

You Can't Participate if You Don't Feel Welcome

Rob Watson, 10th May 2019

You Can't Engage if you Don't Feel Welcome

1 Introduction

“If we have low expectations about our achievement we can act with more confidence and assurance in what we do than if we think we are developing theories and hypotheses” (Helle, 2005, p. 126).

The controversy that is currently associated with the politics of national identity is nothing new. It does seem, however, that the urgency and the rawness that temper the current debate indicates that the concepts and ideas that we associate with inclusivity and diversity in our communities are a hot topic. The issue of multiculturalism has a particular edge at the moment. To put it mildly, it has every chance of becoming singularly problematic and destructive if it's not handled properly and with more sensitivity.

One example that illustrates how difficult this topic can be is the recent suggestion by former UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, that successive governments have “failed to find the right balance between diversity and integration.” What would probably be taken as a relatively benign statement of the obvious by some, has itself become an object of considerable scorn to others. Tony Blair is often mocked for his occasional political interjections, and any consideration of the issues that Blair raises makes them toxic by association. However, whatever Blair's motives, the questions that have been raised about the future of the multicultural model that has been fostered in the UK over forty years needs careful handling. Blair's suggestion, for example, that the multicultural model has been “mis-used as a way to justify a ‘refusal to integrate,’”¹ shouldn't be left unchallenged, but nor should it be automatically rejected because some would see it as a potentially reactionary idea.

Aditya Chakraborty writing in The Guardian notes that the simplicity of Blair's line of thinking is problematic, because it doesn't explain the wider set of connected and interrelated issues that are tied-in and associated with immigration, assimilation, integration and social change. As Chakraborty writes,

“Anyone arriving in this country today is thus put in a near-impossible bind. They are treated transactionally, yet need to act as if they belong. They come from another country but are

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/apr/20/tony-blair-says-migrants-must-integrate-to-combat-far-right>

expected to adopt some mush labelled “British values”. And, according to Blair, just to win parity with racists, they must behave so much better than them. All the while, they are expected to put up with a popular press calling them benefit scroungers and job thieves. There have been times, especially over the past three years, when it has struck me that Britain doesn’t want immigrants at all. It wants saints.”²

The politics of social engagement and integration, it seems, are easily pushed toward extreme positions, and are easily polarised around simplistic ideals that lead to charges of, on the one hand, blind optimism, or on the other hand, of ruthless indifference, or even xenophobia. We either want our immigration policies to be welcoming and supportive, in which case social change is planned and managed sympathetically and gradually. Or, we want immigration policies that foster a hostile environment that actively works to make specific groups of migrants, and their dependents, feel unwelcome. The extension of this process results in practices that actively excludes people and ostracises them.

The problem in a democratic society, however, is that can’t have it both ways. Either we are open and welcoming, or we are closed and unwelcoming. As Chakraborty points out, what makes exclusion possible in any kind of wholesale way, is that it’s easy to reduce people to the level of an administrative function, and to think of them simply as transactions in a system. Ultimately, we know where that ends. The Windrush scandal is the logical consequence of a set of social and government practices that have produced plainly intended consequences.³ Windrush was an effort by the UK government to make whole groups of people feel unwelcome and unable to remain in this country, regardless of their potential to contribute to the greater good. Many might be happy to live in this regime, oblivious to the consequences of these policies, but many more are coming to realise that these are deliberate policies that are representative of a form of arbitrary governmental power characterised by cruelty and vindictiveness. Exhibit A – The Windrush scandal. Exhibit B – Grenfell Tower. Exhibit C – Universal Credit. Exhibit D – school exclusions. The question is where does this end?

History has warned us that any government system that is specifically designed and resourced to harass and intimidate people leads to very dangerous places. The lack of humanity in the administrative systems turns indeterminately documented citizens into deportees; social housing tenants are

² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/24/migrants-tony-blair-british-racism-victims>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/mar/06/home-office-woefully-complacent-despite-windrush-scandal-reveals-mps-public-accounts-committee-report>

turned into shadowy shirkers hiding behind closed curtains, and unemployed or disabled people are turned into scroungers who are reviled as feckless and morally degenerate. As Victor Frankl wrote so eloquently after his experience in Auschwitz, demonising whole groups of people, then reducing them to a number in an administrative system, is the state's way of dehumanising people and normalising their oppression. This leads ultimately to their incarceration, torture and murder, and is something of which we must remain vigilant (Frankl, 2004).

This politics of making people feel unwelcome, furthermore, is facilitated by putting bureaucratic barriers in front of people, making them pay additional and exorbitant costs to access an interminable bureaucracy. This bureaucracy is designed so that ordinary people feel they are unable to understand and navigate its layers and complexity. It's about adding friction and filters that prevent people from engaging with the administrative process in a logical and humanistic manner. Turn up late to an appointment with an advisor and your social security payments are sanctioned, with no appeal, regardless of the reason or the consequences. Parallel to the immigration system are changes that have been introduced to the social security system. These changes are designed to do a similar job, to exclude vulnerable people from fully engaging with the support process. Government systems are increasingly designed to discourage easy access to explanations about the decision-making process, or to give a justification of why decisions have been taken. Government processes, for many people, are increasingly and deliberately opaque. They are difficult to legally challenge, and so we are unable to hold the administrators of the process and the interpreters of the policies to account.

Contrast this, then, with most Western government's drives to make public services accessible and available using online networks and digital platforms. The aim of most governments today is to take public services on to the internet so that they are reachable and more widely used through digital engagement techniques. In itself this can be a laudable aim, however, when we start to look at this process in detail, and ask questions about what is driving the logic of the forms of digital engagement that are being advanced, we might begin to see a different picture emerge from that which is promised. A wider picture reveals the scale and complexity of the enterprise, and the potential problems that are associated with an unchecked and unchallenged administrative and regulatory process.

