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COLLABORATIVE SENSE-MAKING COMPLEXITIES OF (FOR?) LOST AND BREAKING BAD

1. General Introduction

Present article draws on the ongoing work regarding my PhD dissertation which focuses on sense-making synergies in user-generated content in weekly commentary sections of U.S. TV criticism blogs. These blogs provide weekly reviews for highly serialized stories such as Lost and Breaking Bad. As long-running serials, their coverage ultimately amassed a wealth of accompanying commentaries. The internal synergy of such data helps to reflect how these narratives successfully capitalized on trending online networking by both enhancing as well as facilitating socially distributed intelligence through interactive problem-solving. Hence, my core claim presently is that narrative complexity carries over into the reciprocal sphere and becomes re-framed as systems of complex sense-making. Blog commenters, confronted with ambiguities and discrepancies in plot and character, can be observed to plot meaning variations – as-if stories narrativizing their inferences (Fludernik 2005 [1996]; Dannenberg 2004, 2008; Byrne 2005; Hofstadter 1985: 232-233). These micro-narratives function as “tones at variance” (Heraclitus LXXV; Kahn 1981 [1979]: 63), facilitating and composing the unfolding communication of knowledge. What I’m going to maintain is that these “tones,” as it were, develop incrementally into distinct convergences of meaning. These macro-level entities are observable as emerging and intersecting on the backdrop of simultaneously occurring discussions in several blog environments. Subsequent discussion remains largely theoretical, however a two-phased analysis methodology is proposed where (1) commentary data is pre-processed with Text Mining method using Natural Language Processing (NLP) algorithms; and (2) processed data is then further structured and analyzed through qualitative, context-sensitive close reading.

2. Operative Layer; or, Plotting permutations of narrative experience

For a mystery show like Lost, commenters’ interest dwells predominantly on plot level. By producing narrativized coherences, they construct an immersive serial experience through persistent re-evaluations. Because original narrative’s ambivalent “wholeness” is presented piecemeal, advanced attempts to satisfyingly re-w(r)ir(t)e the presumptive pathways of sense are required (Ross 2008:173-174; Mittell 2012-2013). Contrastively, one of the pressure points for Breaking Bad – an explicitly character-driven drama – consists of making sense of initially vague or scarcely implied character intentions. In present case, the narrative complexity for Breaking Bad’s feedback arises from how commenters relate initial uncertainty regarding specific story-events to purely inferential accounts of character motivations.

Such what I call intersubjective entwining capitalizes on the bond of familiarity with characters, the “exposure effect” (Blanchett&Vaage 2012; Giles 2012, 2010; Bordwell 2008). What does my notion bring to the table? Namely, that by becoming the first-hand witness to characters’ real-time changes, the conventional third-person perspective is exchanged for a more naturalistic vantage point. The acknowledgement of characters as acquaintances with whom one has “shared history” subsequently allows for joint sense-making. This links characters’ acting on some intentional grounds (or perhaps considering it) with commenters’ elaborating on their reasons enactively and inferentially. These co-constructed possibilities for characters’ intentions are highly context-sensitive. When a particular outcome is presupposed, it hence has to be “normalized” to that person’s
“story” (Hutto 2008; Gallagher&Hutto 2008). And of that story, both the recipient and character(s) have shared knowledge.

Whilst frequent backtracking in narrative data obviously differs in cases like Lost and Breaking Bad, the meanings produced ultimately resist demarcation from narrative proper – especially concerning Lost’s feedback. The “tones at variance” that every commenter constructs become divergent “outgrowths” of narrative proper. The symbiotic attachment to narrative isn’t waived entirely, however. Such contextual backtracking occurs when commenters appropriate (a) specific incoming narrative inputs and (b) past narrative data. These inputs I refer to as motifs. My usage of this term cuts across its conventional narrative origins and employs it rather as a “thought contagion” (Lynch 1996: 3), sparking commenters’ cognitive machinery. As such, motifs become appropriated as raw building blocks, “elementary atom-like unit[s] of meaning” (Tomashevski 1965), but exclusively for commenters’ imaginative experience.

