it in fact carries much relevancy in this context. While we regard her discussion of cohesive social orders and their corresponding “passionate” trust form—a trust that emancipates from the core of the family and one’s upbringing—and her exposé of the collaborative social order and the trust form “policy”—which primarily concerns the forming of trust in the nation state and democratic societies—perhaps not essential to understanding trust in web-mediated spaces, her discussion of stable social orders and the “habitus” trust form appears highly relevant.

Her “trust as habitus” chapter sheds light on issues around trust that arise in communities where a desire for a stable social order is strong. Misztal’s accounts of habit, reputation and memory as social practices that enable interpersonal trust through—in her words—predictability, reliability, and legibility can, in our understanding, be successfully adapted to an online context.

The first practice, on this reading, concerns how trust is being established through the habits of users within a social space. Here the user, as subject, is related to the social space, which is the objective external structure in which the user is situated. Here, Bourdieu’s notion of habitus as the “system of durable,

transposable dispositions that are produced by the objective structures and conditions, but is capable of producing and reproducing those structures” (Bourdieu, 1977:72) is central to the analysis of trust. Mizralski goes so far as to understand trust as a “specific type of habitus”. The establishment of everyday habits and routines that are shared and understood in a community, then, enables trust by the predictability they produce. In Mizralski’s words, “our habits form a key part of others’ trust in the predictability of social relationships and public orders” (Mizralski, 1995:106).

The second practice concerns the reputation of users within a social space and how it relates to the forming of trust through “social distancing” and a common recognition of a user’s “standing in terms of trustworthiness” (Mizralski, 1995:120). Measures of reputation are discussed, as well as methods of establishing reputation. The increasing fragmentation of post-modern society and how it relates to the establishment of trust is a central topic here. Mizralski concludes that reputation in the modern world, “where there is a variety of standards, relevant in different contexts” is becoming increasingly hard to establish and retain (Mizralski, 1995:122). She puts emphasis on the post-modern condition and how it is changing our ways of establishing trust through reputation in order to increase social reliability.

The third practice concerns memory, and in particular the collective memory of a community. Collective memory is seen as a key social practice in the forming of trust within a community. In

Misztal's words, "memory is the process of a continuous reconstruction of the past by the remembering subject. The individual is able to carry out this reconstruction only as a member of a given social group which provides him or her with a framework for each process of recalling the past and secures the legibility of the present." (Misztal, 1995:140)

In the analysis of our empirical material, we abstain from using Misztal's overarching analytical framework. Instead we use relevant fragments of her theory of "trust as habitus" to understand the forming and transforming of trust within web-mediated social spaces. Using this strategy, we are also able to better connect her theory with the rest of our theoretical framework.

GEMEINSCHAFT & GESELLSCHAFT

In this section we present theory from Tönnies, Parsons and Lewicki & Bunker that seen together with the works of Luhmann and Misztal make up a small framework for understanding trust in relation to the social structure wherein it takes place. Tönnies and Parsons characterize “type behaviours” based upon two idealized social categories closely related to social structure. In conjunction with Luhmann & Misztal’s theory we relate this specifically to trust in order to understand the structural influencers on trusting behaviour. Furthermore we use Lewicki & Bunker’s theory of *Identification-* and *Calculus Based Trust* in order to add a temporal and direct trust-behavioural dimension that we find missing from in Luhmann’s and Tönnies’ work.

This theory is not intended to cement a structuralist point of view but rather, in the larger context and in conjunction with Misztal’s behavioural aspects of habitus and the forthcoming action-based theory of Goffman serve as tools for better understanding of a subset of influencers that we see affecting the performative evolution of trust, trusting behaviour and trust enabling social structures.

Tönnies

Ferdinand Tönnies developed the sociological categories of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* in order to distinguish between the

behavioural and attitude differences that occur within community (Gemeinschaft) and society (Gesellschaft). As such the categories can be thought of as representing the structural influence of a form of social organization on the behaviour within that order. Typically, Gemeinschaft retains a high degree of locality, and is distinguished by the mutual respect between its members and lack of explicit rules and regulations (Asplund, 1991). Within Gemeinschaft the social pressure of the community and a persistent risk of ostracism impose implicit rules that are thus socially enforced. Gesellschaft, on the other hand, is characterized by a high degree of individuality and driven by an increased degree of self-interest (Asplund, 1991). The overall willingness to put oneself at risk or in any way sacrifice for other members of Gesellschaft is minimal whereas Gemeinschaft, conversely, is built upon the sense of the group's primacy above the individual's. Hence, the social order in Gesellschaft has to be formally regulated, similar to Mizralski's concept of the predominantly policy based social order, and furthermore explicitly enforced. Social ostracism is no longer as great a threat since the original feeling of "belonging", i.e. what to be ostracized from, is typically low.

The categories have often been used to illustrate the shift from feudal community where people lived in smaller villages and everybody knew each other to the complex urban society based in large cities where almost all people were strangers to one and other. Asplund (1991:52) gives the illustrative example of how

walking down the street in *Gemeinschaft* and meeting a stranger would be rare whereas in *Gesellschaft*, conversely, it would be rare to bump into an acquaintance. Thus the difference between the categories is intimately linked to complexity and range of action possibilities.

Parsons

Talcot Parsons indirectly extended the notion of the two categories with the identification of his so called *pattern variables* that we wish to use as dichotomised characteristics exemplifying where and how *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* differ. Parsons himself, not directly linking the pattern variables to Tönnies categories, saw the dichotomies of his pattern variables as quality differences between the typically traditional and the essentially modern. Therefore we feel they are inherently and intimately connected to Tönnies categories of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. For our purposes the variables serve, not as truths in the sense that one category of organization exclusively holds the quality of one of the contrasting variables but rather seen as a whole give an indication of the nature of the order's influence. Mainly, Parsons presented the pattern-variables of *affective* versus *affect-neutral*, *diffuse* versus *specific*, *particularism* versus *universalism*, *quality* versus *achievement*, and finally *community-orientation* versus *me-orientation* (Moe, 2005:70-72; Parsons, 1951a). Hence, using Parsons terminology, *Gemeinschaft* is seen as affective, diffuse, particularistic, quality and community-orientated whereas *Gesellschaft* is characterized by the same pattern variables

respective counterparts. Indeed, according to Parsons Gemeinschaft is where we display emotions towards each other, our obligations are diffusely delimited between each other, we expect to be treated differently than others and have an overall inclination to uphold our community or groups interest rather than private individualistic motifs.

Trust and Social Structure

From a Pasonsesque perspective one could say that the elements that assure a high degree of trust between the people of Gemeinschaft are built on the assurance of social punishment from the community in the case of broken trust. The trust upholding mechanisms of Gemeinschaft are removed in Gesellschaft and instead legal frameworks take on the role of risk-reduction in the explicit form of legal punishment. The universality gained by the explicit expression of clear rules within Gesellschaft provides a high degree of efficiency in many ways, for example by way of formalized credit, and allows multiple parties to collaborate with ease. However, in order for the rules to enable efficiency they must become widely socially accepted. Only then can they aid in e.g. transactions between strangers, thus increasing the amount of potential people to interact with.

In relation to trust, we see that within Gemeinschaft, trust-establishment takes place between individuals based on their common beliefs, familiarity and sense of belonging together, very

much in the Luhmann fashion of personal trust. In Gesellschaft trust is established between individuals, however, the trust is often *indirectly* placed in the individual, relying on the security of the mechanized rules and regulations around it. Thus Gesellschaft needs over-arching meta-organizations where all people are seen as equal under a set of universally accepted rules (such as state law). This notion connects intimately with Luhmann's concept of system trust and furthermore serves as our bridge between the theory of trust and that of overall social structure.

Lewicki & Bunker's Calculus- & Identification Based Trust

As Tönnies, Parsons and Luhmann illustrate, size, complexity and sense of belonging of groups greatly impact the nature of the trusting behaviour between its members. However, there is also an important temporal factor that we feel should be taken into account at greater detail than simply by inference of Luhmann's notion of familiarity. Primarily we would like to bring some attention to the distinction between *Identification-* and *Calculus Based Trust* (IBT & CBT) by made by Lewicki & Bunker (1996).

According to Lewicki & Bunker, an initial encounter with another human being with which there are no joint experiences results in a highly rational and calculated trust decision (CBT). The lack of familiarity and joint experiences leaves little space for *identifying* with the other party and the decision to trust or not must be based on assessment of available symbolic "trust-cues". Thus, trusting, in

this scenario, becomes a game of calculations and rational reflection in order to assess risk and potential gain in a manner very similar to social interaction within Gesellschaft.

However, if continued interaction with the same person on several disparate occasions takes place and a relationship with joint experiences and shared goals starts to shape, the trust between the two parties changes form (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). The relationship leads to greater familiarity of each other and increased interpersonal identification. Thus as time goes by, the relationship relies less and less on *calculation* and increasingly on *identification*. In tandem, trusting decisions too are based increasingly on identification and emotion in what Lewicki & Bunker describes as *Identification Based Trust (IBT)*.

At a basic level IBT is stronger and less susceptible to change whereas CBT is constantly re-evaluated and scrutinized. Thus IBT functions as a more forgiving and less critical trust form than the highly fragile CBT. Yet, as stated, IBT, as often found in Gemeinschaft, takes more time to establish and requires a higher degree of involvement in order to evolve making it less common in the complex Gesellschaft.

GOFFMAN & THE PRESENTATION OF THE SELF

The idea of illustrating human interaction as a dramatical performance, as put forth by American sociologist Erving Goffman, is a simple yet powerful way of thinking about interaction rituals and general social behaviour. Goffman connects social behaviour to identity and self-performance in a manner that strikes us as highly appealing for examining micro-scale interaction. Furthermore, we believe that this connection is highly relevant when looking at trust-scenarios since an assessment of a persons identity through their self-performance and appearance is crucial for the decision whether or not to bestow trust upon them (Sztompka, 1996:79-81).

We will mainly be focusing on the theory found in Goffman's works "The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life", "Behaviour in Public Places" and "Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience". As Lantz (2006:74) points out, Goffman's symbolic interactionism is often used as a link between micro-level interactions and macro-social-structures. However, we also intend to use a Goffmanian approach in order to understand the conditions for performances of the self in online social environments and furthermore connect this to the assessment of trustworthiness. We will bring forward architectural issues of the socio-technical online world and relate these to potential social consequences based on Goffman's theory. Furthermore we shall

attempt to use the Goffmanian micro-macro link in order to discuss how changes in behaviour on the micro level relate to structural changes on the macro level.

We would state that trust, both online and offline, is critically connected to the ability to present oneself in a, for the given situation, credible manner. Goffman's theory brings tools to the table that aid in understanding the influence of settings and other people in the everyday presentation of the self.

Interaction as a Dramatical Performance

Goffman is possibly most famous for his idea of conceptualizing human interaction as a dramatical performance. That is, Goffman suggests that we should understand human interaction as a continuous play without a predetermined script and that this aids us in understanding the connection between interaction, identity and self-presentation.

According to Goffman human beings have an internal and external identity where the external manifests itself as a *face* presenting or emphasizing fragments or certain aspects of a highly complex internal identity (Goffman, cited in boyd 2002:21-27). Thus Goffman's focus on self-presentation within interaction is largely a theory on how humans choose to present certain fragments of themselves differently on different occasions and with different settings.

Additionally the face that is presented is constantly in flux, dependent on the other actors, the setting and audience. Thus humans interactively assess their surroundings and alter their presentation of self accordingly in order to express themselves in such a way as to maximize the potential of others perceiving the desired impression Goffman (1959) calls it expression management in order to influence impression.

Audience Segregation & Framing

According to the dramaturgical principle of interaction the performer wishing to present him/herself has to relate to the audience he/she is performing for. Not only this but the “stage” where the interaction takes place greatly influences the presentation and interpretation of the performance itself. Thus the context of any interaction situation can be thought of as at least being comprised of a stage setting and an audience that greatly influence how the performer chooses to enact his/her performance.

Focusing on the audience Goffman (1959:49) uses the term of “audience segregation” to illustrate how a performer can vary his/her performance differently depending on who the audience at a given time is. By segregating the various audiences one performs for, the possibilities of acting differently for different people is maintained. Thus, this allows one to perform in accordance with the current audiences’ social guidelines and focus on different aspects of ones identity in different settings. However, this relies

on the capability of keeping the audiences segregated. If this is not possible the performer runs the risk of appearing inconsequential and worse giving a performance that is socially unacceptable to an unintended audience.

The setting of the interactions is often used to guide inferences about the identity performance. Goffman (1974) refers to this as *framing* and states that the setting aids both performers and audience to establish a collective mental “frame” in order to interpret performances within. *Framing trouble*, i.e. when actors have different views of the setting or base on which to assess each others performances run the obvious risk of a performance being radically misinterpreted and possibly seen as socially unacceptable (Beusch, 2006; Miller, 1995). Framing trouble thus manifests itself in misunderstandings and the lack of rich yet accurate inference interpretations of a person’s identity and character.

Communication Efficiency & The Avoidance of Embarrassment

According to the notion of the drama Goffman makes clear that social interaction is not necessarily about efficiency in transferring information. Based on the distinction by Simmel (1950) that communication can be divided into *form* and *content* Goffman’s very focus on form rather than content can give us a hint of the importance of aesthetic qualities within communication (Lantz 2006:75).

According to Goffman (1959) a performance is an act of trying to impress and furthermore control the other party's impression of the self. However there are more intricate phenomena at work than all parties simply trying their utter most to control each other within the interaction dance. Goffman states that there is an omnipresent underlying collective desire of avoiding individual or collective embarrassment in any interaction situation and that this desire is manifested through the use of face-work in order to reach a *working consensus* (Goffman, 1959:10, 1963). Thus rather than seeing interaction simply as an exchange of information in need of increased efficiency due to the increase of complexity in the world around us, we need to understand the form-factor and the crucial function of constantly altering performances in order to avoid collective or personal embarrassment.

Given & Given off

Within the ongoing dance of interaction Goffman distinguishes between two main *channels* of communication (1959). What Goffman refers to as being *given* is the information or symbols that are explicitly expressed and are to be interpreted as what the performer is consciously aware of saying. However, in parallel with this communication stream there is yet another stream, that which is *given off*. The information stream that is given off is to be perceived as unintentionally signalled by the performer i.e. unconsciously expressed. However, it is not necessarily so that this information *is* unconsciously signalled, it is only important that it is

perceived as such. By regulating the performance the performer has rich possibilities of conveying information implicitly by acting in a manner that encourages the interpretation of information as given off.

By seeking to control what is given off through expression management the performer is also taking great risk. If the other party were to perceive that the performer is trying to give off, rather than give, suspicions of manipulative behaviour are likely to arise. Goffman states that information given off is often understood as far more trustworthy or “closer to the truth” about the “true nature” of the performer yet it rests on the common notion of being “unconsciously” expressed (1959:2-9). Thus by consciously manipulating the communication in order to disguise parts of it as unconscious and given off strong claims about the “true self” can be made, yet at the impending risk of appearing highly manipulative by making false claims about the self appear as true.

By looking at online interactions with the understanding of information being simultaneously both given and given off we can further our understanding about what is actually said, how it might be perceived and furthermore how this relates to the assessment of trustworthiness.

