CONVERGENCE: Managing + Designing Position Statement

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Organizations and Social Media: Hypotheses for Organizing

Social media have recently drawn a lot of attention from businesses, academia, and the public alike. Social media hold the promise for new ways of working and organizing through provision of two-way communication environments. However, there are many challenges in the way of creating effective social media strategies within organizations. One of these challenges is how to integrate the fluidity that is inherent in social networks and maintain the stability of the organization at the same time. Faced with this challenge, many organizations adopt strategies that are reductive. Some see social media as a source of free data or free labor. Some use social media as yet another advertising channel to cast well-crafted and scripted messages, while others consider it as a liability and are solely focused on crafting strict rules about whether and how their members may engage with social media.

The premise of this position paper is that first principles such as pleasure, justice, or freedom are central in giving direction and form to products including organizations and social media. Principles organize individual and group activities giving them direction and meaning. In the context of designing products, including organizations and social media, principles shape the vision and purpose, guide the selection of practices and methods, and are central in shaping ultimate form and structure. At the same time, both organizations and social media are designed environments that bring people together to engage in collaborative endeavors or come together around shared interests and concerns. So, we might ask, how do these products shape the changing and organic form of people’s experience around them? Is it possible that organizations and social media act similar to principles for our individual and collective action? Or in short, that they are principles given tangible form?

As a hypothesis, the notion that products are principles follows the works of John Dewey and pragmatic philosophy in its interpretation of what principles are. For Dewey, principles are neither unchangeable truths, nor expressions of outbreaks of passing feelings. They are rather hypotheses for how one might act in the face of uncertainty. They point toward possibilities but are not prescriptive. Similarly, the hypothesis that products are principles is not meant to cast products as deterministic in nature. Rather, it is meant to highlight that products too offer hypotheses and point to possibilities for how people may engage in collaborative endeavors, come together around shared interests and concerns, or bind around shared values. Organizations and social media are the same in that they organize the relationships and activities of people. They are both products of design aiming at creating environments for collective action.

Starting from this hypothesis, we might say then that an organization’s social media strategy is ultimately a strategy for bringing people together. As a result, it is closely tied to the core vision of the organization for engaging people. Indeed the reductive approaches toward social media are indicative of the dominance of the principles of efficiency and productivity within organizations that adopt them. Yet, social media challenge organizations to move beyond a concern for the logistical and operational side and to engage in the complexity of human relations and interactions.

Consequently, for many organizations, forming a social media strategy involves a clear articulation and perhaps a re-imagination of their core vision and purpose. While an effective social media strategy is highly dependent on the specifics of an organization’s situation, one necessary step in this process is the recognition of individual agency in action and imagination. This shift of principle has several implications, each of which marks a beginning for further inquiry and re-invention of how this principle may translate into action considering the specifics of the situation. Firstly, it problematizes defined boundaries for organizations, challenging established notions of who is recognized as part of them. Secondly, it challenges fixed and well-defined roles for groups and individuals involved with the organization. Finally, it underlines the need for making the connections and relationships to the organization meaningful for diversity of people who are involved in it at different levels. In doing so, it positions dialogue as central in the practices of the organization and key in developing its capacity to encounter and communicate with diversity of individuals, communities, and organizations.

The above-mentioned directions of change all point to organization as a living system that is constantly re-invented. Consequently, the power of the principle of agency in action and imagination is not to be found in a fixed and possibly dogmatic interpretation but as a place for invention and emergence of multiple ways of acting and organizing. More specifically, its power lies in what may be cast as a paradox—that it is abiding and generative of plurality of principles all at once.

REFERENCES