Herewith, it’s useful to re-tool literary theorist Hilary Dannenberg’s notion of “liminal plotting”. She adequately argues that one is plotting liminally whilst confronted with a highly suspenseful situation in the narrative present. However, Dannenberg further claims that such development is accompanied by “doub[e]r immersion.” One’s attention remains in a singular narrative world, whilst just “spliced” temporally within it. For all intents and purposes, the quality of immersion becomes twofold because the suspenseful experience was added an extra layer due to one’s creative processes. For me, this assumption gives pause. Can we really reconcile the two kinds of suspenses these very specific perceptions – experiential narrative proper and construction of “mental fictions” it facilitates – evoke? I’d argue that no, we can’t. I’d propose here to distinguish distinctively internal suspense which develops from within the recipient, owing directly to pleasurable creative paces undertaken. Here, it is useful to adapt the ideas of constructivist scholar Siegfried Schmidt (1994).

Namely, Schmidt has noted that “media offerings” (such as a TV show) as consciously perceived entities are what he calls “Kommunikat-basis.” Media formulates the instigative “basis,” epistemologically, for the “[constructive] process of perception.” Here,

“structures are actively built over perceived materials” and “semantic properties are attributed to and not simply taken from a Kommunikat-basis.” (ibid.:502; emphasis added)

Although Kommunikat-basis – as one’s own idiosyncratic perception of the “offering” in question – is utilized for cognitive construction of meaning, neither that nor the text proper can forecast the results of this process nor “sharply constrain” them. Schmidt refers to this process simply as communication-production (“Kommunikat-production”):

“[f]or a cognitive system a text does not contain or transport ‘meanings’; instead, the cognitive system attributes ‘meanings’ to a Kommunikat-basis via cognitive (self-)organization. These ‘meanings’ are necessarily subject-dependant (but not subjective).” (ibid.:503)

Now, if to interlace these arguments with Dannenberg’s ideas, what’s the key suggestion here? Namely, we can reconsider the core idea of narrative experience. Forgone narrative’s guidance like in case of Lost; or whilst unsure of characters’ intentions that are concealed at the time, like in case of Breaking Bad, commenters are left to fend for themselves. So they navigate the muddy waters of their own constructed perception of narrative experience. They blend diverse data, that is, produce communications from their own subject-dependant perspective, whilst the interactive online collaboration foregoes the issue of subjectivity. After all, as Siegfried Schmidt reminds us, the production of communication is a highly social affair and meanings ensue from “communicative interactions” (cf. von Glasersfeld 2007 [2003]).

3. Systemic Layer; or, beacon as an emergence in/of the complex interaction system

Now, if to move on to the macro-perspective of my argument, what did I mean when I proposed that the individual “tones” of meaning incrementally develop into convergences? To account for such synergy, I’ve chosen the notion of beacon. Why? In this term, it’s underlying principle of guidance appeals to me. In real life, when a vessel finds itself struggling amidst the rough waves whilst carefully evading reefs of a stony shore ahead, it’s skipper is eventually compelled to send out a signal in the form of blinking light. Thereafter, reciprocation is hoped for. Once beacon blinks back, a recursive, self-reflexive dialogue, feeding back to both parties, is established. A feedback loop, if you will. I believe that the relationship between the commenters’ idiosyncratic “tones” of meaning and the complex convergence they compose draws from a comparable dialectics. Observed as a theoretical abstraction, beacon aspires to denote natural, characteristically un-guided pattern-forming which emphasizes thematic focal points as they emerge in synergetic long-term commentary discussions. Alterations and updates in individual “tones” inscribe beacon with its characteristic fluidness. Hence, beacon’s conceptual design affords to observe the seeming chaos of these online proceedings as
effectively narratable, enabling to distinguish plot-beacons (Lost) and character-beacons (Breaking Bad). In the former case, inadequacies in plot magnify specific themes which garner focused, serialized attention, whereas the latter case exemplifies how various presumed reasonings of characters become interlaced through inferential construction.

In speaking of narrativity, coherence and inferential reasoning, it’s important to emphasize that the grasping at narrative coherence in the online feedback of these serials is a collective behaviour and as such, the convergent beacons of idiosyncratic “tones at variance” essentially reveal how commenters’ inability to make sufficient sense doesn’t constrain, but rather amplifies, their proclivity to produce (any kind of) meaning. Beacon, effectively, enables to observe this tendency from a second-order observant macro-perspective. It shows how even the stumblings in the dark, as it were, may appear to paradoxically possess their inner logic of “perfect attunement” (Heraclitus LXXV; Kahn 1981 [1979]: 63), narratively speaking.

