7 Symbolic instruments and the Internet mediation of knowledge and expertise[1]

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Abstract

In this chapter, I demonstrate how Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic instruments, that is structured and structuring structures, can be applied to the Internet to demonstrate the mediation and construction of knowledge and validation of expertise. This qualitative pilot study explored the online language and interrelationship between expertise, authority and constructions of knowledge. The structuring structures of five technology-focused websites are mapped in order to convey how the structured structures of online discourse mediate knowledge and expertise. The portrayal and authorization of 'experts' within these online forums help to shape the way that knowledge is constructed, contested and shared in the twenty-first century. This article extends Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice in two ways: (1) arguing that the Internet is a field comprised of many sub-fields, and (2) identifying some of the symbolic instruments that structure and are structuring knowledge and expertise via social media available on the Internet.

Keywords: Bourdieu, symbolic, internet, expertise, structuring, structures.

1.   Introduction

While recent attention has been placed on collecting data from online forums (e.g. Loveland & Popescu, 2011; Vromen, 2011), focus is needed to explore the social process of attributing expertise (Collins & Evans, 2007) made by multiple Internet users. This project specifically focused on how active Internet users negotiate, construct and challenge knowledge and validate expertise. The purpose of this research was to document how people are constructing knowledge when they engage within and as part of online communities. This chapter reports on a recent study which conducted its research online via archival data collection in the form of observing the online from the offline (researcher as observer), that is, an ethnographic influenced approach.

The research question that this chapter focuses on answering is: how can we describe the online discourse used to negotiate and construct knowledge and expertise? This chapter details how active Internet users are validating knowledge and expertise via structuring structures independently constructed as part of a small number of online communities. These social practices construct authoritative knowledge and expertise only made possible via the user-generated nature of social media, namely Web 2.0 (for example, previously in the first version of the Internet Web 1.0, only those with computer programming knowledge could build and modify content on the Internet). User-generated content through the likes of blogs, wikis and social networking sites (which is what comprises Web 2.0) has meant that not only can more people participate in what goes 'on' the Internet, but also the ease of participation and the ubiquity of access have meant that the number of participants has exponentially increased (though not without its complications, see Kahne, Middaugh, Lee, & Feezell, 2012; Tacchi, 2012). The use of the Internet and its Web 2.0 features available via social media can be considered a social practice of mediated action within our particular historical moment and material space that is a site of engagement. Scollon and Scollon (2004) introduced the notion of *nexus analysis* which they claim

> "entails not only a close, empirical examination of the moment under analysis but also an historical analysis of these trajectories or discourse

cycles that intersect in that moment as well as an analysis of the anticipations that are opened up by the social actions taken in that moment" (p. 8).

Scollon and Scollon (2004) claim that a "social action taken repeatedly is considered a *social practice*" (p. 12). The regularity of access, postings and negotiation of social media means that this social practice is undertaken globally and daily by millions of people throughout the world.

This chapter provides some insight as to how technology is shaping society, and how society, specifically Internet users, are constructing knowledge. The design and structure of the websites presented in this article are accessed and used by Internet users who are arguably shaping how the Internet is used and perhaps the Internet itself. This phenomenon suggests that we should acknowledge the potential democratization of knowledge through the take-up of user-generated Internet sites. These websites showcase how knowledge has been obtained through experience and is being shared via the Internet medium. The article fills a gap in the literature surrounding the informal education freely available and being used globally, resulting from the online dispersion of tacit knowledge.

2.   Theoretical framework

Bourdieu's (1991) key concepts of *field, capital, structuring structures and structured structures* (also known as *symbolic instruments*) provide a useful framework to analyze the structure of the websites. Bourdieu (1991) explains structuring structures to be symbolic instruments for knowing and constructing the objective world and/or symbolic forms, compared to structured structures, which he defines as means of communication, language or culture versus discourse or behavior, or symbolic objects. He claimed,

> "[t]hese classificatory schemes (structuring structures) are, essentially, the product of the incorporation of the structures of the fundamental distributions which organize the social order (structured structures)" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 98).

Bourdieu (1992) defined a *field* as a "configuration of relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon the occupants, agents or institutions" (pp. 72-73). A field represents sites of cultural practice (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002). Actions and ways of being can be generated, created and invented in each field or social space, though they are limited within the structuring mechanisms evident.

