

Information Value Across Cultures and Communities

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ABSTRACT

The value of information within and across communities varies; however, even slight variations in this value may define boundaries between different worlds. The Theory of Information Worlds offers a framework for understanding social information behaviors in these settings. This poster reports on the operationalization of the concept of Information Value and its implications for an ongoing project focusing on the development of codebooks intended to be effective across diverse research contexts and methodologies. Specifically, the concept of Information Value is operationalized and discussed through the lenses of three different dissertation projects focusing on South Korean political discourse on Twitter, Ernestine Rose and the Harlem Library, and the digital literacy practices of role-players in a new Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game. Implications of Information Value on research on communities and cultures are also briefly discussed before describing the project's next steps.

Keywords

Information Value, Information Worlds, Operationalization, Codebook, Theory Development, Communities.

INTRODUCTION

This poster reports on an ongoing project, code-named “3 J’s and a G,” involving three doctoral dissertations and the theoretical work of one professor. The dissertations at the core of this project investigate widely disparate issues: the use of Twitter in political communication in South Korea, digital literacy practices of role-players in online gaming communities, and the Harlem Public Library under the

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leadership of Ernestine Rose, from 1920-1942. While these three dissertations are not closely related to one another, they share a common theoretical framework – the Theory of Information Worlds (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010).

The initial stage of this project focused on the development of a codebook formalizing the concepts of the Theory. In order to guide the first systematic testing of the theory across multiple information worlds and meet the needs of all three dissertations, the codebook, providing both theoretical and operational definitions of the Theory’s concepts as well as examples and questions to guide qualitative coding, is intended to remain general enough that it can be applicable in any possible study using the Theory. A second version of the codebook will add specific operationalizations and examples from the dissertations; this codebook is intended to serve as a model for how the Theory might be adapted and applied to a wide range of radically different research projects.

This poster is limited to just one aspect of the project, a single concept from the Theory – “Information Value” – suggesting how this concept functions across the disparate contexts investigated in the three dissertations.

THE THEORY OF INFORMATION WORLDS

The Theory of Information Worlds provides a framework for examining information in social settings from the most localized through the larger social contexts within which those small worlds are embedded. Although information worlds can be conceptualized and analyzed as discrete entities, they are never isolated from the larger worlds in which they are situated, and multiple worlds interact with and influence each other in a variety of ways. The Theory proposes five concepts that can be used to analyze both specific worlds and the interactions between those worlds: Social Norms, Social Types, Information Value, Information Behavior, and Boundaries. Full definitions and discussions can be found in Jaeger and Burnett (2010); this poster focuses on a single concept: Information Value.

Information Value

Information Value denotes a world's shared sense of the relative importance – “value” – of types of information. Worlds may share information and have similar access to information resources, but often attach different values to that information; one, for instance, may value a particular type of information because of its economic impact, while another may value it because of its “aboutness.”

In the codebook, Information Value is defined as follows: “A commonly accepted hierarchy regarding the variable importance or unimportance of different types of information. Information Value includes a spectrum of values, from high value (e.g., something that is very important to a world) to no value (something perceived as worthless or not deserving attention), as well as a variety of ways in which value can be perceived (e.g. economic vs. artistic value). Value can be contested -- that is, there may be disagreements within a world about the degree to which something is of value, and/or how it is or is not of value.” Further, the codebook (available on request from the authors) specifies that, within a world, Information Value may either be seen through explicit statements of value and importance or, in some cases, must be inferred through observation of recurrent themes and practices within a world; for instance, if members of an Information World repeatedly engage in conversations about a specific topic, or if they are clearly enthusiastic about an issue but never explicitly say “this is important,” it can be inferred that the topic has high value within the world.

THREE DISSERTATIONS

South Korean Political Discourse on Twitter

This dissertation examines citizens' political information exchange via Twitter leading up to the June 4, 2014 election for Mayor of Seoul, the capital city in South Korea, in particular focusing on retweeting practices and the roles of opinion leaders to whom others turn for advice on political or public issues (Lazasfeld et al., 1948).

Twitter has been touted as an emerging virtual public sphere, where individuals gather to freely discuss public affairs, and form public opinion independently of state and corporate influences (Habermas, 1991; Papacharissi, 2002; Dahlgren, 2005; Shirky, 2011). Previous scholarship has mainly used political sentiment analysis to conduct content analysis, since political sentiment is a strong indicator of an individual's political thought, opinion, and orientation (Barnhurst, 2011; Dahlgren, 2005). This requires a high level of qualitative analysis at the level of the individual message, taking into account Twitter-specific capabilities – including text, hashtags, and hyperlinks to images and videos (Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011; Yu et al, 2008; Lee et al., 2013) – as well as commonly used information sources.

The Theory of Information Worlds suggests that retweeting patterns can be thought of as markers of Information Value – that is, the information contained in tweets that are

frequently shared is of sufficiently high value to make it worth passing along; further, the practices and beliefs of opinion leaders, since their words are retweeted extensively by others who share their political orientation, can help to gauge the Information Values of the world of Korean politics as reflected within the virtual world of Twitter. Twitter users explicitly and implicitly express their ideological values by using a variety of Twitter-specific communication practices. These values are explicitly found in the words of Twitter texts – as well as in the deployment of hashtags, images, and hyperlinks as communicative devices. They may also be seen implicitly in the practice of retweeting, as users choose those bits of information that they see as important with others (Himmelboim et al., 2013; Conover et al., 2010; Metaxas & Mustafajaj, 2010).

