An Alternative Approach for Research in ICT:

Foucaultian Methodology

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Various theoretical perspectives and methodologies are present for studying information and communication technologies (ICT). However, most of these approaches overlook the social and especially the historical aspects of the phenomena. The lack of these trigger overly deterministic and thereby mostly inaccurate findings regarding social change, which is also the case for the research in social network sites (SNSs). By proposing an alternative approach, based on Michel Foucault's philosophy, we aim to close the gaps both in SNSs and ICT literature in terms of methodology. Our goal in this article is not to outline a full research process but to introduce ICT researchers to Foucault's genealogy by using social network sites as an example.

1. Literature Review

1.1. Extant Literature

Social Network Sites (SNSs) have been the dominant Internet phenomena in the last couple of years because of their use as a second level network, based on not IP addresses but social ties. Most Internet users rely on them for accomplishing various tasks because SNSs include many different aspects of social media (Gilbert et al., 2008). Because of the massive interest from the society, researchers from various disciplines responded quite early to this phenomenon and many articles have been published (Livingstone, 2008). In SNSs research, majority of the methodologies are quantitative, where survey results, structured interviews, structured observation or public data are analyzed by various statistical methods, social network analysis or content analysis. There are also interpretive studies that employ qualitative methodologies such as case study or virtual ethnography.

However, Orgad points out that the boundaries of offline and online is not as clear as it used to be and studying SNSs only as online social formations is not enough (2007). Beer also advises a broader and holistic perspective where we see SNSs as manifestations and extensions of the entire social system (2008). In addition, most of the existing approaches overlook the social and especially the historical aspects of the phenomena. Therefore, majority of the research on SNSs is optimistic, carrying 'rhetoric of democratization' (Beer, 2008) or in other rare cases highly pessimistic, but in any case carry a huge deal of technological determinism, which is about believing that technology establishes the behaviours of the subjects.

1.2. Causes of Technological Determinism

There are three causes for this deterministic lens. First cause derives from substance ontology, which is the tendency for some researchers to treat the technology at hand as if it is asocial and therefore a stable tool, a finalized object (Introna, 2007). These result in deterministic snapshot studies because these researchers don't feel a need for a historical study. On the contrary, not only technology but all meanings, concepts and materialisations are on the continuous change through social interactions. In order to explain the phenomena studying present-day social relations are not enough as Kallinikos argues (2004). If we don't look at things from a historical perspective, we fail to understand the contingent nature of our research subjects.

Second cause, finalism influences researchers to see a rational continuity in the history of the mankind. It makes researchers take the current facts as a 'march forward', which looks like the result of a 'finalized necessity of development'. Under the affects of finalism, researchers treat the present-day findings as the results of the necessary change that has been introduced by technology without referring to any comparison to past structures. Third and final reason for technological determinism is presentism in the historical studies. It is interpreting past in terms of present-day values and concepts. People, who are under presentism, see major changes in the society, believing that our time is completely different than the past. Presentism cause researchers neglect the changes in meanings and definitions over time. However, what the term SNS refers to is constantly evolving and the common understanding that we have today is not the one that we had before.

2. An Alternative Approach

2.1. Research Question

We find the current literature on SNSs and ICT 'inadequate' and 'incomplete' in terms of methodology because of the above oversights and would like to take the challenge on a different level. Rather than looking for the social changes that SNSs might have caused, we should analyse whether SNSs themselves are the representatives of social change. We must ask a broader yet more illuminating research question: *How different are social network sites from the past social systems?* By studying SNSs with a historical perspective, we may be able to show whether they are representatives of a novel social system, which could instigate social change, either positive or negative.

In order to answer this question we propose the below:

1. Seeing and treating SNSs as if they are asocial and stable manifestations that we can trace both into the past and future would create various oversights and inaccuracies in research. Therefore, substance ontology and the resulting tool conceptualization have to be avoided and a much more holistic approach, based on analysing the discourse that defines the understanding of SNSs, has to be adopted.

2. Understanding change as a multi-level concept is important in realizing what kind of data and findings can claim substantive change in the nature of society. We shouldn't confuse a symbolic change or a time-and-space distanciation with a fundamental change in the nature of the society. Symbolic change is the change only in the signifier, where the underlying reality remains constant throughout the observed period. Time-and-space distanciation happens when technology brings efficiency and therefore compresses time and space (Poster, 1990: 8). Here, life is simply accelerated and shrunk rather than being structurally changed. However, we are after how much the current technological social system really differs from the past social systems according to the social relations, concepts and especially power relations, which define us.

3. Consequently, an empirical historical study, combined with social theory and philosophy, is what we need to show the actual changes in the society but most historical research is affected by presentism and finalism. Thus, in our alternative approach, the past and the present social systems have to be abstracted to power relations, which are conceptualized and captured above the social context yet still traceable back to it. Only then, it would be possible to compare different social systems in different timelines and discover whether there is a profound change in the society.

