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Cross-cultural management and digital societies: Magala's lasting contribution to the emerging research field

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to see how digital societies' studies can be inspired by cross-cultural management.

Design/methodology/approach – Theory critical analysis and review.

Findings – The paper reveals many similarities and analogies, allowing for useful connections between cross-cultural management research, and studying digital societies.

Originality/value – By exposing methodological and theoretical links of cross-cultural management field in general, and Magala's contribution in particular, the following paper helps in better understanding of contemporary research on digital societies, as well as allows for the use of already proven methodologies and approaches in the emerging field of the internet studies.

Keywords Wikipedia, Cross-cultural management, Digital society, Open collaboration, Peer production, Slawomir Magala

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The internet revolution has reshaped and redefined how we live, and also how we do social sciences. After all, the rise of the network society (Castells, 1996) has dramatically changed the ways people interact: from propagation of a-synchronic and textual communication, through tele-work and online recruitment processes, the emergence of the new knowledge workers caste (Jemielniak, 2012a; Jemielniak and Kociatkiewicz, 2009), to the very trajectories people choose their life partners by Alhabash *et al.* (2014) and McWilliams and Barrett (2014), the explosion of digital society has had a tremendous impact on the social life.

This change has resulted also in the creation of entirely new phenomena. In particular, and of special interest for the *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, are those related to online management and organizing. In this short essay I intend to draw a quick picture of the digital revolution in organization studies, and also show how insight from publications of Slawomir J. Magala, seemingly traditional and not-so-virtual, yet rich in relevance, helps in advancing our understanding of these new, emerging fields.

Online revolution

Some scholars perceive the online revolution as a dire threat to liberty and human freedom. They recognize the risk of increased corporate and governmental control, and are also dubious of the positive side-effects of digitalization (Lessig, 2004; Morozov, 2012).

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The others focus on a tremendous potential that the so-called internet remix culture and the consumer co-production bring (Hill and Monroy-Hernández, 2013; Lessig, 2008; Potts *et al.*, 2008). Both sides of this conversation make important points, and it is yet way too early to establish, which of these tendencies may prevail. What is already clear, though, is the fact that the boundaries between "professionals" and "amateurs" have become irrevocably blurred. Journalists have to compete with bloggers, full time photographers with skilled enthusiasts (Boehlert, 2009; Simmonds, 2010) – hardly any of the creative occupations is left unaffected.

Many of those "unprofessional" endeavors are of extremely high quality, even though they are often produced without any financial remuneration. While their perceptions in the eyes of some authors is radically negative, as they are considered to "kill culture" and depreciate quality (Keen, 2007), in a highly ideology-driven form of "digital Maoism" (Lanier, 2006), many others point to tremendous benefits they bring. Especially in the area of organization studies the developments of digital society are major. According to Yochai Benkler (2006, 2011), the new modes of cooperation, epitomized by the so-called open collaboration communities and F/L/OSS (Free/Libre/Open Source Software), will soon overtake the contemporary companies, as they have the potential to challenge the traditional economy assumptions (e.g. of rarity of altruistic and pro-bono behaviors and work) and the capitalist system itself (Roth, 2015).

Examples are plenty. For instance, Apache is currently the leading operating system for servers, Firefox is a major player among the internet browsers, and Wikipedia is by far the most popular encyclopedia in the world (Jemielniak, 2015b), and is also highly reliable on average (Reavley *et al.*, 2012). In more general terms, most electronic devices heavily rely and draw on software developed in open source movement. The new ways of organizing, and in particular open collaboration (where anyone can join and quit, without a stable hierarchy, permanent division of labor, or traditional control, see: Jemielniak, 2015a) challenge the rules of traditional economy, as they rely on a "marriage of altruism and self-interest" (Rheingold, 1994, p. 58) and result in what is sometimes called a gift economy, a new post-capitalist form of society (Barbrook, 1998). Traditionally (Appadurai, 1994, p. 81):

> Gifts and the spirit of reciprocity, sociability, and spontaneity in which they are typically exchanged, usually are starkly opposed to the profit-oriented, self-centered, and calculated spirit that fires the circulation of commodities. Further, where gifts link things to persons and embed in the flow of things in the flow of social relations, commodities are held to represent the drive – largely free of moral or cultural constraints – of goods for one another, a drive mediated by money and not by sociality.

