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Cultural identities in the flow - a theoretical reflection on the impact of technological globalization on intercultural communication

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Abstract Cultural analysts observe a profound change in the creation and distribution of cultural content and cultural identities, the permeability and shifting of cultural boundaries through the influence of media and communication technologies, often called the *flow*. Intercultural communication research needs to adapt. Far from invalidating cross-cultural research *en bloc*, we observe a movement towards more dynamic models, including aspects of co-creation of culture. Modal anthropology can aid us to orient our research since they take into account dimensions *hitherto* underrepresented in research on the relation of culture and technologies.

Résumé Des observateurs culturels notent un changement profond dans la manière dont le contenu culturel se crée et les identités culturelles circulent, la perméabilité et le glissement des frontières culturelles avec le concours des médias et des technologies de la communication, souvent appelé le *flux*. Les recherches sur la communication interculturelle doivent s'adapter. Loin de vouloir invalider l'approche culturelle comparative, on peut observer un mouvement vers des modèles plus dynamiques, incluant les aspects de co-création de la culture. L'anthropologie modale peut fournir des éléments pour orienter notre recherche car elle prend en compte des dimensions jadis sous-représentées dans la recherche sur les relations entre la culture et des technologies.

Introduction

A number of analysts of current cultural tendencies and in particular the impact of technologies on modernity at large mainly stress two phenomena: they perceive the existence and the force of *flow* (Hannerz 1997, Castells 1997, Semprini 2003, Baumann 2006) and find technology playing an important role in this development as epitomized for example in the process of *mediation* (de Zengotita 2005).

We propose to consider these phenomena to have an impact not only on studies of the process called globalization but also on the way we study culture and identity and consequently on our models of intercultural communication.

In 1977¹, Peter S. Adler heralded the rise of the multicultural person as a new paradigm for understanding intercultural relations. Technology and the overarching

¹ Republished in Bennett (1998).

process of globalization reinforce the need to rethink intercultural communication paradigms again through the phenomena of *flow* and mediation, as we will argue below.

What is flow and how is it linked to mediation?

THE FLOW OF CAPITAL

In the early conceptual uses of the term, economic postmodernists conceived of *flow* as essentially an incessant and accelerating movement of objects, products, and capital, conditions of what they perceive as “disorganized capitalism” (Lash and Urry, 1987).

THE SYMBOLIC FLOW

Other observers of culture and technology (Hannerz, 1997, Castells 1997, Beck 2003, Baumann 2006), building partly on this analysis, also advocated the need for revising our conception of culture and enlarged the vision to include more symbolic and psychological aspects. Hannerz (1997) argues that anthropology needs to take into account not only localities and local cultures but also global networks, connections and *flows*, what he elsewhere calls cultural complexity (Hannerz, 1993).

Manuel Castells (1997) takes up this analysis and focuses on the network character of global social exchanges, on information, bits and bytes, exchanged in an intricate worldwide system, spatialized by the neuronal network of the internet and thus fundamentally organized. Ulrich Beck (2003) has coined the term “risk society”, and has argued that contemporary societies and technological progress produce increasing psychological uncertainty for the individual but also that this risk becomes part of our culture and that we develop the tools for mastering partly these risks through the same progress and technologies. Zygmunt Baumann (2006) called this state of flow and uncertainty the “liquid modernity”, where individuals are now theoretically free to define themselves. This apparent freedom goes hand in hand with a liquidation of the collective force since interpersonal links are weakened as the autonomy and responsibility of the individual is strengthened².

² Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (1991), takes a completely different, more positive stance towards the issue of personal freedom and flow, which he calls the state of optimal experience, a psychological condition in which the individual becomes, to put it somewhat simply, the channel for the realisation of its own dreams and desires through a state of connectedness and focus on the concrete workflow of actions. This autotelic experience of happiness through productive action differs greatly from more sceptical societal analyses but shows similar aspects in that it relies on the recognition of the force of the state of flow and the importance of the issues of involvement, control and experience.