CALLON & PERFORMATIVITY

In the final section of Part III we focus on how trust, as a social phenomenon, is affected by the services in our case study. We employ the theory of *performativity* from as presented within economic sociology in an attempt to understand how trust can be transformed. The term performativity originates from the linguistic field of speech act theory, where it has been used to describe statements that are not simply descriptive or constative, but rather performative in the sense that they perform an action and thus change the state of affairs in the world (Austin, 1962). The concept of performativity has later been adopted by French economic sociologist Michel Callon (1998), cultural theorist Judith Butler (1990) and several others. Callon's argument, which we will be focusing on, is that instead of discussing how accurately economic models represent and predict markets, we should pose the question of how economics, and economic models in particular, *affect* and *shape* practice in the markets in which they are used. In this view, "economic models are an engine of inquiry rather than a camera to reproduce empirical facts" (MacKenzie, 2006b), or, in the words of Austin (1962), economics models are *performatives* as opposed to simply *constatives*. In Callon's own words "economics, in the broad sense of the term, performs, shapes and formats the economy, rather than observes how it functions" (Callon 1998:2). In this view, "tools" from economics are mediators between the theory of economics and the economy: "not only are they responsible for the

cross-relations between the two but, like any other mediator, they promote the construction and constitution of each of them” (D’Adderio, 2006). This, as we shall see in Part III becomes highly relevant for the study of online user profiles.

Since Callon first published his paper in 1998, a number of studies have applied a similar perspective in the study of models and representations from microeconomics and finance theory (MacKenzie, 2006b). These studies have shown that economic models can have profound effects not only on the actors in a particular market but also on the very constitution and structure of that market over time (MacKenzie, 2006a). In one of the theory’s most thorough applications so far Donald MacKenzie has analyzed how performative effects led to the “self-referential verification” of the Black-Scholes theory of efficient financial markets since it was first conceived of in the 1970:s. According to MacKenzie, the theory “performed” the market by helping creating and sustaining the entities it postulated. The market was reformed and reshaped as regulators worked with the theory in mind, and as stockbrokers used the pricing model of the theory when operating in it.

MacKenzie (2006b:15-25) notes that the concept of performativity allows for both weaker and stronger interpretations, and that the stronger the interpretation, the harder it is to show conclusively. He distinguishes three levels of performativity. With *generic* performativity, concepts and terms related to a specific theory or model of a market are used by participants in that market. *Effective*

performativity occurs when a theory or model is “used in a way that has effects on the economic processes in question” (MacKenzie, 2006a). The strongest case is *Barnesian* performativity, after Barnes (1988), and denotes the enacting of a theory or model that alters the actors or process “so that they better correspond to the model” (MacKenzie, 2006b:19).

In our analysis, we adapt the theory of performativity to our case study on trust in web-mediated social spaces. Specifically, we focus on how digital representations and models of different aspects of our identities affect how interpersonal trust forms, and transforms, online. Throughout the analysis we relate the concept of performativity to Luhmann’s (1979) theory of trust as social complexity reducer and Misztal’s (1995) theory of trust as it relates to social orders.

CHAPTER 3

Our Approach

“This diversity of assumed functions and various classifications, together with an ambiguous and diversified context of trust relations as well as an overload emotional and overstated explanatory value of the concept, makes trust one of the most difficult concepts to handle in empirical research.” (Miształ, 1995:95)

As stated beautifully by Miształ above, trust is a very difficult subject to study empirically. The phenomenon escapes a concise definition and seems impossible to measure with any acceptable accuracy. To study it on the web appears even more challenging. There is not yet an established research tradition around the subject, which means the general understanding of what methods to apply is low. It is, for example, questionable whether a quantitative approach to studying web-mediated interpersonal trust would yield any results that could even come close to answering the questions we pose.

For this reason we decided at an early stage to turn to innovative *companies* who are in one way or another deeply familiar with trust online, rather than studying users on the web directly and the emerging trust between them. By using an *indirect* method of more explorative character, we hoped to be able to identify the dominant relevant issues around trust on the web, and give more justified answers to our research questions.

The methodological approach chosen has thus been based first and foremost on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with relevant people from four companies concerned with trust online. The companies in question were chosen due to their involvement in

building innovative web services where interpersonal trust, in one way or another, is a key component. The companies are Opinity, RapLeaf, TN20, and Yahoo!. All of the interviews were conducted on the field in San Francisco and Silicon Valley during a three-month stay in the summer of 2006. We conducted a total of six interviews of which four were done with a single interviewee and two were longer group interviews with three and four people respectively. It appeared important for us to immerge ourselves in the atmosphere in which our studied companies exist, namely the web-entrepreneurship community in San Francisco and Silicon Valley, since the predominant shaping companies of social software are all clustered in this area. Furthermore, actually being there enabled us to visit the companies of our study in *their settings* thus aiding us in grasping the thinking and context of the individuals behind the companies more thoroughly.

In addition to the collection of primary empirical material we spent a considerable amount of time studying secondary empirical sources. Much of this research was done in the native setting of the companies studied—on the web. We also maintained a weblog called Trustmojo⁴ on the subject during the entire duration of our stay, something that led to a number of enlightening conversations with experts on trust in such diverse fields as sociology,

⁴The weblog can be found at <http://trustmojo.com>

psychology, interaction design and computer science. The weblog enabled us to tap into the ongoing discussion around online trust in and around San Francisco with greater ease, and also simplified the approach of the companies in our study.

More formally stated, our research strategy could be described as an *explorative mixed-methods approach* (Caracelli & Greene, 1997), since we have attempted to integrate qualitative empirical material with a large amount of secondary data to gain a comprehensive view on the subject. In hindsight, we have found this approach to be very fruitful in providing helpful answers and material for our analysis of interpersonal trust in web-mediated social spaces.

PART II

INTRODUCTION

Our case study took place in San Francisco and Silicon Valley during the summer of 2006. It concerns four companies, Opinity (Silicon Valley), RapLeaf (San Francisco), TN20 (San Francisco), and Yahoo! (Silicon Valley), of which all but the last are young web startups. Our study of Yahoo! and some of its services added the perspective of a large and established organization yet remaining within the field of innovative services. We would definitely consider all the companies in our study highly innovative, including Yahoo! and its progressive technology development group. Here, in Part II, we bring forward the material from our empirical sources that we found the most relevant for understanding how these companies think about trust online. This material will, in combination with the theory from Part I, serve as the basis for the forthcoming analysis in Part III.

CHAPTER 4

Yahoo!

THE COMPANY

Of the many companies attempting the *web portal* strategy in recent years, few remain today. Yahoo!, on the other hand, managed to become the world's most visited website with the portal *yahoo.com* and its branches of broadly heterogeneous Yahoo!-branded services. Since the initial purchase of Ludicorp Inc.⁵ in March 2005 the company has made numerous acquisitions of other social software and innovation savvy start-ups such as Upcoming.org, Del.icio.us and Jumpcut. The acquired companies have been brought in under the Yahoo! brand but remain rather autonomous, both in operations and in appearance. These innovative companies have undeniably brought strong developers and entrepreneurs too a Yahoo! that today is considered to have one of the world's most talented innovation teams within social software.

THE SERVICES

The services offered by Yahoo! cover everything from auctions to children's entertainment, from soccer-managing games to research, and more. With the increasing acquisitions of other companies and the plethora of heterogeneous original Yahoo! services the company seeks to cover just about everything any regular internet user could require. As a very brief background to the services

⁵ Creators of the photosharing site Flickr.com

discussed in the empirical material we here present some of the main aspects of three Yahoo! services.

YAHOO! ANSWERS

Answers is described as a “place where the world gathers to share information” and is intended to help people who are looking for answers to specific questions (Yahoo! Answers, 2006). Users post questions about virtually anything and other users give answers that subsequently get rated and ranked by the community. All questions and their accompanying answers are saved and become instantly searchable in order to accumulate an ever-growing database of “real answers from real people” (Yahoo! Answers Official Site, 2006). Questions such as “Can I dye my hair blond?”(Teddy), “How can I clean satin wedding shoes that are stained after wearing them at my wedding?”(Guru Girl), “Give me information about inventory/material management packages from India?”(sannidhi r) and “What is a boom box?”(gerry l) are posted continuously in this huge user-generated content database. Users all have personal profiles with scores concerning how many answers they have given, if they have been rated “best answer” on a specific question and so forth.

The screenshot shows the profile page for user 'bulldogsr2cute' on Yahoo! Answers. At the top, there are navigation buttons for 'ask.', 'answer.', and 'discover.'. Below this is a search bar with 'Search' and 'Advanced' options, and a 'My Q&A' link. The profile header includes the user's name, 'Member since: October 31, 2006', and a note that the user does not allow IM or email. A profile picture is shown next to '184 points Level 1' and '4% Best answer'. To the right, 'bulldogsr2cute's Stats' shows '41 total answers' and a bar chart where 4% (2) are 'BEST' and 95% (39) are 'OTHER'. Below this is a table for 'Activity Summary' with columns for 'Total Points' (184) and 'Points this week' (184), and a 'View Leaderboard' link. A second table shows 'Answers' (Total: 41, Best: 2) and 'Questions' (Total: 5, Resolved: 0). At the bottom, there are tabs for 'bulldogsr2cute's Answers' and 'bulldogsr2cute's Questions'. The 'Answers' tab is active, showing a list of answers with a 'View by:' dropdown set to 'Best Answers'. The first answer is 'Why do Canadians get mad when us Americans talk about Canadian accents?' asked by 'OHIOgur!' 9 answers ago, 2 days ago, in the 'General - Canada' category.

Figure 4.1 Profile page of the Yahoo! Answers user “bulldogsr2cute”.

FLICKR

Flickr is an online photo managing website that seeks to enable new ways of sharing and organizing photos (Flickr official site, 2006). The service combines photo management with social network features and users interact by commenting, tagging, sharing and subscribing to each other’s photos. Due to the large community of users and semantically tagged photos it can also be used as an image search engine. An *interestingness* scale can be used to list images in descending order according to how *interesting* they are. Thus, if searching for an image of a cat a user can search Flickr for photos tagged “cat” and furthermore list them by their

“interestingness” in order to find the most interesting cat photos. Every user has a profile page that is dominated by their photo stream i.e. their uploaded photos listed in chronological order with the most recent first.

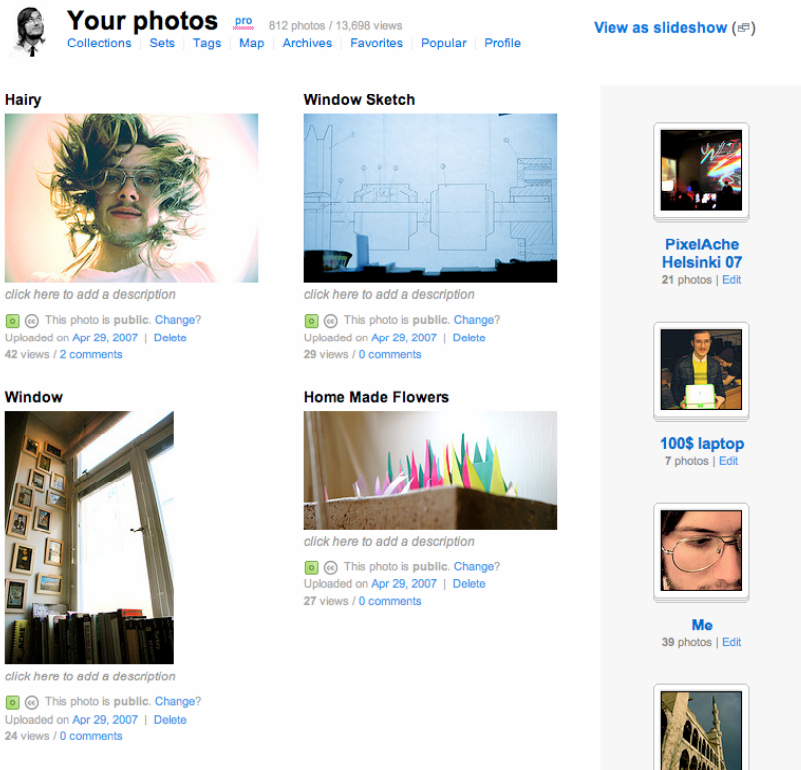


Figure 4.2 Personal profile view when logged in on Flickr, photos from photostream

YAHOO! 360°

Similar to *Orkut* or *MySpace*, *360°* is a social networking site with some additional features. The site seeks to integrate other Yahoo! services such as *images*, *groups*, *messenger* and *local* in order to make

these available to the users from within the 360° website. Among other things, users can write “testimonials” i.e. opinions about their friends and subscribe to a friend’s activities via a RSS-feed. Similar to e.g. MySpace the user has great control over the appearance of their personal profile page and thus a wide range of expressional elements are observable across different profiles.

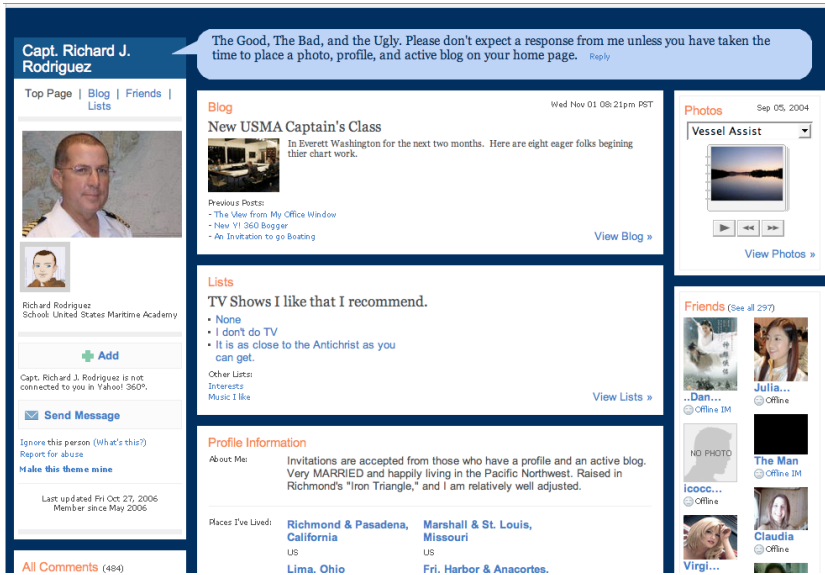


Figure 4.3 Personal 360° profile of “Capt. Richard J Rodriguez” with customized look and content.

A PLATFORM FOR TRUST

Yvonne French, Product Manager for Yahoo!’s reputation platform meets us in a small conference room at Yahoo!’s Sunnyvale office where we have the opportunity to ask her how Yahoo! manages online trust. First she tells us that “[u]ltimately,

our goal is to build better communities, tighter communities, more engaging communities so that our users keep coming back”. French quickly moves talk about trust into the realm of reputation and continues by explaining why it has become increasingly important to Yahoo!.

“We have a participation platform, which is really a platform that manages user-generated content and of course we’re getting more and more of that. And the more user participation we have and the more user-generated content we have the more we need a reputation system because the users no longer know who to trust or what content to trust because there’s so much of it out there.”

For a company the size of Yahoo!, it is vital to build new technology in a platform-oriented manner in order to be capable of applying it to several business units and their respective services. The reputation platform being built by French and her team is expected to function across the entire Yahoo! network and be useful for most of the various services. “The idea is that it’s a very generalized platform because it has to manage reputation applications that are pretty different” says French. She adds that apart from using “the reputation platform to improve the overall quality of the user-generated content” they are also “looking at supporting some internal reputation models for spam and abuse”. Thus, there appears to be a combination of an “outward facing to other users” and “internal application” need for a single reputation system that both come with different functional motives.

SHAPING COMMUNITY BEHAVIOUR

Yahoo! Answers has implemented an early stage reputation system that French describes as “good and bad” and “easy to find holes in”. She tells us about the impact of their system:

They’ve [Yahoo! answers] tended towards, or put a lot of weight on, activity and participation versus quality. One of the things that we’ve seen as a trend is that *that* is very common when you’re starting out because as a new business your main goal is liquidity. You want to get a lot of stuff, you want to get content. So, if you build a reputation system that incentivises people to participate that is what will happen. They’ll participate but very often at the expense of quality. That’s what we’re starting to see on Answers that have been very successful in activity and participation”.

As Answers has become increasingly popular and the amount of information and users has increased, French furthermore notes a change in strategy, “now the goal is quality [not quantity] so they need to shift their model”. Since the old model incentivises users to participate as much as possible at the expense of quality, it now needs to be modified in order to alter the behaviour of the community participants.

