

Tracing the Trajectories of (The) *Humans of New York*

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Humans of New York is a photoblog started by Brandon Stanton that was initially supposed to be an exhaustive collection of photos of New York City's inhabitants plotted on a map. Over the last four years, however, *Humans of New York* began to take on a very different character as Stanton started to collect short stories and quotes from the people he photographed. In this article, Tharini Viswanath traces the many trajectories of the *Humans of New York* Facebook page by linking it back to some basic concepts of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), including production, distribution, reception, and socialization.

What is **trajectory**? Where does it happen? When does it happen? And how is it connected to those sticky **cultural-historical activity theory** (CHAT) terms, such as production, distribution, reception, and socialization? One definition of trajectory is that it is “the life of a specific text, during its creation, distribution and use” (Jarema 25). The trajectory of a text traces its path—it shows us how the text is produced, how it reaches a particular audience, and how it ends up in numerous places, sometimes unpredictably and unexpectedly so.

My colleague, Frank, once used football as a metaphor to explain trajectory to me. “Think of the football as a representation of your work,” he said. “Once the football is thrown—that is, once your work is released to the public in some form—there are several routes it could take.” You can score a touchdown, or the football can be fumbled, intercepted, or passed. Similarly, there are a number of things that can happen to a text at every level. It can be misrepresented, remixed, completely misunderstood, or understood perfectly—those are only some of the trajectories your work might take. Trajectory is all about adaptation and response—not only does the audience adapt and respond to a particular work, but the work responds

to the audience as well. A home team tends to play better because their fans are there to cheer them on. Texts, like football games, can have multiple trajectories in terms of both how they are produced and how they are taken up and used. The text exists within a context where the history and culture of the region influence the text as much as it influences history and culture. It is important to remember that the trajectory of a text *cannot* exist in isolation. The trajectory of a text—no matter how intangible it may seem—usually begins with its conception and ends with its reception. Of course, not all trajectories have an obvious “ending,” as we shall soon see.

Tracing the trajectories of social media can be quite difficult. The text—which for my purposes includes words, pictures, or both—doesn’t necessarily move in just one direction. This increases the various characteristics of the text one has to consider, as each factor influences it in one way or another. In this article, I will be tracing the trajectories of a Facebook page. To understand the trajectories of the Facebook page, I must first focus on the initial form of the text (the photoblog), before moving on to its more complicated incarnations.

When a Facebook page is the offshoot of a photoblog, pictures are the main things that are posted. Sometimes there is writing along with the pictures. The writing varies widely, ranging from a journal-like entry to a caption about the picture(s). But how are these pictures produced? Who reads these words and pictures? And what do the people who read them get out of reading them? What do the people who read them do once they have read them? As online media, where do these pictures go, once they have been read? All these questions will get answered by understanding the trajectories of the text in question: the *Humans of New York* Facebook page.

A Word About Pictures

First thing’s first. Why do so many people like photographs posted on social media so much? Part of our ability to post such a huge quantity of pictures has to do with our access to smart phones with cameras, which allow us to capture every moment. Perhaps it is because today’s technology facilitates the sharing of thoughts, feelings, and experiences almost as soon as we have them that viewers feel connected to the people who post these things. In a TED Talk in 2008, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi talks about the notion of “flow.” He defines flow as “a state of heightened immersion in activities” that could include anything from art and play to work. It is that creative moment when we get involved in an activity for its own sake. This might happen at times like when we are watching a movie or reading a book, where our sense of time disappears and we forget where we are. That feeling of being a part of

something larger, that state of focused relaxation, happens to us when we look at photographs. When we look at photographs—usually several of them at once—we enter this state of flow. Sometimes, when we look at pictures online, we realize that we have spent an hour when we never intended to spend more than ten minutes! Nothing outward has happened in that time, but internally, several things have changed. When we enter the flow and look at pictures, we enter a state of mindfulness, we glimpse a world that might not necessarily be part of our own, not influenced by what we know/how we see the world. We are able to relate, connect, commune, and share through photographs.

According to a study called “13 Reasons Why Your Brain Craves Infographics” conducted by NeoMam Studios, we are “visually wired,” and almost fifty percent of our brains are involved in visual processing. In fact, it only takes 150 milliseconds for a symbol to be processed and another 100 milliseconds for us to attach meaning to it. Given that we consume thirty-four gigabytes of written information on an average day—that is around 100,500 words—visuals come as a relief from information overload. Although the studies conducted by NeoMam Studios are about infographics, the research can be extended to cover photographs as well. We need to remember, however, that photographs don’t just convey information. They also convey feelings, drama, and humor associated with those events. More importantly, the photographs and captions allow us a glimpse into strangers’ lives and, therefore, into other realities. Although we do not know these people—or perhaps because we don’t know them—we are able to not only empathize and support the subjects, but also be inspired by them. The photographs connect us. They allow us to share and be part of a secret and intimate conversation.