The aim of the digital engagement strategies for health, education and most other government services is to introduce efficiencies of scale, administrative simplification, multi-agency links, and so on.

Thereby providing frictionless access for service users who are told they will be able to use these systems to exercise a greater level of choice about when and how these services are applied. The bounty that is promised, and that we supposedly gain from shifting our services online, is said to outweigh the hazards. One major problem, however, is the democratic deficit that accompanies this drive. The designers, engineers and programmers who implement these ICT systems are seldom questioned in public or held to account by their fellow citizens, except in terms of cost and project management delays.

Those who caution against the digital-drive, moreover, are often dismissed as luddites or reactionaries. Instead of working to understand the complexity of the topic of digital engagement, it's often easier to dismiss critics of the digital engagement drive as being stuck in a nostalgic fantasy world in which community romantics long for meaningful face-to-face engagement between the public and the civic service providers. It would be correct to point out, though, that bureaucracy has long been theorised and criticised for its technocratic and dehumanising impact, its lack of accountability, and its lack of adaptability to changing social circumstances. Max Weber's 'iron cage' comes to mind.⁴

Furthermore, what drives the push to improve government social engagement using digital and online systems and tools is considered largely a matter that relates to the design and planning of the ICT infrastructure and platforms that are being introduced. This is an argument for expediency above alignment with the social world. The general requirement when a new IT system is introduced into a workplace or a community, is that everyone has to undergo retraining and upskilling to ensure that their working practices are compatible with the system. We end up arguing about what the relevant skills, literacies development and capacity building might be of the people who are supposed to use and engage with these services. We miss out on thinking about the principle of digital engagement and whether these services *should* be administered in this way at all? People's lives, at worst, become merely an afterthought, and at best, are acknowledged through hopelessly tokenistic gestures.

Situated against the backdrop of an almost obsessive governmental - or even ideological - drive to deliver public services through data-driven ICT platforms, we are locked in a paradigm that has no escape route. Just try arguing that any government policy should be excluded from digital delivery, and you will feel the force of the ideological conviction at work. It's like a fish suggesting that it

⁴ <https://www.thoughtco.com/understanding-max-webers-iron-cage-3026373>

might be possible to breath air instead of water. It's not going to go down well with the other fish, but it is entirely possible in the right circumstances. The primary purpose of government policy is focussed on achieving efficiency and economies of scale. The widespread belief of policy-makers is primarily concerned with getting people to move to services on-line simply for no other reason than it is supposedly more efficient. By pushing people wholesale in the direction of digital services, defined by their supposed accessibility and multimedia operability, we may as well be pushing people toward their social oblivion. They become non-people excluded from mainstream society if they are not digitally connected.

The dominant model of digital engagement, I would suggest, fails to take into account what the social circumstances are that make digital media practices meaningful to people from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds. With the varying sets of social expectations and belief system that they have. As with immigration or social security policies, these services can be designed in different ways. They can be designed without being unwelcoming and exclusive. They can foster inclusivity and a sense of mutual understanding and belonging. Rather than fostering social divisions and inequality, they can foster mutual support and collaboration instead.

1.1 Addressing Engagement and Inclusion

While the aim of much of digital engagement policy, on the surface, appears to want to address issues of engagement and inclusion, we shouldn't accept this assertion at face value. Instead, we should reflect on the evaluative processes that we use to determine our judgements about the policies and practices of implementation and administration that are tied together. We need an approach that can see beyond the dominant transactionalist and systems models that are applied to digital engagement policies, and explore other methodologies that can get to grips with the subjective and divergent human experience and practices of meaning making and belonging. As I will argue, the people who appear to be the least likely or willing to engage with digital media services require a different approach. An approach that should be founded on identification with established social patterns of interaction, or meaningful ways of being in the world, as they are expressed in recognisable archetypal figures. To get people to engage, they have to feel that they belong. Therefore, coming to a clear understanding of what it means to belong in the many different social situations that we face in our daily lives, and not just in theory, but also in practice, is essential.

Here I will try to map out and define a methodological approach that can help to account for the practices and experiences of participants in digital platforms, for whom the search for meaning and

belonging are tied together, as we attempt to establish and manage an ongoing a sense of social co-presence with one another. This can be expressed directly in social interactions, but it can also be found in forms of media practice and participation. We can see these patterns of social expression in both legacy forms of media, and also as they use emergent forms of social and digital media services. To paraphrase John Ruskin, the question is not what we get from producing media, or even what we make when we produce media, its is who we connect with and what we become in the process of engaging with and sharing the media that we produce. As we use the available technologies, techniques and affordances of different types of media, they help us, as McLuhan identified, to become something more than we were previously. But rather than being technologically deterministic and focusing on the medium, as media studies has been doing for some time now, I want to suggest that a difference approach is taken to social change that goes beyond simply looking at the media that we use, and instead, we should be thinking about the generative and creative approach advocated by Carl Jung, in which we use media to express and demonstrate who we are, both individually and collectively.

1.2 Alternative Modelling

The objective of this alternative modelling, moreover, is to identify how an evaluative framework, that draws on symbolic interactionism and pragmatism, and in a limited way Jung's notion of the archetype, can be put into play. I call this *socialmeaning*, as there is an intrinsic relationship between the social meanings and the social relationships that we experience. If we change one, we also change the other. I believe that a wider understanding of these relationships are best understood as developmental processes which can be an effective in cultivating and nurturing a social environment based on of identification and empowerment, or what Jung called individuation, leading to a healthy and productive collective sense of social solidarity. All the while remembering that we have to maintain a pragmatic handle on these processes that is grounded in empirical investigation.

