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Blogging about climate-friendly soups and twittering about eco-cleaning: Practising environmental information in social media

Introduction

This paper discusses construction, production and distribution of environmental information in social media. More precisely, the focus is on people's accounts of their everyday live practices aimed at leading what are considered (more) 'environmentally friendly' lives in social media. In these often short accounts certain sets of everyday life practices are continuously aligned with environmental destruction and protection. This paper seeks to establish how through the repeated reproduction of these alignments situated information on the environment is constructed and made available. Furthermore, it asks if this could contribute to our understanding of what makes environmental information meaningful and what it could imply for our framing of information practices as productive as tools for change. Studies of practices are currently a highly topical area within information studies (e.g. Kjellberg 2010, Lloyd, 2010, Lloyd & Talja, 2010; McKenzie 2010, Pilerot & Limberg 2011; Savolainen 2008; Sundin & Francke 2009, Veinot 2007). Environmental information on the other hand is a lot less prominent in the field. An indirect aim of this paper is therefore to stimulate a discussion on what information studies can contribute to environmental research.

Background

Environmental information is often abstract and badly anchored in people's experiences in their everyday lives. This contributes to the disconnect that exists for most people between what they know about environmental destruction and protection and how they act (Bartiaux 2008; Haider, in press; Hobson, 2003, Shove 2005). However, when talking about environmental information, the focus is often on information campaigns carried out by various organisations. Peoples' stories and accounts of what they actually do, amongst themselves in non-official contexts, on the other hand, are rarely considered. Yet, these are rich and very diverse sources of environmental information, more precisely of experienced practices that are considered environmentally relevant.

Theoretical frame

The paper unites an interest in two theoretical perspectives. Firstly, it is informed by theories of practices. Here, a starting point is taken in an understanding of practices as series of routine-based activities that are performative (e.g. Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki 2001). Yet, since in many cases environmentally responsible practices are about doing things in different ways this focus on routines is balanced by considering the disruptive potential of practices of and for change (Knorr-Cetina 2001). Secondly, the paper is guided by an interest in the internet's role in mediating or supporting civic engagement in matters of societal relevance. Here, it draws on the notion of *subactivism*, "small-scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and remain submerged in everyday life" (Bakardjeva 2009, p.92).

Material and method

The internet is full with suggestions for reducing ones impact on the environment. Many, especially those in social media, are published and produced by people in the course of their everyday and often domestic lives. People use social media to tell about their experiences with acting more environmentally friendly. Very concretely they talk about what they do and sometimes they provide information on how to do as they. Examples are myriad and include practices such as recycling, composting or choosing certain products. Cycling or avoiding flying are on the list, using less electricity, avoiding plastic, eating vegetarian are further examples. The forums for accounting for these practices are many. Blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube are used amongst other similar platforms. Often, taking advantage of social media's architectures, different platforms are woven together in diverse ways. Importantly, in these notes and stories information on the environment, its destruction and protection is being created, re-negotiated and spread.

This study is based on a qualitative, interpretative analysis of content, materiality and form of 10 Swedish language blogs, dedicated specifically to aspects of environmentally friendly everyday life. The blogs were selected from a set of 60 interlinked environmental blogs, active during January/February 2011. The analysis looks specifically at accounts of routines related to environmentally relevant practices; how they are established, maintained, questioned or disrupted. This is complemented by an analysis of the mash-up architecture of the blogs. This concerns if and how the integration of other social media applications (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Delicious) works to situate these blogs within a *network of practice* (Brown & Duguid, 2000 p.141-142) and if this can make *subactivist* engagement more visible.

Preliminary Results and Discussion

The short narratives on environmentally relevant practices people generate, publish, comment on and re-distribute in these blogs are a type of personalised environmental information, very concrete and down-to earth. They are inseparable from the story that is being told on the person's daily life and its practices. This is in line with how much of social media works. Most applications build on the idea that everybody is at the centre of its own constantly shifting and growing network – of interest, of social contacts or similar (Baym, 2010). This ego-centredness fosters a strong focus on self-display, which in turn lends itself to making public (in addition to other things) seemingly mundane everyday life practices. Moreover, it is very easy to generate content either from scratch or through copying or forwarding and to link into a web of already existing content and relations. Since search engines, specifically Google, rank social media content high, they are also easily found.

Routinisation is essential to environmentally relevant practices. Likewise, the routinised alignment of certain practices with the environment is indispensable for environmental information to work at all. At the same time, breaking with routines, dismantling and re-arranging practices is what makes them possible in the first place. Hence, the visible *re-normalisation*, accompanied by constant negotiations, is probably what makes the stories told in the blogs studied meaningful and informative, in the most pragmatic of ways.

These accounts of seemingly ordinary, often domestic practices are many things, but at least three are important for our purposes – on different levels: Firstly, for us as researchers they are rich accounts for studying the situated-ness of environmental information. They let us see some of the stories people tell about the strategies through which practices are aligned with environmental protection, but also destruction, and how these are being popularised and routinised. In addition, we can frame them as information in two different ways. They are of course valuable information on enacted environmental protection and destruction that can be found on the web. Furthermore, if we think of information practice as an analytical tool rather than a fixed category, they can also be looked at as stories of information practices. In fact, if we want to think of information practices as being able to be disruptive and involved in

change, it is this that makes them especially relevant. In order to be that, it is necessary to see them as embodied (Lloyd, 2010) and situated (Anderson, 2007; Haider, in press) and I think importantly also as productive.

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