Bourdieu's forms of capital have been detailed elsewhere (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986), but it is important to clarify the states of cultural capital, that is, the *embodied* state of cultural capital includes dispositions, demeanors and character that contributes much to one's habitus. The *objectified* state of cultural capital includes the material objects and cultural goods one owns, including the quality of clothing. Finally, the *institutionalized* state of cultural capital encompasses educational qualifications in the form of legitimized certificates, diplomas and degrees.

3.   Methodology

There were 511 posts recorded via screen capture (Camtasia) and through copying and pasting textual data into Microsoft Word. The online archival research collected data over a period of four months via a daily collection of postings made within forums as well as from archived posts, and could be entitled as a "crossover" or "reengineered" methodology (Leander & McKim, 2003). The project was ethnographic-influenced in that the research aimed to capture what was going on in the familiar, naturalistic setting (that is, the particular forum they were using) of the Internet users. Instead of the researcher being a participant observer, the researcher was an observer who observed the online from the offline. This covert observation and collection of archived textual data was employed in a bid to generate understandings of the cultural practices existing online. The asynchronous research resulted with in-depth descriptions of the websites and their ways of operating, aligned with an *in situ* approach. While ethnographic principles of naturalism, discovery and understanding (Genzuk, 1999) were employed, and observation and collection of textual artifacts were

the main data collection methods, the research cannot be called ethnographic (for further discussion, see Johnson & Humphry, 2012).

The project originally intended to map the online construction of knowledge through capturing, documenting and thematically analyzing the text from 12 websites and their associated discussion forums. Despite the original intent of providing data in the form of textual posts from the websites, in a bid to provide anonymity and confidentiality, it became clear that the original purpose of the research could not be achieved (for further discussion about ethical tensions, see Henderson, Johnson, & Auld, 2013). Therefore, the focus of this chapter is to explain how five of these particular websites were structured in order to showcase how knowledge and expertise are being structured and are continuing to be structured.

The data collection focused on the textual collection of comments posted in the public domain of websites that are accessible to any person browsing the Internet. Photographs or icons of users in their profiles were not captured as legal identity cannot be confirmed, nor can photographs be authentically linked to this legal identity. The prime focus was on the capturing and subsequent content analysis of the text and imagery placed within the websites of interest. This research was not focused on accurate identification of online users; instead, its focus was to explore the language used online, rather than to identify how old the users were, or their gender, or their ethnicity or cultural background. Data (textual posts) are not included in this article due to ethical concerns detailed below.

4.   Ethical considerations

Ethical permission was obtained from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee to conduct this covert form of online research. The main data reported in this article are the structure of how the websites share and construct knowledge and the ways that the notion of 'expert' is constructed and purported. While the website uniform resource locators (urls) are actual, no verbatim quotations from postings are shared due to the fact that search engines enable these textual

excerpts to be traced and subsequent users identified. In addition, none of these Internet users were able to give their informed consent. That said, in considering these ethical issues, it is possible to assert the probability that no online research can ever be fully confidential, as traceability has increased and the depth of search engine potential continues to increase. One's digital footprint is difficult to erase even if a concerted effort is made to withdraw one's contributions from cyberspace (Henderson et al., 2013). Further, in an attempt to conduct online ethnographic influenced research, the ethical tension of 'lurking' became an issue (for a further discussion about 'lurking', see Johnson & Humphry, 2012). An attempt was made to peruse technical sites that were mostly frequented by adults, but as it is almost impossible to accurately define the identity of the users, it was also impossible to identify the age and ethnicity or cultural background of the users.

5. Websites that construct and shape knowledge and expertise

The following websites were located and identified as being useful to help answer the research question, and are now described as facilitating the creation of new knowledge or enabling the sharing of established knowledge. While 12 sites were selected and monitored, only the following 5 are reported on because they are the most relevant to addressing the purposes of this chapter. To delimit the scope of the study, the research assistant focused on identifying and collecting data from websites that focused on technology. As the data were collected, it became evident that the websites also structured how experts were identified and how their expertise was shared. Some of these lay experts or "experience-based experts" (Collins & Evans, 2002) are certified specialists but many are uncertified specialists, whose interactions constitute an engagement with or a contribution to a particular scientific field (Collins & Evans, 2002, 2007). Many of those positioned as experts in these forums are attributed with expertise via a social process, that is, the "socialization into the practices of an expert group" (Collins & Evans, 2007, p. 3). It should be acknowledged that the interfaces on the websites are regularly updated so what is identified and described below

is not static. Generalizing the results to a broad sample of the population was not intended; the provision of the following findings and subsequent theorizing provides insight and illumination.

