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The Information Society

Critical Concepts in Sociology

Editor's Introduction

Volume 4: Information Societies: Everyday Life

> These 'ways of operating' constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production …to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of 'discipline'. Pushed to their ideal limits, these procedures and ruses of consumers compose the network of an antidiscipline. (Certeau, 1984: xiv-xv)

Everyday Life Online and Offline

The Information Society is discussed in the academic literature from many disciplinary perspectives. Empirical research, drawing upon sociological and political theories of power, reveals insights about why some developments in today's multifaceted information societies are variously welcomed or resisted. Research carried out in the 1980s and early 1990s exhibited a fascination with the virtual, often neglecting the offline environments in which participants in online communities live their lives.[1]

One of the first online communities was The WELL or Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link in the United States which was created by Stewart Brand and Larry Brilliant in 1985.

[1] Orgad (2007) provides an overview of the way the interrelationships between the online and the offline have come to be understood.

Originally established as an electronic bulletin board, by the early 1990s it had become a fully interactive Internet based online discussion site. The WELL was bought by the Salon Media Group in 1999, a small Internet company based in California, offering online news and entertainment. The group has since experienced considerable losses, finding it difficult to attract sufficient subscription advertising to some of its other services, and in the mid-2000s is hoping to take advantage of the opportunities offered by Web 2.0 developments. Participation in The WELL has declined, but the profile of its users remains predominantly American (more than 80%), well-educated (more than 79% with university degrees) citizens.

This illustration could be used to exemplify the rise and fall of innumerable Internet start-up companies and high profile large corporations that are hosting online community sites today. There is a vast body of research on online business models and the factors contributing to their success and failure. The ‘everyday life’ research tradition is concerned with the use of these sites, rather than with their production. Although some research focuses on the affordances or design of these sites, the principal focus is on the everyday lives of those who interact within online communities and how, in turn, this influences meaning construction, the representation of self and others, and in some cases, action in the ‘real’ world.

Countless virtual community websites cater to an enormous variety of human interests. Blogging has created opportunities for online publishing and discussion and online gaming, and the use of avatars in virtual spaces, such as Second Life, and numerous online art sites, mean that there is an almost limitless opportunity for online experience, assuming a user has the access and resources required to enter websites

and participate. How do these virtual opportunities influence people's lives? In what ways do the new spaces of socio-technical production combine with older modes of information production and communicative practice to alter people's everyday lives, and with what consequences?

Virtuality and Identity

The implications of information societies vary depending on the situation in which they are encountered. In the United States, writer and critic, Harold Rheingold's interactions within The WELL informed his insights published in *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1993) where he maintained that with the development of online interaction, every user becomes a potential publisher. This book became a classic and a touchstone for further investigation of the way virtual communities may be implicated in people's lives.

One major line of research has focused on the way interactions in 'cyberspace' or electronic spaces, such as those supported by the Internet and Web 2.0 developments, influence identity construction. Sherry Turkle's (1995, 1997) pathbreaking work, *Life on the Screen,* focused on the implications of the multiple identities that avatars may assume on behalf of their creators. Her early studies of users of Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) were informed by psychoanalytic theory and she found that users of online games were likely to cycle through different characters and genders as they adopted flexible identities. More recent work, by Constance Steinkuehler and Dimitri Williams (2006) for example, has examined 'third spaces' where identity creation

occurs online, while Sal Humphreys (2005) demonstrated some of the ways in which online gaming communities are challenging the sustainability of conventional media.

There are disputes about the implications of virtual engagement for social engagement offline and for intra-psychic experience. In 2008, an American psychiatrist, Jerald Block (2008: 306) argued that 'Internet addiction appears to be a common disorder that merits inclusion in DSM-V [the American Psychiatric Association's manual listing mental illnesses and diagnoses]'. He acknowledged that there were no reliable data in the United States, drawing instead on evidence of a link between intense Internet use and rates of suicide and depression in South Korea and China. Al Cooper et al.'s (2000) reviews of studies of online sexual compulsivity, however, suggest that such behaviour should not be perceived as a major problem and, similarly, Robert Kraut et al. (2002) found for the United States that intensive use of the Internet is generally consistent with perceptions of well-being. Nevertheless, these findings have been called into question[2] and the jury is out on the balance between positive and negative intra-subjective experiences of virtual spaces and their consequences for people's everyday lives.