Of CHAT and Trajectories

CHAT and trajectory don’t necessarily have to go together. However, CHAT is a useful tool when it comes to breaking down a text for understanding how it is created and how it is received and/or remixed by audiences. One needs to keep in mind that a text is not received by one particular person/audience, and that no two people/audiences receive a text in the same way. Let’s take the relatively simple example of a text message. Let’s say you text your mother, “In twn 4 da weeknd. Sat dnr?” One option is that your mother reads your message, understands it correctly, and can know to expect you for dinner on Saturday. Alternatively, she could misread or misinterpret your message, especially since you may have used SMS lingo she might not be familiar with. What if someone else had been using her phone at that time? They may or may not have passed on your message had they seen it. But if your kid brother happened to be playing Angry Birds when you had texted, and had

not even noticed the text, the text's message might never have reached the intended audience (your mother). Moreover, had you accidentally texted a wrong number, or had the message failed to go through, she would not have even received the message. There are several variations of this very scenario. The text might have been received in any number of ways depending on the recipient's involvement with the situation and frame of mind at that point. Needless to say, Cousin Becky at her bachelorette party and your ex would have gotten two completely different meanings from the same message. Now, instead of texting your mother, had you been planning a burglary and texting your accomplices, the police would have been able to access your messages at a later point if you were caught. The intent behind your message would then be analyzed by a set of experts in the field, thereby giving a whole new interpretation to said messages. In short, although trajectory itself is not one of the elements of CHAT, it is extremely useful to link trajectory and CHAT, as the path a text takes is constantly influenced by its production, distribution, reception, and socialization.

While a text message is a fairly simple text (in that it is produced at point A and is received at point B), the trajectory of a post on a social networking site like Facebook is a LOT more complicated. There's so much liking, commenting, sharing, and transferring to other social media—and that's just from the people who actively interact with the text! That's why I decided to look more closely at *Humans of New York*, as it beautifully combines visual images with text such that they work together to create a mini story. Also, to trace the trajectories of a text in a particular form, we sometimes need to begin even before that form. That is why I have begun my analysis with the photoblog, as I feel that it plays a role in how the text is received. I will go on to define the different CHAT terms and explain how four of these terms affect the trajectory of the *Humans of New York* Facebook page.

Tracing the Trajectories of Humans of New York

Production: *The process of combining different material and immaterial inputs to create something for consumption. This includes everything from physical elements to intangible elements like plans and the know-how needed to create an object.*

Humans of New York began as a photoblog in the summer of 2010, when Brandon Stanton lost his job trading bonds in Chicago and moved to New York. He walked around New York taking photographs of strangers. Stanton's original plan was to photograph 10,000 New Yorkers and plot their photos on a map. He was going to organize all the photographs by neighborhood, so you could click on any neighborhood in New York City and scroll through

the people who lived there. Soon, the blog evolved into something different. To quote Stanton, “it became much more about picking a random person off the street no matter where they happened to be and celebrating them on a stage” (Humans of New York).

In a TED Talk at Columbia University, Stanton mentioned that he noticed when he was photographing events with other photographers in New York that everyone migrates towards the same people to photograph. These people who get photographed often represent the most extreme elements of the crowd. For instance, at Occupy Wall Street, the focus was on the extremely weird. At the World Trade Center Memorial on the anniversary of 9/11, the focus was on the extremely emotional, so much so that the mourners were not allowed to grieve in peace. The press covers a small group of individuals, rather than providing a representative coverage of all attendees. Photographers migrate towards the extreme or the most graphic because news genres tend to value the unusual over the ordinary. By choosing to focus on random people on the street, Stanton gives the smaller, more personal stories precedence over the more sensational stories. The people who get photographed usually talk to Stanton for a few minutes and share a thought or a quote. Stanton then posts them together as a portrait comprised of both images and words.

So how does Stanton record what people say? Given that he walks several miles a day and talks to several people (sometimes in groups), it is not really possible to take copious notes. So what does he do? Shorthand, of course. Everyone Stanton features in his posts seem very articulate when their pictures are posted, but that is because of the creative license Stanton takes while posting the pictures (UCD). He paraphrases some of the sentences rather than transcribing. “It’s all about looking for that one thing a person might say,” Stanton said in an interview. He added that he instinctively knows what the caption will be almost as soon as he talks to the person (UCD).

Distribution: *The process of making a product available to the intended audience. This can be done directly (think of a farmer selling his produce at the farmer’s market) or indirectly (the farmer sells his produce to a wholesale store, who sells it to Jewel Osco, who sells it to consumers).*

All these portraits—around six or seven a day—are posted on Brandon’s blog and are then uploaded onto Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. In turn, these photographs get liked, shared, commented on, reposted, tweeted about, and reblogged. And each of these retweets, reposts, shares, and reblogs get tweeted, posted, shared, and reblogged over and over again, resulting in an ever-growing and extremely complex web of likes, shares, and posts. Indeed, several things happen at once, where distribution, reception,

and socialization merge, making it difficult for us as readers/observers to distinguish one from the other.