5.1.   justanswer.com

justanswer.com is a 'professional' site where questions can be asked on any topic, and when satisfied with an answer, the 'professionals' are paid. The promotion on the home page consists of three logos that say, "Ask an Expert", "Get a Professional Answer" and "100 percent Satisfaction Guarantee (pay nothing to your expert if you're not satisfied)". The home page also showcases a range of tabs that have categories with sub-categories below each one. For instance, under the "Computers & Education" tab, the sub-categories include "Tech Support Specialists", "Networking", "Mac", "Programming", "Laptop", "Computer Hardware", "Software", etc. There is a pricing scheme for getting answers. The "experts" who answer the question receive payment for answering. Stage 1 (new) Experts earn 25 percent of what a customer is offering for an answer and Stage 4 Experts earn up to 50 percent. The person asking the question sets the price. The minimum price option is generally $9, but some categories are higher. Users can choose the higher prices based on urgency and complexity of the question. The average question costs $15. The credentials of the experts are verified by a Fortune 500 firm. Experts apply through filling out an online application, taking a short subject matter test and having their credentials such as a license, certification, two or more years of research-related employment or a Bachelor or higher degree. Once questions are 'accepted', the expert gets paid and some advertise the amount of accepted answers on their profile. Experts also display the percentage of positive feedback they have received. That said, the website includes a disclaimer about the labeling of expert: "Verification; No Reliance on the Term Expert".

Every Expert on the Site has had at least one credential relevant to the category in which they are answering questions verified by a third-party verification service. Other information about an Expert, not shown as verified, has been provided by the Expert but has not been verified. Use of the term "Expert" by JustAnswer

and on the Site is only meant to describe Users who answer questions on the Site, and not to guarantee any particular level of expertise of these Experts.

Sometimes, the "expert" will have to provide extensive "customer support" service in the form of multiple queries and assistance before the "customer" will accept that they are satisfied with the answer and that the problem is fixed.

5.2.   allexperts.com

allexperts.com is a straight question and answer site. It advertises itself as "the oldest and largest free Q&A service on the Internet". It has many categories and covers most topics such as money, movies, music/performing arts, parenting/ family, real estate, recreation/outdoors, science and shopping. The "experts" are volunteers. No money, points or rewards are exchanged. Each volunteer provides a short biography giving their credentials, be it formal qualifications or interest and experience. The site claims:

> "Our experts are all volunteers, people with knowledge in their area of expertise who are willing to share their knowledge with others. We can't guarantee they can answer every question, but we can guarantee that most try to help. The really great thing about our service is that its people based – volunteers helping people without money exchanging hands!" (allexperts.com).

One of the tabs on the home page highlights the experts of the year and allocates awards for top performances, including "volunteer of the month" and "shortest average response time". The guidelines for expert volunteers state:

- You must be able to type grammatically correct English.

- You must have an above-average knowledge of the subject, although you certainly don't need to know the answers to all questions.

- You must be polite to all questioners.

- You must respond to all questions within 2-3 days, except when you go on vacation.

- You can take yourself offline during that time.

5.3.   itknowledgeexchange.techtarget.com/itanswers

This website is an information technology-based knowledge sharing website. You need to be registered to ask or answer questions. They do have a points system for both the asking and answering of questions. The logo on the home page states, "Get answers. Share knowledge. Collaborate with peers".

The site advertises how to earn knowledge points that demonstrates a collaborative mentality and a means for individuals to earn social capital:

> "You can easily earn Knowledge Points by contributing to the community. Here is a breakdown of how many points you can earn depending on what you do:
>
> - Ask a Question: 5 Knowledge Points
> - Answering a Question: 15 Knowledge Points
> - Discussing a Question: 10 Knowledge Points
> - Accepting an Answer: 10 Knowledge Points – approve an answer a fellow member has give[n] to your question
>
> We will be highlighting the top ten contributors to the community throughout the site so start earning your Knowledge Points today. To view the point total of any user, simply click on their handle to view their profile" (itknowledgeexchange.techtarget.com/itanswers).

The users are also able to earn "badges". There was no indication of how these were earned/gained. At the time of the research, the top contributor had 59,930 points and the following badges: platinum, gold, silver, bronze, moderator, blogger, featured member and contest winner. When viewing his profile on the

website, one can see his name, occupation, place of residence, a short biography, his blog or personal website, and his area(s) of expertise. The profile page also highlights his experience by topic, stating whether he is a "brainiac", "genius" or "nerd".