But paradoxes abound. Beacons as emergent convergences can be seen to go beyond their subjects and loci. They transcend what Niklas Luhmann called Bewuβtseinssystemen (Luhmann 1990a, 1990b, 1992) – consciousness systems uttering communications – as well as “online epistemic communities” (cf. e.g. Fréard et al. 2010; Détéenne et al. 2012) they hail from. Beacons can be accredited with sovereignty which manifests whilst observing their self-organization amidst the flow of information. They “aris[e] from diverse [interactional] contributions[,] encompass[ing] knowledge greater than the contribution of any individual” (Johnson et al. 1998: 4).

As Luhmann aptly put it, only “communications can communicate” (Luhmann 1992:251). As such, beacons enable to tease out fascinating fluctuations within the fabric of longitudinal, joint narrative experience as it constructs itself through persistent co-operative alterations. Beacons provide unique insight into naturally occurring autopoietic interaction systems in Luhmannian sense. Going especially by his ideas, beacon as emergence lends itself to be observed as growing out of a doubly-rotating system which is prone to systemic and operative circularity. Its systematic nature emerges from bottom-up operations (see section 2). Such system of communication(s) becomes “an indivisible unity with emergent properties” (Laszlo&Krippner 1998:53). It persistently re-evaluates its incremental alterations and re-organizes itself accordingly. And with every added difference, it grows more complex (Luhmann 1992: 252).

I believe presently introduced core claims can be reinforced further by proposing a specific analysis methodology. Hence, going forward I’ll suggest a two-phase method of analysis. (1) Computational generalizations, that is, text mining which provides an important initial layer of strategic data pre-processing; and (2) qualitative close analysis of this pre-processed data.

4. First-phase analysis: data pre-processing

For these purposes, I utilize the Natural Language Processing (NLP) algorithms as used IBM’s Text Analytics for Surveys, or TAS4 for short. It’s fairly recent software which has so far been successfully incorporated for qualitative data analysis in sociology (Tierney 2012; cf. Lin 2012: 301). To best of my knowledge, text mining by utilizing NLP, especially as a preliminary measure to scaffold an enriched qualitative analysis, hasn’t yet been applied in order to shine a systematical light neither on the “cognitive work-out” induced by complex narratives nor on the intricacies of continuous online interaction these narratives facilitate. Notions such as online feedback, community building and opinion trending, meanwhile, have sparked methodically correlative interest in diverse areas, such as service (Ordenes et al. 2014) and marketing research (Glance et al. 2005) and social network analysis (Bondendorf&Kaiser 2009; Finin et al. 2008). My aim is to introduce possible gains for the previously discussed theoretical framework which integrated cognitive narratology, complexity theory and reception studies.

For serials Lost and Breaking Bad, 500 commentaries from 4 blogs and 200 commentaries from 3 blogs were collected, respectively. In case of Lost, these texts presented wide-spread discussions focusing on two specific episodes from 2007 and 2009. For Breaking Bad, discussions focusing on one significant episode from 2010 were observed. Relevant data was first inserted into two-column Excel spreadsheet. Into one column, coded data including commenter’s and blog’s name, date and unique reference was inserted. Unedited commentary text was put into the second column. This spreadsheet was subsequently fed into the TAS4 software for further processing. TAS4 then focused on the commentary texts by extracting and indexing text variables, or concepts.
Here program’s internal resources, like dictionaries, thesauruses and templates were utilized. This internal conceptualization process relies on built-in rule-sets of NLP. Thus, it functions as a useful resource to tease out recurring communication artefacts - single words, sometimes phrases. This technique proved fruitful in examining this kind of longitudinal computer-mediated communication because majority of the extracted concepts turned out as contextually relevant for the evolving meanings amidst the overall flow of knowledge communication. Also, TAS4’s framework is readily adaptable. Once the concepts are extracted, program’s internal library enables to prepare custom typologies for more detailed concept-extraction. This step helps to refine further processes of extraction.
5. Second-phase analysis: Qualitative-contextual reading of data

Next, a second-level process of aggregating concepts into encompassing categories is performed. For Lost’s data, this building process was accomplished manually. Such choice enabled to emphasize the insight gleaned from the preliminary qualitative examination of the extracted concepts. This sort of strategy mixing helped in shaping the categories specifically for the occasion. Concepts significant for developing meaning-patterns, for example, can be added as the descriptive sub-routines to custom categories. Significantly, categories in TAS4 are not exclusive or hierarchical. Instead, their content “flows” freely between categories, thus enabling to construct visual category maps which, on closer inspection, are deducible to one single commentary text. As such, ample breathing room is afforded for nuances in emerging meanings which may easily go unnoticed in more refined quantifiable research situation (Tierney 2012: 179-180). Hence, by close observation of the extracted NLP results, distinct beacons were presently distinguished and named. They were built from contextually relevant concepts, and in some cases, from motifs as sub-categories. This move enabled to visualize the extremely condensed interrelations beacons and motifs share. In program’s internal terminology this is aptly called “shared responses.”