As John Dewey argued, we should remember that the person who is the expert when it comes to feeling the pinch of a shoe is the person wearing the shoe themselves. The cobbler, or expert, can help to rectify the problem, but only the person wearing the shoe can identify where it hurts. The same principle applies to the way that we come to an understanding of our belonging in our communities. There are many ways to think about the way we belong, but to be humanly nourishing we need to think beyond the technologically determinist, transactionalist and behaviourist models, and seek to understand how a sense lived engagement and belonging (or not belonging), is situated in

the community of feeling in which we are based, in the communities of practice in which we express ourselves, and in the communities of identification to which we potentially belong.

Much of our policy discussions and social planning has a limited and narrow view of what it means to belong, and seeks only to deal with the superficial and arbitrary markers of connection that link us with a geographic space or locality. For example, a sense of neighbourliness, a sense of faith, or a sense of ethnic identity, and so on. The benefit of this wider approach, however, is that it can be used to address issues of exclusion, voice poverty and misrepresentation, without having to resort to instrumental or deterministic sets of administrative or governmental practices. Nor does it have to resort to theoretical gymnastics and technical bedazzlement, because at the end of the day, it is grounded in human social experience. How do you work out if people have a sense that they belong or that they are happy? Well there is no other way except by asking them and by observing them. By maintaining a watchful eye and continuing the traditions of ethnographic investigative practice, it is possible to recognise and account for the spontaneous and creative expressions and relationships that people build and maintain for themselves, using the media tools that they have to hand. There is nothing new in this, but it is useful to remind ourselves periodically that paying attention to the symbolic, as well as the practical expressions within our lives, is equally as essential in helping us to build resilient and sustainable forms of community, with the capacity for inclusion, development and growth.

2 Digital Engagement Paradigm

The governmental and administrative digital services ethos is now well established in policy and planning regimes. Many billions of pounds have been spent, and will continue to be spent on priming digital services. The first wave of digital systems integration was for resource management and logistics planning, i.e. the IBM era. Following this was support for information sharing across the internet, i.e. the Microsoft era. Next was support for user management and production tools within the system, i.e. the Apple era. And finally, we have entered the stage in which end-users are being brought into the system to report directly and select options that more closely match their needs, i.e. the Facebook, Amazon and Google era. At present this integration is closely modelled on economic exchange and the purchase of goods and services, but in the future this will more likely be dependent on information management, learning, relationship building and vocational expressions of purpose in an open, transparent and dispersed process, i.e. the blockchain era.

At each stage of these prior process social control has largely been maintained by the centre, and has only been released from the centres grasp when sufficient capability and cybernetic return pathways have been established between the centre and the periphery. The slow pace of dispersal to the periphery has been carefully managed so as to keep essential control at the centre and out of the hands of those operating at the peripheral nodes. Think of Amazon's role as the gateway platform on which their tightly controlled marketplace exists, or Google as the place at which information is warehoused and collected, or Facebook as a platform for hoovering-up data about our social interactions. Gatekeepers, quality assurance agencies and market research priorities still abound in these models, with only the impression of meaningful distribution and dispersal. The fundamentals remain the same. The centre is in control and won't share or explain how its algorithms work. The edge only has a limited and narrow ability to access all the information that passes through, and is generated by, people engaged in the network. It's a one-way process. Basically, we give them information, and in return we get efficiently applied and centrally managed services. The trick has been to manage these services at a global level that can go beyond the capability of any one node within this network. The ability to scale-up the systems and services so that they can be offered very cheaply and *en masse* means that the quantity of information produced is overwhelming and needs complex automation and autonomous learning systems to help manage the deluge. It's rich pickings for the people who control and have access to this flow of information.

2.1 Silicon Valley Minds

This is the digital engagement paradigm, and it operates almost as naturally as a fish swims in water. The question is, what does it enable us to do and how does it operate? What are its affordances and what are its restrictions? In its most basic form, and in the sense of digital engagement policies, it is the drive by government to get users/citizens/claimants/patients, etc, using digital services. It is the belief that services and social engagement with the civic process will always be better if they are digital and are online. There is an acceptance that services must be self-serviced, that choices are available from a specific repertoire of options, and that by offering pathways of engagement there is some certainty that they will lead to defined outcomes. In a reciprocal promise to the user, change to their social status is on offer. The promise is better wellbeing, enhanced economic potential, a thicker social network, and more direct ways to engage in entertaining ourselves. Entertaining ourselves includes gaming, movies, music as well as pornography. Fundamentally, the expectations of the people who are developing these services and the digital products that are tied in with them, are behaviourist and instrumental. Moreover, they are like this because they have grown alongside the dominant commercial model of transactionalism, which is widespread and plentiful, but which are

more clearly exploitative because they have an economic service rationale based on a race to the bottom. The in-app purchase, subscriptions, pay-to-play, and so on.

This is what might be called the Silicon Valley mindset, and it is based on:

- Psychologically exploitative and adaptive models of behavioural theory.
- The aggregation of multiple and many sources of information.
- The warehousing of vast amounts of data and information, often without the explicit permission of the users of the service.
- The intensive and thorough data mining of this seemingly disconnected information, with search algorithms seeking to identify patterns of behaviour and consumption which can then be aligned with known behaviour patterns with psychological models.
- The widespread surveillance and observation of user's behaviours and action-routines that are used to monitor and predict actions, such as voting or consumption.
- The promise to the user is a veil of feedback and rewards developed using predictive social psychology models that link indicators of social significance and participation, such as likes, shares, recommendations and views, with deep rooted psychological needs.
- These models are designed to be transactional and behaviourist, seeking to match the social and psychological sweet-spots of users and to encourage ongoing engagement and reward-based reinforcement.
- Finally, the sheer quantity and force of these experiences are socially normalised along established real-world social pathways and through social experiences. The tech industry is banking on the fact that all your friends, colleagues and fellow citizens are engaging in this digital fantasy, so you as an individual will have great difficulty opting out from it. Try deleting Facebook, for example, and see how friends react?

