

Communities and Identities Facilitating 'Informed Identities' and Societal Literacy in Future Education

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Major Trends:

Social and human sciences have advanced and offered an understanding of identities and communities as socially constructed, rather than essentialist concepts. Identities are not a stable core of the self but are reflective of and shaped by wider social, cultural and economic parameters. Being socially constructed, communities and identity have undergone fundamental transformations throughout modernity. Among the factors which have impacted on the changing formation of communities and identities – political, economical, social and technological – the technological has frequently been identified as the key driving force behind substantive change in the nature of both communities and identities, though such technological change is in turn interdependent on economic, social and cultural macro conditions (Mackenzie and Wacjman 1999).

As part of such technological change the rise of print and broadcast media reflects and embodies the two key processes at the heart of transforming identities and, consequently, communities throughout modernity: the disembedding of social relations (Giddens 1990, 1991) and the deterritorialisation of individuals' lifeworlds (Tomlinson 1999). In the early modern era these processes were framed within the organizational realm of emergent Westphalian nation states. The expansion of social, economic and political relations within states was mirrored as well as driven by forms of mass communication such as the printing press which accelerated the formation of supra-local social identities and communities in early modernity (cf. Eisenstein 1980). Modern forms of mass communications thus allowed for the formation of, in Benedict Anderson's (1991) words, nations as 'imagined communities' - communities based upon shared and common practices for media consumption. The role of the BBC and other national public broadcasters in building and maintaining shared cultural values and identities across the territories of nation states has been widely documented (Scannell 1996, Scannell and Cardiff 1991). Through the daily, weekly and annual patterns of the media calendar, national mass communication established a shared set of practices and a common textual universe that facilitated the maintenance of national communities. The relationship between communities and identity - while never monodirectional - was hence one in which community membership, still predominantly structured through notions of place and territorial belonging, informed individuals' social and cultural identity.

This relationship between identity and community has been inverted as community membership has become increasingly elective. As Fenton (2007: 336) attests in a recent study of English and British identity in young adults' lives, no support could be found for the common arguments "that 'national identity' is 'fundamental' or an identity which 'trumps all others'". Audience research has similarly highlighted how contemporary audiences drawing on an ever wider range of available media texts increasingly articulate identities reflecting categories other than the national such as age, ethnicity, gender, class or sexuality. This reversal is the result of the further advancement of disembedding and deterritorialisation reflecting technological developments of information and communication media combined with the deregulation of media and telecommunications markets in Western Europe from the early 1980s onwards. The increasingly transnational distribution of popular media has thus underscored the simultaneous fragmentation (within nation states) and homogenization (across nation state) of cultural identity (Appadurai 1990; Tomlinson 1999).

Uncertainties, Projections and Challenges:

The research challenges arising out of these transformations are based on two projections: On a micro level, while we are unable to anticipate the details of technological development in information and communication technologies, we can assume that these will continue to drive processes of convergence and intertextuality by further widening increasingly individualised access to information and entertainment as well as to offer enhanced mobile connectivity. On a macro level, the forces of disembedding and deterritorialisation that have transformed identities and communities throughout modernity will continue to serve as driving forces behind increasingly individualised identities and self-selected communities. The emergence of new communities based upon individualized cultural experiences and consumption practices is thus set to accelerate over the next half century.

The relative decline of particular forms of community (such as those based on the local, class or nationality) and its associated identities does not equal a decline of the significance of communities *per se*; instead community membership continues to serve fundamental needs of sociability and security. Yet, as the composition and articulation of communities changes, the fundamental challenge for social sciences and policy makers alike lies in identifying the likely changes in the interplay between communities, identities and areas of governance of the nation state such as education.

The challenge is therefore not to evaluate (or lament) the decline of a singular *Leitkultur* as the cultural cement of the nation state but to manage change to ensure citizens' empowerment (and competence) in a globalizing world. If identities, as Hall (2000: 17) claims, are 'constructed precisely within, not outside, discourse', then the changing nature and mediation of such discourses lies at the heart of understanding transforming identities and communities and their impact on the education system over the next fifty years. Consequently, the proposed research challenge is concerned with the interplay between changing technological and textual forms of mediated communication and transforming identities and communities. In two steps it aims to:

- detail the impact of media convergence and the proliferating intertextuality on the interplay between new information and communication technologies and identity and community formation
- formulate educational strategies in response to such change.

Research Challenge

Phase One: Explore the interplay between changing identities and media convergence and intertextuality on process of meaning formation.

