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CLICK FRAUD: ADVERTISING AND THE TERRITORIALISATION OF PERSONAL BLOGS

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Abstract

Drawing upon Deleuze & Guattari's concept of the assemblage, and Callon's actor-network theory analysis of economic markets, this paper draws upon ethnographic research to examine a case study of changing practices amongst personal bloggers in Malaysia. Focusing on cost per click advertising, it shows how stabilising reciprocal practices became recast as 'click fraud' by a blog advertising network, and 'community' is reframed as an income generating collective.

Introduction

This paper looks at how Malaysian personal bloggers' practices became entangled with market relations through the use of web analytics that enable the 'cost per click' (CPC) pricing model, whereby the advertiser pays for metered clicks on advertisements (Bermejo, 2007, pp. 113–14). These clicks represent an active choice by the potential consumer; thus, they are understood to be direct expressions of interest in the good advertised and valued at a higher premium than exposure alone. However, the possibility of 'fraudulent clicks', clicks that do not correspond to genuine interest, may then become a matter of concern. Other forms of blog monetisation, such as paid reviews, are not discussed here.

Drawing upon Deleuze & Guattari's discussion of assemblage and capitalism, Jensen & Rødje argue that "[c]apitalism decodes desire and its products in order to recode them into abstract quantities in the form of money and commodities" (2009, p. 17). Similarly, from an ANT perspective, Callon et al. (2002) argue that this process of attaching, or commodifying, particular goods to a market happens through a process of "qualification", whereby goods are given particular qualities that translate them into objects of value in the market context.

Importantly, the 'market' here is not understood as a natural phenomenon, but instead it has to be examined in "interaction with specific substantive or value orders" (Collier & Ong, 2005, p. 14), such as an ethical underpinning based mostly on the utilitarian model promulgated by Adam Smith (e.g. Dilley, 1992; Silver, 1990). Once markets are

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understood to be particular and contingent, it is difficult to argue for a universally consistent market logic, and instead culture and economy are more advantageously considered as components interacting on a 'flat' plane. In this way, DeLanda details the historical development of local and regional markets as specific assemblages (DeLanda, 2006, pp. 17– 18).

Assemblages are understood here as dynamic constellations of causally related material and non- material components, held together through stabilising practices that territorialise the assemblage, but also prone to deterritorialising movements that destabilise them (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 97–8). Michel Callon's actor-network approach argues for "markets as social artefacts that are instituted via purposive strategies and technologies of calculation" (Slater & Tonkiss, 2001, p. 94). This argument has three main components: markets are created (with 'economies of qualities' being important in this regard), calculative agencies are central to the latter, and they create overflows, or externalities. With regard to online advertising, a particular market assemblage is assembled through the use of calculative agencies that target audience measurement and actions. The market assemblage does not exclude relations through market exchange per se.

However, an inevitable result of the reassembling of relations when market-based values are introduced into personal blogging networks is that there are loose ends and new dynamics generated, enabling lines of flight or what Callon refers to as 'overflows' (1998, p. 248). In the case study outlined below, we see how established practices that stabilise social relations between personal bloggers became 'overflows' – i.e. undesirable externalities that reflect the limited ability of the market to incorporate all sociocultural activity (Callon, 1998) – when reframed in the light of the need to quantify the interested audience, and provide market-related metrics.

Methodological note

This paper draws mostly upon data gathered during an ethnographic research project in Malaysia over three years (2007-2009) that included on- and offline participant observation, a survey, and interviews. The bloggers involved were primarily urban ethnic Malaysian-Chinese, who maintained English language blogs with daily readerships ranging from 500 to 10,000. Details of the particular interviewees and/or fieldnotes are given in footnotes where relevant. More details are outlined in Table 1.

The research was aimed at following developments in personal blogging following the introduction of advertising opportunities. The fieldwork mostly involved attending blogger events, participating in contests and related activities, maintaining two blogs, and interacting online. Although the case study used here is a single situation, it exemplifies a practice that was common. The eventual reaction by the blog advertising network, as well as similar regulations by Google and other advertising networks, suggest the widespread nature of reciprocal and organised clicking on advertisements for mutual gain.

Table 1: Stages of the research

Stages of the research																			
	2007					2008					2009								
	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N
Blogging on <i>anthroblogia</i>	[Shaded]																		
Participant observation (blogmeets in stripes, number indicates more than one)	[Shaded with grid patterns]																		
Collating database, noting patterns and trends.	[Shaded]																		
myBlogS survey	[Shaded]																		
Blogging on <i>Tropical Gardening</i>	[Shaded]																		
Interviews	[Shaded]																		

I scratch ur back...u scratch mine!

In 2007, two Malaysian blog advertisement networks began inviting blogs to carry remotely controlled advertisements. They generated a broad interest: BlogAdNet,¹ the more successful company, received 1,500 registrations in three months, and by 2009 had more than 140,000. In the early stages, a blogger, DammU, posted a review of the two services, and concluded his post saying: “you readers better be clicking on my ads. I’m counting on you people for my first cheque from both company!”² In the blog post comments (below), some of the interactions showed how existing blogger practices were adapting to the new opportunities:

[Commenter A] said...

I clicked all your ads already. It's your turn now!! We are helping each other.

2:18 PM

[DammU] said...