2.2 Government Efficiencies

Governmental attention, moreover, is principally obsessed with efficiency. The reasoning behind the drive to unified and centralised government services is most often justified as a way to promote value for money for the taxpayer. By shifting public services online and limiting these services within a pre-defined repertoire of so-called choices, the civic and democratic evaluation of those services is curtailed and avoided. Civic engagement and community deliberation concerning policy and decision making is not a priority in these rounds of investment and development. Instead, the emphasis is on

an improved multimodal capacity that encourages, or at least removes many of the excuses that people use to explain why they don't access digital services. Increasing the numbers of people who engage with government services online and digitally is the be-all and end-all of social policy. So, the emphasis is now on going beyond the simply textual or image-based interface and increasing the use of voice recognition and spoken translation systems, along with gesture-based interfaces that respond haptically to the user. The aim being to get more users online.

There is, however, a significant problem with this approach to the civic engagement process. It lacks any sense that these processes, systems and practices are open to democratic review or appraisal. There are few examples of developers and designers being regularly and consistently challenged and engaged in civic deliberation. There are very few moments when elected representatives are able to question the programmers and the algorithm developers about the systems they are designing, to check if they are acting in the public good. This is clearly odd, because so much money is spent on digital engagement, and yet so little oversight and civic engagement is considered to be relevant.

The algorithms that drive engagement are notoriously:

- Opaque and lack democratic accountability and scrutiny.
- Designed to maximise commercial monopolistic or government advantage.
- Remote from the people who use them.
- Remote from the people who pay for them.
- Offer no proof-of-work.
- Ruthlessly extract social and economic value from other people's work without investing in the capacity to generate and develop content and services.
- They are not co-located in the social environment in which people live.
- They are not co-producers of content and thus accountable for the content that they share and promote.
- They are dependent on simulated engagement to drive continuous use.
- They do not anticipate or respond to social change and mitigation of harm, nor do they take a view about the resilience of communities and the sustainability of our natural environment.

If the digital engagement paradigm is so heavily one sided, then the challenge must be to offer a comprehensive and grounded alternative methodological approach. An approach that has the capacity to generate comprehensible and detailed information and data based on empirical observations that more closely align with local experiences and social patterns of behaviour. As Kevin Howley states “communities are expressions of commonality as well as difference” (Howley, 2010, p. 64). This means developing methodologies that are accountable to socially situated people, and not to abstract projections, and to look at the way that those services affect those people and their development needs. It should not be forgotten that there’s no point in doing any of this engagement work if there is no focus on growth and the enrichment of our human experience, both individually and collectively. Leaving people to use government and public services in the same way that we leave people to gamble and watch porn is reprehensible. We need to establish communities of support and nurture based on the values of reflection, growth and understanding.

3 Heading Symbolic Arrangements

The challenge, as I’ve sketched so far, is to develop an evaluative and analytical approach that is sensitive to people’s lived experience, and which can cope with the complexity of the manifold and varied way that we live our lives. There is nothing new in this desire, and many people share the same objective, and obviously this is a well-trodden path. I should explain, however, why I am drawn to symbolic interactionism as a methodological and conceptual framework, and why I think it fits with my stated desire to achieve an understanding of the processes that drive our civil, social and mediated interactions. Because symbolic interactionism is well established within academic networks, it does not mean that symbolic interactionism is widely practiced elsewhere. The tradition of media studies that I have previously followed indicates that symbolic interactionism steps outside of the established study and engagement patterns that are commonly associated with media. For example, discourse analysis, authorship or genre conventions.

My interest in symbolic interactionism is two-fold, firstly because it is founded on pragmatic and empirical principles that seek to explain social interaction without imposing a rigid theoretical framework at the outset – though a framework is a useful practical outcome if it does emerge (Blumer, 1953, 1966, 1969); and secondly, because it offers a practical and generative interpretation of the information that is collated. Symbolic interactionism is both a method for collecting data, and it is a creative method for explaining that data. It is a reflexive and practice-based approach to sense-

making and explanation-forming that recognises its own terms of development and engagement as a reflexive process.

The symbolic interactionist approach is closely tied with the ethnographically informed investigation practices of the social sciences. The simple aim of which is to find out what is going on within human communities, but rather than undertaking investigation that is driven by models of testing, hypothesising or theorising, symbolic interactionism suggests that we first ask people and observe what is being negotiated in these social interactions. I'm reminded that Herbert Blumer, in one of his bolder statements, suggested that holding a prior research question in our mind before we go to investigate an issue is likely to negate the purpose of the investigation, because it suggests that we know what we are looking for before we have even started to look for it. What's the point in looking if we think we already have an answer?

