

Conference Report: The Internet as Playground and Factory (November 12-14, 2009, The New School, New York City, USA)

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Several hundred people attended the conference "The Internet as Playground and Factory" that took place from November 12th-14th, 2009, and was organized by Trebor Scholz and his colleagues at the New School in New York City (see <http://www.digitallabor.org>).

The topic of the conference was that on the Internet, and especially on what is by some termed web 2.0, social software, or social networking sites, play and labour tend to converge and how this play-labour convergence should be assessed.

Numerous scholars, activists, and artists presented their works in 20 sessions. The presented works can be situated within an emerging transdisciplinary field that transgresses the boundaries between the social sciences and computer science and that has been labelled with terms such as ICTs and society, social informatics, information society studies, Internet research, or new media & society (compare: Christian Fuchs. 2008. Introduction to the special issue on "ICTs and society: PhD students' transdisciplinary research projects. tripleC 6(2): i-viii, <http://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/80/74>).

The methods used in the scholarly works that were presented can in my opinion be roughly divided into three types: First, the narrative style: scholars who used this method based their presentation on the discussion of concrete examples for the Internet as playground and/or factory and tended to discuss quotations from various theories and approaches. This was the most frequently employed method of analysis. Second, theory

construction: some of the participants tried to construct new theories of Internet labour and/or Internet play that are grounded in existing theories and go beyond these theories. Third, empirical research: others presented results of case studies that were conducted by employing data analysis or empirical social research. Also any kind of combination of these methods could be found at the conference.

"The Internet as Playground and Factory" has shown that the field of ICTs and society is continuously growing in size and importance, that this field has also created a multiplicity of critical approaches, and that it is important and promising that critical Internet studies are further pursued and advanced.

If the Internet is a playground and/or a factory and what kind of Internet is desirable are highly normative and political questions that were at the heart of the discussions at the conference. This political dimension is also related to the question to which extent the contemporary Internet is or is not a democratic space, which democratic and anti-democratic potentials are inherent in the interrelation of the contemporary Internet and contemporary society, and which strategies for political transformation make sense and should be employed in this context.

In my opinion, three positions on these questions could be identified in the presentations and discussions at the conference. These positions partly overlap, are partly complementary, but to a certain extent also stand in contradiction to each other.

Representatives of the first position hold that there is a symmetric exchange between

users and Internet companies so that the latter make money profits and in exchange provide benefits in the form of free access for users to technologies that allow information sharing, communication, and community building. The Internet is conceived in this position as being a participatory system because it allows users to become information producers and to create and share user-generated content. Representatives of the second position tend to argue that the Internet is not a truly democratic or participatory space, but has deficiencies and is shaped by asymmetric power structures. However, there would be democratic projects and potentials of the Internet that allow envisioning the realization of an alternative, people-centred Internet. The representatives of this position are thus rather optimistic and argue that projects such as for example peer-to-peer platforms, open access, open content, free software, open source, alternative online media, digital art projects, cyberprotest, public online media, public access projects, etc are likely to bring about positive changes. Representatives of the third position see the Internet as being shaped by asymmetric power relations. They tend to argue that there are positive potentials and projects for an alternative participatory Internet, but that the contemporary Internet is largely shaped by powerful actors, especially corporations, that derive material benefits at the expense of Internet users, commodify the

Internet, exploit Internet users, and appropriate the Internet commons. Categories employed in this context include exploitation, class, capitalism, alienation, enclosure, appropriation, or expropriation. The political implication of this position is that political movements and organizations are needed that bring about wider transformations of society so that a commons-based and participatory Internet becomes possible.

These three positions on the one hand partly overlap or are simultaneously present in approaches, and on the other hand are to a certain degree opposites that result from different political and theoretical positions. Opposites need not and cannot always be overcome, it is possible that they stand side by side and create productive tensions that advance the overall field. This requires to acknowledge that there are certain commonalities and to agree that there are disagreements.

Overall, the conference “The Internet as Playground and Factory” has shown that Critical Internet Studies is alive and well and is a subfield that is growing in size and importance of the transdiscipline ICTs and society. The practical hope for the future is that Internet scholars will continue to work in the critical spirit that has shaped this conference and thereby will try to contribute to bring about a participatory Internet in a participatory society.

Conference links

Conference web site: <http://www.digitallabor.org>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/idctweets>

Conference Twitter hashtag: #IPF09

Flickr: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/newschool/collections/72157600533401886/>

Vimeo: <http://vimeo.com/user2103510/videos/sort:date>

Conference video streams: <http://streamingculture.parsons.edu/>

Mailing list: <http://digitallabor.org/discussion>