Changing both the business and the technology platform model quickly is crucial according to French and she describes unexpected usage behaviour as one of the reasons. In order to incentivise the type of behaviour desired within the community they have to be able to test and quickly modify technological changes depending on how they end up influencing and effecting

the users. French describes how it takes place:

“Whatever model you put out there [...] you’ll probably see some change in user behaviour, it might be exactly what you expected which is good but probably it won’t. It’ll be something completely different than you expected and you’ll have to go back and change the model. So, what we’ve found that building a system like this you have to be able to react very quickly.” (French, 2006)

SAY IT OUT LOUD OR NOT?

Caterina Fake, Head of the Yahoo! Technology Development Group and Team Leader at Yahoo!-owned Flickr, tells us about how different presentational elements within a service can radically alter the behaviour of users and illustrates it with their *interestingness* score. “The “interestingness”-algorithm works much like any calculating software looking at several different variables in order to, as in the case of Flickr, assign an “interestingness score” to a certain photo. However, this score is never displayed on the site and it is not based on explicit user ratings. A user can see lists of photos that are ordered by interestingness but s/he can never find the actual score itself. Fake describes the input of the score as “looking at behaviours rather than explicit action” since there is no rating mechanism that the user can deliberately influence. Fake continues to express that explicit rating actions can be “dangerous” since they make people focus too much on “what created the outcome” and competitiveness (“What could I have done to make my photo a full five?”). Product Manager Chris Plasser agrees and

fills in that it “doesn’t promote sharing either”. (Plasser 2006)

Yvonne French states that “the more you gather implicit events that contribute to the reputation the better” and that this promotes behaviour beneficial to the community. However, according to French, the issue of explicit vs. implicit ratings and reputations depends heavily on the particular group setting.

“Many Yahoo! groups are different [from large groups]. They’re like a family. An extended family of thirty or forty people [...] So, you have to be very careful with those [reputation and rating] kinds of systems. You have to understand the type of community it is first”. (French, 2006)

She implies that the nature between these smaller groups and the large “open communities” at Yahoo! are of very different nature. According to French:

“Where we feel the rating and reputation systems work best is in the open communities where people don’t already know each other. Where they are trying to figure out, ‘who is this person? Should I trust them? Should I believe what they are telling me?’”. (French, 2006)

GETTING PERSONAL

Yvonne French tells us that the reason Yahoo! is interested in user ratings is manifold. Mainly they want to be able to present the *aggregated community opinion* on a certain topic. She explains how simple representations such as a number of “stars”, “thumbs up or

down” or textual comments can manage to quickly “present the aggregate of what the community is about”. However, according to French the users don’t only want the aggregate from the community, they are increasingly looking for *personally relevant* information and that is one of the reasons why Yahoo! is trying to integrate information across multiple services. French describes a scenario:

“If you do a search for “Italian restaurants in San Francisco” we’ll list them and we’ll say this is the community’s favourite restaurant but we’ll also tell you which one’s your friends have rated the highest, your friends from 360°. So this is kind of going a little bit further in terms of trust and relevance. You’re getting the aggregate from the community but you’re getting specific opinions from your friends also.” (French, 2006)

However, once the reputation and ratings are not solely about the community aggregate, once they become personal, things seem to get slightly intricate. French says that “in the reputation system I don’t believe that we are necessarily going to tie the inputs of the data to a person”. It appears that connecting opinions or ratings directly to a person often leads to various problems and uncomfortable social situations. French explains:

“[O]ne of the things that we considered, I don’t know if this would solve the problem [of rating retaliation and reputation inflation] is to not directly rate another person. So, the principle that we’re going after is that you can make comments about that they *do* or *say* [but not about *them*]” (French, 2006)

COMPATIBLE IDENTITIES

We talk at length about online identity with Yvonne French. She says that “where you have disposable ID it’s much harder [to establish trust]”. According to her, “eBay has a huge advantage over us [Yahoo!] since they actually have a credit card tied to every person”. As a problem she references what her colleague Randy Farmer, calls “the lawyer that skipped town” and explains that it means “when somebody comes in, builds up trust in the community and then does one bad thing and runs away”. In Yahoo!’s case, only between 5-10% of the user accounts have credit cards attached to them and their ID’s are thus seen as “disposable” (French, 2006). The issue of not having secure identification is, according to French, “a big challenge to the industry as a whole” by hindering users and companies from leveraging their information across several web services. “I know that our motivation as a company is to make our services open, and to provide API:s to ID, reputation and your relationships” says French. She describes how they would like to be able to know “that this eBay users is this Yahoo! user” and use their respective data on both services in order to provide better services.

The difficulties of ID are not just confined to an “outside versus inside the Yahoo! network”-issue but have proven to be complicated even within Yahoo! due to the plethora of companies bought and different systems used (French, 2006). However, from a user-perspective it is possible to use one Yahoo! ID across

Yahoo!'s services (despite the different backend systems) but French adds that "it's a little bit complicated because you tie multiple aliases to a single ID". An *alias* is a nickname used within a specific service such as e.g. a *Flickr name*. So, a single user can have one Yahoo! ID that works to login to all the Yahoo! services but then s/he will have a unique alias or username on every specific service (e.g. Flickr, Answers, 360° etc.). If a user makes use of the same user ID across Yahoo! services it enables Yahoo! to "recognize" her throughout the network. However, due to the possibility of assigning different aliases to the same ID it might not be possible for *users* to recognize each other across Yahoo! services. Moreover, about 5-10% of the Yahoo!-users use the multi-alias name in order to present "different identities" or different personalities in different services thus using the names as a way of separating their various personalities to various people (French, 2006).

From a user perspective, recognizing other fellow users across services is highly important and Yahoo! are already attempting to address this by looking at meta-identity solutions (French, 2006).

"If I create a relationship to you and I go somewhere else I want to know that you are the same person so I want to see the same name, the same picture, whatever. But there's also a tension, right? Because sometimes people don't want to be the same person."

A meta-id system would mean that the alias would no longer work as a personality separation but French argues that the increased

benefit for the remaining users would be great enough for the system to be taken into use. However, she clearly points out that Yahoo! would like to make people recognizable across services but still enable them to express themselves differently and expose different aspects of their personalities in different contexts. She describes their current approach as “trying to find a way to represent the user consistently across the network” maybe by “com[ing] up with a small set of identity information that is consistent everywhere” such as “just a picture and a name”. In this way, according to French the user is recognizable but can still express more of themselves (in e.g. a user-profile) in a domain specific context.

ASTRONOMERS ARE EXPERTS AT ASTRONOMY, EVEN AT A MUSIC SERVICE

When French talks about reputation and describes how other employees at Yahoo! approach her regarding the reputation platform it sounds similar to the comments about identity. She describes a common scenario:

“One of these things I keep getting asked when I talk about this reputation to people internally is, I don’t know why they keep asking this question but, everybody asks ‘Oh, so you have *one* Yahoo! reputation?’ And somehow there is this assumption that everything you do on Yahoo! is getting rolled into the magic Yahoo! reputation. But of course that’s not true because context is so important. In the real world you don’t have *one* reputation. Depending on different

things that you do, different areas of your life you have different reputations and that's exactly what we want to model here. And context is very important." (French, 2006)

However, although atomically separating all the services might be the simple option for also keeping reputation separate, French has a different vision: "We *do* believe that there *are* contexts that can be shared across the network, and for a company like Yahoo!, being able to share reputations and relations across contexts is very, *very* good for business because we get users to plug into multiple services."

French describes that even though reputation is often tied to a context or subject matter (such as e.g. music), boundaries between such subject matters and Yahoo! business units are not always aligned. She illustrates the problem by giving an example of an expert from Yahoo! music giving a CD review at Yahoo! shopping—the expert's reputation from music should of course, in this case, be applicable to shopping (French, 2006) but due to service separation they are not. Furthermore, "I should be able to improve my reputation as an expert everywhere I go" says French. She continues:

"So, if I know a lot about trust, or astronomy, if I contribute to a message board about it, if I moderate a group of astronomers, if I write about it in my blog all the time, if I go to shopping and rate telescopes I should always, with all those things, be able to increase my reputation as an expert."

The challenge, according to French, is therefore to find these “overlapping contexts” and getting the “community of expert astronomers” that today are “all over the place in different business units at Yahoo!” to be able to “get together”. She describes the challenge as finding the “shareability” of reputation and trust.

CHAPTER 5

RapLeaf

THE COMPANY

RapLeaf was founded in 2005 by Auren Hoffman, a Silicon Valley serial entrepreneur who, together with computer science graduate Manish Shah, has previously started and sold three companies. Hoffman provided the company's funding during its first few months and in the beginning of June 2006, RapLeaf raised \$1 million in an angel round led by Peter Thiel (Former founder and CEO of PayPal), and also including Eric Di Benedetto, Jeff Clavier, Aydin Senkut, and Ron Conway (Marshall, 2006b). RapLeaf's web service was launched in the beginning of May 2006, its seventh employee joined the team in the beginning of fall and at the time of writing they are expanding rapidly.

THE SERVICE

Rapleaf is "a portable rating systems for commerce" (RapLeaf Official Site, 2006), which operates similarly to eBay's online rating system. It is designed to, unlike eBay, track e-commerce reputations across *multiple* websites and marketplaces, thus in effect establishing "a reputation score out of the silo" (Maddox, 2006a). In other words, Rapleaf is "eBay feedback for the rest of the web, and the offline world" (Arrington, 2006).

A person's Rapleaf score is calculated by the number of negative feedback ratings subtracted from the positive ratings given by buyers and sellers. The ultimate goal, Hoffman says, is to make

Internet users to act responsibly when buying and selling items. “If we are successful, we literally will make people more ethical” (Hoffman, 2006a).

The name “RapLeaf” comes from rap sheet or reputation, and leaf, signifying life. The company’s tagline is simply “It’s more profitable to be ethical.” A RapLeaf score is reminiscent of “Whuffie,” Auren Hoffman says, referring to the reputation-based currency of Cory Doctorow’s 2003 science fiction novel, *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*. In the book, *Whuffie* is a continuously updated and instantly viewable public score that measures how much esteem and respect other people have for a particular person.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RATINGS

Many studies of eBay (e.g. David & Pinch, 2006) have shown that there’s a significant price premium on a good eBay feedback rating and that sellers with good ratings can receive as much as 40% added price for high-value objects (Resnick et al., 2006). Marshall among others consider eBay’s feedback system as “one of the more valuable monopolized assets out there” (Marshall, 2006a).

A research study on “transactional trust” commissioned by RapLeaf shows that ratings are “the most important criteria for trust in commerce on the buyer’s side, and second most important on the seller’s side” (Hoffman, 2006b).

In the offline world, standardized credit ratings play an important

role. In the U.S., FICO scores enable people to, among other things, borrow money with less hassle than in other parts of the world. Hoffman points out that “the idea behind RapLeaf is to be your FICO score for general trust transactions.”

Within reputation systems that are not tied directly to monetary transactions (unlike eBay or Amazon) there is a comparatively significant increase in fraudulent behaviour. Hoffman explains that RapLeaf is working hard at developing an advanced technical system to deal with fraud detection and prevention.

In order to discover users who try to game the system in different ways, they look at a large number of parameters. At the time of our interview, the number of analysis parameters amounted to 112. “They range from obvious ones”, like a user’s IP address”, says Hoffman, “to extremely non-obvious ones.” He adds that they all must be kept confidential in order to prevent “fraudsters” from finding out new ways of gaming the system.

A UNIVERSAL RATING

RapLeaf’s feedback rating, which can be displayed in the form of a badge on any website, can be used for conveying trustworthiness in commerce scenarios, but there’s more to the badge than just commerce. “As you can see, there’s a whole slew of ways you can use your RapLeaf badge. Your reputation is helpful for commerce, yes. But your reputation affects not only buying or selling, it also

affects your life and where you want to go in life”, writes Vivek Sodera on the official RapLeaf weblog (Sodera, 2006b).

This implies that a RapLeaf score could be used outside of the context of a business transaction. Hoffman argues that many situations we would not call “transactional” at first glance, in fact are. “You could say that agreeing on a time for a meeting is not transactional, but then again ‘are you going to show up on time?’. I’m saying basically [by e.g. including my score in an email footer], ‘I’m showing up on time. I’ve got a good RapLeaf score. I’ll be there.’”

Hoffman continues to tell us about a study they did on RapLeaf users reactions to seeing the badge, “The number one feedback point was ‘I knew I was going to get rated so I would do an extra good job’ [...] that is, most people simply think, there’s going to be consequences so I’d better do a good job, which is basically what we’re trying to do at RapLeaf. Our tagline is ‘It’s more profitable to be ethical’ and we really believe that. We see this a cause, not a business.”

Hoffman continues, “small towns tend to have fewer robberies than big towns. It tends to be easier to do stuff, because there’s mutual respect. On the Internet it’s harder, in a big city it’s harder. And so we’re essentially enabling really big places to act like small villages.”

A REPRESENTATION OF TRUSTWORTHINESS

The RapLeaf badge currently consists of three numbers. The main number is the “RapLeaf Score”, which is based on feedback on commercial transactions. The second number is the “Personal RapLeaf Score”, a number based on purely personal feedback. This score is unrelated to the first. The third number, the “Feedback Percentage”, is the percentage of a person’s commerce feedback that is positive. It is calculated by dividing the number of positive commerce ratings by the sum of positive and negative commerce ratings. Neutral ratings are not included. On a RapLeaf profile page, one can also view the comments made by both commercial and personal feedback-leavers. There are also some further indicators as to whether a user can be trusted or not. This can be whether the email of the user has been verified, whether the user has any websites, and so on.

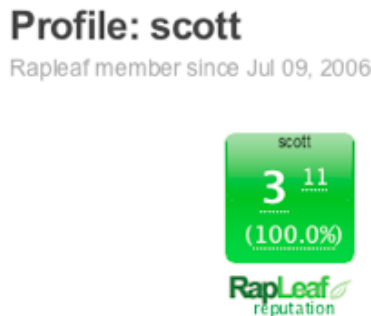


Figure 5.1 RapLeaf score badge of the user “scott”.

The score has deliberately been made easy to understand: “people should just ‘get it’, it should be that simple” says, Manish Shah (Mattson, 2006). Even so, it might not be completely intuitive how to read the RapLeaf score. In a RapLeaf newsletter from October 2006 there is a joke about the badge’s striking similarity to chemical notation:

“Displaying your Rapleaf Badge on your blog and classified listings helps tell people you practice and encourage ethical behaviour. Don’t let its similarity to a periodic table element take away from that fact. [...] At a glance, you get to show your reputation, garner more trust, and earn more business. [...] Place the badge at the bottom of your emails, and your signature will convey your reputation on every email you send out.” (V. Soderer, 2006, RapLeaf Newsletter, October 25)

There has been a lot of internal discussion at RapLeaf about the representation and the accuracy of the score. It could be done in many ways—also potentially more “accurate” ones. One could for example assign a weight to each feedback-giver depending on their calculated reputation or based on the size of the transaction, similar to how Google handles their search results. Hoffman comments:

“Right now, we [weigh values] internally, so part of our fraud prevention is we weigh everything. And we almost do a reverse rating for fraud, because we try to determine how likely something is to be fraud. When we calculate the actual score, however, we don’t weigh people differently. We’re battling with how to do the score in the future. We opted to go with the simplest solution so we do our rating system not too different from eBay or other systems, which is very

simple to understand. It's very obvious how the score is calculated. When you do weighting, which is essentially a second derivative, it's not obvious how your score is created. And it's not easy to calculate. Sometimes it's not possible at all to calculate. But it might be a little bit more accurate. So it's a trade-off. You have to figure out how much more accurate it'll be versus how the users will understand it."