As the graph above depicts, the width of the connecting lines depends on link intensity. This correlates with the volume of “shared responses”, that is, commentaries that overlap in various categories (more shared responses, bolder the connection and bigger the indicating bullet points). Significantly, in the case of the beacon designated Someone’s Alleged Captivity the connections are the strongest with the two years worth of discussion fixating on the motifs of “cry for help” and “ambivalent substance”. Directed attempts are made to decipher the reasons behind someone’s imprisonment. Incidentally, it is commentary content relating to these motifs, as well as to entirely different beacons altogether, which ultimately enables the beacon of Someone’s Alleged Captivity to emerge amidst the overall flow of information. In short, the intense links indicating “shared responses” can be seen as threads which run through every beacon, spotlighting its self-production as it comes to be.
Further examination of these processes would distinguish a commentary sample, which, whilst having shared beacons and/or motifs, would differ by posting times. This distinction would enable to clarify in minute detail the key idea behind beacon – that is, how it develops and modifies itself through the individual “tones” converging into it over time. Furthermore, the categorical non-exclusivity of TAS4 software permits to assemble *layered* samples, which enable to consider diverse meaning fluctuations comparatively. One could observe individual commentaries overlapping three or more beacons / motifs as indicated by same number of joint threads.
Similarly, one could concentrate on the synergy occurring distinctly within one thread.

Contrastively, in regards to *Breaking Bad*'s commentaries, the automated feature of category building was applied, instead. Here a far messier graph emerged which was subsequently edited for readability. Nonetheless,
NLP algorithms correctly distinguished key motifs facilitating the communications in regards to one specific episode (ricin, poisoning, child, car, cigarette). The outcomes of the automated tasks of concept extraction and category building were closely analyzed. Then, the names of contextually relevant characters (Walt, Jesse, Gus) as recurrent communication artefacts were added manually to assure that their obvious linkages to the motifs in question would not go unnoticed.

This strategy availed to distinguish diverse threads of “shared responses.” Hence it was possible to visualize not only the interrelations revealed by interleaving significant characters and story motifs (such as Gus and ricin), but also, importantly, how the communications in regards to inferring one character’s possible intentions always become intertwined with those of his co-inhabitants in the experienced story. Put differently, Gus’ intentional activity in regard to presumed ricin poisoning is always empowered by how commenters’ view his possible actions intersecting with similar inferences regarding Jesse and/or Walt. This, again, enables to leverage the macro data for micro gains, as it were, by observing how threads become layered in individual commentaries.
To summarize

This article concentrated on online user-generated content in the form of blog commentaries. I argued that individual narrativized meaning variations develop into convergences of meaning amidst the communication of knowledge as facilitated by concurrent discussions in several blogs. I described such synergy through the original notion of beacon. By distinguishing plot- and character-specific beacons, I claimed it to denote natural, characteristically un-guided pattern-forming which emphasizes thematic focal points as they emerge in synergic long-term commentary discussions. Alterations and updates in individual meaning variances – which I termed the operative layer – inscribe beacon with its characteristic fluidness, modifying it systemically from bottom-up. As such, beacon can be seen to effectively narrate seemingly chaotic and vast-scale processes like online feedback. To reinforce my theoretical claims, I employed TAS4 software in order to provide deeper empirical insight. Here, notions such as communication artefacts, link intensity, threads and layering were introduced to clarify and visualize the previously hypothesized complexly intertwined nature of knowledge communication in online feedback. For further research, the analysis methodology applied can be extended to include other media (e.g. movie series feedback) and other feedback outlets (publicly accessible forums, e.g. imdb.com, reddit.com; or, commentary sessions on youtube.com) in order to ascertain similarities and differences in ways the meanings produced may interact with and compose flows of communication.

Bibliography