The site is specifically for questions about information technology (IT). There is a section where many blogs are featured, but there is no 'lounge' or general discussion area. In fact in the instructions for posting a question, it states that "job postings, homework assignments and advertising-based messages will be deleted". It is an active site with many questions being added per day.

Each question has an answer wiki, where answers can be improved. The history of answers and their revisions can also be viewed. There is also a place where the answers can be discussed and notifications of new postings can be made by Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds.

5.4.   tech-faq.com

The home page of this site states:

> "Tech-FAQ is a comprehensive resource of information about technology. It is built by people who believe in technology and its transformative powers to help you efficiently use technology to achieve your goals, and as a result improve your life. We have created over four thousand pages of unique and compelling content about the ever progressing technology that makes our world great. We hope that you enjoy them and that they make a positive impact on your life" (tech-faq.com).

They had 6,136 members as on 17 February 2011. When members ask questions, they receive replies which they can/cannot accept. The responder then gets "points". There are guidelines for posting. Posting comments and being helpful earn you points of recognition that you can see on the right sidebar, if you are a registered member. This site has restructured recently (since August 2010) and non-registered users no longer can see the members

and their information. Prior to August, there was public access to users' profiles and all their posts.

The site is now divided into various areas: forums, news, blogs, glossary, proxy and websites. The forums seem to be the main area of use. It is divided into three main areas: "Tech Talk", where users can post questions of a technical nature and get responses, and the "Top Bits Zone", where new members introduce themselves, post announcements and call for feedback and suggestions. The final area is the "Off Topic" area where members can use "General Chat".

5.5.   geek.com

This site allowed for feedback to questions from anyone. The site seemed to appeal to technically minded people with many of the questions and discussion focusing around technical issues to do with computers, phones, iPods, software and games. There is also a "lounge" that has general discussion areas, e.g. how to track a GPS device, what degree should I get to be in the IT field and so on.

The site works by a member opening a thread and others responding. There appears to be no criteria for "expert" status, no qualification or experience needed, merely a response to questions and the person then taking notice of the response. Examples of forums are "Gadgets", "Games" and "Tech Support", and there is a table that lists the number of topics and posts in each forum.

The people who post comments do need to be registered and this also enables a brief profile to be created. Within the profile is a list of the latest forum posts that the person has written or responded to. Other parts of the website focus on the journalistic items that promote the latest news or gadgets. There are many advertisements for new products as well as reviews and recommendations of items. There are buyer's guides as well as RSS feeds on particular topics of interest such as "Mobile" and "Apple". A "Shop" section for products is also promoted.

We can apply the concept of structuring structures and structured structures (Bourdieu, 1991) or symbolic instruments to the websites and their users. The structuring structures are these particular websites and how they are set up to convey and share knowledge (and experiences). The structured structures are the accepted ways of operating (doxic practice) within the website's forums. The discourses that are utilized and espoused demonstrate that the 'experts' are being assigned social capital, even though it may not be (or is unlikely to be) in the form of institutionalized cultural capital (certificates, degrees, diplomas).

6.   The Internet and field theory

Scollon and Scollon's (2004) nexus analysis (e.g. the moment under analysis and historical analysis of everything intersecting at that moment) closely relates to the three distinct levels of data analysis that Bourdieu advocated. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) synthesized Bourdieu's account of field analysis. They claimed that a researcher should be directed to consider three distinct levels, namely:

1. analyze the position of the field vis-à-vis the field of power;

2. map out the objective structure of relations between the positions occupied by agents who compete for the legitimate forms of specific authority of which the field is the site; and

3. analyse the habitus of agents; the systems of dispositions they have acquired by internalizing a determinate type of social and economic condition (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 104-107; see also Mills & Gale, 2007).

In considering this framework or guideline of data analysis, the identification of the field before analyzing the position of the field is necessary. I purport that the Internet is a field (a social space) that is made up of countless sub-fields. While it can also be called an environment that is made up of networks, it is useful to

think of each field and the negotiations within as being representative of both virtual and biological lives, or in real life. For instance, if I am an IT consultant who is able to share my expertise and knowledge with others online, while also doing this same kind of work in my real life, then I am part of that field of interest in both places. The online forum is itself a sub-field which can transcend time and space virtually and biologically.

To give another example, if I am a teacher in my real life and yet am interested in family history and negotiate online genealogy forums making irregular posts in my spare time, I am only participating in the online sub-field of genealogy. I am not participating in the real life sub-field of genealogy though it is a possibility. The habitus that is part of the field may only constitute the digital aspects of my life; in fact it may be a segregated digital habitus, only evident when I engage in the online sub-field of which I am particularly interested.