Online Engagement Patterns

Another line of research employs surveys to explain the determinants of Internet use. An early contribution using this method was William Dutton et al.'s (1987) examination of personal computer use in American households which highlighted the characteristics of different types of adopters. Survey based research includes the Pew

[2] See papers in *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, e.g., Boles et al. (2004); Palandri and Green (2000).

Internet and American Life project surveys in the United States,[3] and the World Internet Project surveys, which encompass a growing number of countries.[4] There are also occasional surveys, illustrated by Jonathan Gershuny's (2003) work on time use. Surveys have also been developed by Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite's (2002) work on *The Internet in Everyday Life* and to support Wellman's (2004) extensive research on online intimacy and perceptions of social capital and online collaborative working.

Online Activism

Although some of this research compares different patterns of use of the Internet on a national relative basis, it is limited to countries with the resources to conduct such research and by the questions that can be asked in survey instruments. There are many case studies of the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) and the media in support of development goals, as illustrated by Ramesh Srinivasan's (2006) review.[5] Some of this work is linked to critical theories of learning and theories about the role of culture, power and language within dispersed networked communities, as in the case of Gustavo Ribeiro's (1997: 503, 1998) emphasis on the role of these technologies in enabling 'witnessing' as a form of political action: 'Witnessing from a distance is not new; but, in the age of information dominated by immediacy of image, it operates more profoundly than ever before. Witnessing – besides being an existential force – activates different forms of commitment embedded in moral and sometimes religious values'.

[3] See http://www.pewinternet.org/, (accessed 23.08.08).
[4] See http://www.digitalcenter.org/pages/site_content.asp?intGlobalId=26, (accessed 23.08.08).
[5] This field of research is not included in this volume, but see Mansell (2004) and http://www.gg.rhul.ac.uk/ict4d/collective.html (accessed 23.08.08).

Ribeiro makes it clear that the outcomes of cyberactivism are governed by offline power relationships, enacted in the real, rather than the cyber world. Similarly, Karim Karim's (2007) work focuses on the potential for virtual communities to engage diasporas to create new connections that may lead to the possibility of 'globalization from below'. Lilie Chouliaraki's (2006) research addresses whether life as represented on the screen may be alienating spectators in a way that inhibits their inclination towards public action.

Mediation in Information Societies

The connections between public action and mediated life online are central to research building on the tradition of 'everyday life' studies in sociology. Case studies are employed in research that focuses on the strategies and tactics of what Michel de Certeau, the French social theorist, called 'ways of operating'. This is an approach with a long history in the sociological literature.[6] Henri Lefebvre (1962/2002: 4), a French sociologist and a major contributor to studies in this research tradition, observed that 'there can be no knowledge of the everyday without knowledge of society in its entirety'. In the field of media research, Roger Silverstone, a British sociologist, worked within this tradition to analyse the mediation of people's lives by older and newer media, with the aim of understanding both the detailed nature of their experiences as well as the wider politics and societal consequences. Silverstone (1994, 1999) and David Morley and Silverstone (1990) and Silverstone and Leslie

[6] The origin of studies of 'everyday life' in sociology research can be traced to Georg Lukács (1920/1971) - influenced by Georg Simmel; to Henri Lefebre (1962/2002, 1971/1984) and Michel de Certeau (1984); and to Irving Goffman (1959) and Harold Garfinkel (1967) (see Bennett and Watson, 2002). For application to the study of media and ICT, see Haddon (2004) for a review.

Haddon (1996) and Haddon (2006), developed these ideas to focus on people's strategies and tactics for accommodating and resisting the new digital technologies, including stand-alone computers, social networking sites and mobile phones, resulting in a distinctive approach to the 'domestication' of ICT and into the way diasporic communities embrace the technologies of information societies, an approach also developed by Maria Bakardjieva (2003).

Like Jesus Martin-Barbaro (2002: 622) who understands that 'the network society is not, then, purely a phenomenon composed of technological connections, but rather the systemic disjunction of the global and the local', Silverstone (2002, 2005a,b) was interested in how we can relate the local to the global in societies where individualization seems to take increasing precedence over communal interests, arguing that it is through everyday experience of mediated relationships that a common humanity is created. The concept of mediation refers broadly to the way meaning and value are constructed through interaction with technology and media content.[7] In *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis*, he argues that 'mediated connection and interconnection define the dominant infrastructure for the conduct of social, political and economic life across the globe' (Silverstone, 2007: 26) and that this dominance has profound ethical and moral implications which call for public action to ensure that disadvantaged people are not excluded or harmed.