FLOW - A SYNTHESIS

The most complete synthesis of the analyses of the society of *flow* yet has to our knowledge been undertaken by Andrea Semprini (*La société du flux*, 2003). Semprini, who is a communication researcher and keen observer of international developments in the sphere of the media (*C.N.N. et la mondialisation de l'imaginaire*, 2000), details eight essential characteristics of *flow*³. All of them are linked which might seem to make some of them redundant but each harbors its own intrinsic quality. Referring to an amplifying phenomenon already pinpointed by Raymond Williams (1974) analysis of television programming, Semprini conceives of *flow* as an incessant movement of images, content, products, identities etc in an international mediasphere et through symbolic networks. These characteristics of the *flow* pose certain questions for intercultural research. One of those main characteristics is continuity.

Continuity

Continuity mirrors for general societal processes those that Williams found in television programming. As the focal point of interest isolates more and more the individual element and not the great narrative or overarching ideology⁴, and the separating markers between each element tend to disappear, things become blurred, uncategorized, not subject to choice motivated by culture's value structure but free-floating items. Semprini goes further in saying that different textual items⁵ not only become less distinct but that their production itself aims at producing "text-for-flow" (Semprini p.100). Not only the media industry (soaps, 24 newscasts) or political communication (sound-bites, blurbs, spins) but also interpersonal communication might be affected. Don't we now write blog posts shaped to be blog posts, RSS and SMS and chat with very specific style (in French *flux RSS*, or *RSS flow, sic!*)? As far as the access to or presentation of foreign cultural content is concerned, we are witnessing an impressive growth. This availability of images of the *other* impacts on our construction of proto- and stereotypes.

Homogeneity

The flow as a phenomenon is largely homogenous, as a consequence of the process described above (Semprini, p.101). The lines between the cultural texts are blurred, and production of texts-for-flow is encouraged, as Williams already remarked for television programming. In turn, public and social space is threatened to dissolve as options and individual choice are opened up. This challenges cultural values as an important element of choice for the individual.

³ Semprini acknowledges that these eight do not exhaustively define the *flow*, but contribute to characterizing it sufficiently.

⁴ Critics of postmodern theory refute this perceived ideological void as a dangerous misconception.

⁵ Media texts, texts-as-cultural-artefacts

Destructuration

Since its continuity and homogeneity do not allow perceiving distinct elements, the *flow* is a destructuring force (Semprini, p.101). Organizing principles are difficult to find, often not present. It's an open process, running more on images, memories, sensations, emotions, wants, then on societal categories and established values shared by a large number.

Liberty

Semprini (p.102) suggests that its anarchical character seems to define the *flow* as a liberating form, as *free to* chose, act, perform, and produce. That said it can also be seen as encouraging a *freedom from* social engagement, collective action and shared experiences, thus leading to anomic states of public life. The choice depends largely on the competence of the modern individual to master the *flow*. As in Semprini's analogy with a river it is only the experienced swimmer who can get from one shore to the other, beware of the inexperienced one. Cultural and media literacy thus stand out as the top competencies of *flow* mastering. Some argue that time solves the issue, since *digital natives* (Prensky 2007) might soon outnumber *digital immigrants*. The long-term effect of kids growing up digital remains to be seen, and the digital divide still exists, however and the issue of a cultural info-elite mastering the flow at the expense of the excluded seems a real issue.

Movement

The flow is also a phenomenon of movement (Semprini, p.102), which here does not stand for the mobility of people and capital, even though an acceleration in this area has clearly contributed to reinforcing the *flow*, but of movement of values, criteria and behaviors, i.e. of symbolic capital, and thus of elements of identity. What needs to be analyzed is not the opposition between mobility and restraint but the character of the availability and distribution of cultural texts.

Quantity

The movement of flow is above all characterized by its abundance and profusion (Semprini, p.103). *Flow* can only exist as a phenomenon of impressive quantity, which makes it difficult to pick out culturally relevant items, attitudes and behaviors.