As can be seen from the description of the websites showcased above, each of the online communities evident in the forums are specific areas of interest; there are sub-sub-fields within each forum. These online communities set up those who are esteemed, that is, those who have the symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and accepted practice within the field (Bourdieu, 2000) to be positioned as experts. These ongoing structuring structures help to perpetuate the symbolic capital exhibited by these lay experts. The structured structures that constructed the current position of these lay experts are negotiable, non-traditional and non-linear pathways (as suggested by my previous works, see Johnson, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c).

How might the position of this field be analyzed in regard to other fields? Regardless of whether readers agree that the Internet overall is a field, what we must do is compare website forums like these (sub-fields) with the field of power. Previously, authoritative knowledge could be found within textbooks or encyclopedias, written by those with high levels of institutionalized forms of capital and perhaps of economic capital. Web 1.0 opened the door for those with computer programming language knowledge to generate content, arguably another elitist form of sharing information. Social media has enabled almost

anybody of any age with access to the Internet to position them in an authoritative or expert-like way. This is not without its problems or complexities, but it does mean that the Internet by its very user-generated nature can be egalitarian, enabling users to distribute their voice more easily, and society can be less reliant on hierarchical authority associated with institutional capital.

The Internet is also a field of research that has been opened up to researchers to explore. This can be done via the type of research conducted (online surveys for instance), but also as sub-fields that are representative of sub-fields within real life. Discussions surrounding the validity of online research and authenticity of users have been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Johnson, 2011; Lefever, Dal, & Matthíasdóttir, 2006; Williams, 2007) but this also demonstrates how the Internet is its own independent field, but yet can also be closely linked with fields or sub-fields that existed before the Internet or are in current coexistence between virtual and analogue lives.

In this chapter, I map out the relational structure of multiple agents who are competing for legitimization of their knowledge. However, there are severe limitations in being able to fully analyze the habitus of the agents. If Internet users are identifiable, we cannot be sure of their authentic identities; therefore, we can only conjecture the acquired system of dispositions. Only the captured prose from the forums could be used to explore this third level (as suggested by Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), but as stated earlier, it is unethical to present this prose because of the possible identification of Internet users.

6.1.   Structured structures

Pre-Internet, knowledge and expertise were established by institutional structures and authoritative texts. These five websites have been constructed by non-traditional or non-institutional structures not usually associated with education or formal knowledge. Some are set up as enterprises, as commercial entities whereby knowledge is a commodity. However, they also shape the Internet by enabling the continuity of autonomy, independence and flexibility. These symbolic instruments contribute to the continued construction of

knowledge and expertise. This is being done without the validation of external verifications, qualifications and attestations (though on some websites, listing these is a requirement). It is being done through peer validation and affirmation; yet, there are repercussions. If you do not know your stuff, you do not get paid (or validated) on justanswer.com. On the other websites, if you do not offer answers or advice that is accepted then your social capital will not be validated.

6.2.   Privileged and marginalized knowledges

Harwood (2004) terms privileged knowledges as "dominant knowledges", typically those that are knowledges which are school-centric, or institution-centric. Those that value dominant knowledges do not value non-institutionalized productions of knowledge. The dominant knowledges we as academics praise are ones that meet hierarchical and developmental forms of achievement surrounding the progressive (linear) mastery of content. We value those that have objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in the form of certificates or degrees. This has been brought about by being positioned "in scholastic universes resulting from a long process of autonomization" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 25). It seems the user-generated version of the Internet is a social condition that enables the generation of cultural products or contemporary knowledge, self-evident through the active production, consumption and fluid modification of user-generated websites.

Supposed authoritative texts such as books can be disregarded in favor of seeking "practical wisdom" (Beckett, 1995) from Internet users seeking answers to questions from real people. These 'sites' could be considered to be symbolic instruments where marginalized knowledges are represented. By some, they might be considered erudite knowledges, but by most, their constructions and outworkings are marginalized. Just like gamers whose skills are considered irrelevant depending on the field in which they are positioned, their knowledge is valued. Despite that, many of the experts promulgated within these websites do not possess institutionalized cultural capital in the form of formal educational qualifications.

These experts are perceived to possess knowledge that firstly has been validated by other users (or the structures of the website); therefore, they have been approved to share it, or these experts are in the process of becoming validated by other users and thus are involved in a process of earning embodied cultural capital. They are self-nominated as experts or as being able to provide useful answers, sharing knowledge from their own experience. This kind of knowledge is different to traditional constructions of institutionalized or privileged knowledge.