There is also a commonly known problem of *reputation inflation* in reputation scores. It occurs because people have a fear of retaliation, suppressing negative ratings, and an inclination to reciprocate positive ratings. This reputation inflation results in the vast majority of eBay and Amazon users having overwhelmingly positive reputation scores. RapLeaf suffers from similar problems. This demands a certain literacy from the reader of a score, since, even though not intuitive, a score under 90% is usually rather bad. "The alternative to a halo effect", Hoffman says, "is people slandering one another. It's hard to get a perfect balance. So if I had an err, I would err toward the halo rather than the slandering, because there are all sorts of problems with that. So you do have the reciprocal nature. [...] I like the reciprocal nature of things."

The question still arises whether RapLeaf should implement alternative ways of representing the score. "We may actually over time change the way we display things... we're still figuring out... how to map that out. How do we actually say, are they in the top quartile? Or could we say other types of things about them? We may still do the numerical, but we may also show how they fit with

the broader community. We're still trying to figure that out" Hoffman says.

RapLeaf

Profile: nate
Rapleaf member since May 02, 2006

Rate This Person

Rating Positive Neutral Negative
 You are a Buyer Seller Swapper Friend
 Comments I certify that these comments are the truth. I put my integrity behind these comments.

Statistics

	Total	Buyers	Sellers	Swappers	Friends
Rapleaf Score	1				
Positive Feedback	100.0%				
Rapleaf Personal Score	12				
Positive Ratings	13	1	0	0	12
Neutral Ratings	0	0	0	0	0
Negative Ratings	0	0	0	0	0

Ratings

Legend: Buyers Sellers Swappers Friends

View: **All** | Only Buyers | Only Sellers | Only Swappers | Only Friends | Only Positive | Only Neutral | Only Negative

- "Nate is an upstanding individual who singlehandedly could revolutionize the way we feel about and approach after-dinner-sipping-coffee conversation"
Posted by **bferens** for **nate** on Jun 28, 2006 as a friend. | [Show Response](#)
- "Nate is a pretty swell guy!"
Posted by **devinreams** for **nate** on Jun 26, 2006 as a friend. | [Show Response](#)
- "Nate is an incredible problem-solver and PHP developer. He also has great business sense and project management skills."
Posted by **radscientist** for **nate** on May 10, 2006 as a friend. | [Show Response](#)
- "Nate is one of the most clever tech savvy individuals on the market. Very trustworthy, upfront and amazingly capable and a master at code."
Posted by **mish4** for **nate** on May 03, 2006 as a friend. | [Show Response](#)
- "Nate is a positive guy with great ideas, six thumbs up. He also is a pretty mean pickle ball player, so get ready SD here he comes."
Posted by **tdenton** for **nate** on May 03, 2006 as a friend. | [Show Response](#)

Figure 5.2 Profile page of the RapLeaf user “nate”.

Perhaps a non-numerical completely textual representation might be more appropriate? Hoffman answers: “It might be. This is RapLeaf 1.0, and the thing we know for sure is that we’re probably wrong. We understand that we’ll have to change things over time.

To me it's amazing that eBay hasn't changed in 10 years. We're going to have to change slowly, add more and more things. That's another reason why we opted to go with the simplest solution, because it's easier to change from there."

RAPLEAF'S VISION

On the RapLeaf weblog Vivek Soderer writes about RapLeaf's world-changing potential:

"[C]ompared to other companies, we have it easy since it's inherent in what we're trying to do. Our team envisions a society where your reputation is completely ubiquitous...where you can ping someone's Rapleaf score, while away from the computer, and consider if you should buy or sell to the individual. That's just an example but that's very plausible, no? [...] It is possible of course, but the process of getting to that point personally frustrates me. I, the author, can't speak for the entire team when I say this but, it really infuriates me when I hear about these new cases of people getting ripped off, scammed, etc." (Soderer, 2006a)

Similarly, Hoffman talks about what motivates him to work with the system. "I started on this mainly because of the ethical components. And I think that if we're successful we'll actually encourage people to be more ethical. And so it's very motivating, when you basically can change people's behaviour." He talks about how one of his investors got the idea wrong: "[The investor] said 'It's great, you can reward people who are ethical, and you can punish people who aren't'. And I said 'No, that's not what I want to do. I don't want to reward people who are ethical. I want to

encourage people to be ethical.’ [...] So if I want to make more people ethical, I don’t want to hurt people who aren’t. [...] I simply want to convince the vast majority of people to take a step in a more ethical direction.”

RapLeaf sees their project as having an educational as well as business component to it. “It’s hard for people to grasp the concept today, it’s not easy for them to understand how *useful* portable ratings are”, says Shah in a recent podcast, “we’re working on getting the idea in peoples heads” (Mattson, 2006).

RapLeaf also plans to work with offline credit agencies to verify people’s real identities in the future. When we ask whether credit agencies will get online in the future, Hoffman answers boldly: “sure they will. I mean, I don’t think they’ll do what we’re doing. Maybe we’ll buy one of the credit agencies one day.”

CHAPTER 6

Opinity

THE COMPANY

The name *Opinity* originates from a play with the words *opinion* and *identity* and suggests the concept of an *opinion-based identity*. The company was founded in 2002 by Ted Cho and Doyon Kim and is currently based in San Jose. Opinity claims to be “the first online reputation services company” and is well connected with the progressive web reputation- and identity community. The company also has a full time company blogger, Tom Maddox, who is a former science fiction writer. At the time of writing Opinity had 10 employees.

In the summer of 2006 Opinity partnered with three Web 2.0 companies: Edgeio, GoingOn, and RapLeaf (Hoffman, 2006c). Opinity provides reputation services for Edgeio and GoingOn, while RapLeaf provides them with commerce ratings.

THE SERVICE

Opinity runs a web based “reputation service” (Opinity Official Site, 2006). The service seeks to offer credible insight into individuals’ past history on the web by several means, not just business transaction ratings. Similarly to RapLeaf, Opinity’s site is open to anyone who interacts or transacts business on any website rather than being a closed ratings system such as that offered by eBay (Opinity Official Site, 2006). Thus, Opinity seeks to offer a solution to the fragmentation of today’s online users’ digital

identities so that they do not have to rebuild their trust and credibility on every new site they join.

A primary goal of the service is to make it easy to verify someone's claimed legal identity and information such as email-addresses, physical addresses and web accounts attached to that identity. Hence, it enables users to prove that they really are who they say they are, while letting them maintain control over the level of disclosure of personal information. On the Opinity website the service is described as:

“Using Opinity’s services, you can build a trustworthy identity that can easily be communicated to others online. Your Opinity Reputation Profile can contain a rich portrait of who you are, what you have done, and what others think about you. You can choose to have your information verified. You can verify ownership of online identities, blogs, and even book authorship.” (Opinity Official Site, 2006)

BE KNOWN, BE TRUSTED

On the official Opinity weblog, Maddox describes the problem that Opinity is trying to address: “Emerging social spaces and those yet to come need ways to establish the facts about their users’ identities and behaviour in spaces where new kinds of relationships are being worked out and the rules are little known if at all, and *simply knowing who someone is* becomes a difficult and potentially dangerous issue.” (Maddox, 2006f)

There's a strong line of thinking about reputation at Opinity which has its roots in a number of famous science fiction books that envision entire markets and societies driven by reputation systems (Doctorow, 2003; Stiegler, 1999; Masum & Zhang, 2004). Opinity even owns the domain Whuffie.com.⁶ Tom Maddox, the company's full-time blogger, is a former science fiction writer who earlier worked with people like William Gibson and was active in early 90's hacker culture.

Opinity are strong believers in reputation as a key component for building trust on the web and that reputation can be *communicated* online, at least to a large extent (Maddox, 2006). Furthermore, they believe that online reputation management in general has a very bright future. The company's fitting tagline is "Be known, be trusted."

TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR REPUTATION!

Maddox says there are two truisms about reputation that he opposes: "People say you can't own reputation and that it can't be transferred." "But the truth", he says addressing the first truism, "is that although you can't own your reputation, you *can* control it. Just look at celebrities!" He continues, "[The first truism] tells people to

⁶ "Whuffie" is the name of the reputation currency envisioned in Cory Doctorow's (2003) book.

be passive with regards to their reputation, when in fact *you can manage it.*”

Ted Cho, CEO and founder of Opinity argues that reputation management will be common in the future, “I suspect that this process of managing ourselves online will turn into a complex one, but I hope that it will also be a routine process, one enabled by user-configurable software so that we won’t have to hack the system—not that there’s anything wrong with that.” (Cho, 2006)

The second truism concerns *reputation portability*. This is a very central topic for Opinity. The issue that is heavily debated in the industry is to what extent online reputation—whether it consists of a one-dimensional score or a more complex set of data—can be used *across domains*. A user might have a reputed taste for music, but that reputation doesn’t necessarily mean much in the context of films or books. Few would doubt that reputation is portable at least across some limited set of domains, but to say *which* domains they are is not always trivial.

In the offline world, however, reputation is often tacitly transferred from one domain to another—sometimes in ways that aren’t easy to understand. Bill Washburn, VP of business development at Opinity, takes the example of positions in higher education: “Professors and academics in different disciplines, they always claim, first thing, that [reputation] isn’t portable. And it’s actually not measurable.’ And yet they all use it. And it transfers from one

school to the next, even though they assert—some of them very confidently—that there really isn’t such a thing as portability.”

REPRESENTING REPUTATION

Essentially, an Opinity user profile consists of a collection of data that Opinity believes could be relevant for a user’s reputation. The user can extensively customize the profile display, as well as what data to display publicly. Maddox writes on the Opinity weblog:

“We present ourselves to others as though engaging in a dramatic performance. [...] So one crucial point is that [the Opinity profile] is under the user’s control. Anyone who signs up at Opinity decides what to present, what to have verified, and, ultimately, what to show to whom—this last part is the trickiest, the devil being very much in the details.” (Maddox, 2006c)

Cho says that they are still thinking a great deal about *how* to display user profiles. He also talks about coming functionality on the service: “We are planning to let our users define multiple ‘views’ of their reputation profile. You could then define one of your profiles as your ‘commerce profile’ and it would only show your commerce reputation. Your dating profile would only have your dating reputation, and so on” (Cho, 2005)

Opinity believes there’s more to reputation than simply a feedback score. Scores are considered just one out of many components on a users’ reputation profile. Cho points out that the idea that one’s reputation—or even trust in others—could be reduced to some

distinct metric is far too simplistic, but surprisingly widespread.

Opinity has partnered with other companies to be able to verify information on e.g. a person's address or phone number. If a piece of information is verified—either through Opinity or a third party—it is displayed as “verified” on a user's profile. A user can also hide e.g. the address on their public profile so that it has to be explicitly requested by users who want to know it. A user can even go so far as to just state the fact that s/he *has an address* that has been verified by a trusted third party, without revealing the address itself. This enables multiple degrees of privacy on an individual basis. The Opinity site states, “the more information contained in the profile, the richer the picture it presents. Also, if a profile owner has chosen to verify information in a profile, that increases its trustworthiness.” (Opinity Official Site, 2006)

Reputation Score:

Community:  0.0 (0)

[View all reviews](#)
[Add Review](#)
[Rate at Rapleaf](#)

Personal Info:



Name: Calvin Webster **Gender:** Male
Location: Newport, NC **Year Born:** 1979
United States

Interests:
surfing, emerging technologies, podcasting, blogging, activism, philosophy

My Online Identities:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ID: barrelofcalvins (More info)	Site: Yahoo!
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ID: ***** (More info)	Site: MySpace
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ID: Calweb	Site: Flickr.com
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ID: *****	Site: PayPal
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ID: plasmidcal (More info)	Site: Blogger


Views: 495

Identity URLs

calweb.opinity.com [OpenID](#)

Accomplishments:

Education

 **College:** Duke University
City: Durham
State: NORTH CAROLINA
Country: United States
Degree: Cert. in Nonprofit Management
Major: Nonprofit Management
Start Date: 05/20/2005


 **College:** UNC Chapel Hill
City: Chapel Hill
State: NORTH CAROLINA
Country: United States
Degree: SEP program
Major: PreMedicine
Start Date: 05/12/1999
End Date: 08/03/1999
Graduation Date: 08/03/1999
GPA: 3.6

Figure 6.1 Profile page of the Opinity user “calweb”.

Tom Maddox describes on the official weblog where Opinity profiles come into play when assessing trustworthiness online:

“I believe that as primates we are always more secure in our knowledge of whom to trust when we can meet someone in the flesh and observe their interactions over time, and, of course, interact with them ourselves to see how they respond to what we do. When we can’t do so, that is, we can’t get knowledge *of* someone, we must fall back on a

complex web of knowledge *about*.

Can we automate the processes by which we obtain such complex knowledge? Only to a degree, I think. But we can make the process simpler, more structured, more accessible—hence, more useful—and Opinity is in many ways an attempt to do just that.

But I don't think we can then automate the decision to trust or not to trust someone based on the knowledge we gather. The criteria we employ in making judgments of trust are necessarily subjective, situation specific, constantly shifting (as we and circumstances change).

Thus I would say that an automated trust manager [...] merely manifests a risk assessment of a very limited kind, one that we believe can be extended in this particular transaction. Is that trust? If you wish. But once we step into more complex realms, where the kinds of knowledge about someone are required that I mention above, then we must judge for ourselves.” (Maddox, 2006g)

Maddox describes the importance of having fine-grained control over privacy on an individual level: “When we're buying or selling something or seeking someone's trust”, he says, “we have to tell them about us. What we tell depends on the context. If we're participating in an online dating or matchmaking service, we have to reveal certain kinds of information; if we're trying to sell someone a high-ticket item on eBay, we have to reveal other kinds. And in either case, we only want to reveal what is necessary to the transaction.” (Maddox, 2006c)

Washburn likens Opinity profiles to military badges as a way to quickly signal your merits and in turn trustworthiness. On the Opinity weblog he writes about the importance of what he calls “virtual clothes”:

“Clothes are an essential part of civilization. Whether we like it or not, we all accept this social convention. It is self evident that clothes constitute a protective covering *and* a statement (a ‘fashion statement’ is often the phrase) regarding who we assert ourselves to be in our group, in the society of which we are a part, and in the world as we understand it. On the Internet, however, there is not yet any widely adopted or recognized form of ‘virtual clothing’ that serves as either a protective layer of insulation between each of us individually and everyone else nor is there anything that we yet have to use to assert on the ‘net who we are. I believe this is an essential missing piece of the socio-psychological dimension of how human beings—or at least ‘civilized’ human beings—interact. Put differently, while we have various complex mechanisms for psycho-social protection and self definition in the material world, we do not have such mechanisms yet in the virtual world.” (Washburn, 2006)

Cho adds that Opinity profiles could be a way to tacitly “show off” individual credibility cues, “You can’t say ‘I’m humble’”, he says, “that’s too explicit.” He argues that one can discretely point people one’s Opinity profile instead in order to “indirectly state” one’s humbleness.

REPUTATION SOCIETY

“When we’re online [...] we’re deprived of one of our fundamental mechanisms for understanding and evaluating each other. It’s not just a matter of ‘communication’—by whatever definition—but of our biologically determined being-in-the-world. And this implies that we are essentially off-balance online, trying to determine others’ trustworthiness by indirect and artificial means, generally deprived of our best and smartest ways of figuring out each other.” (Maddox, 2006d)

Opinity imagines a future where online reputation matters a lot more than it does today. But this future is still distant for most of the general public. Thus companies like Opinity feel they also have to engage in educating people. Understanding online reputation demands a new kind of literacy of the user, “it’s almost like you have to be a literary interpreter” says Maddox.

Washburn tells us that Opinity could help people move forward, “In the 80:s people threw trash straight out of their cars, today nobody does it. People *can* change.” He continues by saying that Opinity has to redefine “good hygiene” in online interaction. Maddox adds that “we can educate people, we can create a ‘culture of responsibility’ online.”

