Web designers' power struggle strategies and management innovation

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Abstract

In marketing, different forms of power struggle, tension, anti-consumption and resistance have emerged as catalyst to change and innovation. The partaking, co-creation, co-production literatures underline the emergence of external agents as critical for change. This study examines the case of power struggle faced by web-designers' resulting in the establishment of new practices that have the potential to alter change at field level. The analysis of 21 in-depth interviews of web designers in the USA, via grounded theory, reveals three phases of tensions between web designers and clients. We illustrate how tensions and power struggle regarding social cues inclusion in web design are discursively constructed via web designers' subjective positive resistance. We found that discursive power strategies practices that leverage non-institutionalized actors' knowledge as response to tensions are not outright refusals but positive willingness to participate in the exploration of alternative, proactive solution for web development leading to new practices that re-shape change at field level.

Keywords: web designer, tension, change, discursive power strategy, innovation.

Paper type: research paper

Introduction:

Organization theory has traditionally linked change in firms to the role played by purposeful actors from within the firm. Within this increasingly well developed theoretical frameworks, 'institutional entrepreneur' and other purposeful actors are put forwards as individuals that re-shape, re-frame, and help in the establishment of new practices (Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007). Criticism has been made, however, of the over focus on heroes and mavericks rather than the wider array of third party non-institutionalized actors.

It is along these lines that Birkinshaw et al (2008: 829) defined management innovation as "the generation and implementation of management practices, process, structure, or techniques that is new to the state of the art and is intended to further organizational goals". Lately, the literature has recognized that unorganized groups of individuals, often from outside the firm, can also purposefully or inadvertently trigger change. This lead to the notion of 'partaking' whereby autonomous non-institutionalized actors accumulation of behavior over time lead to new practices that catalyze changes at the field level (Ansari and Phillips, 2011).

Our paper address this gap by investigating in the less traditional, more fluid, dynamic and interdependent setting of web design, where do sources of management innovation come from? Through our in-depth examination of 21 website designers in the USA (average 11 years of experience), we provide an account of how the micro- level practices of consumers if interpreted and integrated in web design can lead to changes at field level.

We present our argument in four steps. First we briefly review the sources of online social knowledge change and how web designers' knowledge partaking (bridging micro and macro environment) can be combined to shed light on new potential sources of management innovation. The methodology is then outlined along with a presentation and discussion of the findings. The study concludes with a series of practical and conceptual implications.

Theorizing change and innovation

While proponents of technology have concentrated on tracing sources of management innovation in the technical processes (Constantinides, 2004; Hsiao, Yen and Li, 2012), other scholars have started to underline the importance of human agency, pointing to the socio-cultural roots of management innovation (Hedberg, 1984, Ho, Kuo and Lin, 2012). In consumer behavior, recent models of proposed a different view on power and have rejected the notions of the all powerful consumer as well as the opposition between the powerful firm and resistant consumers (Schilling, 2010). These rejections mirror recent evolutions on the interaction and exchange between consumers and producers co-creating and reproducing the market (Chu and Chan, 2009, Denegri-Knott, 2006, Lush and Vargo, 2007).

Accordingly, discursive power models following Holt (2002:89) encourage non-purposeful actors, such as web designers, to interpret cumulative and converging consumers' behavior to "assist entrepreneurial firms to tear down the old branding paradigm and create opportunities for companies that understand emerging new principles". This is paralleled in Johnson, Langley, Melin, and Whittington, (2007, p 322), who have proposed that "technical communicators influence technology use and the transfer of knowledge about these technologies" and hence facilitate management innovation and the spread of new practices beyond technological capabilities.

Moreover, following Cova et al (2007: 232-233), "organizations must aim at providing managed and dynamic platforms for consumer practice, which on the one hand free creativity and know-how of consumers, and on the other, channel these consumers activities in ways desired by the firm". In contrast to traditional organization theory, we define tension and resistance by non-purposeful actors as encouraging the establishment of new practices that lead to change at field level. This study extends the scope of analysis to tension practices as a reflection of resistance as active engagement by meso-level field actors. Taking into consideration the various aspects of resistance, Collinson (1994: 49) sees tensions as attempts to "challenge, disrupt or invert prevailing assumptions, discourses and power relations". Tension as resistance can take multiple material and symbolic forms, and its strength, influence and intensity are likely to be variable and to shift over time…'. Drawing further on Fleming and Spicer (2008: 29), four key practices of resistance have been analyzed; refusal, voice, escape and creation:

"Resistance as refusal overtly blocks the effects of power by undermining the flow of domination. Resistance as voice demands that those in control change particular aspects of power relations to favor those being affected by them. Resistance as escape reflects processes of mental disengagement from the workplace: cynicism, skepticism and dis-identification. Resistance as

creation refers to the way that alternative identities and discursive systems of representation emerge within domination".