2.2. Theoretical Perspective

In order to comply with the above propositions, we choose to apply Foucault's theoretical perspective and methodology. Foucault's name is sometimes pronounced under critical research, yet he never had prescribed solutions or grand theories for emancipation. On the contrary, he used historical analyses to help us to reflect upon the current conditions of the research subject (Brooke, 2002). Foucault focused on the contingencies in the history of the subject and the human sciences, and opened up different ways to see things. He wasn't after the truth or a-temporal structures (Willcocks, 2003: 247). He was showing that truth was contingent throughout the history. That's why, leaving a priori concepts about human nature and moving onto historical discourses was crucial for him. In a Foucaultian research, we have to use the term *concept* rather than *theory* because Foucault was against strict theorizing. Foucaultian perspective has two fundamental concepts: *discourse* and *power/knowledge relations*.

Discourses construct the objects that they talk about by statements (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 61).

> [Discourse] whose meaning Foucault expands from 'a regulated order of talk' to cover also chains of statements, institutionalized statement processes and the historically and culturally determined rules that regulate the form and content of the order of the talk. (Willcocks, 2003: 250)

There are non-discursive real world entities like the body or the nature but nothing is really outside the discursive domain as discourses define their contemporary understandings (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 67). Discourses have neither 'inside' nor 'outside' (Kendall and Wickham, 1999). 'No inside' implies that there are no deep internal meanings in things as they are merely the products of discourses. 'No outside', suggests that while tracking a discourse we cannot go beyond the discursive surface of our study to another discursive domain or go deep through the non-discursive reality, because there is no meaning hidden in those places as well.

Unlike Kant, early Heidegger and other philosophers, who looked for existential preconditions, for Foucault discourse is all there is. Discourse is not a context where we can trace and analyze objects, subjects or even concepts, because they are in constant change without being finalized. Therefore, discourse is the foremost entity to be studied. However, discourse cannot be explored by an essential system of formation rules as structuralists believe and yet discourse is not as autonomous as early Foucault used to believe as well. Even if it was autonomous then we could have no analytical foundation that can conceptualize it relevant to our social context. Therefore, after a long period of self-imposed silence, Foucault came up with his concept of power to study the discourse and no longer claimed a position of phenomenological detachment (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 61, 77-78, 100, 103, 122).

Foucault believed that 'A normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centred on life' (1998: 144). Unlike the general belief that where power is not present, there can be true knowledge, for Foucault, there is no power in the absence of knowledge and vice versa. Thus, they are usually written together and imply one another. Foucaultian power is not a negative force but actually a productive one and should be seen as the invisible force that keeps the discourse going on, thereby the society (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 185-186).

Power relations are defined by various modes of action that act upon others' actions but not on their body (Foucault, 1982: 220). Foucaultian power can only be exercised over free subjects, because each individual must feel that they have "a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse components may be realized" (Foucault, 1982: 221). If power limits the body rather than constraining actions, then it doesn't stay in the background, but renders itself visible; this is not the Foucaultian power, which should be nonsubjective, not present in the will of an individual or a group.

Still, this doesn't mean that the Foucaultian power is unintentional (Foucault, 1998: 94-95). All power relations are meaningful with specific objectives, but these objectives do not originate from certain individuals. At the local level, the tactics of power – normal observable power, not the Foucaultian one - is explicit and rational, but all these local tactics affect each other and form the system of power relations on the background. The local tactics don't consciously relate themselves to this system, as they are unaware of it. However, the resulting strategies, *technologies of power*, are anonymous and hidden yet still deliberately coordinate the local tactics.

2.3. Methodology

Foucaultian methodology has two separate phases, archaeology and genealogy, but usually the entire research process is called only as genealogy. Archaeology is studying general history rather than total history (Kendall and Wickham, 1999: 24-25). Total history sums up the progress of a certain phenomenon in a rational order, however, in general history, the statements are not organized. Our judgement is suspended because we refuse to evaluate the statements outside of their historical context. We just document the discursive statements for a certain phenomenon by focussing on the contin-

gent nature of history.

After the archaeological phase, where we come up with 'meaningless' results, genealogy starts. As a genealogist, we change our mood and we switch to, as Foucault said, 'lighthearted positivism' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 105). We start diagnosing our 'meaningful' text, and 'concentrate on the relations of power, knowledge and body in modern society'(Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 104-117). Basically, we analyze the discursive statements with power/knowledge relations in mind to discover the technologies of power in the discourse and the resulting social system. In short, Foucault's genealogy avoids to pitfalls of other methodologies by analyzing subjects and objects without resort to theory or deep meaning (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 183).

