

## **Designing social media: Exploring ideas on sociality, design practices and contradictions**

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Sociality cannot be designed; it can only be designed for (Bouman *et al.* 2008). Much debate has been carried out recently in the literature about the effects social media has on our domains of sociality, in other words on the ways in which we associate, communicate and share information with each other. Particularly, boyd and Ellison (2008) argue that what makes social media unique (compared to other online services) is that they enable their members to articulate their existing, offline social relations and make them visible online. Members of social media are not necessarily looking for new ‘friends’ as much as relating to people they already know, sustaining online the community-centered sociality they developed offline. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue that the value of social media lies in that it allows not only existing friends but also strangers to associate with each other by means of sharing objects of interest, such as photos on Flickr or music on Last.fm, fostering online what Knorr Cetina (1997) calls an “object-centered sociality”. Wittel (2001) sustains that interactions on social media are not necessarily based on a shared history or interest. Rather, they are characterized by situational exchange of information and on fleeting caching ups, fostering what he terms a “network sociality”.

How web designers go about facilitating such rich and diverse forms of sociality on social media has received little attention in the literature. The aim of this exploratory study is to address this issue and obtain an insight into the design approaches, philosophies and ways of thinking and knowing designers employ in designing an engaging social media. Likewise, by using critical evaluation methods as proposed by Pawson and Tilly (1997), I intend to take the exploration a step further and offer insight into what designers see as the working ingredients of their designs, what makes them work (i.e. attract members, foster interactions between them etc.). I follow Cross (1982) and Lawson (2008) in arguing that web designers share particular “designerly ways of knowing and thinking” that reflect the nature of the design task they undertake and of the design problems they address. The research questions that guide this exploratory study are:

- What is ‘social’ for social media designers?
- What design approaches, philosophies and best practices are proposed in designing for meaningful and sustainable forms of social interactions?
- What contradictions, difficulties and paradoxes are there in the designerly ways of knowing and thinking about designing social media?

The empirical data on which this study is based consists of 7 in depth interviews with designers at major social media sites, among which are Last.fm, Google and Digg and 45 blog posts written by web designers. The keywords used to obtain these posts were “social media design”, “community design” and “interaction design”. A part of these posts were obtained from links mentioned in some of the posts obtained through the search. Both interviews and blog posts have been coded following a common coding scheme. The analysis of this data is currently underway.

Initial findings indicate that there is a paradox between the designers' definitions of "social" – seen as human to human interaction – and their ways of designing for social(ity) – which reflects more of a human-object-human interaction. Likewise, most of the design approaches identified in the data reflect elements of all three types of sociality mentioned in the social media literature. This initial finding illustrates that the current debate might be too restrictive. Instead it can focus on the mechanisms that enable different types of sociality between the same members of the same or different social media. A significant limitation of this study is that it focuses only on what designers say they do, and not on what they actually do when designing social media. This however, is addressed in the fieldwork I am conducting for my PhD.

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