We frame more specifically the study around this question: In seeking to identify the sources of management innovation can web designers' discursive power strategies used to justify or not e-socio-cultural atmospheric cues be leveraged to catalyze change at field level?

The contribution of this study is twofold. First, in the e-marketing and web development literature, researchers are only now beginning to examine processes by non-core, non-institutionalized actors that shape online provision –partaking-. Second, while a heavy emphasis is placed on technology-led strategy planning, comparatively little is known about how tensions emanating from discursive power strategies producing 'normal' and 'deviant' behavior processes can alter the sources of management innovation.

Methodology

This research is based on a series of 21 semi-structured interviews via Skype with respondents recruited from an advertisement on Coroflot (www.coroflot.com). Selection criteria were: (i) US web design employment, (ii) range of firm experiences (see type of website designed in Table 1), (iii) primary occupation as website designer. Table 1 presents an overview of the respondent demographics (full anonymity followed our institution's ethical guidelines). Most importantly the last column, show the array of respondents' most influential online source of socio-cultural information, allowing a greater grounding of the discussion (Phillips, Sewell, and Jaynes, 2008).

Although not representative of the entire population of web designers, given the constraints of voluntary participation, the sample does provide an adequate mix of gender, age, cross ethnic social backgrounds and employment (average 11 years of experience).

The themes investigated included: (i) definitions of key terms (web designer, e-culture, management innovation, network, value creation, external agents, tension) and roles, (ii) the meaning and purpose of website design in relation to engagement with sources of management innovation, and (iii) identification of 'tensions' as drivers of discursive power strategies that do or do not justify deviant practices.

The grounded theory analysis proceeds concurrently with data collection, allowing each interview to build on the findings of previous interviews. All data was collected by a single author (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Yin, 1994, Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Findings and discussion

The findings highlight many different facets (types) and apprehensions (dogma) regarding the various practices of discursive power strategy to justify deviance via tensions and conflicting demands for or against the inclusion of e-socio cultural atmospheric cues that have the potential to catalyze change at filed level. Three phases of tensions are identified: functional (as recognition), ideological (as reflection), and market (as action).

Website design was, first of all, portrayed by all our respondents as governed by functional codes and technical bureaucracies. All respondents stated that such day-to-day practices (including technical standards, official formats, approved content and language) exert considerable power over when, where, and how the source of innovation and change might emerge. The sources of management innovation are thus identified as resulting from tensions against (i) traditional top

down power and control sources including vetted applications and (ii) the fatalist belief that processes of e-value creation mainly emerge from within clients' strategies (after listening to the market i.e. market research and other institutionalized agents such as consultants).

Second, designers describe web design as existing within powerful managerial technological cultural systems whereby a specific power source (possibly the marketing department of the client) restricts the social richness of other agents' cultures (DiMaggio, 1998). This fundamental ideological tension to cultural information disclosure and change at the level of the client is identified by the majority of respondents despite the long rhetoric about firms' market-orientation. Respondents portray their clients as having strong animosity against unregulated information (often oral/video) and cultural cues that do not fit current corporate cultural values and operations. These strip away any sense of designers' agency. Moreover, political correctness was described as needing re-definition and extension beyond government and industry codes towards the immaterial power of virtual online communities.

Finally, the findings show a curvilinear process at work. The timing to leverage tension as source of management innovation is important. Tensions debated too early in the design at the contractual stage are described as negative resulting to team disintegration as distrust. Similarly, at a point in the advanced design process, acting on tensions is synonymous with work destruction.

Our analysis (see appendix Table 2-4) contributes three advancement in understanding the role of consumers and web designers within an ever growing co-creative partaking networked environment that influence the process of change and innovation from outside the firm. First, by focusing on the processes that lead to the creation of new practices as in the case of e-socio cultural atmospheric cues, we expand the understanding of the sources of management innovation. This study demonstrates the potential effectiveness of creative positive tension (refusal, voicing, escape, creation) as mean to unlock sources of management innovation via cumulative behavior leading to change at field level (Ansari and Phillips, 2011). A crucial point is that the process is identified not to be merely technical; web designers and clients must perform ritual and symbolic activities in order to gain membership in the cyber community to obtain the information and create e-socio cultural atmospheric cues. In turn, web designers become the repository source and creators of cultural and social capital online that ought to be considered as complementary to clients-marketers' activities. Overall, most respondents sought new rules and processes to develop and include socio-cultural cues as a legitimate and beneficial differentiation assets that can then be used as sources of management innovation. That effort places renewed importance on and seeks to analyze the independent vs. interdependent relationships between clients/marketers and non-institutionalized meso-level actors that catalyze new practices conducive to change at the field level.