Immediacy

Immediacy expresses the unfiltered character of the flow as it arrives directly in our sphere of attention. Due to its speed and abundance, its continuous and deconstructed character, mediating the flow becomes very difficult (Semprini, p.104). This suggests that cultural mediators such as political, esthetic or religious authorities cannot react quickly and thoroughly enough to deliver a critique of the incoming *flow* and integrate it into their discourse. The movement of totalitarian governments to limit network access is part of a reaction to this phenomenon.

Force

Taken together the aforementioned principles paint a picture of an extremely forceful phenomenon with the power to overcome resistance due to its sheer quantity and ubiquity. The force of *flow* is its power to generate cultural text made for the flow.

Mediation

One of the forces of *flow* is its immediacy - images and cultural content and messages of all sorts arrive directly on our screens without much cultural mediation. It seems thus somewhat contradictory to speak of an increase in mediation of everyday life. A close observation allows us to see mediation as the consequences of the immediacy and the force of the *flow*. Indeed, mediation is the general state of our symbolic universe, our cultural semiosphere (Lotman, 2000) in a society of *flow*. Combine incessant arrival of potential identifiers and symbolic markers with the reflexivity of the modern human being and one might agree on the mediatedness of our conceptions of the world. The modern individual has the choice of a variety of outside options, brought in by the media of choice of the *flow*, first and foremost television and the Internet. Lifestyles and life choices, models and heroes, opinions and information all are not our own personal conviction or creation but increasingly fueled by the incorporation of elements from the symbolic warehouse that the networks and the mechanisms of *flow* bring to us. Thomas de Zengotita, in his account of *mediation* (2005) focuses on these central elements of this perceived mediation of our lifeworld: growing reflexivity, availability of choice (media-content) and an increased narcissism.

A central quality of new technologies (Web 2.0, social networking) is the inclusion of the (former) audience in media production and identity creation. *Mashups*, as did sampling for the preceding generation, provide means of cultural collage and participation in the *flow* of production. Combined, these elements mean that our exposure to the *flow* is growing. What is its impact on our cultural identities?

The phenomenon of *flow* has an impact on identity

As more and more models, situations and contents for identity construction are available, we observe that the functionalist cultural paradigm loses more and more of its force of analysis. Old boundaries, like nationality or ethnicity lose their status of *primus inter pares* of the well of possibilities composing a human beings identity. The passport has never been the exclusive proper description of cultural identity, but this is true for an increasing number of people⁶.

⁶ Wolfgang Welsch even sees us approaching an era of *transculturality*, where individual cultures disappear (Welsch 1994).

As life paths grow continually complex (for more and more than just a cosmopolitan elite), as the spaces of cultural production and exchange grow incessantly (Featherstone et.al. 1996) we observe that

- cultural traits considered formerly minor play an important role (gender, professional community and ethos)
- creating new cultural groups, both fleeting (based on networks) and more durable (communities) has become easier

An example of our own research (Wilhelm, 2005) on an international student group evolving in an online masters course at a distance shows that online communication patterns did not vary enough to clearly establish national, ethnical or regional cultural sub-groups⁷. However, we can observe an emerging co-culture fuelled by the communal experience and the adoption of a professional ethos and jargon, and a community with a memory of its experiences and creating new experiences are observable⁸.

The theoretical treatments and practical observations we have described have a deep impact on the concept of *culture* we need to espouse in the age of *flow*:

Culture needs to be seen as part of the discourse we analyze, as operative more than descriptive, as "plastic, political, contingent" (C.Barker in Titley 2005). In our case study we came to acknowledge that cross-cultural research might become more and more tedious in intercultural environments. Even if cultural traits and attitudes do not disappear, they step aside and make room for co-configuration work (Engeström, 2002), co-culture (Orbe 1997, Puren 2002) and what Jacques Demorgon (2005) calls "interity" (*interité*).

Whereas Engeström, based on cultural historical activity theory pays particular attention to the group co-constructing their experience, especially in the work place, Orbe guides our attention to the power structures operating in society and the creation of co-culture as a common denominator of the dominated. Jacques Demorgon synthesizes in the concept of *interité* years of intercultural research in his plea for a reconnaissance of what is between, what precedes (the voluntary choice of communicating across cultures) and what emerges (the co-created meaning) in the act of intercultural communication.