On the Opinity weblog Maddox argues that reputation should matter as much on the web as it does in the offline world:

“Reputation is about one’s behaviour, one’s performance, one’s standing amongst his or her peers. This importance of reputation in the material world is clear and well understood, in the vast majority of people. Reputation is at least part of why we have good manners, why we trust or don’t trust restaurants, why we drive responsibly, and so forth. In the online realm, reputations are not much in evidence and it is easy to hide behind newly minted, unproven ID:s, that can be discarded permanently at a moment’s notice. To me this strongly suggests that on the Internet we have to start developing persistent forms of identity and reputation that are visible and used broadly. In this way we can begin to move toward building legal standing and citizenship rights and responsibilities on the ‘net. With time, energy, and the investment of hard work we can start to create, cooperatively with many others, a fabric of reputation that is persistent, highly valuable, and well

developed so that it is also trustworthy and of high quality.”
(Maddox, 2006e)

Washburn in turn talks about the importance of search engines in this development. He argues that today people are being “googled” every day, and that this will be commonplace in the future. “That’s when a system like ours starts to matter!” When it comes to online reputation he says simply, “there’s no more important thing from now on.”

CHAPTER 7

TN20

THE COMPANY

TN20 was founded in the fall of 2005 by Mike Micucci, Jari Koister and Tom McCleary, all of whom had previously been working together. At the time of writing they are a seven-person startup, with headquarters in South Park, San Francisco and their main development team in Sweden. The three founders had previously been working together with e-commerce B2B enterprise software during early 2000 and have separately been involved in various startups since. Apart from the seven-person team of TN20 they also have an advisory board of another seven people with different backgrounds and skills within large special interest groups, online-community moderation, startup funding, marketing and usability.

THE SERVICE

TN20's service is still, at the time of writing, in the "closed-beta" stage and thus private. However, the intention is to provide a system that will enable existing real-world communities and special interest groups (SIGs) to collaborate effectively online. TN20 are focusing on pre-existing communities and those with an already established physical presence such as mothers' groups, religious organizations, school groups, alumni groups and so on. They aim to create a service similar to a social networking system for groups rather than individuals.

IT'S THE PEOPLE STUPID!

TN20:s stated objective lies in the desire to help communities collaborate much more effectively. CEO Mike Micucci tells us about how he, before the start of TN20, reacted to seeing some of the expert knowledge within existing offline communities:

“I had never seen that kind of information anywhere [...] What could we do from a collaboration perspective to nurture that information through the process so that it could be reused by the community over and over again?”

Out of this “aha-moment” the team started to devise a system that would “help a community collaborate at a much higher level of fidelity than it would normally do”. Thus, instead of attempting to build a service in order to attract users to then help shape a new community TN20 seeks to “target special interest groups that [already] have a physical presence” prior to a web presence (Micucci, 2006).

In shaping TN20s view of what a well-functioning community is, they “look to off-line community examples to see what the defining characteristics are.” They believe in the ability of the members to shape a good community and view technology as something that can help a community to become more effective—but not as a community-building tool in itself. McCleary writes that communications are but one element of groups that is subordinate to the consistent theme of any group, namely shared life-

experiences (McCleary, 2006b). On their official weblog he furthermore states that his answer to the perpetual question of “what makes a community good?” is easy. “It’s about the people, stupid!”

Another aspect behind TN20s desire to help communities collaborate is to “harness” the “power to force change” from both the community’s and the individual’s perspective. By supplying “better tools” to the pre-existing communities TN20 seeks to help them organize and thus exercise greater power within society—something they believe to be “beneficial to everybody” (Micucci, 2006). In order to accomplish their goals TN20 have been looking at several aspects of community. Mike Micucci tells us about one in specific: “We realized that a lot of what we wanted to do in helping communities collaborate heavily involved trust”. And instead of building tools in order for communities to establish trust Micucci describes TN20s focus from the its background:

“From a trust perspective, we mainly took a completely different direction. We said ‘where is existing trust? And, how can we exploit that?’ That’s when we had the aha-moment.” (Micucci, 2006)

HURDLES TO TRUST

According to Micucci “there’s a reason why that information [in communities] is so good and this is because there is a high degree of trust that exists [there].” Micucci means that the trust was

established “out of the *hurdle* to get in the group”. When working with pre-existing communities TN20 sees that the groups already have established hurdles to “get in” and thus have obtained a higher level of trust among themselves. So, the “first level of trust” is according to Micucci not “something they [TN20] have to do, it exists within the [social] system itself”.

Examples of hurdles could be nominal membership fees or invitation-memberships only, or according to Micucci, “anything that raises the barrier to entry.” The hurdles then, Micucci suggests “solve a lot of the social issues that you see in today’s [offline] communities”. Similarly on the web, Micucci says that when examined, “groups that were private had a higher degree of trust.” Furthermore, the high trust in the already established communities comes from the members’ “joint needs” or “passion” since “they have already formed for some reason” (Micucci 2006).

Micucci tells us that the overall trust level in the community transfers back and forth between the individual members and community as a group. The trust established within the groups would thus transfer from members to the group collective and vice versa. This enables the trust in previously unknown people stemming from a perception of a shared group identity. Luke describes it as “what makes groups special—a peace [*sic.*] of advise means a lot more from a community you trust than it does from some random user on Amazon, Cnet, [*Sic.*] or the iTunes Music Store.” (Luke, 2006).

GIVING TRUST A HAND

In the future, TN20 also seeks to connect various communities and groups in order for them to benefit from each other's knowledge. Linking groups is not always easy and the increasing size of the member-body can introduce new problems (Micucci, 2006). According to Micucci, as groups get larger the collective trust appears to weaken. "When you get to a larger community when you are well over a thousand members, this is where a lot of the people really want to know—who is this person on the other side?" Micucci tells us and references their "fifty different focus groups with different interest groups".

He says that the focus groups also showed that people tended to monitor *certain parts* of their communities based on their interests. Thus, a person with a specific interest would often then become an "expert" on *that topic* within the community. However, within the larger groups with multiple interest areas problems of harnessing this expertise would arise. "She had a level of expertise, but nobody would know that unless you spent a lot of time in the community and realized that she knew what she was saying" says Micucci when describing a nurse with medical expertise participating in a parent group. Thus, the trust in the group might be strong but once it includes several interest areas the expertise within a certain topic varies among the users and so does the amount of individual specific trust. Micucci means that there should be a way of indicating that an expert is more trustworthy

within his or her topic and gives us an example.

“And I think, when you get to these different kind of community forums there’s always *the expert*, right? How do you figure out the expert if you’re a new guy? You have to spend a lot of time but what if the system could tell you—that guy is the man on cars, you know, that’s the guy you want, that’s the guy you should seek out. That’s *so important*.” (Micucci, 2006)

Micucci again tells us that just belonging to the group might not provide sufficient trust in certain cases: “I might trust you on a recommendation on a bicycle but I don’t trust you for recommendations in financials, right? So, it’s not just the individual, it’s the subject matter, and you have to track both.” Micucci sees that this is where TN20 can really help communities by system means such as monitoring for fake identities, controlling whether people are willing to expose their real names, are their profiles visible to other members. Additionally Micucci adds that they have ways of algorithmically determining if users are “good community citizens”, if they have “thoughtful posts or comments” or if they are “flaming people”. However, he is hesitant in answering *how* this is accomplished. CTO Jari Koister tells us that “among other things” they use technique called “sentiment analysis” to figure out how positive versus negative a certain written text such as a comment is. He continues by telling us that TN20 do not want to explicitly display that information for the user, in something like a post rating, but rather use it in the background in order to recommend material to the users (Koister,

2006).

On the explicitness of certain information, Micucci remembers what happened in the early versions of testing a system with heavy social networking features:

[T]hey [the users] freaked out! Because of the level of information that was suddenly exposed to other people in the community they freaked out. Oh, yeah, they said *I don't want to show that!*" (Micucci, 2006)

EVERYTHING WILL CHANGE

"I hate to say it but a lot of it [development] is just learn by doing, right? You try a little bit and then aww, that didn't work, keep refining until you start to realize how these different social behaviours are actually occurring. I think we are just at the beginning of a lot of experimentation." (Micucci, 2006)

Micucci emphasizes the explorative nature of development at TN20 and tells us about how things have changed direction completely over the last few months and how he expects them to change again.

"Some of our initial assumptions turned out to be blatantly wrong. Like, all right, throw that out, off you go. The cool thing about doing something like this is that you don't have the heavy weight of a large company under you. You can be pretty flexible and responsive" (Micucci, 2006)

The explorative development model comes partly from the view that knowledge about social interactions online is at a very initial

stage. Micucci references “the little nuances of social behaviour” and says that we all still “have a lot to learn” about how the systems should interact with us. TN20 is learning by trying, remaking and trying again.

PART III

INTRODUCTION

In this final part we will discuss the questions posed in the very opening of this study. We will make use of the theoretical concepts introduced earlier to interpret and attempt to grasp the implications of our empirical findings. Throughout the analysis, which is divided into three chapters, we activate different constellations of the theoretical framework to reveal underlying social phenomena at work and relate this to trust. Chapter 8 discusses the inherent tensions between the global and the local, and how this tension relates to the formation of interpersonal trust. The analysis here revolves around issues of identity and reputation in online spaces. Chapter 9 concerns the role of social space design and how it can affect trust between individuals online. It discusses various implications of explicit versus implicit designs, as well as the paradoxical notion that designing for trust actually might entail designing away trust. In chapter 10 we continue the analysis by asking if the design of a social space might not only change the way trust works within it, but if it may also affect the very notion of the concept itself. We here use the notion of performativity in order to understand the potential trust transformation capabilities in the social spaces in our empirical material.

In the 11th and final chapter we close by bringing forward the main conclusions that have been put forth in the analysis.

CHAPTER 8

Tensions Between The Global &
The Local

INTRODUCTION

Judging by our case study and theoretical base trust appears intimately connected with identity. As stated by Luhmann (1979:19), trust is highly based on familiarity and the key to a sense of familiarity within an interpersonal relationship comes partly from identification but also from being able to make a correct assessment of the other party's identity (Sztompka, 1999:79-81). Thus, the assessment of the other party's trustworthiness is intimately connected to how he or she performs or is able to perform his or her identity and in turn how the other party is able to interpret it (Goffman, 1959).

All interviewees discuss the idea of extending the local, context-specific identity in order to expand its use, making the familiarity between users extend beyond its original context. Parallels can here be drawn to Luhmann's basic concept of trust as a social complexity reducer (1979). According to Luhmann we look to the past where our choices of action have already taken place. The past has already excluded the "other possibilities" of action whereas the future, uncertain as it is, consists of infinite possibilities (Luhmann, 1979). Thus, memory of the past guides our decisions of the future and familiarity based on this memory is crucial for the establishment of trust. Reputation, which was much discussed by our interviewees, addresses the same idea and can be approached as a *memory connected to a specific identity*. Furthermore, as Misztal states this reputation can be seen as a *collectively* agreed upon version

of how history has taken place (Misztal, 1995:140). Thus the desire to extend an identity outside of the context where it was established is also a desire to globalize the local function of reputation, expanding the collective memory if you wish, in order to leverage local benefits within a global context. However, all companies also address the vast problems that arise and, as we would argue, much of these problems derive from a tension between the various qualities of a situated versus a universal identity. In order to begin to understand the nature of this tension we look our sociological theory with the expressed motifs of the studied companies as a background. In this way we can learn more about why the tension based on local versus global identity affects possibilities of trusting behaviour.

GETTING STARTED

Opinity's own slogan ("be known, be trusted") tells us about their view on the relationship between familiarity and trustworthiness. Furthermore, coinciding with Fukuyama's statement that "Trust is only possible if there is truth" (1995) Opinity's core service is about enabling personal claims about your identity to be verified in order to secure their validity. However, whereas eBay has similar features, Opinity describes eBay's services as "closed" and is instead interested in creating a similar "open" system. "Openness" in this case refers to the possibility of extending identity use across several services and thus introducing a meta-identity that would be viable in several domain-specific services (such as eBay). At

Yahoo!, Yvonne French emphasizes the importance of recognizing, in order to aid the sense of familiarity with, a user across several services. As we have seen in the previous chapters she discusses meta-identity solutions as a potential problem solver but also emphasizes inherent limitations.

Due to the intimate connection between identity, performance of self and trustworthiness assessment, let's begin our analysis by looking at online identity and the specific differences from its offline counterpart.

ONLINE IDENTITY

Identity online, as opposed to offline, introduces problems due to at least two dominant properties. Firstly, the lack of institutional identity verification in a social security-number fashion can give rise to difficulties in obvious trust crucial scenarios such as e-commerce. Simply, the use of multiple and context-specific usernames establishes an environment that lacks the meta-framework qualities of e.g. a social security number system. As scholars have pointed out, the over-arching legal framework of the citizen within a nation grants security within multiple scenarios within that same nation (Fukuyama, 1995). Within a situated commerce scenario, such as the sale of a high-priced second hand car, the exchange of social security numbers between buyer and seller establishes a certain degree of security due to identity verification. Online standards for similar identity systems are yet to

prevail. Kim Cameron, among others, even go so far as to say that the internet as a whole is losing credibility due to the problem of “identity-one-offs” (Cameron, 2005) and that meta-systems (though not necessarily unified) are the much needed *panacea*. However, this only addresses *identity verification* and lacks any information about the character of the social security-number holder. Identity as a performed concept (in a Goffmanian sense) relating to self-presentation and the qualities of the person remains unaddressed by these solutions.

To clarify the discussion, we need to separate the legal term identity (such as a social security number) from identity as a notion of self—*who* am I? Or maybe even *how* am I? Indeed, identity as something performed and not a legal construction is highly affected by the very nature of online interactions and brings us to the second major issue. Within offline life a person generally performs his/her identity in *one* place, at *one* time due to the inherent limitations of a necessary physical body-presence. Online however, a multitude of identities in several places and can be actively or passively performed simultaneously, even when the identity holder is not present (boyd & Heer, 2006).

Consider the 360°-profile discussed in our case study. According to boyd [*sic.*] & Heer (2006) a profile is written into existence not only by its owner, but also by the community around it due to comments and other expressions from friends being placed on the profile site itself. Thus an identity performance towards a visitor is

highly affected by what *others* write about that person on his/her page. Indeed, the performance a user is continuously giving due to the 360°-profile being constantly accessible is in perpetual flux due to additions made by friends. Therefore a user might not even be online but yet still be performing an identity at 360° by passively interacting with others. So, as humans we have a challenge of learning how to deal with these new conditions of parallel identity performances (Turkle, 1997). Additionally, online performance differs further from offline due to increasingly complex issues of transparency, searchability and persistency (boyd, 2002; boyd & Heer, 2006). That is, we are performing for several contexts at once, we are negotiating several unknown audiences and furthermore our performances are being archived, open for out of context view for many years from now.

WHY A META IDENTITY?

As seen in Part II, all interviewed companies have ideas about meta identity solutions, although their scope varies greatly. The advantages of extending identity solutions to encompass larger contexts are manifold and as Yvonne French of Yahoo! states “can be a crucial part of success” (French, 2006). Extending identity brings an increased number of users from different contexts together and heightens the overall variety and value of the society (Jacobs, cited in Asplund 1991). In Jacobs’ reasoning, Gesellschaft’s *majority of strangers* is imperative for the degree of variation needed in order to create an interesting space (cited in

Asplund 1991). However, the anonymity of strangers leads to a situation where the total potential possibilities, as well as complexity, increases as the number of members increases. If the complexity increase can be kept at bay by e.g. collaboration enabling mechanisms the increase in number of members comes to represent an increase in co-operational possibilities and leads to a larger inherent potential value within the society (Rothstein, 2005).