In addition, the analysis reveals that through the three phases of tension –functional, ideological and timing tension resisting market governance - there are genuine, novel sources of management innovation to be leveraged. The functional practices are associated with the voicing of individual tensions underpinned by the more fundamental issue of *inactivity-interactivity* and the systemic silencing of non-institutionalized actors and issues by technology. Practitioners' ideological tensions as a refusal of the status-quo involves shaping questions around the '*doing*' and '*how*'. Lastly, timing tensions involve balancing market governance forces linked to the deep-seated issue of *interest* (e.g. where loyalty lies) with profit (Spicer and Böhm, 2007)

The findings emphasize the importance of online culture via a dispersed set of influence peddlers. At stake is re-defining technology management in our personal lives when non-strategic, non-

core actors are authorized and encouraged to shape and change the expectations in professional lives (Levi, 2011).

Conclusion

Through 21 semi structured interviews of web designers in the USA, an investigation of the tensions and deviances potentially exhibited by web designers on the decision (or not) to include more online social knowledge was initiated.

This study has a twofold contribution. Firstly, researchers in the e-marketing field have just begun to take into considerations processes by non-core, non- institutionalized actor's that shape online knowledge provision. Secondly, little is known regarding online deviance as positive resistance leading to knowledge sharing strategies as an alternative management innovation behavior. Indeed, the focus of a large majority of studies in the field of web development is in the area of technology acceptance rather than more culturally oriented.

Thus, we identified that through the three phases of tensions i.e. functional (as recognition), ideological (as reflection), and market (as action), web designers deviate from existing rules at the field level. Furthermore, we enhanced that discursive power strategies practices leverage non-institutionalized actor's knowledge to become more innovative and thus satisfy better customers' needs. This we feel is particularly important in a networked society whereby social media (via mobile devices) are omnipresent in consumer lifestyle. Hence, tensions, resistance are not outright refusals but instead positive willingness to search for alternatives, proactive solutions which lead to better service through new practices.

Some issues requiring future research include: (i) the need to explore how tension can be negotiated at times of changes going beyond the typical depiction in the literature of 'winners' and 'losers'. (ii) online social knowledge sharing practices displayed by all agents must be investigated under the specific context of market creation rather than the traditional market orientation strategies (Spicer and Böhm, 2007; Baker and Nelson, 2005) and (iii) the emergence of new forms of retail format such as blogshops, with the potential to disrupt traditional mega retails strategy will need to be investigated. Online culture in such micro-organization is evolving at a rapid pace and may form the basis for future strategic innovation.

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Table 1: Respondents' profile

AGE	EDUCATION: level and type	Claimed Time as web designer	The 5 most influential source of information in your work that you read regularly
26-35	University. School of web designers	> 10 years	Engadget, Tech Crunch, Gizmodo, IXDA, NNG, Twitter eye-tracking topics, UI Patterns website, IxDA forums, Linkedin forums, Jakob Nielsen, Lynda,Adobe Flash Documentation, Learning Action Script 3, communication Arts, Technology Review, Communication Arts, Wired Magazine, Dwell, Engaget, Google's designs, Favourite Website Awards, blogs, Web by Awards, Human Factors, A List Apart, My Fonts, Wired, AIGA, Smashing Magazine, underconsideration, Mashable Mag, NY Times,freelanceswitch, Techcrunch, news, slashdot, A List Apart, JoomBlogger, The Best Of Joomla, and Freelance Switch, NETTUTS, Six Revisions, and Individual Designer/Developer Blogs, UXBooth, Jakob Nielson's Alertbox, Matt Mullenweg's blog, and Deviant Art, Boxes and Arrows, Mashable, Behance, A List Apart, Smashing Magazine, 24 ways,blog jquery, cssremix styleboost, Smashing Magazine, TechCrunch, HuffingtonPost, Webmonkey, Boag World, Twitter - following names such as @BoagWorld @RyanCarson @ElliotJayStocks and @Malarkey, Think Vitamin Radio podcast, LightReading, CED,Media Post,B2B, Microsoft, codeplex, dotnetnuke, infragistics, Google search for Learning and Inspiration, Wikipedia, Web sites visited randomly (Inspiration), Academic Papers (Information), Design Observer, Expression Engine CMS community site and forums, site point, CSS beauty and W3C sites.
36-45	University. Autodidact (scientific, social sciences)	> 10 years	
36-45	University. Other	> 10 years	
26-35	University. Other	> 10 years	
26-35	University. Other	< 10 years	
36-45	University. Other	> 10 years	
18-25	University. Other	< 10 years	
26-35	University. Other	> 10 years	
46-55	Master. Autodidact (scientific, social sciences)	< 10 years	
18-25	University. Autodidact (scientific, social sciences)	> 10 years	
18-25	High school. Autodidact (scientific, social sciences)	< 10 years	
26-35	University. Other	< 10 years	
18-25	University. Other	< 10 years	
36-45	Master. Communication	> 10 years	
26-35	High school. School of web designers	> 10 years	
26-35	University. Autodidact (scientific, social sciences)	< 10 years	
46-55	Ph.D. IT	> 10 years	
26-35	University, IT	< 10 years	
26-35	Master. IT	> 10 years	
36-45	University, communication	< 10 years	
36-45	University. Communication	> 10 years	