Digital Literacy in MMORPGs

This study examines the digital literacy practices as well as the information cultures and values of active role-players in a new Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), *WildStar* (Carbine Studios, 2014). It employs an adaptive, multi-sited, data-intensive game ethnography that combines elements of Hine's (2000) virtual ethnography, Steinkuehler's (2004) interpretation of Hutchins' (1995) cognitive ethnography, Gillen's (2009) virtual literacy ethnography, Knoblauch's (2005) focused ethnography, and Pearce and Artemesia's (2009) game/performance/ethnography.

The information behaviors of MMORPG players are inherently social, using the skills and expertise of others (Martin & Steinkuehler, 2010); multimodal, using multiple types and channels of information inside and outside of the game (Monahan, 2009; Storie, 2008; Whippey, 2011); active and passive, encompassing both directed searching and serendipitous observations of information (Adams, 2009; Monahan, 2009); and creative, requiring players to manage and use information within the context of the world of the game (Karlova and Lee 2012, Nardi 2008). Digital and related literacy practices are required to be successful within MMORPGs (Martin, 2012, Martin, et al., 2012), so much so that games can be considered literacy practices themselves (Steinkuehler, 2007).

The Theory of Information Worlds suggests that an MMORPG can be seen as an information environment that is simultaneously self-contained within the world of the game itself and situated within larger online and offline worlds. The Information Values of such worlds will reflect this, with high values attached to information that is of direct relevance to the concerns of the activities and contexts of the game itself; information coming into the world from the outside will be of particular relevance to the extent that it echoes the concerns and values of the game world. For instance, the setting of the world of the game, with its internal politics, geography, and communities, will likely play a major role in determining what types of information are valuable, and when they are of interest to

players. In general, Storie (2008) identified four types of information of typical value to MMORPG players: goal-based information, needed to quickly advance through the game; strategic information gained through experience over time, needed to become a more masterful player and stronger character; social information, gained during the process of staying in touch with peers and friends as well as events taking place within the world; and cultural information, focusing on the specialized vocabularies, unique activities, and social norms of the game.

Ernestine Rose and the Harlem Library

This historical study examines Ernestine Rose and her work at the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library between 1920 and 1942, using primary sources and applying a Change in Historic Institutions model, now under development, along with the Theory of Information Worlds to describe the phenomena and test the theories.

Libraries are, by design, Information Worlds situated in specific settings to meet the information needs and support the information values of those who live and work in those settings. Rose's tenure at the Harlem library took place during a particularly active period of demographic, social, and political change in Harlem. Previous work on the Harlem library has focused on the activities and programs engaged in by staff (e.g. Anderson, 2003; Arns & Daniel, 2007; Jenkins, 1990), or on the role of race in hiring and promotion practices (e.g. Whitmire, 2007). Elsewhere, library work has been contextualized within the larger biographies of women who worked at the library (e.g. Hutchinson, 2006; Whitmire, 2014). This study, however, will explicitly analyze the social contexts of Rose's work within the broader context of the Harlem community and New York City and its library system.

The Theory of Information Worlds suggests that the success of Rose's work in Harlem was, at least in part, made possible because of the extent to which she was able to become an insider within the Information World of the community within which her library was located, mirroring the Information Values of that world while also reinforcing the values of librarianship by providing ongoing information access and other information services. For example, Harlem library staff continuously held events promoting the work of local artists and writers (Anderson, 2003), suggesting that the creative endeavors of community members were highly valued at the branch, as they were in the community, and were thus worth of attention.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Information is embedded within cultures and communities, taking specific forms within individual Information Worlds. Close attention to how information functions within and across diverse settings can tell us a great deal about how people construct meaning and value within their worlds, even when those worlds may differ radically from each other. An examination of multiple information worlds, then,

can help bridge the differences between worlds, helping us to see what we share in common as well as what divides us.

For example, the examination of South Korean political tweeting has the potential to help reveal what kinds of Information Values – and, potentially, what other values – are shared by citizens across the ideological spectrum even when they hold radically different political views. Similarly, research into information practices in online gaming can suggest ways in which seeming “leisure” activities may mirror and help illuminate other, seemingly more serious concerns. And, finally, a study of Ernestine Rose's tenure at the Harlem Library can tell us a great deal about how information provision and librarianship can – and should – be embedded within a particular community not just geographically, but culturally as well.

This project, still at an early stage, undertakes a broad testing of the Theory of Information Worlds across multiple settings and contexts. The first stage of that testing – the development of a general codebook based on the Theory's concepts, and initial planning of a second codebook with specific operationalizations of those concepts drawn from the three dissertation projects – is reported on in this poster, using the concept of Information Value as a focus. Further work will focus on the creation of the second codebook, and will look more closely at Information Value as well as the other concepts from the Theory.

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