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INFORMATION WORLDS: BOUNDARIES AND INTERSECTIONS IN THREE ONLINE SETTINGS

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Introduction

This paper reports on a collaborative endeavor that applies a single theoretical framework, the Theory of Information Worlds (Jaeger and Burnett, 2010), to three independent research projects investigating three online environments. In its broadest outlines, this endeavor aims to develop a qualitative codebook rooted in the theory that can be applied equally in all three projects, and to identify situations where coding must be more specific to individual projects.

The projects investigate discursive and information sharing practices in three settings:

1. The use of Twitter for political interaction and information sharing during election cycles in South Korea.
2. The use of visual “memes” on Facebook pages related to the Occupy and Tea Party movements in the United States, and the extensive discussions in response to those memes. And
3. The intersection of information behavior and digital literacies in Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs).

In particular, this paper examines political discourse in these three settings in light of one of the core concepts of the Theory of Information Worlds and the ways in which

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politics function both as a point of intersection and a boundary between the online settings and the outside world.

The Theory of Information Worlds

The Theory of Information Worlds provides a framework for examining the place of information in social settings from the smallest and most localized through the often much larger and broader social contexts within which those localized settings are embedded. Although information worlds can be conceptualized and analyzed as recognizable and discrete entities, they are never isolated from the larger worlds in which they are situated, and multiple worlds interact with and influence each other in a variety of ways.

The Theory proposes five concepts that can be used to analyze both specific worlds and the interactions between those worlds: Social Norms, Social Types, Information Value, Information Behavior, and Boundaries. Full definitions and discussions can be found in Jaeger and Burnett (2010), but this paper focuses on Information Value, which denotes a world's shared sense of the relative importance – “value” – of different types of information. Worlds may share types of information and have similar access to information resources, but often attach different values to that information; one, for instance, may value a particular type of information because of its economic impact, while another may value it because of its “aboutness”; The Theory's concept of Information Value offers a way of understanding differences in how information is conceptualized across worlds, and can increase our understanding of information-related interactions – cooperation or conflict – between worlds.

Information Worlds and Political Discourse on Twitter

This project uses social network analysis and content analysis to examine South Korean Citizens' political information sharing behaviors on Twitter during the 2012 presidential election. In this setting, citizens use a variety of information behaviors for political communication and deliberation with others. The study examines social types – opinion leaders, discussion starters, questioners, etc. – and emphasizes those participants whose tweets are most often retweeted, marking them as opinion leaders.

The information worlds of Twitter reflect both explicit and implicit social norms; explicit norms govern the use conventional tagging practices (such as the use of hash tags), while implicit norms influence the frequent use of jokes, irony, sarcasm, and other linguistic behaviors. In this world, participants engage in information sharing, reinforcing political homogeneity and polarization according to their information values, largely along conservative and liberal orientations. The boundaries between these worlds reflect the polarized ideologies of these groups.

Information Worlds in Facebook Memes

This project examines political activity via “memes” (images with overlaid text) on pages supporting and criticizing the Occupy and Tea Party movements. As on Twitter, much of the information behavior on these pages emphasizes information sharing, with often-

lengthy and vehement comment threads following many posts. Both groups follow similar normative patterns in both posting and commentary, though some pro-Occupy pages tend to be more civil than many pro-Tea Party pages. Comment threads reveal a variety of information values, often circling around the relationship between ideological factual accuracy and rhetorical posturing and representation; in many cases, participants (including page admins) tend to be more concerned with information that supports their groups' views rather than with accuracy.

Boundaries and intersections are a crucial part of this analysis: All the groups exist within the same social media space (and the social norms shared across that space) and, thus, intersect with each other in a variety of ways, including a focus on particular issues and the use of similar rhetorical strategies. At the same time, each group can be seen as a distinct information world with its own distinct social media presence with very clear boundaries separating them from politically opposed groups; in this environment, Occupy groups tend to be more accepting of opposed political viewpoints than Tea Party groups.

Information Worlds in Virtual Spaces

In the 3-dimensional spaces of modern MMORPGs, social types are of particular importance: players choose a particular role to engage in activities, (questing, storytelling, socializing, gathering, crafting, building, etc.). These choices strongly influence participants' sense of information value, and have important implications for information behaviors and digital literacy practices. This can also lead to the development of smaller, more focused information worlds – such as communities of healers, particular guilds, etc. – within the larger world of the MMORPG. Individual small worlds may lobby against others for design changes to the game itself in order to alter things that matter most to them. Thus, political discourse in MMORPGs tends to emphasize the politics of the gaming world itself rather than that of the outside world, marking a clear boundary between the world of the game and what is outside.

In another sense, however, this seemingly impenetrable boundary is also an intersection: as players interact, the boundaries between information worlds may blur or clash. Players often use social media, forums, blogs, and websites to share ideas, organize and manage information, coordinate efforts, and lobby for improvements, allowing players to bridge the boundaries between their virtual and real information worlds of their everyday lives.

Discussion and Conclusion

Each of these three worlds intersects with outside worlds – both online and offline – in which they are embedded; that is, outside concerns and resources enter into the worlds to a greater or lesser extent. In Korean political discourse on Twitter and the sharing of and discussion concerning political information on Facebook, the intersections with external concerns are overt, as “real world” issues cross the boundaries around these worlds to become a focus of discussion.

In MMORPGs, the relationship is different; because MMORPGs are full virtual worlds within which gaming can occur, in-world concerns are primary, although they often re-enact external concerns such as politics. Information value in these worlds reflects the internal concerns of these worlds and the ways in which those concerns mirror or deviate from concerns of other worlds.

The Theory of Information Worlds focuses on how information functions in social settings within and across multiple worlds; because the theory focuses on the relationships between worlds, seeing them as interacting with rather than isolated from each other, it provides a mechanism for analyzing not only the social role of information within online worlds, but also an ideal framework for understanding the boundaries and intersections between those and other worlds.

References

Jaeger, P. T., & Burnett, G. (2010). *Information worlds: Social context, technology, and information behavior in the age of the Internet*. New York: Routledge.