Table 2: Selected coding example

	Traditional web designers n=8 4 female, 4 male		Progressive web designers n= 13 2 female, 11 male	
Type of website designed or help to design:	MTV, VH1, The Hawn Foundation, PacSun, Dell, Pfizer, 99Fish, Fur Is Dead, All About Animals. Fishing Hurts, Caring Consumer, Specialk, leggomyeggo, whirlpoolatlowes, maytaghomedepot wagworld, Sarah Jones, Brian Gallagher, Kopplin's Coffee, Crash+Sues, Sauce spirits & Sound, Leslie the Realtor, Master clean, WEA Trust Member Benefits, WSUM 91.7FM Student Radio, Flyover Country		Yahoo! Kelley Blue Book, Nissan, Sea Island, Playlist, Apple, Google, Electronic Arts, Charles Schwab, Wells Fargo, USA TODAY, John Kerry Presidential Campaign, Noblis, National Wildlife Federation, Pentagon, McKinsey, Bank of America, Light to Unite, Ad Campaigns, Freeze Frame 4 Vets, Golgotha - The Movie, Mobile Medical Care, Computerworld, Network world, IT world, Infoworld, Marriott, Pearson Education, AOL, Bank of America, Budweiser, Budlight, Zenith, playdom, I2 TV, I Bongo, Mindteck, Passhe, Poslovni-savjetnik, Akron University, Interca, Brandon Campus.	
Experience	Over 10 years	Below 10 years	Over 10 years	Below 10 years
Functional Resistance as creative voicing **Focus** on -Technical codes and practices -Official formats; -Knowledge repository ownership -Engagement - Targeted vs mass culture - Short vs long term **Emphasis** Day to day practical aspects **Connotation:** Resistance to marketing propaganda, struggle with authoritarian one way power voicing as value creation	I like to use the same official design patterns over and over so that people do not have to re-learn an entirely new environment. You try to design for an average use. I think the technology both web design and client supported systems are very inflexible and that complex nature inhibit creative growth. (Female)	I m self taught, I mean the technical part. Socio-cultural cues require more time and money. Small companies cannot afford all and they have to be more modest in their demands. They need to make money now. (Female) It is the responsibility of the client to take care of the inclusion of social cues. It depends on their business goals. They do not always share with me such details. It helps them to learn about the site audience but then they have to react to the information. (Female)	It is a litigious society. Major corporation are so gun-shy of venturing in the moral or political arena. It is a lack of understanding of the nature of online work and what online culture has really become compared to comfortable contractual agreements lots of legal and copy. (Male) We are constantly constrained by other people, those who have a stake in that website. We have to stay in the confine of unspoken rules for cultural cues and follow strict rules for design. I want to be different, that the human tendency but that does not mean that I will be allowed. (Male)	The world wide web organization (w3.org) focuses only on the technology. There is no resource to help you to know the social cues to include for different types of people. (Male) There is no certification and there is nothing that says you are a web designer. But web analytics talk to client. I do research and store it in a content management system called Joomla but the clients do not care. (Female) What does the majority want to see? How do they want to feel? Clients ask for things to be kind of mellow, do not break the mold, and follow the template. But I think curiosity is at the art of design. (Male)