Reception and Socialization: *Reception involves people's reaction to the text. Socialization is the interactions of people and institutions as they interact with the text. Think of a recipe—if someone didn't like a recipe you handwrote for them (reception), they might change it on the card to fit their tastes better. If enough readers of your online recipe/baking blog left comments with the same complaint on a recipe post, you might edit the post. The readers would have influenced the actual recipe (socialization).*

At every level of this process—from Stanton taking these photographs to the million likes and shares—there is reception and socialization. It is not surprising that *Humans of New York* has a global audience. We want to read these stories, because maybe we are just curious about how other people live. Or perhaps we want to see ourselves in these pictures, to know there are others like us, perhaps in another city, in another world, who have similar anxieties, worries, or even senses of humor. Some people look for the aesthetic appeal of these pictures; others see what they can do to help. There are instances where the audience is inspired by what they see and they try to emulate the people in the photographs; other times, people misunderstand these pictures, and the comments and responses take a new trajectory on their own.

We must remember that this is not any old Facebook page. No, indeed! This is a page with more than ten million likes that at least six million people follow and another million or so comment about. There typically are ten thousand likes and four thousand comments (not counting the likes for each comment) less than ten hours after Stanton uploads a picture. It's no longer just a photographer taking a picture of a person on the street—this person will soon (by virtue of social media) be famous. Given how intimidating it is to be on *Humans of New York*, it is not surprising, then, that sometimes people want to say something different after reading the comments on the post about them. Stanton states that however much he tries to set a positive culture and tries to get people to be supportive, it becomes very difficult to do so when there are five million people sharing opinions in that space. Therefore, it might become an unpleasant experience for some, however much Stanton tries to moderate the comments. The trajectories of these posts change once they have been commented upon. The content and the context of these portraits don't change every time someone comments; however, how we as viewers receive and understand the photographs will change.

As with any other text, there have been several instances where conversations have gone off on a complete tangent. Given that some of these people share about very personal details, ranging from drug abuse to time spent in prison or even the death of a loved one, readers' comments range

from inspiring or empathetic to downright judgmental. Although Stanton employs an assistant to ban nasty comments, sometimes, right under the caption, you will see a comment that reads something like, “How dare you call this person ugly?” or “That is very unchristian of you!” that might be part of a longer conversation, but the entire conversation is not visible because Facebook displays only around ten comments at a time. Moreover, *Humans of New York* has a global audience, although most of the people photographed are New Yorkers or people visiting Manhattan and the areas around it. Sometimes, differences in the belief systems of the people viewing the images and captions can spark debate. These debates in turn color our reception of the portraits and our own personal responses to one/some of the comments. We might choose to reply, or not, which, in turn, will affect other responses, including our own future response. In fact, reception of a photograph can change so many times that I personally have stopped reading the comments. I read only the picture and the caption so that I can decide for myself what my uptake and reception will be.

Here is an example of what happens in regard to the reception of a specific photograph and caption posted on the *Humans of New York* Facebook page: Stanton took a photograph of a man who happened to be the manager of a teenage rock band called Xero Gravity and the father of the drummer. The picture itself is just his side profile, as he is talking. His comments, however, made ripples. He told Stanton, “I pay for everything and handle promotion. Work is stressful, so it’s my release. I’m always checking my phone to see if there are any new likes or wall postings on their Facebook page” (Stanton).

“After the picture was spread around, we had a massive surge of likes,” said Jack Rose, Xero Gravity’s bass player, in an interview with *The Independent*, a British newspaper. “On the morning of 4 July (2014) we had 2,026 or so likes on Facebook—12 hours later we hit 22,000. It was massive and we had people from all around the world interested in us and talking about us. It was insane” (Culzac). The band released their debut, EP, in August 2014. Of course, this does not mean that all the comments or responses were accurate—there were misunderstandings as well. Jack Rose went on to say, “people were saying that our manager paid for everything and paved our way without us paying any dues, which is completely false. We all earn money together, have money saved up from concerts and merch, and have jobs and try to put anything we can to the band” (Culzac).

Here, we see two things happening. Some readers, based on their understanding of the band manager’s quote, are judging his role with the band. Yet many people also were motivated to go to the band’s Facebook page and like it, thereby giving the band much-needed publicity. The social media, therefore, functions both as a tool and as a medium, influencing people’s real-

life decisions in the real world. In this instance, a new trajectory for the band featured in the Facebook post has sprung from the photo and caption.

Conclusion

The trajectory of a Facebook page is far from self-contained. The many trajectories not only trace the path of a text—or, in this case, text and picture—from conception to reception, but also influence the content and context. The many trajectories of *Humans of New York* made it so popular that it was published as a book in 2013. Another offshoot of *Humans of New York* is *Little Humans*, a forty-page picture book for children. More recently, Stanton was funded by the United Nations to travel around the globe and take pictures of people from other countries. This not only increases his (already) global audience, but also highlights how CHAT categories such as production are not static—the production of Stanton’s posts would differ as he traveled to other countries, where he would need translators or interpreters to help gather the comments of the people he photographed. In addition, we can’t discount the effect *Humans of New York* has had on other people to not only notice, but also photograph what they see on a day-to-day basis.

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