ABSTRACTING CONTEXT

Gesellschaft is not anarchy. The functioning society, despite the high degree of anonymity, individualism and complexity is made possible by meta systems such as legal frameworks and policies. RapLeaf thus, in contrary to their statement of “enabling really big places to act like small villages” (Hoffman 2006), i.e. a *Gemeinschaft*, are in reality rather providing a standard rating system to function as a meta-system across areas where users are not familiar with each other. Therefore they are not helping users become familiar and establish trust between each other *per se* but rather, they are aiding a rational calculus-based trust process by providing familiar and universal measurements. In the words of Luhmann, they are enabling a greater degree of system trust in a situation where personal trust is believed to be unobtainable.

The tension between the particular and the universal is especially strong in the case of RapLeaf. If we draw a parallel to the eBay transaction-tied rating system, a large and universal system where

all users are measured in a similar manner, we see that *what* is actually measured is highly particular, namely the rating of performance in a transaction (Resnick & Zeckhauser, 2002). Thus even though the universality of eBay's system is high, the contextual factors are surprisingly low. For RapLeaf, wishing to expand across domains, the difficulty lies in taking a rating for a person's particular action and translating it into a universal and cross-context comparable number. Due to the many contexts in which the ratings take place this proves difficult and can partially be explained by Goffman's notion that people perform themselves very differently depending on the setting or context of the interaction they find themselves within. Hence, in seeking to universalize RapLeaf-reputation the context of any action is completely abstracted and thus, in a Goffmanian sense inhibits *framing* in future interactions (Goffman, 1974). In other words, the universal numerical becomes a contextually disconnected free-floating number that *in itself* has to be trusted since the users know little or nothing about how it was accumulated. Thus the users have to trust the system and furthermore trust that others also trust the system, or as Luhmann puts it, for the system trust to function we have to "trust in trust" (1979:66-70).

The companies within our study can be seen as aspiring to extend users' identities from a single domain specific representation to a kind of web of interlinked representations tied together by one or several *master* meta-identities. As described by French, Yahoo! finds

it essential for users to be able to recognize other users across multiple services. Hence, there is a desire to make *the already familiar* familiar in alternative settings or contexts. Therefore by making the anonymous *Gesellschaft* inhabitant familiar, trust can be established with greater ease (Luhmann, 1979). However, this is where tensions arise since a cornerstone of *Gesellschaft* is the anonymity, due to great variety, that its members ensure (Asplund, 1991). By making people recognizable across contexts, familiarity, recognition and identification based trust is supported—but at the cost of privacy, potential framing trouble and, as we soon shall see, increased risk of *audience segmentation failure*.

COLLAPSING CONTEXTS

The tension between the various degrees of identity extent is shown in a simple idea supported by Goffman's sociology, namely the failure of audience segregation. A person that places a representation of an identity fragment in a web-based social space is performing a certain face of his/her identity there. If that same person uses another service and performs an identity there, by way of another representation, he or she, due to the searchability of the internet, becomes subject to the risk of collapsing contexts, i.e. the failure to keep audiences segregated (Goffman, 1959). As Goffman explains, we perform identity for an audience in a particular setting. In this case a user might be performing certain parts of his/her identity in a particular way on the first site (e.g. more work related) and choose to focus on other aspects on the second performance

stage (e.g. personal). The searchability of the internet allows an audience member or counter-actor from the “first stage” to visit the “second stage” and thus observe the variations in the two (or more) performances. Hence, the transparency of the stages leads to the common social discomfort of collapsing contexts (boyd, 2002; boyd & Heer, 2006; Grohol, 2005). Moreover, if instead any stage is seen as having the world as the audience (as is technically the case with an online performance) how can a user, in a Goffmanian sense, perform for this audience? How can the user read the audience, which consists of every- and anybody, in order to successfully present him/herself in a, for that social setting, credible manner?

The risk of exposure through collapsing contexts also inherently holds a degree of personal vulnerability due to the disclosure. This becomes interesting since vulnerability and trust are also intimately connected. In the words of moral philosopher Annette Bauer this is in fact exactly what trust is about: making oneself visibly vulnerable and showing that one believes the other party will not exploit this (Bauer cited in Friedman, Kahn & Howe 2000). Indeed, through this cross-contextual transparency and increased disclosure the performer is leaving the observer the option to discover further similarities between them, potentially increasing familiarity, identification and ultimately his/her assessment of their trustworthiness. Again, however, the performer is exposing him/herself and his/her possible inconsistencies, making

him/herself vulnerable to disclosure of inappropriate social behaviour (i.e. a performance in one context for one audience is acceptable in that setting but not in the other) (Goffman, 1959). Thus, a tension between a local and a global identity is strongly influenced by the potential of exposure in a collapsing context yet at the same time this very vulnerability also holds a potential for increased identification, familiarity and expressed trustworthiness.

DRIVING INDIVIDUALITY

An interesting point with its roots as far back as early Christianity arises when looking at individuality in conjunction with the sin of usury. Asplund assures that there is no better way to transform (or ultimately destroy) a *Gemeinschaft* order than to introduce usury into that community (Asplund, 1991:91-110). Why this happens, according to Asplund, is that usury inherently draws attention to the possibilities of personal gain over community gains and gradually erodes the sense of group-over-individual. We argue that a clear parallel can be drawn to the reputation systems promoted by some of the companies in our study in the sense that reputation in these systems is put forth as an individual asset on display for the rest of the world. Hence, the competitive nature of the system (my personal reputation is worth more if yours, or the average mean, is lower) promotes individual effort and collides with the notion of joint group effort behaviour. As seen in the interview French hints at this tension several times (French, 2006). It tells us that the community and togetherness of the *Gemeinschaft* is

fragile to the influence of system efforts that implicitly or explicitly promote individualistic behaviour. Again, Fake mentions similar tension when talking about lines of thought that the implicit interestingness-rating at Flickr is trying to avoid. Fake: “What could I have done to make my photo a full five?” (Fake et al. 2006). Flickr thus wishes to promote the social goals of the community and are hesitant to introduce anything that might promote individual competition. Therefore we see that there is not only tension between familiarity and anonymity but also a tension between degrees of identity in relation to what type of behaviour one wishes to promote as social norm.

In the case of TN20, a Gemeinschaft oriented approach is taken in the decision to build around already established communities with pre-existing offline-bonds and relations (Micucci, 2006). Micucci mentions “high barriers to entry” as a means of establishing a stronger sense of community and a higher level of group trust (Micucci, 2006). Thus the members of the groups that Micucci refer to all share a common opportunity cost not only in the sense that actual time spent in the group eradicates other possibilities but by *signalling* that they belong to a certain group thus raising a border between *us* and *them* (Sztompka, 1999:115). As Fukuyama notes the trust that can thrive within that community is partly fuelled by the strength of the distrust to group outsiders (1995:252). Therefore the trust Micucci refers to can only be as strong as the feeling of the group’s exclusivity. Naturally a tension arises in TN20’s

strategy to combine communities in order to increase the combined knowledge base (Micucci, 2006), or in Jacobs' terminology increase variety since the strength of outsider exclusion is degraded by this inclusion (Jacobs, cited in Asplund 1991). The proposed addition of "expert-finding" tools can lead to great risk of explicit person-based valuation and ratings thus increasing competition and individuality that, as noted by Asplund can erode the very core of the community.

CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, much of the tension between a local and global identity boils down to the opposition between complexity and familiarity. Increased complexity leads to greater potential knowledge bases and variety yet also hinder familiarity and thus increases the obstacles to IBT-establishment. However, attempts at establishing standards such as a RapLeaf or Opinity can aid in dealing with complexity and CBT-establishment even without the interpersonal familiarity. Yet these services also introduce competitiveness and prove intricate to generalize enough to become fruitful in a multitude of contexts.

Furthermore, using Luhmann's notion of personal and system trust we understand that the tension between various degrees of identity is highly influential in promoting different trust forms. The global standardized meta-identity based upon specific rules and regulations leads, according to Mizstal, to a social order

characterized by the potential of collaboration and a trust form based on policy. This, we need to understand as a radically different trust form than the interpersonally based habitus trust form existing in social orders characterized by stability (and closely related to personal trust). Thus the tension that arises when the companies seek to extend an identity to be useful in a larger context can in relation to trust be understood as a tension due to the transformation of the predominant trust form. Managing the tension is largely a battle of seeking to retain the benefits of one trust form while transforming the identity basis into something leading to a trust form transformation. The social order of stability is often the starting point for many social spaces yet the collaborative potential of the internet tempts the companies into shifting the social space's order and thus implicitly suggesting a change of the main trust form (from habitus to policy). Of course, as Fukuyama states, the increased focus on rules coupled with the promotion of individuality runs risk of eroding the original *Gemeinschaft* (Fukuyama, 1995).

As we can see, shifts from *Gesellschaft* to *Gemeinschaft*, from policy to habitus, from system to personal trust are all closely related. At the same time the dominance of one trust form or social order will often naturally impede its counterpart. Thus, we would conclude that the tension between local and global identity closely influences a similar tension between different trust forms and furthermore even a tension between different predominant

social orders. In this light, we can begin to understand why the attempts to expand identity beyond its original context are extremely difficult. Simply put, the shift requires a transformation of the social order and with this follows a shift in the predominant trust form. Furthermore, this shift does not guarantee that the qualities that interpersonal trust in the previous order were based upon are at all relevant within the new order and trust form.

CHAPTER 9

Designing for Trust, Designing
Away Trust

Part of the skill in letter reading is in reading between the lines. I was tempted to say that we just have to learn to read between the pixels of Web pages, but I think we have to read beyond the pixels to see how they express the social processes and intentions that lie behind them. Miller (1995:9)

INTRODUCTION

For the companies in our case study strategy manifests itself primarily in the design, in a broad sense, of the service. The service as a social space is designed to afford certain kinds of behaviours and similarly discourage or even prohibit others. With this line of thinking the strategic decisions made by a company greatly affects the *social design* that in turn will affect interactions and social behaviour within that socio-technical space. As seen in the previous chapter, certain qualities within the overall attitude tend to lead to different social orders that in turn highly affect behaviour and trust establishment within the space. As we shall examine closer in the forthcoming chapter, the interplay between designers and users is intricate and in constant flux. In this chapter, however, we look at the possibilities of the company as an influencer of the space's social order and thus also its predominant trust form and more specifically at the influencing impact of design. Code and design are inextricably *vehicles of values* (Lessig, 1999) and if they make up the architecture of a social space the values of its creators are inherently ubiquitous however not necessarily static nor absolute. Furthermore, the design of a social space greatly influences the possibilities of self-performance and is

thus closely coupled with how trust can be established within that space. The socio-technical construction that the website as a social space embodies resembles society in its multi-layered complexity of technological, social, cultural and economic characteristics. As such it is naïve to assume one can fully understand or present an all-encompassing analysis. Thus with the obvious risk of being conjectural we here present a selection of design implications that, based on the empirical material appear as central when considering the design of a social space. Foremost we seek to examine design decisions that play key roles in *how* users can perform themselves. Thus, in extension we seek to look at design decisions that greatly affect how trustworthiness can be assessed and what consequences this has for the trust forms of the social space.

AMBIGUITY AS A SOCIAL RESOURCE

Writings on communication seem to have suffered a harsh blow from Shannon & Weaver and their text *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* based upon the idea of a “sender” delivering information with minimal distortion to a “receiver” (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). The theory’s inherent focus on efficiency (low distortion) resonates well with the notion of “information” being transferred but fails to address the important aspect of human communication taking place within a social context. As Goffman’s dramaturgical conception implies, efficiency is not a primary goal of social interaction (Goffman, 1959). Rather, the use of face-work to interact in a harmonious manner coupled with the desire to

avoid personal and collective embarrassment prevails as key to understanding why interaction takes place in the manner it does (Goffman, 1959; Simmel, 1950).

Thus, within a social space efficiency in interactions is commonly not the primary objective. In fact, within social interactions, quite the opposite is often the case. It has been noted that face-work relies on, among other things, the use of ambiguity in order to reach understanding without risking humiliating exposure or embarrassment (Aoki & Woodruff, 2005). Aoki & Woodruff (2005) present a trivial yet to-the-point example of the social function that ambiguity can play in social interactions.

...[I]magine that you called your friend two weeks ago and left a message asking them to call you back, but they did not. Based on previous events in your relationship, you account for this failure as likely being due to busy schedule as opposed to a personal issue. You later run into your friend at a party. Your friend, apparently concerned that you will feel you have been rebuffed, says, "I'm sorry I didn't call you back. I've been out of town." Now, you may or may not believe your friend is telling the truth. However, in either case you are likely to give the impression that you accept your friend's story and move on, saying something like, "That's all right. I just wanted to ask you for Mary's phone number." By taking this action, you are helping to maintain harmony, just as your friend was helping to maintain harmony by offering an explanation.

The example displays how a tacit agreement can be established in a real world setting where the friend uses an excuse (and the subject accept it) to aid the relationship. However, in other scenarios, "the excuse" is often placed on technological, economic or external

uncontrollable factors (Aoki & Woodruff, 2005). For example consider the youngster ending an undesired phone-call with the excuse of his/her cash-card running low. Or the company representative who forgot to respond to an email and ends up blaming the company server for not delivering the original message (“maybe the spam-filter got it...”). In other words, technological and other externally imposed limitations can become social resources (Aoki & Woodruff, 2005) in such a manner that *limited* expressional possibilities become liberating. In a system where misunderstandings and ambiguity are common the negative effects of those misunderstandings are also mild (Miller, 1995). Hence, in tandem, the range of potential interpretations becomes greater. Un-explicated tacit agreements can also be based on paralinguistic cues afforded by the designed interface and are closely related to social cues that Goffman would describe as *given off* (in contrast to those *given*). Moreover, a tacit agreement is often based on tacit social signals intended to be interpreted as unconsciously given off (Goffman 1959, 1962).

Within Opinity we find the desire to aid the users in expressing something explicitly (e.g. a Stanford degree) with the impression that it was implicitly *given off*. If say, a personal profile has a group of set values that all members must fill out (such as university degree) the act of writing “Stanford” seems to be imposed by the technical system. However, on the contrary, if the profile page was completely open for the user to enter any information s/he pleases,

the act of writing “Stanford” alters into not just an indication of what university the profile owner went to, but also an indication that he or she wishes to explicitly express this. This has implications for social cues that are used as assessments of trustworthiness since a trust relationship is often tacit and furthermore often fleeting once explicated. In yet another example, consider the wife telling her husband on his way out that “I trust you won’t sleep with anybody tonight”. Explicitly she is saying she trusts him, implicitly, however, she is stating the exact opposite (since she felt there was a need to remind). Thus in any trust relationship there is an imminent need to express social cues tacitly that thus appear to be *given off* in a credible manner. Constraints in the expressive possibilities of the system can hinder—but more interestingly also enable richer interaction possibilities and complex tacit cues.

REPUTATION SOCIETY & TRUSTING COMMUNITY

An interesting paradox arises when considering the design of a social space with *Gemeinschaft* characteristics. Since *Gemeinschaft* represents “the organic” and design with its value-based judgements inherently stands for construction there is a clear clash (Tönnies, cited in Asplund 1991). Tönnies also stated that a community cannot possibly be engineered or constructed (cited in Asplund 1991:67), rather it has to be organically organized and evolve from the grassroots and up. Design can hardly be classified

as a simple top-down practise, yet there is an obvious element of particular control over choices made in the social space that is not compatible with the sociological view of how community is shaped. However, in the context of a web-based social space we would argue that Tönnies is both right and wrong. There is no engineering formula that ensures a thriving community within a social space yet there are clearly design choices to be made that dramatically influence the type of social order that will be established there (including ones that fosters community).

Fukuyama states that there is usually an inverse relationship between rules and trust in the sense that the more people depend on rules to regulate their interactions, the less they trust each other (and vice versa) (Fukuyama, 1995:224). However, this only presents half the truth, rules also aid in reducing complexity and thus make trust possible in complicated situations (Luhmann, 1979). Hence, Fukuyama's statement should be seen as rules leading to less personal trust yet not necessarily less system trust. In a familiar community setting where rules and regulations imposed from above are few and the sense of belonging is high, trust establishment between two parties within the community proves to be rather straightforward and furthermore of an identification-based, thus "strong" type. A high degree of rules in a similar setting would imply that the community itself lacks the capability of functioning without rules thus diminishing the sense of togetherness and closeness.