	Over 10 years	Below 10 years	Over 10 years	Below 10 years
Ideological Resistance as creative refusal **Focus** on -managerial culture - consumer centred strategies - Reward for effort vs. reward for inertia -Risk vs stability **Emphasis** customization, reflection on new meaning for e-culture Reflection on the importance or not of innovation **Connotation:** Desire towards differentiation to regain control, struggle within the profession	If the education of web designers does not have that particular aspect of including the social cue, it's more likely that it won't appear in the web design. For clients, they are trying to stay as neutral as possible. There is a lot of comfort in inertia. They do not want to enter arguments or have to justify themselves. It is the designer obligation to follow the directive of the marketing department and not create problems. (Male) I think that you would have to prove first that it's true that social cues have an impact on the bottom line, and then companies would get very excited about it. Also can such designs stand across a reasonable period as updating is usually slow? (Female)	Most of my clients try to do a kind of marketing done in their physical business. Technology makes is easy to create art but who really appreciate the final piece in view of the times it requires to be created? Then it is down to how much you charge compared to competition. (Male) The tendency online is to be politically correct as you are surrounded by strangers and you don't want to make them upset. This prevents segmentation and targeting. Created websites are sterilized. We have the guide from the client explaining what we should do. We are not perceived to be here to provide inspiration. Innovation do cost more and is risky. (Female)	The idea of being politically correct online is really American for me. I work a lot for NGOs site, we do this thing 'light to unite' the idea is to inspire people. You have to risk new design some with choking photographs for example. I want my design to shine that goes beyond selling and touch viewers' heart without losing the focus of the content just a contemporary authentic design showing how HIV is. (Female) Many people think designing a good web site is a piece of cake. But it takes time, takes a lot of efforts; people think that if you know java, python, you can design a good web site. Many firms are just followers. (Male) I think we include social cues in the web design but not consciously, ideologically. Clients see a popular trend and mimic it. But they never get really fantastic work. Clients simply have a huge disconnect. They refuse to let the users be more active in creating content. Too much need to rely on trust. (Male)	The general consensus of American people is that they are ahead. Clients do not want users to think too much, just act and buy. It is fear based reaction. Firms are running around fast paces try to maximize profit, big ideas are nice but most people do not take the chance. (Male) I think it's due to the language English, the business world talk English so everybody else has too. Nobody's aware that when we're designing and dealing with an international audience at home. (Female) Experience of e-culture is the limiting factor. Clients do not understand the potential of social media. They are too free and anybody can say anything. Many designers think that if you start taking every last social factors into account then you end up with nothing. (Male)

Experience	Over 10 years	Below 10 years	Over 10 years	Below 10 years
Market resistance as creative escape **Focus** on - re-definition of authority - relationship with true audiences - new norm development **Emphasis** knowing micro culture taste and preferences **Connotation:** creating options and new settings for management innovation. Reaction on how meso-level actors work together, creation of a new framework developing roles for new actors	I think it depends on the web site. Visual merchandisers and information architects should have a greater responsibility. More than traditional marketers. Clients need more specialists within their team. Their teams have not changed much over the last 10 years. Topics are also too usual. (Female) The interested parties need to want to dig into the site. But you have to know if they are modern in their views or whatever make them tick. How users understand the world is not always related to clients then you have a gap.Male) Do we really have to work with such a level of details and variety of users? (Male)	Some designers have a style and target certain type of clients. There is a trend to be more centered locally. And it is developing. It is the responsibility of the client to take care of this. It takes too much work to be holistic and to have that responsibility all upon us is too easy. We always get blamed when things do not work as planned. (Female) My job is to make sure the site works and does not break. Social cues are a kind of buzz word. Technologies that pushes website a little further, interactive systems. We should work more with advertising agencies that entice user's imagination and curiosity. But you do not want o make something much cooler that it might actually be otherwise in a week it is finished. Also the emerging norm may be to update things every week. Few clients are ready to contemplate such a dynamic situation (Male)	Web designers don't have a lot of power inside the company. We work on short contract and they feel they can easily replace us. (Male) Localization is great and in my company we try to localize but it is generally around language and linguistic customs. It's hard to show that and convince, you know, upper management that to include social cues is an investment worth spending now for a longer term gain. Client think about current not future customers. (Male) For the moment, many clients don't need users' experiences; they just focus on processes such as sells, secured transactions. (Male)	Companies have a short term vision and they may not be convinced that they are going to make money with social cues inclusion. But I try to explore, how many different users do we have? What type of design best meet their need? Larger fonts, clearer categories for complex topic, bit chunk info, young. Rich media is anything that is not static, dynamic data user base driven like feedback.(Male) A lot of companies are afraid of exposing their image to too much of one cultural preference and business does not like to pick sides.(Male) We are combating a lot of outsourcing to India and places like this where the money is worth more, whereas I need to have about $3000 to do a good web site, someone can do it in India with ten guys for $250-$300. May be socio cultural cue will force in new management system based on more intangible services that cannot be delocalized. (Female).