Media convergence, driven by the development of information and networking technologies has increasingly made the boundaries between different media and their content redundant: with increasing bandwidth the World Wide Web combines formerly distinct platforms such as newspapers, magazines, e-books, radio, and television with new textual forms of dedicated websites, blogs, message boards and chats. Written texts, sound, the spoken word, still and moving images all converge in the realm of high-speed internet. Content produced by media professionals is distributed through the same medium as that created by aficionados, activists and other non-professional individuals, who through digitalisation have gained affordable access to sound, image and video production technologies which are complemented by free distribution channels such as video and photo sharing websites. As much as generic and professional boundaries, digitalisation has also eroded the geographical and spatial ordering of communication with content from across the globe near universally accessible. Emerging technologies such as wireless hard-drive routers make such convergent technologies available across the home (facilitating access through households' main television sets), while, smartphones and similar handheld devices allow for increasingly mobile and hence further individualised access integrating mobile telephony, navigation functionality, internet access, gaming, photography, filming, and viewing capacity.

On the side of media consumption these process of convergence and the consequential media saturation of everyday lives have led to the rise of 'diffused audiences' (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1999) - a state in which we are constantly engaged with mediated content and our everyday life performances and interactions are intersected with mediated communication. On the side of mediated textuality, the same processes have resulted in the transformation of formerly distinct textual forms and boundaries (cf. Genette 1997, Gray 2005, Sandvoss 2005) into textual fields with amorphous boundaries, composed of a multiplicity of urtexts, intertexts and paratexts. A given narrative thus spans, for instance, across a film, and its original cinematic release via its adaptation in a television show, as a video game, novel, children's toys, fan websites to its accompanying sound track and music video, all at the same time interacting with the star persona and associated narratives of its actors and actresses, directors and producers and its intertextual references within its particular genre. Yet, these degrees of intertextuality are not limited to popular entertainment but equally inform the circulation of news events as well as other forms of information and knowledge.

The proliferation of diffused audiences and intertextuality, however, fundamentally impacts on the way individuals construct meaning in mediated communication and engage with the world they encounter in and through different media. Audience research in the fields of sociology and media studies has demonstrated the wide spectrum of different meaning formations viewers, readers and listeners construct when engaging in with the same text (for an overview of such research see Morley 1992). Forms of mediated communication have thus been described as polysemic or polysemous - texts that encapsulate a range of different potential meanings. The realisation and construction of such meaning is dependent upon a range of contextual factors of reception (cf. Hall 1980), including readers' knowledge, experience, and habitus reflecting individual combinations of economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984).

In the intertextual fields of media convergence, however, audiences' power in meaning construction is further heightened by the simultaneous need and ability to define textual boundaries, through, for example, selecting between different media texts in informing themselves about current affairs, community matters and other forms of knowledge and entertainment. As audiences are thus able to seek 'media of proximity' corresponding to their relative cultural, social and political positions and convictions, identity and community membership become both structured and structuring forces in their engagement with mediated texts. International comparative research suggests that in states that have seen the furthest advancement of media deregulation and convergence such as the USA and the UK levels of public knowledge and awareness of political and social issues decline (Curran 2007).

This research challenge therefore focuses on the importance of process of engaging with changing media and communication technologies through *processes of reception and reading* in identity and community formation. It aims to contrast the empirical findings of audience research with the rich conceptual contribution of literary theory to our understanding of the interaction between reader and text (including written, spoken and audiovisual texts) (Eco 1981, 1994, Iser 1978, Jauss 1982, Fish 1980) in an attempt to gain a more detailed understanding how audiences select and construct different meanings within the intertextual fields of converging media. In doing so it aims to answer the following questions:

- How do audience members select between different media, genres and texts? How do texts and paratexts interact?
- Do convergence and intertextuality lead to a blurring of boundaries between different genres?
- If so, are media previously associated with, for example, entertainment or social networking utilised for knowledge acquisition and can they be integrated into formal educational settings?
- Can suggestions in recent popular communication research that audiences prefer texts which, in Iser's (1971) terms, can be easily "normalised" - in other words texts

that confirm and correspond with past experiences and one's horizon of expectation - be substantiated and applied to non-entertainment based media consumption (as the notion of 'viewpapers' suggests)?

These questions should be addressed through a programme of desk research over a six months period conducted through a research assistant under the guidance of an established audience researcher. Various media and communication or (cultural) sociology departments in the UK with dual expertise in audience research and reception theory – including those at the University of Cardiff (Hills), Goldsmiths College (Morley, Couldry), the LSE (Livingstone) or Salford (Longhurst) could serve as host institutions for this phase of the research challenge. Other researchers with expertise to lead this part of the research are Tim O'Sullivan (De Montfort), Shaun Moores (Sunderland) or Máire Messenger Davies (Ulster). The internationally leading scholar/centre of research on media convergence and its impact on audiences are Henry Jenkins and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Phase Two: Formulate policy suggestions and curriculum resources to enhance societal, political and media literacy.

