



Extended Abstract

Negotiating the architectural power of connective media. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model and the critical study of digitally afforded social environments

Seija Ridell¹, and Minna Saariketo*¹

¹ University of Tampere / Kalevantie 4, 33014 Tampereen yliopisto, Finland

E-Mails: seija.ridell@uta.fi; minna.saariketo@uta.fi

* Author to whom correspondence should be addressed; Tel.: +358 40 419 4447

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Introduction

The integration of Facebook and other web 2.0 platforms as parts of daily routines in Western societies has made ever more pressing the question of how these technologically mediated environments afford and mould people's activities and interactions. A particularly pertinent issue that has received only scant scholarly attention so far is how users experience, understand and potentially reflect the 'architecture' of the digitally enabled social spaces. In other words, do users pay attention, and if so, in what ways, to the spatial characteristics generated by the computer code that afford their communicative actions? A related question concerns the users' perceptions and views of the interlinked technological and economic dynamics that underlie the production of these spaces and to which the users' own activities contribute.

In this paper, we propose that Stuart Hall's classic encoding/decoding model is useful for grasping critically how people (inter)act in and understand the distinctive spatial nature of web 2.0 environments. It is our contention that the model, despite being created for the analysis of mass communication (and using television as its example), continues to offer valuable theoretical and methodological footholds.

In current research on web-based social media, two lines of study in particular are prominent: one of them being concerned with user practices on social media sites, and the other focusing on these sites' operational logic from a political-economic perspective. In conceptual terms, the difference between these research foci is one between the level of individual agency and that of the systemic structure (see, Berg 2012). Analyses that combine these two foci are rare. Instead, studies that explore user practices tend to ignore the economic structures and other macro-level forces that shape the online spaces' architectural set-up, thereby affecting and steering user experience in them. When concentrating on the structural and systemic aspects, researchers, in turn, are inclined to dismiss the potentially active role of the users.

Our proposal in the paper is that Hall's encoding/decoding model provides a fruitful starting point for addressing these two aspects as irrevocably entwined. To demonstrate the model's critical analytic potential in the contemporary context, we use as an example our empirical study of Finnish users and non-users of Facebook.

Hall's model meets connective media

Since its introduction by Hall in the early 1970s as a colloquium presentation and a stencilled paper in the CCCS series (Hall 1973), and after being published in an edited and more concise form in 1980, the encoding/decoding model has gained a firm and largely unquestioned position in the field of cultural media studies. True, the crudeness of the model was already being criticised in a constructive manner when first applied in empirical analysis by David Morley (see Morley 1980, 1981; also Morley 2006), and critical views have been presented even later (see, e.g. Pillai 1992; Schröder 2000; for an outright rejection, see Barker 2003). Nevertheless, the model has not been seriously challenged nor substantially reworked as a conceptual framework. This, in fact, was something Hall himself regretted (see Angus & al. 1994). Indeed, Michael Gurevitch and Paddy Scannell (2003) were able to claim more than ten years ago that Hall's model exemplifies "canonization achieved".

The canonization of the encoding/decoding model can be said to concern primarily media audience studies, which has tended to understand the model and utilise it in quite a restricted manner. First, audience studies scholars have focused almost exclusively on the decoding of media representations. Second, they have more or less ignored the relation of production, as well as the technical infrastructure that Hall (1980: 130) also distinguished, to the decoding side of his diagram that describes the whole production–consumption–realisation–reproduction circuit. In the present digitalised and networked condition, the encoding side is extremely important to take into account. Even more pertinent today, given the transformations brought about by technological development and its entanglement with centralised economic forces, are the model's productional and infrastructural aspects.

In order to tap the methodological potential inherent in Hall's model, we bring it into dialogue with the critical political economy of web-based media. More particularly, we aim to rework the model for the purposes of empirical research by cross-pollinating it with the notion of connective media, as defined by José van Dijck (see, e.g., van Dijck 2013). By doing this we seize Hall's insistence that if

the encoding/decoding model is “of any purchase now and later”, it “needs to be worked with and developed and changed” (Angus & al. 1994: 255).