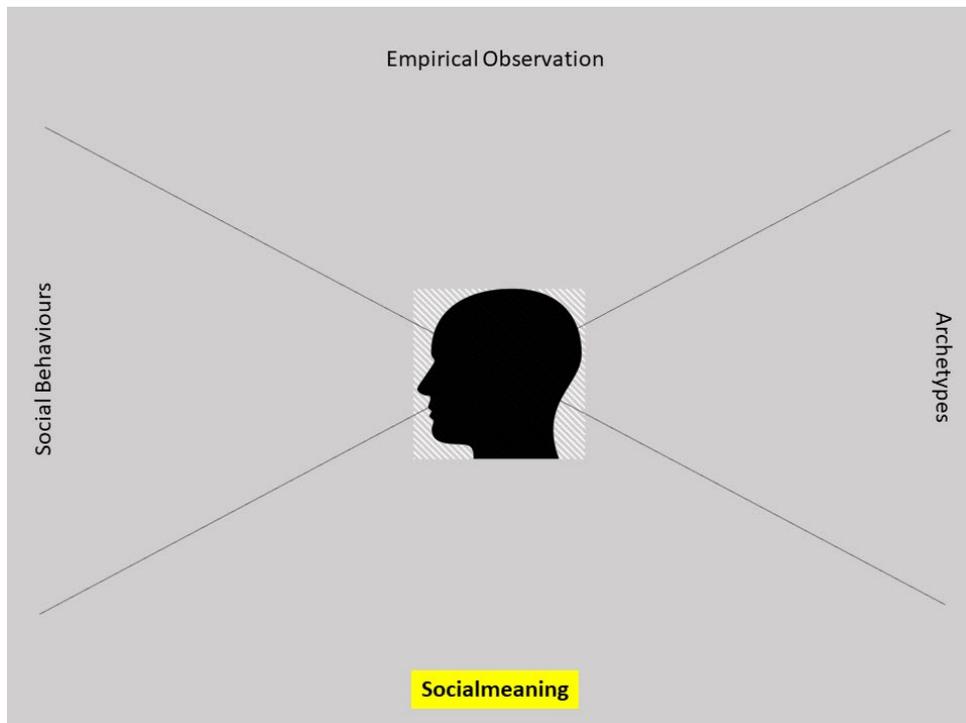
Symbolic interactionism, therefore, can be understood in basic terms as the study of meaningful social interactions and the negotiation of lines of action based on those meanings. These interactions are governed by three principals about social life which propose that social interaction and group life is far from random or chaotic, and nor is it deterministic, but it is creative, principally because it is:

- **Relational** – our social life is one in which people negotiate lines of action in pursuance of their potential accomplishments.
- **Generative** – our communication is founded on expressions of creative agency.
- **Social** – our relationships are the arrangements, patterns and behaviours found in group life, and should be pragmatically understood.

4 Socialmeaninging

Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionist approach to social enquiry proposes that ***social arrangements and meaning are linked***. Blumer recognises that they are relative and relational concepts, that are defined by corresponding process-based set of relationships. For simplification I have called this '*Socialmeaninging*,' as an homage to Einstein and his understanding that space and time are best understood as linked in one process or phenomenon known as *spacetime*. Space and time are not separate categories as they appear on a day-to-day or common-sense basis. Instead, Einstein's theory of General Relativity suggests that as our proximity to the mass of an object changes, then there is a relative change to both time and geometry. So, if time changes then the structure of our

geometry changes. Likewise, if geometry changes then there is a corresponding change in the structure of time. Neither factor is the product of the other, nor are they the sole factors from which the other results, but they are the *setting* and the *processes* by which things in the universe are arranged and interact. What we think of as gravitational forces are actually distortions in the shape and texture of spacetime.



I was stuck by the following passage when reading Herbert Blumer's account of the industrialisation process:

“An analysis of what takes place at [the] points of contact between the [meaningful] process and the social setting reveals a different picture. The picture is different in important respects. The initial factors, the x and the y, undergo alteration in interacting with each other, and furthermore, are subject to appreciable change by the entrance of new factors into the process of interaction. One cannot account for the z, the determinate social change, by a combination of x and the y; the determinate social change is the result of a process of development in which the x and the y themselves undergo change and in which other factors than the x and y may enter. What is important is the process of development and not the x and y factors that are presumed to set it off” (Blumer, 1990, p. 141).

The implication of this assertion, I believe, is that when we pay attention to the characteristic indicators of a social environment, for example the texts that are circulated in our cultures, or the practices that are ritualised in our daily lives, then we will not understand why those indicators are important by examining them in isolation, as separately designated categories or experiences. Nor will we understand them simply by accumulating and aggregating enough samples and datapoints in a

process of accumulation. Simply put, amassing evidence of the object and the social marker, as is often the focus of quantitative forms of enquiry, will not explain the processes by which these artefacts and objects become present in our minds and our culture. Nor will they show what processes govern their ongoing interaction and meaningfulness. As Horst Helle summarises,

“To put it briefly, therefore, meaning is action through space and time. The meaning of objects is identical to their potential for action. This applies both to actually existing objects and to those, which are imagined, objects of physical reality and products of human fantasy alike” (Helle, 2005, p. 25).

On a day-to-day basis we tend to employ heuristics and rule-of-thumb generalisations in order to make the world comprehensible to us. We do this so that we can engage with the world in a phenomenologically meaningful way. However, we would be wrong to assume that these generalisations are the product of a straight-forward cause-and-effect relationship between what we see and what we might surmise to be a reactive force. Newton’s apple did not, in fact, get pulled from the tree by gravity acting as an attracting force. Instead, it did only what it could possibly do. The apple followed the curvature of spacetime to the next significantly massive object that was distorting the spacetime field that it occupied. If we explore this analogy further, imagine that you are flying a space craft through the meteor belt, and that you are frustrated that all of the individual objects are getting in your way, forcing you to be vigilant of their presence and requiring you to make constant course corrections. However, by only focussing on the individual or even the collective position of the meteors, we are missing the bigger picture that explains their presence, and the forces that keep them in place. The bigger picture is that there are more massive objects in the vicinity that are distorting spacetime and shaping the flow and position of these objects. The sun and Jupiter being the most significant. We can focus on the immediate objects in front of us as much as we like, and thereby develop a tactical view of the meteors. Or, we can step back a little further and see the bigger picture and think about the stronger forces that are at play, and which shape the cosmological environment that we are embedded.