One of the difficulties of understanding the implications of information societies, which embrace intensive use of newer media including the Internet, mobile phones and other applications, is that there is a gap between situated, qualitative micro-level

[7] Different ways in which mediation is used in the literature can be found in Mansell & Silverstone (2002).

studies and those with a macro-level perspective. Paul DiMaggio et al. (2001) in their review of the literature on the social implications of the Internet, show that the main issues that have been studied are concerned with inequality, community and social capital, political participation and organizational change or the economy, with few connections with the everyday lives of Internet users. They argue, as have I (Mansell, 1999, 2004), that this aspect needs to be addressed. So far, there are few instances of convergence between the different approaches in the literature. An exception is the work of Nick Couldry et al. (2007) whose book *Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention*, brings qualitative and quantitative research methods to bear on questions of civic engagement.

Literacy

In the era of conventional broadcasting, concerns were raised about product marketing to children and their capacities to discern advertising from the entertainment content of the media (Melody and Ehrlich, 1974). Policy initiatives were taken in the United States to protect children and to increase their literacy or ability to distinguish been different types of media content. These measures are less effective in relation to the new media platforms that are hosting advertising that is almost indistinguishable from entertainment or education content. Current concerns over literacy extend far beyond children's exposure to advertising and beyond traditional capabilities for reading and writing in a given language. The spread of the Internet has brought literacy issues to the forefront of policy concerns at national and international levels, many of which have been addressed by Sonia Livingstone (2003, 2004) and others, such as David Buckingham (2003) and Gunther Kress (2003). Literacy in information societies is

associated with confidence in using digital platforms of all kinds, in creative ways, that are perceived as meaningful by users.

The findings of research in this area are contested by many as they raise questions about which literacies are aligned with different cultural and discursive practices as indicated by Phil Graham (1999, 2007). Hopeton Dunn and Sheena Johnson-Brown's (2007) review of the literature on literacy highlights the importance of research on the multiplicity of information society literacies that are essential for an understanding, from the perspective of the 'global South', of the hegemonic impositions of social, cultural, political and market-oriented norms that are being imposed in line with The Information Society vision.

Gender and the Cyborg

Some but by no means all of the foregoing domains of research are undertaken with sensitivity to gender issues. Studies of information societies, generally lack such sensitivity despite its importance and clear evidence that it is an issue notwithstanding the possibilities to participate anonymously in virtual spaces or to play with gender identity online. Donna Haraway's (1991) 'Cyborg Manifesto', first published in 1985, discusses the politics of feminism when social reality conceives of human beings as hybrids of machine and organism. She argues that, 'we are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system' leading to a more strongly bimodal social structure. She suggests, however, that despite the repressive aspects, 'if we learn how to read these webs of power and social life, we might learn new couplings, new coalitions'. Women and other disadvantaged groups

need to take responsibility for the relations between science and technology and embrace 'the skilful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all our parts' (Haraway 1991: 162, 171, 181).[8]

Judy Wajcman (2000, 2004) insists that all aspects of the technologies underpinning information societies should be regarded as open and contingent and shaped by both the symbolic and the material aspects of technoscientific practice and politics. She argues that Haraway's approach tends to permit semiotic analysis to take precedence over the material, with the risk that the social action required to promote the changes in gendered power relations to enable woman to take greater advantage of the possibilities of the Internet is not sufficiently emphasized. Juliet Webster's (1995: 319) survey showed that changes involving technologies are often introduced by management in order to achieve a desired work organization. In this sense, ICTs are not 'gender neutral'. Sue Jansen's (1989) discussion of the invisibility of gender in research on communication and technology highlights processes enabling the reproduction of power in the social distribution of knowledge; similar observations can be found in Liesbet van Zoonen's (2002) work.

Radhika Gajjala (2002: 183) offers an evocative commentary on the challenge of undertaking ethnographies of women's use of networks. She highlights the dangers of researcher complicity and the need to differentiate between "'speaking for," "speaking to," "speaking with," and "speaking about" human subjects of research':

[8] For cyborg literature see, http://www.unizar.es/departamentos/filologia_inglesa/garciala/bibliography/Subjects/8.Cybernetics/Cyborgs.doc (accessed 22.08.08) and for the science fiction genre, see Hacking (1998), Gray (1996, 2002) and Haraway (2008).