Drawing on the summative findings of the first research phase, the second phase aims to assess the projected opportunities and risks for education and the education system. On the one hand, access to a near unlimited wealth of information and opinions as well as the ability to participate in public discourse beyond the realm of our immediate social environments resulting out of diffusion of new information and communication technologies is an unparalleled opportunity for both school-based and life-long learning, participation in democratic processes and for the articulations of multifaceted identities and communities in a globalizing world. Communication technologies become an indispensable tool in the maintenance of deterritorialised and disembedded identities and communities. As, for instance, the growing body of research on diasporic communities and their media use in the UK has highlighted (Gillespie 1995, Georgiou 2006) emergent communication technologies play a key role in confidently articulating the specificities of increasingly complex and multilayered identities as a result of transnational mobility.

On the other hand, 'diffused audiences' engagement with a plethora of content across converging media platforms raises questions about what identities are articulated through the use of communication technologies, how such identities inform the sources of information and entertainment individuals chose, and how they verify and reflect on forms of information and knowledge. Recent work on the consumption of entertainment media (Scodari 2007, Ruddock 2005, Sandvoss 2007) has indicated that increasingly 'privatised identities' (Savage 2000) invite a 'cycle of self-affirmation', in which individuals seek out textual resources that readily correspond with their horizon of experience and expectation (cf. Jauss 1982). Particular identity positions, values systems and forms of knowledge are hence reaffirmed and fail to be challenged through a lack of encounters with texts challenging existing perceptions. In contrast, the relative quantitative scarcity of televisual output during the height of the public service broadcasting era, for instance, enabled broadcasters to confront audiences with content frequently challenging viewers' experiences, knowledge and expectations (as, for instance, in some of BBC television drama of the 1970s) as well as to promote commonly recognised information and knowledge. In the education and development of children, mass media and television thus offered additional resources of learning that transcended class and other socio-demographic divisions (cf. Rice *et al.* 1990).

The decline of such commonly shared textual resources in a diversifying and widening market thus creates new and changing demands on the education system as the sole remaining realm of expertise and knowledge acquisition shared by all individuals in the UK in which central public or state institutions maintain agenda setting powers. In an environment of diversifying identities and communities rooted in multifaceted and complex mediated communication, education will increasingly be challenged to equip individuals with the skills and knowledge base to manoeuvre these complex intertextual fields in ways that facilitate reflection on our own identities and community memberships in relation to others

as well as enable individuals to seize the opportunities of networked societies for their social, cultural and economic wellbeing and enhance their social mobility.

The aim of the second research phase is therefore to facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue aimed at moving towards the formulation of strategies and curriculum resources that supplement successful initiatives seeking to enhance social and emotional literacy in primary and secondary schools (SEAL and SEB) which have focused on the micro settings of home and school interactions, with a programme enhancing children's and young adults' societal and media literacy, enabling young individuals to utilise the intertextual spaces of future mediated communication not only to articulate identities, but to build 'informed identities' that match the demands of – in Bauman's (2005) analysis – 'liquid life' by maintaining self-reflection and awareness of the textual and cultural *Other*. A societal and media literacy strategy would thus be aimed at contextualising individuals' participation in sub-publics and their selective reading of textual fields to avoid the trap of self-affirming reading positions which aid the rise of social fragmentation rather than plurality, the proliferation of ethnic and religious extremism and, perhaps most pressingly, the reassertion of socio-demographic divisions which education systems seek to overcome.

In moving towards the development of such a strategy and a review of existing curricula, this second research phase links micro concerns over childhood development with the macro structural forces of mediated communication and thus requires wide interdisciplinary input and dialogue between educationalists, educational psychologist engaged in environmental approaches to literacy, sociologists and communication scholars and media practice educators on the academic side, as well as regulatory bodies concerned with media literacy (Ofcom), the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the Department for Children, Schools and Families. The consultation and dedicated conference events that will facilitate such dialogue, proposed to be held during the seventh and ninth month of the research challenges, aim to answer the following questions:

- Do existing curriculum resources establish the necessary knowledge base to equip individuals to successfully navigate intertextual and networked media?
- How do they inform identity choices and articulations through mediated communication?
- Which technical and production skills will be required to participate in networked publics?
- How can technical competency be supplemented with media literacy that aids individuals in utilising the plurality of available information?
- How do the forms of literacy required in the use of networked mediated communication relate to forms of literacy competence currently foregrounded in the curriculum (cf. Alloway and Gilbert 1997)?
- Can such forms of societal and media literacy aid social mobility and democratisation?

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