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SUBVERSIVE IMAGINATION AND POSSIBILITIES OF CRITICAL AGENCY IN THE LANDSCAPES OF CODE?

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This paper reflects the intertwinements of ‘agency’, ‘infrastructuration’, and ‘imagination’ in our increasingly networked technological everyday life. The paper builds on and elaborates further the key finding from a research project called *Imaginaries of Agency in the Landscapes of Code* which navigates at the interfaces of critical media studies, domestication theory, science and technology studies, as well as critical software and algorithm studies. The conceptualization of agency builds on the concept ‘critical agency’ by sociologist Paola Rebughini, stressing how critical agency is “dissident and innovative, oriented against and beyond what is perceived as unjust, unequal, unacceptable” (Rebughini, 2018:3). The paper argues that critical research should make visible alternatives to current modes of technology-related action as well as urgently develop ways to challenge people to creatively (re)imagine the kind of technology they want to live with.

The research problematics revolve around the question of how understandings of human agency and the technologically mediated everyday entwine in the ‘landscapes of code’. The focus is on the ways in which imaginations on one’s own agency and the agency of others are constructed and stabilized in the contemporary world. Likewise, attention is directed to how societal power structures are produced, reproduced, and possibly challenged in the processes of constructing imaginaries of agency.

To study the above mentioned perspectives together, I apply and update critical cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall’s famous encoding/decoding model in the contemporary media technological context (Hall, 1973; 1980). In tune with Hall, I suggest that it is important to study how the public imaginaries of agency are constructed, on the one hand, and what kind of imaginaries of agency ‘ordinary people’ hold in their code-based everyday environments, on the other hand. I juxtapose the notion of imaginaries to Hall’s idea of ‘maps of meaning’, by which he refers to the hegemonically constructed assemblages of meaning and the ways in which they are attached to societal practices. Suggested Citation (APA): Saariketo, M. (2020, October 27–31). *Subversive imagination and possibilities of critical agency in the landscapes of code*. Paper presented at AoIR 2020: The 21st Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Virtual Event : AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

I connect 'maps of meaning' to the questions of softwarization (e.g. Manovich, 2013; Berry, 2014) and the increasingly networked quality of everyday life, bringing Hall's conception into dialogue with the notion of 'sociotechnical imaginaries' by STS scholar Sheila Jasanoff (2015) and the notion of 'social imaginaries' by philosopher Charles Taylor (2004).

In the first case study, I examined how agency is defined in administrative-political discourse, while the second case study focused on how – and what kind of – agency is constructed by discursively pre-domesticating a new technological artefact in the media. In both cases, people are interpellated to accept and adopt a particular form of agency. The two latter case studies shift attention to how people experience the softwarization, and what kind of technology-related negotiations take place in their everyday life. The case studies are a story narratological analysis of European Union's strategic plan *Digital Agenda for Europe* (case I), discourse narratological analysis of news items on Google Glass from the (*country*) mainstream media (case II), an adaptation from Hall's encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1973; 1980) to study focus group data on Facebook user and non-user negotiations on the architectural power of the platform (case III), and an application of Henri Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre 1992/2004) on interviews of avid social media users on their experiential landscapes of networked daily life, using self-tracking on ICT use as a prompt (case IV).

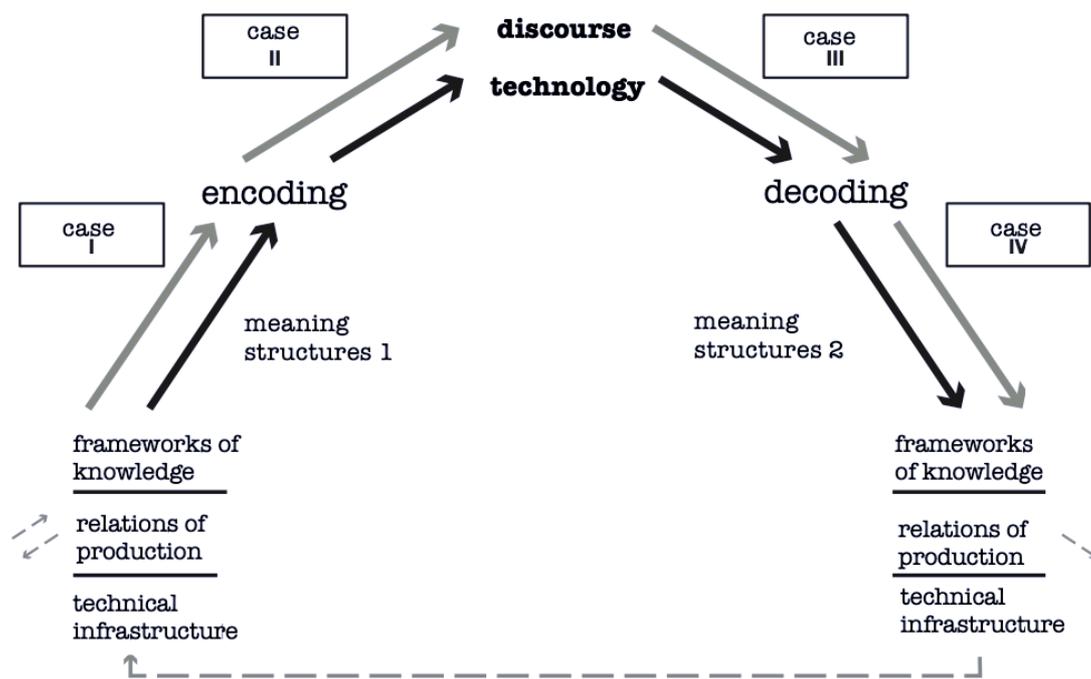


Image 1 Update on Hall's model (1973; 1980) and case studies in relation to it

The multidisciplinary, multimethod, and multidata approach employed in the research sheds light on the diversity and complexity of imaginaries of agency. The results of the

case studies suggest that administration, technological corporations, and mainstream media persuade people to adopt a form of agency that promotes increased consumption and economic growth. At the same time, the direction of technological development and values that guide the development as well as questions of connectivity and infrastructural conditions disappear from sight. A similar process can be observed in the focus group and interview data when people talk about their relationship to media technology and especially to smart devices and social media.

Based on the research results, I suggest that there prevails an almost resigned sense of agency that many people share in relation to the conditions of their technologically mediated everyday life. Despite sporadic negotiations and dissonances that surface in the data, it seems that people have become accustomed to the idea that they have very little, if any, chances to influence the structures of their networked daily environments. I interpret that the way the research participants positioned themselves in relation to the conditions of their technological everyday settings is an illustration of how people have become schooled to ignore the conditions of the mundane software (Thrift & French, 2002: 311). This process is well captured in the idea of 'infrastructuration', that is, networked media technology becoming such a self-evident part of daily life that it is often reflected upon only when it breaks (cf. Star & Ruhleder, 1996; Edwards, 2019; Ridell, 2019).

Visions that could challenge or radically alter the sociotechnical forces that currently condition agency remain in the margins. Thus, my argument is that the imaginaries of the media technological landscape as ruled by the tech giants contribute actively, though not necessarily in a conscious manner to consolidation of the structures of power. I suggest that future research should concentrate on making visible alternatives to current modes of technology-related action as well as develop concrete ways to challenge people to creatively (re)imagine the kind of technology they want to live with. As an example of what this might mean in practice, the paper will present an experiment with design fiction that is organized together with young people and local newspapers in Finland.

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