Hook states that a Foucaultian discourse analysis 'cannot remain simply within the text, but needs to move in and out of the text' (2007: 134). It is a double analysis where you concentrate both on actual practices and discursive statements, which objectivise them. This is actually what Foucault calls constructing the grid of analysis, *dispositif* (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982: 121). Dispositif is combining both the episteme and the discourse in your analysis. This results in analysing both the discursive and the non-discursive, which includes finalized activities and manifestations (Jaeger, 2001: 57). The discursive and the non-discursive mutually shape each other. The dispositif for the entire society is a huge social network, which defines all understanding, therefore there is no way to capture it wholly for any given research topic. We have to limit our studies in the selection of discursive and non-discursive data and focus only on the ones that relate directly to our phenomenon.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

Foucault defines three types of relationships: non-discursive, discursive and power relations. These three intersecting types are in a constant mode of stimulation and negotiation in various interstices. There is no single balanced version of these that is prevalent throughout the society but sometimes, these three areas form a distinct block of 'capacity-communication-power' (Foucault, 1982: 218). Various institutions can be seen as a *block* as well, where these types of relationships are materialized. These blocks might be good places to start the analyses. However, analysing power relations cannot be limited to the study of institutions. We also have to analyse the relevant discourses. Accordingly, we have to conceptualize SNSs in two parts, nondiscursive and discursive.

Our first part of the conceptualization, the non-discursive, consists of various practices and materializations. If we stick to Foucault's methodology, for the non-discursive part, it would be best to conceptualize SNSs as "carefully defined institutions" (Foucault, 1982: 222), where the users gather to socialize, while being governed by the SNSs' internal policies. To emphasise and analyse materialization, SNSs' software can be seen as architectural objects, where the technologies of power are embedded in. The members' online actions and social interactions within these institutions are the non-discursive practices that we are after. Like the architecture, these actions embody certain technologies of power that are at play.

Second part of the conceptualization consists of various discourses that have shaped the today's SNSs by carrying the same technologies of power within the discursive statements.

Obviously, there are numerous discourse planes that join to the discussion but we have to limit ourselves to the most direct ones regarding our aim. The discourses that we concentrate on are the ones about defining SNSs and their proposed social effects, especially on individual liberation. Here, the most effective medium is the mass media especially newspapers, where there are constantly articles and news about SNSs. Even the results of the academic articles and the summary of the books are conveyed through daily news. Owners of the SNSs are also influential in the discourse by their mission and vision statements, personal blogs etc. Finally, users of SNSs discuss at the forums and discussion boards within SNSs about their rights and expectations from the company and the software.

We can gather the above discursive and non-discursive data to construct SNSs with power/knowledge relations in mind. Still, we need additional sources for our genealogy, so that we can compare SNSs with the other historical social systems. Foucault already studied various discourses and institutions, and in his books, we can find the general technologies of power that belongs to certain timelines in our history. We may use these descriptions in our studies for comparative purposes. This approach is also consistent with what Foucault advises at the end of Discipline and Punish: 'At this point I end a book that must serve as a historical background to various studies of the power of normalization and the formation of knowledge in modern society' (1991).

3. Discussion

The major limitation of a Foucaultian theoretical perspective is only being able to produce redescriptions. There is neither exploration nor explanation involved in the Foucaultian studies and thereby no action plan as well. In addition, because of the sceptic nature of Foucaultian philosophy, there is no way to prove that these descriptions are better than the existing ones (Prado, 2000: 38). Besides, as some researchers claim, we can go back in time forever to trace the construction of knowledge and facts. Nevertheless, it is not about truth finding or a question of where to stop. As long as we reach to an alternative viewpoint that disrupts the current perception of the phenomenon, then we are one step closer to a wiser action plan.

Foucault chooses to stay out of the interpretive context by focussing only on the power relations. With his methodology, it is not possible to do a more in-depth study that would also analyse the interpretive context. Yet, a study that might trace a phenomenon both on the power relations level and also on the interpretive context might be very rewarding. Even though, we don't need this for the SNSs example, in most ICT studies, this might give more empirical strength and result in more specific findings regarding the phenomenon. Shoshana Zuboff's (1988) book, *In the Age of the Smart Machine*, is a good example where she successfully employs Foucault's theoretical perspective and power concept by providing detailed historical analyses about the role of IT in the long-term discourse of the work environment (Willcocks, 2006: 278, Willcocks, 2003: 268-269, 1988). However she also, by employing phenomenology, explores various technologies of power on the material level.

4. Conclusion

As Willcocks reminds us, in Foucaultian methodology, we don't focus on materialized technologies but on social and behavioural technologies that generate the contemporary un-

derstanding of the these materializations (2006). These social technologies are tied to the *power relations* within the discursive and non-discursive. If we can identify these relations, then we can come up with an alternative descriptions of ICT based on power strategies. This abstraction can help us to put ICT into a historical perspective, where we can avoid substance ontology, presentism and finalism. This way, we won't fall into the trap of technological determinism while comparing ICT with past social structures and will have more accurate findings regarding social change.

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