Therefore, in designing for community and a social order of stability, explicitness of top-down governing through rules, regulations imposed expressive restriction and such (i.e. policy) should be kept at a minimum. As Yvonne French explains, Yahoo! has to be particularly vigilant when introducing reputation mechanism in tight group settings (such as Yahoo! Groups) since they may run the risk of eroding the group's sense of agency from within. Furthermore the introduction of reputation mechanisms within these tight knit communities may not be synchronized with how the community wishes to construct and remember its own collective history. Thus these mechanisms imply that the control over the group's collective memory has been taken away from the group itself and instead placed on the reputation systems and their algorithms. Striking the right balance between liberating technological restrictions in the form of "social ambiguousness increasers" and plain restrictions as forced-upon social control is highly intricate and can be identified as a complex task for all of the interviewed companies.

RapLeaf's Auren Hoffman states that he wishes to "encourage" users to act ethically instead of "punishing" those who do not and uses the design of the RapLeaf score, in order to achieve this. The score, designed as a numerical measurement of trustworthiness is thus portrayed as something charitable to pursue an increase of yet also works by psychologically engaging the users in competition. Moreover, as previously noted, it functions much like Asplund's

(1991:91-110) theory on usury in the sense that it drives individuality. In the commerce case, similar ratings at eBay have been proven to hold a substantial monetary value thus increasing the drive to achieve a higher score (Resnick et al., 2006). Yet, as we have seen, trustworthiness is a relative and contextually sensitive concept and the higher the average RapLeaf rating becomes the higher a user must transcend in order to obtain a premium. Thus the inherent individualistic competitiveness positions users against each other in an ongoing race towards perfecting their reputation. The highly individual design of the RapLeaf score thus not only seeks to aid collaboration by reducing complexity but also engages the user on multiple levels to increase her score. Moreover, the design reveals the score to the public in a fashion that brings the ideas of panopticism (Foucault, 1995:195-228) to mind. Indeed, it would appear that all holders of RapLeaf badges intrinsically remain in a state of fear of being negatively rated, thus further coercing their behaviour into line with what is to be perceived as most ethical.

In the design of Yahoo! Answers the initial key necessity, as explained by French, was to accumulate a high degree of participation, not in order to build community but rather to gain large amounts of contents. The design of letting any user answer and rate answers, making the ratings visible coupled with the ordering of the answers so that the top rated answer gains the most exposure creates a situation of strong incentive. By gaining

attention as being the “most correct” or having the “best” answer the user thus acquires recognition as an expert. Thus the act of answering a question is not so much about actually helping the user asking the question but rather about improving personal status. Since the members of Yahoo! Answers have no connection with each other and exist in a *Gesellschaft*; the desire to answer a question in order to bring greater good to the community is virtually non-existent. We would argue that the motif of the users answering questions is mostly derived from *ego drive* and the striving for attention and recognition as individuals rather than altruism.

The design strategy of Yahoo! Answers did indeed lead to a large amount of participation and content, but as French states, the mass of information is now becoming an obstacle due to the massive increase in complexity and the lack of knowing who’s answer to trust. Hence, the absent feeling of group belonging leads to an absence of overall trustworthiness towards the other members and the users now need new mechanisms for filtering out the complexity. Therefore, Answers is currently demanding a great deal of collaboration yet the policy based social order is not yet in place and reliance on habitus-esque individual judgement is high. Thus the clash between habitus as a dominant trust form and the complexity of the social space is central in understanding what is at play when the French expresses the needed strategy change.

At Flickr the personal representation is largely constituted of the images a user shares in his or her *photostream*. The communication

of the design focuses on establishing a sense of togetherness or community using informal language and an overall lack of formality (contrast this with Fukuyama's view on rules and formality). The focus on the *social* aspect of use implies that sharing is inherent in the very foundation or nature of Flickr usage. Thus the act of sharing photos on Flickr, an act that could easily be interpreted as intentionally *given* (Goffman, 1959) information takes on the character of informal sharing among friends. However, at large the photos on Flickr are not just shared with friends, they are publicly accessible to anybody using the internet⁷ and are thus very rich social cues for assessing the overall character and personality of an individual and his or her trustworthiness (Sztompka, 1999:79-81). Through images, Flickr users can express social signals that appear as given off (that can be reinforced by *anchoring* (Barthes, 1985) image-interpretations with tags and text) and the use of metonymy is frequent. Hence, through the images from a user's life s/he can metonymically imply information about him/herself, try to establish a *preferred reading* (Hall, 1973) and thus guide the assessment of trustworthiness in a manner of things given off (Fiske, 1997:149-151). The sense of intimacy in the images and the decision to showcase them is balanced by the impression that they are published for friends. The outside assessor gains the role of the voyeuristic peeping tom, having been granted a secret peep-hole

⁷ Unless you explicitly prohibit access

into the life of the subject. This setting paves way for a potential increase in credibility, sense of vulnerability and, depending on the depicted activities, even trustworthiness.

The design of the social space can thus be understood as highly influential when making inferences about the original intentions of *why* a social cue is expressed in the first place. The question of *why* is crucial in the reader's interpretations of making clear whether to understand it as given or given off in order to read between the lines, or understand what the text communicates in addition to its literal meaning.

TRUST & FUNCTIONAL SUBSTITUTES

“The logic of functionalist reasoning leads us to suspect that, when trust is missing, the resulting vacuum will be filled with some alternative arrangements providing similar functions and meeting universal cravings for certainty, predictability, order, and the like. These are the functional substitutes for trust” (Sztompka 1999:115)

The complexity of late modernity has, as Luhmann describes, rendered the close interpersonal trust found in e.g. families unobtainable in a wide variety of day-to-day scenarios (Luhmann, 1979). Identification based trust that, as described earlier, is built over time and is based on shared life experiences and interpersonal identification, is costly to establish and is frequently not viable in the countless relationships that we engage in. Yet, as

Rothstein points out, trust between individuals within a society provides rich social capital and the lack thereof can lead to *social traps* where collaboration is rendered impossible even though it would be mutually beneficial (Rothstein, 2005). Therefore, from a functional perspective we as humans need a different trust form or a functional substitute that enables trust establishment in complex scenarios in order to obtain the benefits of collaboration and avoid these social traps. Conversely, widespread mutual distrust obstructs possibilities for enriching the social life around us.

However, as Misztal argues, there appears to be an underlying assumption that trust in itself is a somewhat “natural” phenomenon between social beings when in fact it is not necessarily so (Misztal, 1996). Social orders are constructed and trust between its members has, by way of ideas such as those presented by Rothstein, been a general design desire for both smaller communities and large societies.

In the midst of our global post-modern network society the overall complexity has reached heights that simply were not imaginable during the industrial era (e.g. Castells, 1996). Communications technology has enabled the *technical possibility* for global collaboration yet we are at the infancy of establishing social practices to support the desired collaborative benefits. The internet and its lack of geographical state-based delimitations enables *the network society* yet, in conjunction questions our established ideas of what societal organization is. As a brief parallel we can look to

International-Relations theory and point to the realist notion that the world is best described as a “sea of anarchy” where only “my” sovereign state provides refuge from the “outside” chaos (Dunne & Schmidt, 2001:141-161). In light of this notion, the internet, seen as removing the sovereign state as a safe haven thrusts this outside anarchy right into the very centre of our lives. As such, the, in classical terms, unorganized reality that the internet represents is literally streamed right into our organized reality and concurrently questions this reality’s very foundational elements.

This internet-fuelled anarchy, thrusting like a swift punch into our current perception of reality, naturally leaves many people feeling uneasy and ready to counter-act the change. RapLeaf, Opinity, Kim Cameron and advocates of the “reputation society” (Masum & Zhang, 2004) stand before this disturbance of order and are reacting instantly. With ideologically based rhetoric they are frantically trying to re-establish the order of reality, as we once knew it.

“[T]his tells us a lot about the satisfaction of work, of a job well done. Which is not so much about constructing something new, but maybe, human work, at its most elementary level [...] is the work of cleaning the traces of a stain. The work of erasing the stains, the notion of keeping at bay this chaotic netherworld, that threatens to explode at any time and engulf us.” (Zizek, 2006)

This quote by Zizek illustrates a non-obvious point about the work of online global reputation advocates of today. The pragmatic use

case for a reputation score is to avoid single instances of fraud in an environment where we are yet to understand how to keep these undesired behaviours at bay. These instances of actual criminal actions become the stain that the companies are trying to clean in order to suppress the chaotic world of stateless anarchy. Yet, the non-obvious and underlying desire might, if we dare expand the analysis, indicate a violent reaction towards the very upheaval of *reality* as we know it. In the online anarchy the regulatory framework of state-based overarching policy is questioned, by both action and by words. The daring proposition would thus be that the possibilities to act in criminal or non-criminal ways, that in traditional reality would have been kept suppressed due to hindering social or legal mechanisms, are currently threatening the very fabric of how we organize our perception of reality itself. Hence, by seeking to eliminate the cases of fraud, i.e. by cleaning the stains, the companies attempt to restore the structure and social order of reality into the state we are traditionally accustomed and familiar to.

However, the mechanics introduced in order to restore trust by companies of today can, in light of Sztompka's initial quote, be questioned as to whether they are restoring the possibilities of interpersonal trust or rather introducing new mechanism acting as *functional substitutes* (Sztompka, 1999:115) in situations where we wish to retain the social benefit of trust (Rothstein, 2005; Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997) yet find ourselves in a complexity that

obfuscates the very element that we traditionally build trust upon (Luhmann, 1979). In other words, is a global reputation mechanism at all a possible base of trust? Or is it rather a system that enables social behaviour “similar” to that of trusting agents in a manner that makes the benefits appear as equally desirable?

Luhmann’s proposition is, as we have seen, to understand this as a shift from interpersonal- to system trust, yet with his own words the systems themselves can in cases “be seen as rendering trust redundant” (Luhmann, 1979:51). Simply, the rational computational aspect of the system suggests a scenario by which the very design of the system attempting to ensure trusting behaviour is in itself an attempt to *design away trust*. Thus, insofar as we accept this idea, the actual designing *for* trust in this setting paradoxically transforms into a designing *away* of trust.

Yet, on the other hand one can question what it is that is sought to be upheld. As Misztal notes, trust need not be intrinsically natural to humans and furthermore the overall rationale of these systems is not to uphold trust *per se* but rather to make sure the functional equivalent to trusting behaviour is upheld (Misztal, 1995). Thus, the potential shift in how we perceive trust due to the workings of its functional substitutes raises interesting questions as to how our activity today is reshaping the notion of trust tomorrow. This is what we address in our following and final chapter.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter we have looked at several influencing capabilities of the companies behind the social spaces and related their action to potential counter-actions by the users. We understand design as a powerful means of influencing a web-mediated social space yet it is in no way completely up to the designers to decide what social order and furthermore predominant trust form that the space is to have. We have seen that strict rules can limit the users expression but that this limitation can also function as a rich social resource in the maintaining of a harmonious relationship.

We can understand that a great sensitivity is needed when creating a social space since the intricate relation between users need of communicating things given and given off and the need for a general decrease of complexity proves utterly complicated to design for. From our case studies we see that a design decision seeking to influence the users in a particular way almost always also leads to other unexpected and possible undesired effects. We argue that this is related to our findings in the previous chapter concerning the shift of predominant social orders. Furthermore if we understand design changes as altering the stage in which interaction takes place we can easily understand why a certain change will not only effect its subject but also the perception of other expressions.

Additionally we have discussed the paradox of designing for trust that in a late-modern context can turn into designing away trust. We have showed that the desire of the companies to establish reputation systems as means of reducing fraud and aiding collaboration may also have deeper psychological fears at work. Yet, as these fears and desires are put into action we see new domains where trust would traditionally not exist appear and function similar to trusting societies. This in turn leads to the question of how our own understanding of *trust* may be changing due to the actions taking place within the web-mediated social spaces.

CHAPTER 10

Trust & Performativity

“What was overlooked was the decrease in complexity between reality and representation, between world and intention, between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, and so it failed to grasp the function of representation as the creation of order through the reduction of complexity” (Luhmann, 1979:26)

PERFORMATIVE REPRESENTATIONS

In a sense, web-mediated social spaces are constructed by the positioning and interrelating of specific representations, symbols and terms. Thus, online representations in general, and representations of identity in particular, are of great importance in the shaping of an online space. Representations serve the purpose of reducing the complexity of reality by emphasizing relevant parts of it—and through that reduction new modes of communication and socializing are established. As we have seen so far in the analysis, web based user profiles play a central role in the majority of the services in our study. A user profile represents a user’s identity in a way that makes sense within the web-mediated social space provided by a particular service. In the Opinity case, for example, the representation of a user’s identity is carefully crafted to convey trustworthiness through a rich collection of trust- and reputation cues (See figure 5.1). Identity representations vary in their complexity throughout the different services. They can be very simple, consisting of a name in combination with an image for example, to highly advanced, comprising of a multitude of information about a particular user. A profile can also contain elements that are based on the input of other users. These

“collaborative” parts of a profile can be e.g. comments, ratings, images and tags. This means that there are profile representations not entirely under the control of the user to which the profile belongs. Consequently, user profiles are being continuously reshaped over time through a dynamic interplay between the users, their representations, and other users that encounter and “co-produce” these representations (boyd & Heer, 2006).

In the following we intend to explore how these online representations of identity relate to the formation and transformation of web-mediated interpersonal trust. As the basic framework for the analysis we use the notion of *performativity* in Callon’s (1998) sense. We distinguish between three levels of performativity, “generic”, “effective”, and “Barnesian” (MacKenzie, 2006a). Using Callon’s language, we argue that as representations, user profiles are not simply *descriptive*, but can be viewed as *performative* in the social context in which they are used. It means that rather than asking questions such as “Does this user profile accurately represent an individual’s reputation?” we instead ask questions of the type “How is this particular representation of reputation transforming not only our behaviour, but also, on a longer time frame, our very perception of what reputation is?”

PERFORMATIVITY PRESUPPOSES LITERACY

Representations only takes on performative qualities after users

start performing their own identities *supported* by them, analogous to how actors in a market perform their practice aided by economic models (Callon, 1998). It is in this way that new representations gradually find their ways into the users' everyday social practice. This reasoning connects well with Turkle's ideas of virtual identities as one performative aspect of our current "culture of simulation"(1997:19-26). Turkle's argument is that we have moved from the modernist view of "culture of calculation" into a more post-modern "culture of simulation" where we at a greater degree "learn by trying" rather than "learn first and try later". She brings forward the computer as the premier tool of this simulation-heavy culture and especially as the predominant aid in simulating and shaping our identities.

Applying Callon's theory to online identity suggests that user profiles can only "start performing" after users learn to understand their meaning and function. Hence, users need to develop new "reading" skills, become, as it were, "literary interpreters" (Maddox, 2006). We refer to this skill as the users' *literacy*, by which we mean the ability to read an online representation of someone's identity and understand its trust cues in order to assess trustworthiness in a web-mediated social space. "Early adopters", from a literacy point of view, can be interpreted as users who understand and embrace new representations and adapt their social practice accordingly. In other words, they are the forerunners who pave way for the mainstream in terms of adopting new tools for

thinking (Turkle, 1997). There is often an inverse relationship between the readability—or intuitiveness—of a representation and its accuracy, as evident in the case of RapLeaf: “...it’s not obvious how your score is created. And it’s not easy to calculate. Sometimes it’s not possible at all to calculate. But it might be a little bit more accurate. So it’s a trade-off. You have to figure out how much more accurate it’ll be versus how the users will understand it.” (Hoffman, 2006) This suggests that striking a reasonable balance between the readability of a user profile and its accuracy is a major challenge for the companies in our study. “Education” of users is a related issue, as emphasized by Maddox (2006).

