

Tugging at the Seams: Understanding the Fabric of Social Sites

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ABSTRACT

Social networking websites have become increasingly popular in recent times, yet it can be difficult to understand the way in which people use these spaces. This poster presents a systematic deconstruction method which grants insight into the nature of a given experience, and shows how this knowledge can be used to reconstruct experiences in new contexts.

The authors demonstrate the method by applying it to some key facets of social websites, and discuss how the functionality might be reconstructed in different contexts such as ubiquitous computing. We evaluate the method and discuss the findings, noting that if social material can be provided in new contexts, far more people can be included in interactions which are currently limited to the web.

1. INTRODUCTION

Use of social networking sites has greatly increased in recent times, and understanding this new arena of social interaction can be problematic. Additionally, a large chunk of society is excluded from these facilities: for example, in general elderly people face a range of obstacles to the uptake of technology [2].

By fully understanding the experiences offered by social websites, it is possible to re-imagine those experiences in new contexts, perhaps using technologies with which offline people are familiar. Opening up fresh communication channels could help improve their general wellbeing, for example by improving contact with family and allowing access to the online content and communications facilities which so many of us take for granted.

To achieve our goal of broader access to online content, it is necessary to rebuild the web-based social fabric offered by social sites. Our vision comprises a social fabric - an interface and social model - supported by a messaging framework. The social fabric enables communication and browsing, facilitated by the messaging framework, which allows interaction via any of a number of communication channels. We demonstrate the vision with a scenario.

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This poster presents a systematic deconstruction process for understanding experiences, and shows how the results of the process can help reconstruct experiences in new contexts. It describes existing work and social networking websites, before explaining and applying the deconstruction process to this functionality. We discuss the process and results, before evaluating our contribution and describing future work.

2. UNDERSTANDING ONLINE SOCIAL PHENOMENA

Understanding the modern day web experience may not be simple: experiences which superficially appear similar may manifest differently in different media. This is demonstrated by Dix's work on Christmas crackers [1], which introduced the deconstruction technique: Dix deconstructed a physical social experience (pulling Christmas crackers), and reconstructed it in a new, digital medium.

In this poster, we describe deconstruction alongside Actor-Network Theory, a sociological tool which models the process by which people are recruited into a network.

Our aim is to deconstruct a digital experience (using social sites for communication and awareness of friends' activities) and reconstruct it in a different digital context, providing that information and interaction via novel pervasive channels. Here, we present deconstruction of public messaging, microblogging and photo sharing.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The social networking experience is generally subjective and ill-defined, resulting in challenges measuring the success of sites. Deconstruction is one technique which can bolster our efforts, while other techniques (such as applying ANT) provide alternative perspectives. Next steps include furthering our understanding of how to evaluate the results of deconstruction.

The functionality offered by social websites appears to map to various physical experiences such as conversation (direct or overheard), shared moments and seeing friends carry out actions.

The authors have also prototyped a framework to convey and translate messages between multiple modalities, based on preferences and context. A more sophisticated system is planned.

Access to the described social experiences forms the core of the social fabric supported by the messaging infrastructure: combining the two layers gives a fully-fledged multimodal social fabric. This is motivated by the ideal of allowing people without

use of digital technologies to access (and return) communication and social information which originated with these technologies.

4. REFERENCES

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