

Controversy and Publics: Mapping Issue Networks

Introduction

In his book 'We Have Never Been Modern' Bruno Latour takes us through a host of complex 'hybrid articles' (1993, p. 2) that he encounters in his daily newspaper. The articles include the AIDS virus, computer chips controlled by Japanese scientists, frozen embryos, Monsanto and the Pope. In this seminar we are going to conduct a form of applied Latourian mapping where we are going to use newspapers to bring into view hybrid issues and novel objects.

Many social scientists argue that we are now living in a society that is dominated by developments in and issues associated with science and technology. For example: human-animal embryo research; the use of biofuels; DNA testing and the loss of personal electronic data. One approach social scientists use to understand our technoscientific society is to study such controversies. Here, a controversy can be understood as a state of affairs where matters surrounding an issue are not yet settled: where competing technologies, scientific claims or policy issues are open to scrutiny, questioning and counter claims. For designers and the design of new artifacts, applications and services controversies offer a number of opportunities, including but not limited to the following. First, controversies provide topical issues of significance and relevance for design. Second, controversies expose the emergence of new technologies, users, sociotechnical practices as well as new and yet undefined ethical contexts. Third, controversies reveal how our futures are not, as yet locked down, but are instead being contested in the present. The potential of designing artifacts and services as a means to engage publics around particular issues, or 'matters of concern' suggests that design can be employed as a means to explore and intervene in emerging sociotechnical matters.

In this workshop we are going to use newspapers and magazine articles to identify issues and then map the constituent heterogeneous elements of the controversy. Moreover, you are going to consider the kind of publics that are formed around the issue and what kind of futures are implicitly and explicitly proposed by the various participants in the issue.

Seminar Plan

1. Newspaper Reading & Issue Selection (30 mins)

First, you will be split into groups with whom you will work to identify and map issues throughout the seminar. Read through the newspapers and magazines provided, looking for articles that you find interesting, curious and lengthy. This is a quiet time to allow you to read a selection of newspapers and identify interesting and topical articles and issues. Then, in your groups discuss the articles and choose one issue you believe to have the most mileage for mapping.

2. Issue Mapping (45 mins)

In your group further discuss the article and as you read make a visual chart of the claims, matters of concern, stakes, people, organizations, technologies and objects that are featured in the article. For example, an article published by the Guardian Newspaper (Thursday May 8th, 2008) reports on the issue of cannabis classification. The issue hinges around how to manage the legal rating of cannabis as a means to combat drug abuse. The article reveals the associations between the government, scientists, the then UK Home Secretary, homegrown skunk, government expert bodies on drugs (ACMD), the police, psychiatric patients, a drugs information charity and so on.

3. Group Discussion (45 mins)

In the final part of the seminar you will present your issue map to the group. You will be asked to take us through what you think are the key actors, publics, technologies, users, relationships and stakes in the issue.

Materials & Process

You will be provided with newspapers, sticky-notes marker pens. You are asked to visualize an issue and in doing so you might consider cutting out your article and using it as a centre point for a diagram. You might consider listing all the actors, relationships, stakes and claims on sticky-notes and ordering the notes into a relevant pattern.

References

Latour, B. (1993). We Have Never Been Modern. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.