The point, moreover, is that if we only focus on individual and discrete actions, reactions, products and artefacts within our culture and social systems, then we will fail to learn what the bigger and longer-term processes are that are shaping our environment and creating the space for their emergence. Instead, we have to pay attention to what the processes of development that give rise to the design, planning and engagement practices in terms of their participatory and democratic social

arrangements and meanings as we see them around us today. This is because and according to the principles of *socialmeaning*:

- If we change the meanings, then we change the social setting.
- If we change the social setting, then we also change the meanings.

Therefore, if the two are relational our attention needs to focus on what takes place in the process of arrangement/transformation, in other words their development from one state to another state as they are affected by transformative social forces.

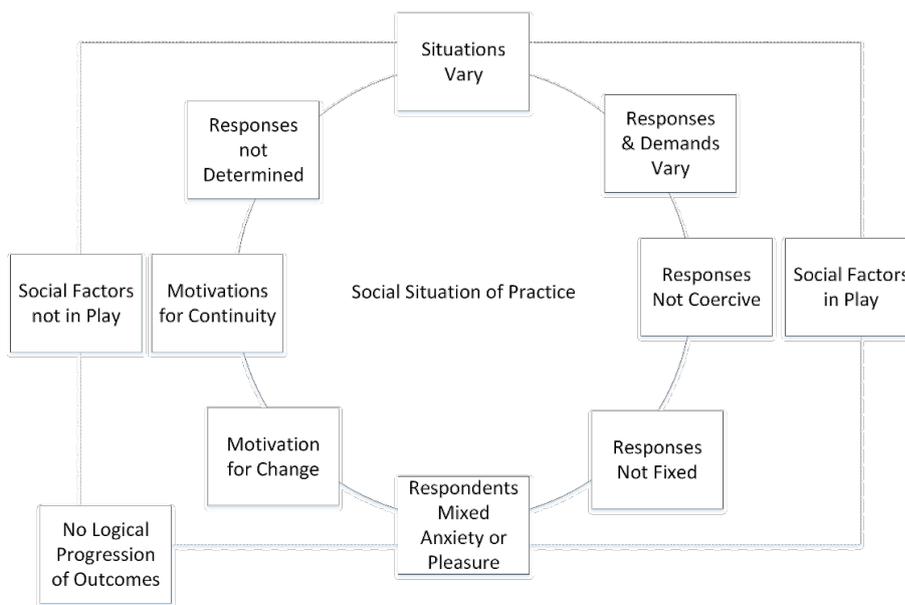
As a consequence, and according to Herbert Blumer, in using the techniques of symbolic interactionism, it is possible to pay attention to the demands and opportunities for new forms of social activity and social relationships as they emerge and take shape. This is especially useful when things are new and our evidence is indeterminate or based on poorly established pathways of operation, and which cannot be inferred from the operation of practice of social engagement and participation alone. Recognising that people often vote with their feet, rather than doing what it is that they say that they will do, we are thus able to go beyond the practice of simplistic scenarios or engagement design or human-user interaction. We are forced, instead, to try to understand the patterns of behaviour that people map-out for themselves in the process of building and maintaining their social relationships.

Think about the design of a public park. The planners want people to follow designated walking routes, but people invariably step off those pathways and cut through different routes to get to their destinations. Is the proliferation of 'keep-of-the-grass' signs a product of a failure to match the design process with the human interaction process? Or are people simply unmanageable? The question, moreover, is do we then spend our time enforcing rigid adherence to the predetermined pathways of the architect and designer, or do we allow people to wander freely around the park, and then meet those people's needs and requirements as those patterns and shapes of interaction emerge?

The study of the situation, therefore, is the primary way by which we will ascertain any knowledge of the interplay of ideas and practices associated with participative and engagement-based media. For Blumer this meant thinking beyond the logic of the immediate evaluative framework and theoretical stance, and developing, instead, a set of observations and insights that are based on direct and reported empirical evidence. Rather than simply relying on what might be explained as theoretical

hearsay, supposition and theorising, Blumer suggested that we need to take heed of the symbolic nature of the social world and how it is constructed and negotiated. Blumer drew heavily on the work of Herbert Mead, and as Helle explains:

“Mead asks where these ‘images’ produced by human imagination are located. Though we can be certain that they are not located in space, though it is possible for them to find their way into the structure of physical things, for example on the printed page of a book. The products of imagination therefore, initially only directly present within human consciousness, can become a part of physical reality and become part of an object of culture as ‘meaning.’ In this way, Mead sees an end to the futile dualism of mind and matter. Perception does not simply occur within the thing as it exists in reality, as realism would have it, nor within the conscious mind of the individual, as idealism argues. In fact, perception occurs within actions, as interaction. Action generates a dynamic relationship between existence ‘out there’ and the consciousness of the enquiring individual. The later does not perceive an object, which exists in some world beyond the perceiving subject, isolated in the world of things; the content of perception is the dynamic relationship, the interaction between organism and physical nature” (Helle, 2005, p. 26).



Studying the social situation, then, in which the process of participation and engagement is practiced as an interplay and negotiation between many different forms of media and digital systems, we are able, and adapting Blumer, to see how “people respond to the demands and opportunities that are set in the situation” (Blumer, 1990, p. 157). The caveat, however, is that situations vary, the motivations for our responses will not be clear, and there are many social factors that are in play which have to be understood and actively incorporated.