The new forms of organizing extend the gifting behavior to unspecific, general public of strangers. Even more curiously, the fundamental changes in our society do not end at economic or organizational effects (Bialski, 2012). The proliferation of collaborative production and remix culture, as well as the popularity and prevalence of online piracy lead to major redefinitions in the area of copyright and intellectual law, changing how we understand authorship, fairness, and sharing (Berry, 2008; Coleman and Hill, 2004; Lessig, 2001; Zittrain, 2008). In fact, the digital societies wave may be perceived, as a whole, as a major social change movement (Magala, 1992).

According to Sławomir J. Magala (2009b), comparative studies of fundamental transformations in domains such as science or art, can help recognize the incoming larger social changes. This insight is particularly true when applied to the studies of

technology and the culture of the internet as well. In the eve of open collaboration and sharing economy wide propagation, where collective action allows for governing the new commons (Ostrom, 1990), typically relying on zero-cost reproducible goods, we see the "use of technology as a form of societal rule" (Bauman, 1991, p. 150). It is a fascinating, new social set of phenomena, which requires not only new methods, but also reasonable approaches and useful analogies for conducting research.

Studying digital societies

According to some researchers, doing qualitative studies online differs fundamentally from the traditional ones (Buchanan, 2004). While this view seems to be overly radical and has been disputed (Hine, 2000; Randall *et al.*, 2007; Travers, 2009), it is clear that digital societies have their very peculiar specifics.

One of them is a possible strong disengagement of online identities from the brick-and-mortar ones. In fact, the process of fragmentation and virtualization of social identities has been pointed out as ongoing outside of the digital world, too (Magala, 2002b, p. 1):

> Most of contemporary individual and social identities (constructed with societal, cultural and technological resources) are radically autonomous, nomadic and virtual – i.e. they are de-traditionalized, open to negotiation and not based on a single interpretation of a tradition. Identizations can be recycled – elements of former identities are being re-used in constructing later ones or identities emerging in one context can be implanted in another or hybridised.

Yet, the hybridization of online identities is more rapid and radical. The reason for that is not only that one can create avatars much more easily than in the real world (Ensslin and Muse, 2011). In online communities one can take the roles of several different personas and play different roles in the same time, which makes an important difference (Green and Carpenter, 2011). Additionally, many online communities rely almost entirely on internal credentials (that is, on reputation and credibility developed only within the community itself and linked to the identity/avatar) rather than external ones (such as formal education, experience, profession, etc. linked to one's name). As a result, the enactment of trust is based on reliance on procedures and structure, rather than interpersonal relations (Jemielniak, 2014; Latusek and Cook, 2012).

Another major difference between the digital and non-digital societies is the possibility to hide some social stigma: it basically is much easier to disclose one's looks (and thus avoid being stereotyped basing on one's age, gender, race, handicap, dress code, etc.). Nevertheless, different kinds of stigma naturally arise. The idealistic view that the internet makes everyone equal is nothing but a dangerous myth. While in regular face to face interactions it is relatively easier to hide one's poor ability to write, in online communities grammatical, spelling, and other language-based mistakes are immediately striking. As a result, online communities may stratify their members even more, just by different criteria. Since these criteria are almost entirely interactive and stemming from one's purposeful presentation of self, the emerging digital biases may be even more cruel than in the real world (in other words, it may be more common to link, e.g. poor writing skills to one's negligence or intellectual inability, than make similar suppositions about handicap or race). Even more it is important then, that while "celebrating differences, we should be careful not to legitimize inequalities inherent, implicitly included in 'otherness' and 'difference'" (Magala, 2009a, p. 28).

Still, the very mechanisms the online communities operate by, are typical for other organizations. This is why using insight from cross-cultural and organizational culture

studies makes a lot of sense in the context of digital society (Koźmiński *et al.*, 2009). As shown by Sławomir J. Magala (2004), the notion of multiculturalism encompasses the traditional national divisions, and may and should be used for other cultures, too. This is particularly true for digital cultures, as in the digital world completely new divisions emerge, across nations and languages. Consequently, in a globally networked world, the cultural software of users plays a crucial role in any effective communication (Magala, 2002a). As a result, the application of organizational culture theory, as well as of anthropological apparatus to understanding digital societies turns out to be not only possible, but also most useful (Hine, 2000).