> In cyberspace there is a less clear line between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate,’ authorized and unauthorized public spaces. Yet the fact that cyberspace is still characterized by Anglo-American (masculine) academic and corporate hegemony sees to it that the few inconsistencies are either erased or ignored in various re-writings and re-wirings of cyberspace. (Gajjala, 2002: 184)

Aida Opoku-Mensah (2000) also points out that there is no simplistic way in which these technologies can work in the service of democratization or in the interests of women.

Privacy and Surveillance

In 2008 the wealthy countries of the OECD are calling for renewed focus on policy measures for the ‘Internet Economy’ (OECD, 2008), some related to privacy protection and surveillance. Ideas vary across regions of the world about the extent to which individual privacy – the right to be left alone – should be a priority for policy, over the collective interest in information about individuals for commercial or safety purposes. In 1980 (revised in 2007) the OECD countries introduced guidelines for the protection of privacy and transborder flows of personal data. However, social networking and Web 2.0 applications are leading to renewed concerns among the OECD countries and other countries as well. While it is acknowledged that behavioural advertising can offer benefits to users, this advertising method relies on the accumulation of personal data, creating risks for individual privacy. Numerous

data gathering activities undertaken for military purposes are increasingly being sanctioned by national and international law.

Charles Raab and Colin Bennett (1999, 1998, 2003) have undertaken comparative research on the changing conceptions and treatments of citizen privacy, documenting legislative measures and privacy protection practices. They note that risks to privacy are unevenly distributed throughout populations, which can give rise to new forms of inequality. Anthony Fitzpatrick (2000) provides an overview of the debates over information rights in cyberspace.

Monitoring consumer purchasing behaviour is not a new activity. However, companies and governments are monitoring consumer and citizen behaviour for targeted marketing and surveillance purposes. Oscar Gandy and Jonathan Baron's (1993, 1998) work and the study by Anthony Danna and Gandy (2002), highlight the potential for intrusions into the everyday lives of citizens in the United States and consider the potential for resistance to surveillance. Mark Poster's (2007) work on identity theft is indicative of the need for caution in making assumptions about links between privacy and identity. He points to the dual aspects of identity –consciousness and informational - suggesting that identity theft discourses need to be understood as a new means of 'governmentality' in the interests of those who collect information about individuals.

Oscar Gandy and David Lyon consider surveillance in terms of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, as discussed by Michel Foucault (1977) in his analysis of the prison and discipline. Lyon (1993: 674) observes that 'how far electronic panopticism will

develop … before the dialectic of control starts to swing more decisively in favour of its subjects, and what difference *can* be made by those subjects' is the crucial issue. In a later work, Lyon (2006) has turned to the problems of surveillance that are occurring on a global basis.

Sandra Braman's (2006: np) work calls attention to the way political strategies and tactics involving surveillance and privacy intrusions are implicated by the scale of the Internet and a shift towards a 'panspectron'.[9] She observes that 'in the panopticon environment the subject knows that the watcher is there, in the panspectron environment one may be completely unaware that information is being collected'. When no-one knows who is storing and processing personal information for corporate or security purposes, and stories released by authorities are misleading, she argues that there is a need to use open Internet spaces to construct alternative narratives, a point also made by Michael Dillon (2002). My work with Brian Collins (Mansell and Collins, 2005) reviews a substantial body of literature in the social sciences and in science and engineering, which examines the trustworthiness and risks associated with these developments in information societies.

Conclusion

Everyday life is ever more intensely mediated in information societies - and within a period of intense globalization. Douglas Kellner (2002: 286) observes that globalization is best understood as 'a highly complex, contradictory, and thus ambiguous set of institutions and social relations, as well as one involving flows of

[9] See Hookway et al. (2000) for a discussion of panspectron.

goods, services, ideas, technologies, cultural forms, and people'. In this volume, the focus is how people connect with and experience those flows in their everyday lives and especially on the varied strategies and tactics of accommodation and resistance to online and offline social relationships. These occur locally, but they are interpenetrated by manifestations of the global in complex ways involving power relations which, at least potentially, enable new opportunities for learning and diversity while also reaching shared understandings and conclusions. Whether these opportunities make a profound difference in people's lives and whether they are understood as helpful are questions that the scholarly community must continue to assess.

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