Thus the society of flow seems to both endow the individual actor with more cultural defining power and is fragilizing at the same time its securely defined belonging to established cultural groups and their duration in time. Taken one step further, these theoretical reflections have an impact on theories of intercultural communication.

⁷ In our research setup we measured online interactions in synchronous discussion groups along a typology taking into account orientations like process-oriented, procedure-oriented and relation-oriented messages, each with subtypes (question, proposition, answer...).

⁸ Publication of the results is prepared for the *Colloque international franco-tunisien SFSIC/ISD/IPSI* Interagir et transmettre, informer et communiquer : quelles valeurs, quelle valorisation ?, Tunis, April 2008.

Does researching intercultural communication still make sense? Epistemological propositions for researching culture in the flow

Iben Jensen (2003) in this article “The Practice of Intercultural Communication” proposes a shift from national and ethnicity based concepts of intercultural communication towards ones that take into account other forms of cultural identities. Arjun Appadurai proposes the study of various *-scapes* to come to terms with the dynamic nature and configurations of identity work in the times of *flow* and *mediation*.

Following this train of thought we think much attention should be paid to

- a) the reality of multiple cultural identities
- b) integrating the change in the power of who’s defining identity
- c) conceptualizing trans-cultural identity (Welsch, 1994)
- d) the study of the symbolic and modal parts of identity - *le sensible*
- e) including body and emotion

These aforementioned examples pose a challenge for the study of intercultural CMC. A guiding principle could be to never underestimate the power of the ecosystem, which participants inhabit, however virtual it might be, and to account for their situated experiences as ingredients of culture in the making. These co-cultures, of co-learners, co-players, co-chatters, co-workers in virtual teams surface in narratives that create the coherence necessary to form a community, as fleeting a one as it may be.

Conclusion

We cannot clearly answer the question whether technological change is the motor of the development of the *flow* or one of its results but the impact of the *flow* on cultural identity becomes more and more evident. Researchers of cultural phenomena might adapt to this development by taking into account a more « liquid », *flow*-like culture model, characterized by the following paradigm shift:

Cultural dimensions in cross-cultural research	>	Cultural characteristics in cultural <i>flow</i> research
Position and opposition	>	Oscillations and transformations
Discontinued	>	Continued
Categories	>	Diffuse Svstems
<i>Actantial</i> (humans and artifacts) ⁹	>	<i>Tensive</i> (intensity/range) ¹⁰
Unity system totaliv	>	Modes, modulations, modifications

⁹ A structural semiotic model popularized by A.Greimas using the positions of *actants* (subject, object, sender, receiver, helper...) to analyse communication situations

¹⁰ A post-Greimassian semiotic model based on the values of intensity and range for analysing communication phenomena.

Static	>	Dvnamic
Concent. causality	>	Sensations. events. experience
Ordered, regulated	>	Hybrid- <i>metis</i>

Table: Dimensions of cross-cultural and cultural *flow* research (based on Boutaud 2006 and Laplantine 2005)

As modalities and modulations replace categories as central organizational principles and experience can be accounted for in terms of sensations, hybridity is the norm. Structural analyses focusing on single *actants* (humans, objects, sender-receiver-model) become less and less useful in an environment characterized by flow, where each actant can have multiple roles (sender, receiver, producer, hero, helper). The tensive model seems to be more apt for capturing the force of the *flow* that Semprini speaks of as a central characteristic. *Tensive* approaches supplant actantial ones as the static cultural comparative makes room for the dynamic, hybrid view of culture. Useful examples for these types of processes can also be integrated from research on intercultural competence and intercultural learning.

These theoretical reflexions are meant to sketch some ingredients for novel approaches taking into account the recent and forceful phenomena of *flow* and *mediation*. As far as models for intercultural communication are concerned, the question of possible misunderstanding due to cultural difference as the central focal point of intercultural communication research can be extended. We need an increased awareness of co-cultural elements emerging and we need to pay close attention as to how participants in communicative processes deal with the elements present and their role transculturally, especially in virtual environments.

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