The symbolic interactionist tradition, furthermore, argues that meanings must be found in the experiences of the individuals first, before they can be said to exist for those people who are conducting the social study into what the relevance of these social arrangements and meanings might be. For symbolic interactionists, social relationships are an interplay between the production and the interpretation of meanings. Any action that individuals undertake, or sees to achieve, have to be intelligible. They have to fit within the social perspectives that individuals inherit and experience, not only as participants, but also within the wider collective and social milieu. As Helle describes,

“The social perspective exists in the experience of the individual insofar as it is intelligible, and it is its intelligibility that is the condition of the individual entering into the perspectives of others, especially of the group” (Helle, 2005, p. 29).

Thus, as with fish in water, if we question the objectivity of our perspective, that all fish only exist satisfactorily in water, then any fish that proposes that it is possible to exist outside of water stops being a fish, and becomes, instead, something else. We call our sense of self into question because we are changing the perspective from which we are defined. We have gained our social meaning and our understanding of our self only in relation to others in our social world. Our consciousness is individually located, but it is socially experienced, and it also can't be understood if it is not accounted for within the milieu of others, as negotiated in relation to the perspectives of others. As Helle summarises, the social perspective underlying our actions thus exists as an experience in our consciousness. Therefore,

“The individual defines the social perspective as objective and valid and extracts from it the interpretative ideas to interpret both its own self and the objects around him. As he does he sees himself from the same perspective as others and the other, he is able to understand” (Helle, 2005, p. 31).

Accordingly, meaning is generated and established in the course of social interaction. Meaning is principally formed on the basis of the actual or expected reactions that we have with others. The consequence of which is that we can move beyond instrumental and transactional models of social engagement and instead develop models that assume that

“Human beings are neither victims of their impulses nor unconsciously exposed to external stimuli; they are active organisms able to plan and control their actions by attributing meaning to the constantly changing world around them, thereby interpreting it” (Helle, 2005, p. 69).

This is why we have shared perspectives and shared cultures. They come about because we have to participate in the shared processes of social communication. As Helle further describes,

“Social participation enables individuals to internalise the perspective shared by the members of a group. This opens up a processual view: Depending on how frequently and with what intensity one participates in certain groups, one will or will not acquire those groups’ perspectives” (Helle, 2005, p. 112).

The social process, therefore, is one that is based on the search and practice of negotiation between the concepts that we want to introduce, or which we are calling on from our pasts in order to establish common ground and a shared premise that might meet the terms of our future actions. To paraphrase Richard Rorty, language is only useful as long as it continues to be able to bake our bread. If it stops being useful then we either stop using it, or we shift and change the meanings that are associated with it.

5 Group Life Communication

If this framework of symbolic interaction is accepted, we now have to think about how it might be applied in different social situations, and what the consequences are for digital engagement research, and the processes and policies that follow from this research might be. In acknowledging that group life can’t exist if it is determined by purely individual or private meanings, there then has to be explicit recognition of the common elements of our social engagements. We can look in more detail, then, at the use of language and the shared cultural artefacts that we produce in new ways. The emergent and the developmental becomes more important. As Anselm Strauss argued,

“Group life is organised around communication. Communication consists not merely in the transmission of ideas from the head of one person to that of another, it signifies shared meanings. ‘Shared’ means more than that terms are used in ways sufficiently alike so that persons understand each other; it also means that terms arise out of and in turn permit community action” (Strauss, 2017, p. 150).

The reason that members of a community are able to participate in their common life, moreover, is because they are able to coordinate their activities based on a common use of symbolic forms of expression, of language and representation. We begin by using commonly rooted symbolic forms, so that we can base our future interactions on repeating and negotiated patterns of communication. In turn this allows us to foster further new lines of action. Social interaction results, therefore, in “conjoint communit[ies] of functional use” (Strauss, 2017, p. 151), as groups form around the points of agreement and the new meanings and classifications that have been negotiated. Community is established on the basis of shared social experience and shared symbolic understandings and not just on proximity or identity characteristics.

The question that arises, then, is who and how do people gain and maintain membership of these groups? Strauss argues that it is one thing to apply formal criteria of membership to a social group, but it is another thing to actually participate in a community. There are many instances when it is assumed that we might be a member of a specific community, usually because we share a common social characteristic with other people, such as ethnicity, gender or sexual identity. The problem of membership of communities defined in this way, however, is that this becomes problematic when we try to account for social relationships simply in terms of these potential allegiances. As Strauss points out “to ticket a man as formally holding membership in such and such groups barely suggests the nature and quality for his allegiances” (Strauss, 2017, p. 152). Social motivation, moreover, and the motivations that lead us to either reject or embrace potential group membership associations cannot ultimately be reduced, as Chakraborty indicated earlier, to a transaction of outwardly expressed cultural markers, behaviours and administrative classifications. This would amount to a psychological tyranny if it is imposed by others, and yet much of our digital engagement policies are designed to do just that as they are normalised in the process of classification.

5.1 Lines of Entry

It is worth quickly indicating how symbolic interaction views the wider patterns of social engagement, though there is not enough space here to reflect on each point in greater detail, that will have to be done at a later date. Robert Prus outlines how symbolic interaction views social life in the following terms:

- “Human group life is intersubjective...
- Human group life is (multi) perspectival...
- Human group life is reflective...
- Human group life is activity-based...
- Human group life is negotiable...
- Human group life is relational...
- Human group life is processual” (Prus, 1996, pp. 15-17).

This is a much more fluid and developmental approach to understanding social processes which moves beyond the stark and binary characteristics that administrative processes generally require. The challenge here is how we might look towards and anticipate future social developments so that we can engage in more tolerant and inclusive systems design and planning. The research and implementation process for new digital engagement services has to be adaptable to changing social models so that they are able to recognise and account for these more fluid processes. Can we build a model of civic and social engagement that is process-focussed and developmental? Can we approach

these issues developmentally so that they are shaped by the interplay of these factors, thereby allowing for greater variety, indeterminacy and self-identification within its operations?