It should be noted, however, that a simple replication of national culture models onto a digital map will not work. Very often, digital cultures are treated as naive and artificial extensions of national cultures. Yet, they transcend geographical boundaries and rely on new divisions, present only in the digital worlds (Adams, 2013). Wikipedians will be often able to communicate with each other better than 9gaggers or reddit users, even if they do not share a mother tongue. In the same time, a lot of digital societies, while sometimes representing a global Americanized culture on the surface (Shifman and Boxman Shabtai, 2014), rely on highly local contexts and meanings (Anderson and Sheeler, 2014; Burroughs, 2013). They may draw on and even re-use the same memes, excerpts, or videos, but their successful encoding, decoding, and interpretation will rely on connecting with the transnational, hermetic cultural code of a given community or digital social group (Shifman *et al.*, 2014). Cross-cultural competence, predicted to be of increasing and crucial value in contemporary management (Magala, 2005), gain even more importance as a result of our increased, simultaneous immersion in diverse online cultures. After all, in a single minute a contemporary social actor may engage in several different conversations, requiring different cultural skills, different levels of nativity, radically different rhetoric patterns, and vocabulary – just because of participation in different digital societies, with its own rites and behaviors.

This is where Magala's contribution to storytelling and fiction research also comes handy as well (Flory *et al.*, 2010). Since, unlike in the real world, digital cultures often rely mostly on text and written discourse, their analysis may be based on narrative and storytelling methods (Boje, 2008; Czarniawska, 2004). Applying storytelling and rhetoric of communication to organization studies is particularly useful there, also because in the case of online communities the rules for human subjects research are somewhat blurred. While, obviously, a researcher has the obligation to protect their subjects, in digital cultures a lot of conversations are conducted with an undisclosed, general public as the intended audience and thus disguising the avatars (already anonymous enough in many cases) will not make much sense (Bruckman, 2006). It is possible and easy then to treat the available material and discussions as a text, and directly apply the narrative approach to organization studies (Flory *et al.*, 2012).

Summary and conclusions

As Sławomir J. Magala (2005) points out, cross-cultural management is a serious challenge for any organization, and yet it is quite often neglected, diminished, and trivialized. This is so, because we, organizational culture scholars, way too often hide inside the ivory tower of theoretical concepts and paradigms, instead of a more practical approach and diverse research methods, adjusted to the problem (Jemielniak, 2012b). This statement is true even for the followers of critical theory (Magala, 2000), as their

dedication to critical thought is often diminishing, once they create their own privileged circles and discourses, in a fate closely resembling that of artistic avant-garde movement (Bürger, 1984).

The first crucial step in a successful cross-cultural approach to organizing relies on recognizing the differences, and then taking them into account in everyday decision making. Increasing one's sensitivity to the other is indispensable in addressing cross-cultural clashes (Magala, 2005).

Making sense of digital societies and cultures requires bringing the individual back in into focus of organization studies, and also accounting for the emotional side of organizational participation (both pointed to by Sławomir J. Magala (1997) as the new desirable foci for organization scholars nearly 20 years ago), as digital cultures rely much more on passionate discourse and emotional engagement (Chmiel *et al.*, 2011). Whatever the flux of new values and behaviors emerging from the digital turn will be, the ability to understand and define the cultural dimensions behind the scenes will remain crucial (Magala, 2012). In our future studies of new, digital social phenomena, it is worthwhile then to draw from works of experienced scholars of cross-cultural management.

Let me finish with a quote from Sławomir J. Magala (2009b, p. 195), as he put it better than I would:

> We do not see these changes as they happen, because we still tend to perceive them according to past ideological associations to which we have linked them. We can work with laptops, notebooks and iPhones, but we still pretend that a screen is a page, even if it is a webpage and the persistence of bookish associations remains a charming anachronism and a purely artificial convention.

Indeed, without a more structured and philosophical approach to studies of network societies, in our search for meaning and for making sense we are doomed to perceive the new order of things through our old set of narrowing spectacles. Drawing from seemingly more traditional, but in fact quite avant-garde and refreshingly reflexive works, such as the ones of Sławomir J. Magala, helps in structuring our findings and understanding of the exciting digital world in a richer, and more productive way.

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