Interpretive communities

Description

Itâ??s so easy now to disseminate ideas on the Internet, and to broadcast your own particular claim to being the originator of an idea. On the other hand, the sheer scale of online textual and pictorial profligacy diminishes the authority of claims to originality. Digital social networks amplify the difficulty we have in identifying the source, author, originator or agent responsible for creating something new.

Much is accomplished not so much by individuals standing out against the crowd, but by crowds of people forming, re-forming, interacting, and sharing through highly responsive electronic media. So-called â??smart mobsâ?• are apparently capable of generating meaningful outcomes by collective action through mobile phones, social networks, and crowd-sourced, open-source invention.

Human-computer interaction and digital media promote the idea (whether real or not) of ubiquitous, egalitarian, democratic, grass roots, collective authorship above concepts of hierarchical, heroic and individual creation.

Prominent commentator on digital cultures, Howard Rheingold, highlighted the role of the WELL (Whole Earth â??Lectronic Link), a community of early adopters in the mid 1980s who used simple digital bulletin boards to communicate, build community, organize self-help groups, and construct political action from the ground up.

Participatory design in architecture

Open source software development, crowd sourcing, the gift society, audience engagement, co-creation, and user-centred design converge on the idea of participatory design. But collective agency and shared design and decision-making didnâ??t begin with computers. Distributed action and authorship wasnâ??t a nascent process simply awaiting release by advanced communications technologies.

Public participation in the design and creation of building projects has a long history, that architectural historian Charles Jencks aligns with â??the activist tradition,â?• drawing on eighteenth century socialism and of course Karl Marxâ??s reaction against societyâ??s apparent slavery to mass production and capital.

Architecture wrestles with the relationship between traditions of idealized, autocratic, and personality-centred creation on the one hand, and the traditions of participative, grass roots, democratic design on the other. As well as political and social parallels, participative design in architecture resonates with the grass-roots deployment of technologies of digital communications.

Authors versus audiences

Authorship concerns not only the origin of an idea but attribution, authority, and the cultural context and practices by which society identifies and even constructs individuals and ascribes credit to them. Here is a quote from Roland Barthes, in his seminal essay on authorship, *The death of the author,*

> â??the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture.â?•

The model is not the supposed singular author but of readers and audiences, who come in multiples: â??there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader.â?•

The reader (audience) doesnâ??t operate in isolation but is in the company of a whole community of interpreters. It seems that as much can be said of authorship and creativity: itâ??s a multiplicity. In media parlance, the author-audience relationship is â??many to many.â?•

Hermeneutical communities

Negotiating authority, authorship and agency is the business of interpretative communities. Concepts from philosophical hermeneutics draw attention to interpretive communities as agents of creation, affirming the inevitability of shared participation and distributed authorship.

In fact, the intellectual practices of a community take precedence over individual authorship. Iâ??m fond of the assertion by philosopher and literary theorist, Stanley Fish, writing about professional communities (lawyers, medics, architects): An interpretive community is not â??a group of individuals who share a point of view, but a point of view or way of organizing experience that [shares] individuals.â?• (p.141) (Iâ??ve quoted this elsewhere.)

Fish echoes philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamerâ??s contention about a conversation between two or more interlocutors. People arenâ??t entirely in control of their conversations. Interlocutors â??fall into

re far less the leaders of it than the led.â?• (p.345)

We conversationalists may think of ourselves as the agents of

understanding, but it is more accurate to say that understanding or its failure is â??a process which happens to us.â?• (p. 345)

Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin presents similar arguments in favour of the communality of understanding and authorship: â??verbal discourse is a social phenomenon â?? social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning.â?•

Social practices, human culture, and private thought consist of a multiplicity of languages and voices: â??As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies in the borderline between oneself and the other.â?• Words and ideas are always â??half someone elseâ??s.â?•

In case the theorist is tempted to dismiss entirely concepts of individuality, Bakhtinâ??s assertion points to the ambiguity and multiplicity of authorship in thought, an in-between condition implicating a self and â??an other.â?•

Sociologist Bruno Latour elaborates this understanding further through the theatrical metaphors of actor-network theory (ANT), in which: â??the very word actor directs our attention to a complete dislocation of the action, warning us that it is not a coherent, controlled, well-rounded, and clean-edged affair. By definition, action is *dislocated*.â?• (p.46)

As a further elaboration of its multiplicity, the sociability of authorship doesnâ??t necessarily exist as an assembled group of people, but persists as traces through the environment. Concepts of collective agency resonate with theories of **situated cognition**, that dissipate agency into social practices and language, but also human physiology, devices, spatial organization, and the environment.

Not only are such creative processes highly dynamic, interdependent and complex, but also agency and its attribution are *agonistic*. There are coherent political, theoretical, philosophical, sociological and biological arguments for affirming notions of distributed and complex authorship.

Notes

- In the context of studies in neuroscience and robotics, philosopher Andy Clark appeals to concepts of the â??scaffolded mindâ?• in attributing agency. He asserts that: â??Advanced reason is thus above all the realm of the scaffolded brain: the brain in its bodily context, interacting with a complex world of physical and social structures.â?• If we are to think of the individual, then the role of individualised cognitive apparatus is to â??support a succession of iterated, local, pattern-completing responses.â?• The individual as agent is to be thought of as a piece in a cognitive jigsaw, a machine component, or an organism in a vast ecology of thought. Following Latour, I would add that such environmentally situated cognitive processes are not smooth and trouble-free.
- This post is an updated extract from Coyne, R 2009 â??Interpretive communities as decisive agents: on pervasive digital technologiesâ??. *Architecture Research Quarterly (ARQ)*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 127-132.
- Also see Conservative hermeneutics, The reception of architecture, Hermeneutics and ethics, Audience disengagement, Urban occupy.

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2. creativity
3. design
4. hermeneutics
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rcoyne99