The furore, for example, that follows trans-identity news stories is a good indicator of how contentious these topics are in practice, as individuals seek to identify as non-marginal groups. Many are increasingly able to assert themselves by linking social experiences that are presently outside of the mainstream binary positions of structured social identity. These debates indicate that we lack, at all levels, the social sensitivity and willingness to learn about how social experience changes and shifts, and how our social experience is continually redefined. As previously indicated, changes in one part of the symbolic and social environment interact with other parts of the social and symbolic environment, and will produce surprising results that are difficult to predict and control. The technological and communications changes of the last forty years are being played out against a backdrop of changing expectations of self-representation and increasingly assertive identity work. Self-identification patterns are being negotiated on a continuous basis by people who are newly linked and visible across global networks. Recognising and engaging with this ongoing process will be a major challenge in years to come.

We are moving away, then, from strong identification with traditional social roles in rigid social networks, and fixed forms of local engagement. As our communication and relationship management modes change into new processes of meaning-making and symbolic transformation, so too does our need to evaluate these processes afresh on their own terms. As Michael Polanyi argues, we really have to start to think about, and talk about, what kind of society we want to become, and in what way this society will “honour and respect the meaning achievements” of the past, while also creating space for new meaning to emerge? With the introduction of the internet and the world wide web we should be reminded, as Polanyi argues, that we live in a “society made up of a number of associations of free, self-governing personas, participating by mutual adjustment in the pursuit of various ends,” and that some of these pursuits and ends are “thought to be of such intrinsic worth that they create obligations to themselves, i.e. they engender respect for themselves” (Polanyi & Prosch, 1975, p. 210). The question, however, is how do we assess and evaluate these obligations and ends in ways that are developmental and caring and avoid imposing meanings and ruthlessly fixing categorisations on people’s identity within the administrative systems?

6 Communities of Feeling

The question that we might raise in future work as we seek to understand how digital engagement is promoted and understood, then, is how might these processes be played out in relation to the industrialisation and professionalisation of digital engagement as a formal set of administrative and online civic engagement practices? Choices have clearly been made about how these processes have been developed and implemented, and if recent reports into working conditions at the Home Office are correct, then the repressive and hostile environment that has been fostered in some parts of the UK governments engagement processes, both internally as well as externally, should be a warning that we should always be cautious about these issues.⁵ They are not neutral and they can have adverse effects as easily as they can have positive benefits.

Development approaches are usually dismissed as messy because they are sensitive to their context and they are reflective of the complex lives that people's lives. They are easy to dismiss with either moralism or with claims of their inefficiency, as we have seen with the introduction of Universal Credit. But development does matter, and the processes that we employ to bring that development about matters as much as the outcomes and goals that we are seeking to achieve. As Hanzi Freinacht points out, development is intrinsic to the realisation of our future social potential. A balanced view of development would therefore be one that recognises, not only social interaction, but also cognitive complexity and inner growth. A complexity and model of growth that can be balanced with our scientific and critical need to process data and understand a world of cause and effect would be most beneficial. As Freinacht argues,

“When we fail to recognise an obvious inner state or emotion within ourselves. If each person can hardly know her won state, how can we be expected to build a relatable community upon not only our won state, but the states of a whole group of people” (Freinacht, 2017, p. 277).

We will need, therefore, to foster and facilitate the work of a group of people who, according to Freinacht, are

“Complex thinkers, who never resort to magic beliefs or reductionism, and who are moved by a profound inner depth, who can work transnationally and work to create a more listening society, and who can treat all of the other value memes with kindness and respect” (Freinacht, 2017, p. 350).

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/apr/28/toxic-atmosphere-the-home-office-unit-everybody-wants-to-leave>

The complexity of this thinking has to see beyond the categorical and instead seek answers in the deeper-rooted archetypes that govern our collective relationships, our social consciousness and the communities of feeling to which we belong. This is because archetypes, as Jung argued, “are *transgressive*.” That is, they are not “limited to the psychic realm,” but by their nature are archetypal patterns that operate at a transgressive level, as they “can emerge into consciousness either from within the psychic matrix or from the world about us at once. When both happen at the same time, it is called synchronistic” (Stein, 1998, p. 201).

7 Conclusion

I will give the last word at this point in the development of this discussion to the words of Don and Alex Tapscott, who have embraced the challenge of blockchain models of technology as future innovation of considerable importance, and potentially as a model of wider social organisation and process development. They specify that, in order to

“Bootstrap our identity, we need a model that is distributed among and maintained by the people whose identities it protects so that everyone’s incentives align – an identity commons – with clear rights for users to steward their own identity, access (and allow others to access) and monetise their own data, and participate in rule making around the preservation and usage of the commons. It must exist independent of any corporate, government, or other third party, not subject to the agency risk of executives or political parties. It must interoperate with these institutions even as it outlasts them. It must outlive its users and enforce their rights to be forgotten, which would mean separating data rights from the actual data so that the rights holders could delete them. And, to be inclusive, it must be user-friendly with a low-tech mobile interface and low-cost dispute resolution” (Tapscott & Tapscott, 2018, p. xvii).

For years media theory and research has been critically of the process by which we construct and maintain our identities, especially in relation to power and social dominance. But if the world that Tapscott and Tapscott dream about becomes a reality, then we will need to be able to go beyond the simply pointing out what is at fault, and as Hanzi Freinacht states, “All according to the meta-modern dictum: after deconstruction must follow reconstruction” (Freinacht, 2017, p. 347).

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