It’s very common that terms and specific slang words emerge in online social spaces. At eBay, for example, the noun “Feedback” refers to the feedback rating of a user, at MySpace, the verb (and noun) “Add” refers to the act of adding a new contact to one’s list of friends, and so on. Similar context-specific terms arise in almost every social space on the web, especially to describe online representations or actions. Understanding this new language demands literacy. Thus, the literacy of users in an online social space is intimately connected to the first level of performativity, the “generic” kind, which means that actors in a space actively make use of new concepts, representations and terms. We will return to this relationship later in the analysis.

VISIONARY IDEAS, PERFORMATIVE INTENTIONS

Our interviewees are, as our study shows, strong believers in their services and the potential social impact they can have. Some of them have elaborate and somewhat techno-utopian visions of the future. Hoffman (RapLeaf) and Maddox (Opinity), for example, talk vividly about “Whuffie” (Doctorow, 2003). RapLeaf’s vision is grand: “to make reputation explicit and ubiquitous in society” (Sodera, 2006a).

From a performativity point of view, visionary ideas of this kind can be interpreted as wishes to *create new social spaces and perform them in a Barnesian sense*. That is, they are the companies’ intentions to change the social orders and the actions of users in their established online spaces through new languages and representations, in order to bring into existence the very futures they envision. At the barnesian level of performativity, entirely new markets are created and constituted “with the model as engine” (MacKenzie, 2006b). Emergent markets are of great commercial interest to fast-growth aspiring companies like the ones in our study—hence it is desirable from a commercial standpoint to stay in control of the shaping of social behaviour. An understanding by the companies of *how* to perform social spaces in a Barnesian sense, then, appears a crucial to commercial success.

As evident in our case study, this strong type of performativity,

although desirable, is very difficult to predict, let alone to achieve. As expressed by our interviewees, the process of developing a social space is ultimately pragmatic. At the fundamental level, development is an iterative process of action and reaction, i.e. the social space is modified in some way, there is a reaction to it from the users, to which the company responds, and so on. This action-reaction chain extends over time and is notoriously hard to predict. As French (2006) puts it: “Whatever model you put out there [...] you’ll probably see some change in user behaviour, it might be exactly what you expected which is good but probably it won’t. It’ll be something completely different than you expected and you’ll have to go back and change the model. So, what we’ve found is that building a system like this you have to be able to react very quickly.” Hoffman (RapLeaf) puts it more concisely: “This is RapLeaf 1.0, and the thing we know for sure is that we’re probably wrong.”

This suggests that although the establishment of interpersonal trust in a social space might be affected by performativity at a barnesian level through the companies’ intentions materialized as representations, this transformation is not only, as MacKenzie argues, “the hardest to study” (MacKenzie, 2006b), but also the hardest to predict and achieve. With this in mind, we will now turn to a discussion of some occurrences of performativity at different levels that we have distinguished in our case study.

SIGNS OF PERFORMATIVITY

During the interviews with our case companies we were at several occasions hinted at key performativity-related issues. Here we put forward and reflect on a few of these.

First we consider the reputation profile at RapLeaf. It has the outspoken goal of “making users more ethical”. The profile is a drastically simplified “representation of reputation” that enables quick assessment, and as such it reduces the social complexity of the situation in which it is used. As user literacy grows, the profile becomes a “social tool” for both building and assessing trustworthiness. As discussed earlier in the analysis it aids in the building of trust by adding a new dimension to trustworthiness assessment. As usage increases it leads to a sort of dependency on the RapLeaf system when assessing trustworthiness online. As Misztal’s theory states, the form of interpersonal trust will change as the prevailing social order in the social spaces where RapLeaf badges are used gradually change from informal to formal, from more- to less ambiguous, from *Gemeinschaft*- to *Gesellschaft* oriented. From this reasoning follows that if for example, a bulletin board service installed RapLeaf badges on all its user profiles, this would gradually replace the need for trust in the “familiar” sense by a “system trust” not unlike that in Luhmann’s thinking. This is also how RapLeaf’s reputation profile performs social spaces on a Barnesian level. As more and more people use it to convey and assess trustworthiness, the profile establishes a norm of reputability

that revolves around distinctively new parameters in stark contrast to pre-existing and less formal ones. An emerging “effective” level of performativity is highlighted in the RapLeaf survey where the most common feedback was “I knew I was going to get rated so I would do an extra good job”. Reactions like this clearly hint at the behaviour-changing powers of the RapLeaf profile as representation.

There may also be related performative effects that are less obvious and perhaps more problematic. Soderer points out that the RapLeaf badge “is not only useful for buying and selling, but it can also affect your life and where you want to go in life” (Soderer 2006b). As literacy increases and the value of a publicly accessible online representation of quantified reputation grows, we might see the rise of a sort of panopticon-induced anxiety as a symptom of the constant pressure to manage reputation in order to maintain online trustworthiness.

Our interviewees at Opinity discuss a similar issue. According to them, “personal reputation management” is indeed something that will be common in the future. “I hope that it will be a routine process” says Cho (2006). Opinity’s service, in a way that is more distinct than RapLeaf’s, “sustains” the moment of first impression through its user profiles. Its profiles allow for a closer and more considered assessment of an individual’s trustworthiness by way of examination. It is, as Washburn hints at, taking the concept of the military badge to the web and extending it beyond its original

function.

As Misztal puts it in her discussion of reputation “opinions, evaluations and views about others shape our social relations, the nature of social institutions and, consequently, play a significant role in the maintenance of social order.” Opinity’s service, by bringing opinions, evaluations and views into a materialized existence on the web has a stabilizing effect on the social order within the web-mediated contexts where its profiles are used. It fosters interpersonal trust by the shaping of users’ online identities through the mediation and aggregation of opinions—hence the name “Opinity”. For this reason, Opinity’s user profiles are performative on the “effective” level in that they make possible the establishment of trust through an online representation of reputation and trustworthiness cues. The time-shifted and sustained “first impression”—which is different from meeting face to face—enables a calculus-based type of trust to flourish on a broad scale online. Misztal describes reputation as functioning very differently in an intimate context as opposed to in an open and anonymous one:

“While reputation, like trust, can be a spin-off from participation in small and informal groups, which do not need formal control to secure communication, it needs to be secured in more uncertain and complex environments. In small and informal groups, such as within the circle of family or friends, reputation, based on complete information and enriched by the incorporation of personal relations, is easily established and does not differ from trust.” (Misztal, 1995:123)

Not only is the notion of reputation in Gesellschaft-type societies very different from its trust-like counterpart in Gemeinschaft according to Misztal—reputation in Gesellschaft is also key in the “simplifying process” in which the “unknown and fearful becomes familiar” (Misztal, 1995:123). By formalizing reputation, Opinity’s service thus enables the possibility for trust to emerge through familiarity. But, as discussed in the analysis on tensions between the global and local, the nature of the trust established through Opinity has calculus-based characteristics.

Another example of Barnesian performativity occurs on Yahoo!’s service Flickr. The services provide a possibility for sharing photos in “photostreams” with other people (See figure 6.2). Flickr, as a social space is very different from RapLeaf and Opinity. Its design, as discussed earlier, is less formal and generally has a higher degree of ambiguity. While the sharing-promoting aspects of Flickr’s social design has made it an exceptional place for conveying trustworthiness through familiarity, visibility and transparency, it also carries a side effect. Once sharing becomes the norm, the act of *not* sharing becomes socially and emotionally charged. To abstain from sharing suddenly turns into a marked statement, which in turn could give rise to suspicion and even mistrust. This is not unlike the mistrust that one can cause by turning off one’s mobile phone without a legitimate reason.

Aggregated together to form community, Flickr’s identity representations turn into a sort of externalized collective memory.

According to Misztal, collective memories affect trust building in a community because they “like customs, traditions and habits, can be seen as constant efforts to maintain and reconstruct societal stability” (Misztal, 1995:140). A legible and uniting past manifested as the aggregate of photostreams establishes a web of interpersonal trust bonds within the community through its characteristics of an externalized collective memory (Misztal, 1995). The performativity of a Flickr profile is thus twofold in that it upholds trust partly through visibility and partly through externalized memory. The “Barnesian” performative aspect reveals itself as we contrast the new level of visibility with the “suspicious” lack thereof.

PERFORMATIVITY AND TRUST

Luhmann’s (1979) main argument is that in order to maintain trust despite the ever-increasing complexity of modern society, we must develop and refine our “system trust” and establish a stronger familiarity with abstract regulatory systems, which in turn implies leveraging “traditional” ways of trusting within the context of modern society. Giddens similarly states that trust in the multiplicity of abstract systems is a necessary part of everyday life today (Giddens, 1994). The principles and mechanisms of these abstract systems are opaque and cryptic for the average user. But we still take them for granted, and do not even notice their pervasive presence. The web is one of the places where the increasing reliance on—and trust in—such abstract systems is highly visible today. As Misztal argues in her discussion of trust as

habitus, the shift towards system trust develops in a constant interaction between overarching institutional structures and the actions of individuals—hence Misztal’s interpretation of trust as a specific type of habitus. Seen in this light, the identity representation plays a key role in the transformation of trust in online social spaces since it is the mediator between the individual and the system, the user and the service.

Although an increasing social complexity demands more systems for the mediation of trust, another tendency is also prevalent. That is the tendency of socio-cultural fragmentation and relativisation. Misztal (1995:123) notes in her discussion of reputation that “in the modern world, instead of one common ‘canon of reputability’, there is a variety of standards, relevant in different contexts and frameworks” (Misztal, 1995:122). This increased fragmentation of society hinders the establishment of a single trust culture, and instead leads to the fostering of trust through familiarity within smaller communities through processes of inclusion and exclusion (Misztal, 1995). As Barbalet (1996:80) notes, “[the] increase in complexity decrease the possibilities of familiarity on which individual trust rests”. Misztal notes a similar problem with traditional over-arching mechanisms for assessing trustworthiness: “With modern culture so diffused and fragmented and with the decreasing role of social disapproval, the growing number of exchanges with strangers and lack of a total monitoring system, the mechanism of conformity to social pressure does not seem so easy

to construct and sustain.” (Misztal, 1995:124). Arguably, this leads to a certain urge to re-establish familiarity, and thus informal trust, through isolated, more Gemeinschaft-oriented forms of organization. We see evidence of this tendency in many online communities; in our case study TN20 come to mind as a prime example. In the case of TN20, signs of performativity are at first look strikingly absent since the service simply “leverages pre-existing offline trust” (Micucci, 2006). A deeper analysis would certainly find evidence to prove this first impression wrong, but since the service is not yet public it will have to wait.

In a sense, all of the services in our case study *externalize collective memory* in one way or another. As noted earlier, Misztal points to the importance of a coherent shared collective memory as key to sustaining trust and secure intimacy in a community. In line with this reasoning, it could be argued that the way in which a service externalizes memory could have a performative effect on the emerging trust form within the service. The specific part of memory that is emphasized and “remembered” by the system—its “rules of remembering and forgetting” as Misztal (1995:143) puts it—would according to this logic be a major determinant of the trust form established. Again, the identity representation with its distributed and externalized memory fragments is the key performative element in this establishment.

CONCLUSIONS

In this analysis we have examined how representations of identity in web-mediated social spaces relate to the forming and transforming of trust through performativity. We have discussed a number of performativity-related issues that seem present in our empirical material. A link between the concept of performative identity representations and Misztal's notion of trust as a specific type of habitus has been exposed. In this light, we see identity representations as capturing the way in which the individual's expressions of self is framed by a service maker's intention to promote a specific social order in a web-mediated social space. Identity representations through their degree of ambiguousness, explicitness and structuredness deeply affect the social space and thus the interpersonal trust established within it. A central aspect here concerns the shaping of collective memory through performativity. The established social order then in turn shapes the emerging form of trust. The inherent tension between different trust forms and their relation to specific social orders is made visible by an analysis that sets the emphasis on performative aspects of user representations.

CHAPTER 11

Final Conclusions

This final chapter is comprised of a brief summary of the main conclusions that we have drawn from the analysis of the empirical material gathered in our study.

TENSIONS BETWEEN DIFFERENT PREDOMINANT FORMS OF SOCIAL ORDERS

In chapter 8 we discussed the tensions that arise as social orders are—or merely show signs of—being shifted within a social space. We have highlighted a number of issues that have been described by the companies in our case study such as e.g. the difficulty of *changing contexts* in relation to context-specific expressions. Our conclusion here is that, although many of the tensions and problems that arise may appear disparate, many of the difficulties and conflicts discussed by our interviewees appear to stem from *underlying and strikingly similar* tensions between different social orders of the web-mediated spaces in question. As we have seen, social orders are intimately connected with the form of trust emerging within a social space, and hence we conclude that e.g. an ongoing transformation from system- to personal trust or a seemingly insignificant shift from calculus-based to identification-based trust can in many cases give rise to a multitude of issues that at first glance may appear unrelated to trust. Some of these issues were highlighted in our empirical study and several others are likely to yet be discovered.

Therefore, we suggest that the intricate problems arising from the change of certain conditions (e.g. ways of expressing identity) cannot simply be understood in themselves but are to be understood as problems connected to a larger shift of the predominant social order.

INFLUENCE & INTERPLAY BETWEEN DESIGNERS AND USERS

In chapter 9 we moved on to discuss the role of designers as creators of the social spaces and how they can affect interpersonal trust through conscious design decisions. Especially the choices made about how users can express themselves appear highly influential in the process of establishing social order. However, we also showed that it is not entirely up to the designers and creators of a social space to decide of what particular social order is to be established. As seen with the example of ambiguity as a social resource we understand that users' appropriate limitations within a social space into tools for shaping the *form* of their interaction.

We can conclude that social space design is deeply affecting *how* users are to be perceived by others. Thus, the impression of a user in an online social space is partly made up of that user's expressions but also by the expressions of the facilitator of that social space as manifested through their design.

Furthermore we discussed the potential transformation of trust as a phenomenon and illustrated how a situation without the possibility of interpersonal trust can have the same external manifestations as one with this possibility. In our empirical material we see that companies creating services in order to aid the establishment of *system trust* can be understood as trying to establish trusting behaviour in domains where traditional ways of trust-establishment are unobtainable. Thus we concluded that if these services become successful there is potentially a transformation of the colloquial understanding of the very notion of trusting and what it entails.

PERFORMATIVE PROFILES

In chapter 10 we then explored the role of online user representations in the establishment of interpersonal trust specifically from the perspective of performativity, which is to say we perceive these representations as inherently being able to affect the social context in which they are situated. We find evidence of user profiles *performing* social spaces on different levels, from the “generic” level to the “Barnesian” one. In the analysis we conclude that user representations can in fact through performativity in profound ways affect the trusting behaviours of individuals and thus change the nature of the trust established between them.

Relating the final chapter of the analysis with the previous ones we can begin to see an intimate connection between the tensions in

the social, the design of online spaces and the performativity of representations. Understanding user profiles as inherently performative helps us explain how transformations of social orders and thus also changes in the forms of trust manifest themselves on a concrete level. It becomes evident that the user profile serves as a mediator between the individual and the system—it is here where shifts in trust forms and predominant social orders perhaps make themselves most clearly visible.

THE FUTURE

To conclude, this book has been an attempt to establish a foundation and an initial understanding with which we at greater ease can discuss issues of trust in web-mediated spaces. We believe the analysis we have provided to be a starting point for the establishing of a theoretical framework for the understanding of trust in particular but also social phenomena in general within mediated social settings. There is much continued research to be done and we hope this book can be part of the evolution of an academic discipline that seeks to combine the established wealth of sociological theory with a deep understanding of the technological changes and actual usage of novel web-based spaces in which mediated socialisation takes place.

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