Mapping ECulture, eCultuur, E-cultuur or e-culture: Richard Rogers in conversation with Annet Dekker

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Publication date
2009
Document Version
Final published version
Published in
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What is e-culture –
what was e-culture?

1996: e-culture is the end of the divide between high culture and low culture

1999: e-culture is the opposite of e-commerce

2002: e-culture comes after visual culture and print culture

2003: e-culture is not digitisation, e-culture is online culture

2007: e-culture is an engine of innovation

2008: e-culture is a fully accepted e-word, like e-mail

Google shows: e-cultuur – 51.500 results
eCultuur – 6.410 results

For more information on the Mapping project see the fold-out sheet enclosed with this book.

ANNET DEKKER

In order to get to grips with the term 'e-culture' Virtueel Platform asked Govcom.org to map the term. The result is now mapped and clouded. How did you go about it and what did you find?

RICHARD ROGERS

Recently, we defined clouding as a particular analytical technique. This doesn't mean merely visualising the results of analysis in a cloud, but that you start your analysis by thinking that you're going to cloud it. This in turn means that you do the analysis in a particular way because you're clouding. In the clouding we tried to characterise what e-culture is about. In all, the analysis had three components; What is e-culture about, who does it, and, who recognises the term?

We started with a set of organisations, in our case about 250 organisations that were selected and coded by Virtueel Platform. That is to say, we made up a coding scheme, coded in

a social science way, that consisted of keywords in terms of activities as well as type of organisation. With this data we started counting to get an overall characterisation of the field and to see if a particular organisation type dominates the field. We also queried each organisation website for the term e-culture. We found that funders, for example, were the ones that used that word e-culture very often, which then gives this sense that e-culture is more or less accepted in funding circles. Whereas the actual organisations use the word far less frequently. Instead they use other terms.

For the mapping we built the 'interactor module'[1]. This software finds links between entered urls. Within our source set we watched over a longer period of time to see a general composition of actors surfacing in a field; this gives a sense of who's receiving a lot of attention and whether that attention is rising or falling according to in-link counts. We also used a different mapping approach that looked for links in between organisations, so-called co-link analysis[2]. This brings in other organisations that are not on the initial list. The analysis showed for example that according to the links from the Dutch e-culture sites YouTube is seen as an extremely important e-culture actor, or platform. This mapping analysis shows the significance of some of the things e-culture has, in this case the many dependencies of e-culture on other organisations or platforms outside of the Netherlands.

AD

You just said that you consider clouding an official method of analysis. Could you describe the differences between regular methods and the advantage of clouding?

RR

Traditionally there are two ways of thinking of information visualisation. The first one is that you have an analytical output, and then you visualise it. In some sense visualisation becomes the finished product. That is a traditional way of thinking about it. And there are also specific ways of visualising that have to do with a particular analytical method. IBM's Many Eyes project lists visualisation types depending on data outputs. For example, a line graph is good for things that rise and fall

1
The interactor module is built into the issue crawler, and extends the uses of the network location software. The issue crawler now has three crawling options: co-link analysis, snowball and interactor.

2
In co-link analysis, the issue crawler crawls the seed URLs, captures their out-links and retains those that have received at least two links from the seeds. In the snowball approach, the issue crawler captures all out-links from the seeds as well as the out-links' out-links, retaining every page found. In the interactor module, the issue crawler crawls and maps the links between the seed URLs.

over time like stock prices. But what we are putting forward is that the visualisation is at the beginning of the analysis. This happens in two ways; first of all you start by thinking in visual terms in such a way that the analysis fits the visualisation. And secondly the clouding drives your questions. Given all the issues on the global human rights agendas, which issues are the ones that have the most campaigns? You look at things that are cloud-able. This form of analysis tries to stay close to its origins: digital online data. The tag cloud is a natively digital format that doesn't have a precedent; in some sense it stems from the new kind of information culture and therefore could be considered a new way of thinking about data online, and also made into an approach and method of analysis.