Mr [Commenter A],

I scratch ur back...u scratch mine!

2:38 PM

[Commenter C] said...

¹ All names used are pseudonyms.

² Blog post, DammU, 24 July 2007. In this paper, all spelling and grammar left as is.

I too clicked ur ads! when are u clicking mine? =P

4:04 PM

[DammU] said...

Miss [Commenter C],

I go do it NOW!!

4:36 PM

[Commenter D] said...

i scratch ur back u scratch my back =D

[...]

6:31 PM

[...]

[Commenter E] said...

woah you got rm4.70 and rm 5.86 in just couple days.how do you made it??..me no one click my ads..let we click ads each other please..

3:22 PM

Before personal blogs were able to host advertisements, reciprocal exchanges of hyperlinks and attention actualised through clicks were primarily a means to develop further social ties and were a stabilising influence on the blogging assemblages. Conversely, withholding visits and/or hyperlinks was a sign of disagreement or tension. These actions of mutual support resembled gifting, in which “the act of exchange is inseparably the reproduction of the social relationship in which it is embedded” (Slater, 2002, p. 239). As the above shows, embedded advertisements offered a divergent opportunity for this practice to deliver a financial reward, too.

These actions were initially tacitly condoned by BlogAdNet. In March 2007, a co-founder suggested to his blog readers: “When the ad runs, perhaps egg on your readers to check it out.”³ A year later, at a marketing product launch, the BlogAdNet liaison person informally suggested to bloggers that they limit clicking on ads on their own blogs to once daily, but that it was fine to click on friends’ blogs.⁴ In 2009, however, he explained that bloggers “might be suspended” if they asked their friends to click on their ads. He also explained that the company had an automated procedure for detecting multiple clicks from the same source, and that bloggers would be denied the extra earnings and sent an email asking them to desist. Nonetheless, “the first one will always count. [...]

³ Blog post, Tan, 16 March 2007

⁴ Fieldnotes dated 8 April 2008

you should be interested in something, that's why you click on it [...] [the clients] still get the exposure, so we believe that you deserve at least the 25 sen, the first one.”⁵

Presumably due to clients' concerns, the prohibition on reciprocal ad clicking thus became more explicit. In April 2008 and later in September 2010, BlogAdNet sent an email to registered bloggers that showed a concern with increased 'click fraud'.⁶ In the later email, billed as a "community message service," there were four categories of click fraud outlined, two of which involve the blogger alone: registering a large number of blogs and clicking on them, and/or repeatedly changing the IP address in order to simulate being a different person. The other two relate to reciprocal actions: bloggers were told not to ask readers to click on their advertisements, and not to click "on other bloggers' ads [...] leaving a comment behind asking/hinting to the owner to click on their ads back."⁷

In this way, community was still being invoked although an important collective, stabilising, practice was being reframed. Click fraud was presented as a threat to the 'community' – reframed as an income generating collective – in that it could reduce overall advertisers' interest and funding. Bloggers were asked to refrain from it and educate others, and BlogAdNet stated their willingness to ban those involved "so other members of the community are not affected by those who engage in click fraud."⁸ Thus BlogAdNet was re-entangling the rationalised and depersonalised clicking within a wider reciprocal framework of the 'community'. From a reciprocal support mechanism, BlogAdNet had to bring the bloggers to understand clicks on advertisements as "a market transaction, reproduc[ing] no social roles other than that of buyer and seller" (Slater, 2002, p. 239). The coordination of reciprocal clicking by bloggers was an 'overflow', or externality, in the terms laid out by Callon, which threatens to destabilise the market, and what the email presents was an attempt to internalise an externality (e.g. Strathern, 2002).

Conclusions

Advertisers became interested in advertising on blogs through the social relations created by and through bloggers and their readers, but there is a tension inherent in this appropriation. In a market economy, the transaction that is sealed by the exchange of money, based on a common ethical position formalised in a sales contract, needs to be alienable (Slater, 2002, p. 110). Advertisers want a presence in the 'online community', but – as Callon would put it – they want to contain the 'overflow' and disentangle the actual reciprocal relations that have contributed to the existence of the blog assemblage.

Understanding markets and stabilised collectives as assemblages allows us to understand how they interact and – in this case – the market territorialises the blogging assemblage. The technologies that quantify and measure audience, and which are the

⁵ Interview with Andy, 10 August 2009

⁶ Fieldnotes/email dated 29 September 2010

⁷ The "Prohibited Uses" in the Google AdSense Terms & Conditions (Malaysia) provides a detailed list of similar prohibited uses.

⁸ Fieldnotes/email dated 29 September 2010

source of the commodifiable audience for the bloggers, are the same means that oversee their actions. This recalls Deleuze's argument regarding the use of technologies that substitute "for the individual or numerical body the code of a 'dividual' material to be controlled" (Deleuze, 1992, p. 7) – the qualification of the bloggers as legitimate recipients of the payment for advertising services is done through digitised, quantified and contingent data.

Thus blogs become entangled with market relations through the use of web analytics, which coincide with business models derived from pre-existing mass media. However, although not covered in this paper, calculation is not restricted to quantification – goods are qualified and transformed in other ways such as through blog affordances such as interactivity and personalisation (Hopkins, 2013), as well as through their inclusion in offline marketing-oriented events.

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