A Framework for Studying the Problem of Trust in Online Settings

Tina Guenther, Lecturer in Sociology, Founder and Author of Sozlog, Germany
Guido Möllering, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Germany

ABSTRACT

The chapter contributes to the conceptual foundations of research on trust in online settings by introducing a framework of the preconditions and constitutive elements of trust. Moving beyond simplistic, narrow, and vague applications of the notion of trust, researchers are enabled by this framework to recognize when trust is relevant and to address a broader range of elements and processes involved in the social constitution of trust. By way of illustration and differentiation, the authors discuss trust issues in online marketplaces and online communities in greater detail. An important message from the chapter is that the problem of trust does not only occur in specific activities on a particular website but, more importantly, through the interconnectedness of the websites used and the development of complex online biographies. Accordingly, the authors advocate research methods that are not only are well-grounded conceptually but also geared praxeologically toward the actual experience and enactment of trust.

INTRODUCTION

The possibilities for entering into social relationships via digital technologies such as the internet have undoubtedly multiplied since the beginning of the 21st century. If relationships established ‘online’ involve uncertainty and vulnerability just like ‘offline’ relationships, we need to take a close look at online trust. We conceptualize ‘online trust’ broadly as the social accomplishment of having positive mutual expectations in an online setting which may still be disappointed and abused. More importantly, we are concerned in this chapter with the fact that the ‘online world’ is, of course, not separate from offline reality, meaning in particular that any harm – as well as any good – done on the internet will mostly have offline consequences, too. This is the case, at least, in social relationships that are technologically mediated but ultimately connecting human actors.

Our chapter contributes to a better understanding of online trust by outlining a framework that will enable researchers to assess and analyze more thoroughly, if and how trust is an issue in online settings. After giving some background considerations that motivate our chapter, we will discuss the preconditions for trust’s relevance. This is followed by a description of the different
elements involved in the constitution of trust and how they play out in online settings. We then discuss the implications of our framework, with particular emphasis on the methodological requirements and opportunities for empirical work in this area. In the conclusion, we highlight the value of a sound conceptual grounding of trust instead of invoking it too loosely in research on online relationships.

BACKGROUND

What is commonly called “Web 2.0” and also the “Social Web” – indicating already a new quality of online activities – comprises a wide spectrum of ideas, utopias, and business models. We can distinguish developments in technology, civil society, modes of production, and entrepreneurship that together and in interaction with each other make up the new possibilities of “Web 2.0”.

First, in terms of technology, there are countless new applications such as weblogs, wiki webs, instant messaging, podcasts, RSS, social networking sites, and many more. The new technologies are designed to enable mass user participation and flexible reorganization of applications by users who create and recombine content, code, and metadata (Bruns, 2007; Guenther & Schmidt, 2008; Schmidt, 2006). Second, with this technological empowerment, “Web 2.0” can also denote an optimistic vision of a new civil society and the idea of a neo-Habermasian global public sphere of open discourse where critical discussions are possible, unconventional views can be expressed freely and the power of the state is counter-balanced (see Habermas, [1962]1989). When the barriers to participation in new media are lowered, new arenas for exchanging information and opinions can emerge.

Third, the mode of production associated with “Web 2.0” is supposedly collaborative, heterarchical, and non-profit seeking. The content, code, and metadata going into such ‘open source’ products can challenge the proprietary solutions from the earlier days of the digital age (Benkler, 2006; Lessig, 2004). Fourth, it must be strongly emphasized, though, that the new opportunities are also part of a capitalist project that drives business and entrepreneurship ranging from e-commerce to a wealth of services and products offered by profit-seeking firms and individuals who use, maintain, or enhance the new technologies. It is by becoming more dynamic, integrative, interactive, and recombinant that the world of online media has entered into a new generation without a complete break from the internet of the 1990s.

The downside of increased connectedness is increased exposure. A highly dynamic world also carries higher uncertainty about the future. This makes trust a salient issue. The threats are well-documented by media reports, both online and offline, on crimes, privacy violations, and harassments made possible by the new digital media. Younger people are apparently less worried – though not less affected – by this, but middle-aged and older people are rather cautious, reluctant, and distrusting in their internet usage (Eimeren & Frees, 2008; PEW, 2005, 2008). It is important, though, to analyze clearly whether users merely see the possibility that nasty things can happen or whether they truly struggle to build and maintain trustful relationships with other users of online media. This is a complex matter because – as we will explore in this chapter – different realms of the online world as well as the online and offline worlds become increasingly interconnected, so that risks can spill over and grow to incalculable proportions. This brings trust into the picture even more.

Prior research has clearly recognized online trust as an issue, but tends to address it rather narrowly, focusing on security concerns to do with a particular kind of website, auctioning platform, e-commerce service, or social networking community (see Grabner-Kräuter & Kaluschka, 2003). We are missing a deeper analysis of the trust relationships involved, if any, and of the trust problems resulting from
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