AD
What is 'Govcom.org', and who are you?

RR
The name relates to several projects we did (myself, Noortje Marres and some students at the University of Amsterdam in the department of Science Dynamics, and the Royal College of Art in London) in 1998 and 1999. The first project started because I was asked by the *International Herald Tribune* to write a newspaper article on climate change. This was 1997. I, like many people do, went to a search engine, typed in 'climate change' and hit return. I was going through the various returns, 'surfing' if you will, and I noticed that a lot of the organisations that I came across made hyperlinks to other organisations, but not all organisations linked to all other organisations. The hyperlinking was in some sense selective. What I ultimately noticed is that some organisations received more links than other organisations.

We started manually, with a chalk board and coloured chalk, drawing little circles signifying the sites of the organisations involved in climate change and lines between them signifying hyperlinks. What we noticed was that there was something that we eventually called 'the politics of association' on display. That is, some organisations linked to others for particular reasons.

We thought that hyperlinks at the time, if you take a large sample of them, might signify

the reputation of an organisation. The organisations that get the most links from other organisations working in the same area, one would imagine could have more authority or a higher reputation than the other organisations. In fact the hyperlinks, we thought, displayed some kind of reputation distribution. First of all they showed a politics of association, and on the other hand a sort of reputation distribution. Where the politics of association is concerned, we made a film in 1999 that was our next larger project whilst we were research fellows of the Jan van Eyck media and design fellowship. I was the research fellow and I brought with me a number of colleagues both from Amsterdam (including Noortje Marres) and some people from the Royal College of Art – largely students. We sat at the Jan van Eyck Academy for about five months. We made a video as well as some other things, and one of the things we were looking to find out was why organisations link to one another. So we interviewed the webmasters of Shell, Greenpeace as well as RTMark which is the famous organisation which pioneered 'rogue' websites – or 'fake sites'. The three of them were all in the same issue-space with regard to climate change, and when we interviewed them we found out that they all are, in some ways, competing for attention in the same space.

What we noticed when we were mapping was that when you map an issue, the types of organisations that are on the map most prominently are .govs, .coms and .orgs. So, that is where the name comes from: Govcom.org.

AD
What are you known for?

RR
We are known for issue analysis, or issue mapping. This came out of the Jan van Eyck period where we made a piece of software called the NetLocator, and later the Issue Crawler, which is web network location and visualisation software. That was one of the first major achievements on our part in terms of software making, and we have been working on it since about 2000/2001. The designed version came online in 2004 and it is doing quite well. I mean, it has a mind of its own and breaks a lot and we never know exactly why. It maps issues networks.

AD
What is your interest in these subjects?

RR
Well, it goes back to a particular tradition in the academic area that I studied, that I got my PhD in, which is Science and Technology Studies. One of the areas is Science and Technology Controversy Studies, and it was our contribution to that field to look into particular social issues. I think all of the projects we have done are conceptual, but the conceptual is always backed up by the analytical. We are constantly doing analysis, because we like to think that we can make claims. Once we think we are able to make claims, then from there we try to figure out the best form in which to make them.

But there are a number of ways of answering this question. One of the things, for me personally, is to put on display that issues are everyday concerns. If you read the news or watch the TV news, you'll see that some issues have more attention than other issues. So a project that we did after the Issue Crawler was to look at the difference between news attention cycles for issues, versus civil society, or NGO, attention cycles to issues. We made a piece called infoid.org, which is an issue tracker, and it shows issue attention according to civil society's campaigning behaviours. We found the good news is that civil societies have a much longer attention span to social issues than the news.

We used the web in order to find this out…

AD
How do you see your work yourself? In what context would it be most beneficial?

RR
The work is something that can be presented in a variety of discourses. It has the scientific to it. It has the design to it. We are always very conscious about the narrative. What is the story? What are we telling here? In that sense the presentation is always important. We feel the things we do can be presented, shown and talked about in any of the discourses that we have people from on our team. We are at a point where people can cross over quite well. I am very comfortable working with designers, artists and programmers. I can speak their languages.