We apply van Dijk’s distinction between connectedness and connectivity and support her suggestion that the term ‘social media’ should be replaced with ‘connective media’ in order to capture more adequately the commercially informed logic of automated data collection on web 2.0 platforms. While ‘social media’ resides firmly within the hegemonic discourse of connectedness that the owners of sites such as Facebook themselves foster, ‘connective media’ enables shifting of attention to the economically driven technical aspects of data mining – an aspect that keeps disappearing in research that focuses on activities and interactions afforded by online environments.

Negotiations of Facebook environment

We illustrate the present applicability of the encoding/decoding model with a small-scale empirical study on user and non-user understandings of Facebook’s operational logic and of the site’s spatial characteristics. The data were collected in four focus group discussions (eight users, nine non-users) in spring 2013 in Turku, Finland.

In the qualitative analysis of the data, inspired by Hall’s model, five negotiation positions were constructed in relation to Facebook as connective media: the positions of approval, belittlement, normativity, compliance and disapproval. A general observation in our study is that what users value most is the possibility of staying in contact with people; this is an aspect that several previous studies about Facebook have also shown to be the main reason for using the platform (see, e.g. Ridell 2011; Joinson 2008). The disapproving position was the only one in which focus group participants reflected on Facebook’s architectural affordances. In this position, users paid attention to how the site’s spatial features affect connections with other people.

The positions of belittlement, normativity and compliance demonstrate different levels of approval. In the position of belittlement, people did not find anything alarming in the operational logic of Facebook. In the position of normativity, they considered ‘proper use’ (exemplified by their own uses) as a way to avoid potential problems with the platform. Finally, in the position of compliance, people noticed that there are certain problems and concerns about the site but tolerated them, as there seem to be no alternatives.

Our analysis suggests that positive user experiences on web 2.0 platforms and the routinisation of their use as an integral part of everyday life diminish the likelihood that users would question the material-economic preconditions of these environments. Relatedly, the operational logic of data mining is considered uncomplicated by users, and there is little capacity and motivation among them to imagine alternatives to the profit-driven model.

In our example, the notion of negotiated code (or negotiated reading) in the encoding/decoding model is especially central. As Hall stresses, we are not talking about “one position at all” but about a ‘space’ which is “filled out by a number of different positions” (Angus & al.: 265). Moreover, even in the

case of mass communication, which serves as the primary context for Hall, “negotiated readings are probably what most of us do most of the time” (ibid.). In our study, we approached all decodings as negotiations. These variations range from total rejection (such as refusing to watch *The Social Network* film and to visit websites of companies that use Facebook pages to advertise themselves) to feelings of discomfort due to Facebook having become increasingly commercial (experiences of an intimate space having disappeared and being replaced by a space where one is continuously bombarded with advertising).

Rethinking determination in the digitalised condition

Based on our discussion, we raise key issues for further reflection in critical cultural studies. These include the need to rethink the very notions of encoding and decoding, as well as reassess their (inter)relations. With regard to encoding, we should keep in mind Hall’s remark that it is “a much more contested and variable space than comes through in this model” (Angus & al. 1994: 263). As for decoding, one can ask how we should reassess Hall’s observation that decoding as an activity takes place in a position that is always structured in dominance (see ibid.: 261, 263). This is a problematic that cultural audience studies transformed into a question of ‘active audience,’ thereby simplifying at the outset the encoding/decoding model, reducing its scope and losing its critical edge.

Today, due to the connective affordances of digital networked technologies, the whole question of determination that we find at the core of Hall’s model has become ever more complex and fluid. A major issue in this regard, and one that particularly calls for rethinking, is that negotiation(s) in contemporary media environments do not concern merely, or even primarily, symbolic meanings produced and available in them, but rather their architectural and invisibly material dimensions as spaces of (inter)action.

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