6.3.   The 'no zone' of action

Digitization and flexibility means there are 'no zones' of when things 'can' or 'are allowed to be' done. Language can be far more direct, blunt, reckless, yet, far less reliant on policy, bureaucracy, restraints or having to 'do' what is expected. There is far more freedom available online than in real life, partly because of the possible degree of anonymity able to be gained through posting content online.

The online freedom (an aspect of democracy) means that postings can be made with limited repercussions and limited accountability. However, there is documentation of lawsuits and charges being made, or jobs being lost because of inappropriate Facebook statuses and the like. Admittedly, what does occur on the Internet are new "stakes of the game" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 151). This means that there are not those social cues or inhibitions we may impose or others impose on ourselves. The reality is that comments are made to others online that would never be made in real life or face-to-face, even on the phone.

Derogatory put-downs or off-the-cuff statements are made without any thoughts of consequences of possible inappropriate use of a forum. Private issues become far more public and are instantly done. It does give some a sense of power and a sense of more agency because they can vent online, and in some cases, are able to attract empathy and support (even for fictional, or secretive narratives). This medium means we find out more about others and their personal lives, and private thoughts are made more public –we have insight seldom possible before the advent and take-up of social media.

Instead of only those who are in power being privileged to share and publish results via privileged forms of knowledge, those with marginalized knowledges are now able to do so. More Internet users are able to have a voice with social media; power appears to be more equally distributed. This is particularly the case with the reporting that occurs via the media. Who decides what to report, and when, and how much will be repeated or focused upon? With the Internet, there are no pathways that must be journeyed, no rituals that must be completed (or qualifications that must be gained) and no institutional regulations that must be adhered to, that is, no institutionalized cultural capital. Those with Internet access can report things from wherever they are within any forum via any digital means. To me, this means that power is no longer held within the Press and the gatekeepers. There are few gatekeepers (for the most part) that determine who can have a voice, and who can position themselves as an expert.

Users are able to claim their form of cultural capital via how they access, use and post on Internet forums. Many of them eschew what little capital they have via ranting and have no interest in deliberation or negotiation with others (Loveland & Popescu, 2011). Therefore, while the web is seemingly more egalitarian because more people can have a voice, hereby demonstrating horizontal, rather than hierarchical positioning, multi-dimensional societal factors still affect the field in which they are positioned (Tacchi, 2012). If I make a post in a field that I know a lot about and am able to state my experience, qualifications and nous within the field depending on what forum I utilize, I might be able to claim the symbolic or virtual capital in actuality. If I contribute to a forum where I have limited knowledge of that particular field, I cannot lay claim to any capital that may be actual or virtual, real or symbolic, biological in real life or contrived within cyberspace. This contrived explanation may be realistic or false.

While almost anybody can position themselves as an expert on the Internet, not all are verified and accepted as experts. Despite the possibility of being able to obtain this form of capital, few (in the scheme of things) are ratified as experts. Validation or affirmation of expertise may occur through the structures of the website which is being formally utilized, or may be informally eschewed through popularity, namely the volume of other Internet users who are fans of a particular

virtual entity. Again, this relates to what is valued or powerful within a field or social space. Each of these websites has their social agents within the field of interest that the website is advocating. These social agents have constructed the power and authority of the lay knowledge evident and espoused by these users, but this is structured by the structure of the websites –the zones of accepted (doxic) practice.

7.   Conclusion

The findings of this research suggest that the nature of knowledge is now far more fluid than prior to pre-Web 2.0. The content generated by users who participate in these online forums conveys that knowledge is now mediated and shared discursively via digital actors within society. The way experts are positioned within these forums, that is, the structuring structures such as justanswer.com and allanswers.com, allows for a degree of consensus as to the validation of lay experts, and also those who do have formal qualifications. The distributed nature of access challenges a hierarchical sense of authority, though admittedly brings with it a multiplicity of further issues (Tacchi, 2012). A democratic consensus validates the lay experts' 'know-how'. Digital participants utilize the structured structures to comment on whether statements are accurate or contestable, and the increasing accessibility to the Internet for many people (not all people) means that far more people are enabled to have a voice. They can have power not available to them in their real lives, because of the relative anonymity and egalitarian nature of the Internet environment. The symbolic instruments captured at this time in this site of engagement demonstrate that many Internet users' agency is performed as these structuring structures and structured structures enable them to act on the virtual world in a way not possible to many of them in their real lives.

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