What is the role of the public for you? Do they have a say in the thing? Is there an open forum? Can they only be listeners, lurkers or also participants?

What we have found is that there is much to critique in various projects (especially web ones) that have great assumptions about the empowerment of publics. The secret of publicity is that there is no public (see *Publicity's Secret* by Jodi Dean). Noortje Marres, says in her dissertation: 'no issues – no publics'. Often times the question a lot of people work on is: how do publics form? Are there free-floating ones, or do they form around something? Noortje's answer is that they form around issues, and that they are not just there. When we do issue mappings, what we notice is that you basically have quite powerful professional organisations at work. There is no man on the street involved, nor being recognised by these actors. When you study issue power, you find that public participation is something that is more of an ideal than a reality.

On the basis of those sorts of perspectives, based on some findings, I think the short answer to the question about public participation is that they participate when they do, and when they form. We do not engage in work that forms everyday publics.

Can you see that changing in the future, with the arrival and popularity of the Web2.0?

Every once in a while we do a piece of work that has some kind of public dimension in mind. For example, one of the proposals that accompanied the Issue Tracker (a piece of software which monitors whether social issues are rising or falling) was to have it as an augmented space project. Initially it was inspired by the protests in the streets of Genoa during the G8 meeting in 2001. There was a red zone, and green zone: where the protestors were on one side, and conference on the other. We thought an issue ticker would make a nice interface between those two zones. It has a public dimension to it, but it is more of a showing, a form of presentation of our findings.

Can you tell me a little bit about the software you are using?

We make open source software, but we do not make SourceForge projects because that is a whole world which requires constant attention. We share code… a lot. But, when one says 'open source software' there is often the impression that everything we do is put into the open source community, when in fact it is not. With the Issue Crawler, in particular, we have extensive documentation. But we do not have the actual code bundle online. That is not to say that we have a problem sharing. We make it in the spirit of open source, we use open source licenses but as of yet we haven't done the SourceForge project for it.

The consequence is that with the Issue Crawler we do not have the community of programmers, which is something that occasionally hurts us because the Issue Crawler is user supported. Every year or so we realise we do not have any money, so I write to my institutional supporters, which are quite important universities. There is a list of about 15 or 20. We suffer, in some sense, from not having taken the time or made the extra effort to create a SourceForge project.

Would you say that with your projects you make political statements, or are you more interested in showing what is happening with different issues?

We have made a lot of different statements, and some are summarised in the different terms we use. We are concerned about 'issue abandonment'. We are concerned about 'issue drift'. We are concerned about the life that issues lead and are continually, in some sense, making statements about issues through those sorts of terms.

For example, in 'issue drift' one notices that international NGOs and inter-governmental organisations go from summit to summit, and conference to conference. At each of these different venues, there are different agendas and if you look at it over time you'll notice how particular issues rise and fall in these agendas. We always ask ourselves the question of whether or not these organisations remember what is happening on the ground. Whether or not, depending on participation in these summits, they abandon certain issues in favour of other ones. We are always, in some sense, making statements generally about attention to social issues. Whether or not you should watch the news at all, but also other ideas such as whether organisations leave certain issues unexpectedly because their issues aren't in the news, for example.

Also another term that we use is 'issue hybridisation'. That is the coupling of two or more issues together. One of the things we have been asking critical questions about is what happens to an issue when the organisations doing the issue suddenly enter the human rights discourse, thereby framing issues in terms of rights, coupling the issues with rights. We have noticed on a couple of occasions that when the rights language comes into a certain issue space, the sub-issues that were in that space previously begin to go into decline.

For example on a study we did on the Narmada Dams controversy in India, much of the local concern was about people being displaced because of the construction of the dam. They have to move and they would like compensation. When large organisations, or NGOs, started getting involved, they changed the discourse from compensation, displacement and land loss to rights. Human rights, which has its own dynamics.

In that sense we are making statements by the kinds of analysis we do.