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INFORMATION CULTURE AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL PRACTICE: (RE)DEFINING THE CONCEPT IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL CONVERGENCE

Abstract

In this communication, we will examine the concept of information culture – used preferably to information literacy – and its dynamics in the context of digital convergence. We will argue that the phenomenon of digital convergence, a cultural phenomenon, brings to the foreground the social and human dimensions, it gives a central role to the actors, considered in their interactions with other people and with artifacts in their information environment. So, in a world in permanent change, information culture is much more than information literacy, in its functional and individual meaning. It is not only a matter of seeking and using information; it is a matter of creating meaning out of cultural objects which are much more than neutral objects transmitting messages and information. It includes a general reflection on the process of knowledge creation and communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Which definition for information culture in the context of digital convergence? Since the 2000s, the changing media landscape, including the development of digital networks, and the innovations generated by economic stimuli in the field of science and culture, have been at the origin of a mini-revolution in information practices. They have led to changes in the way of thinking relation to media and information and to a profound renewal of the reflection: the social and cultural dimensions are placed in the foreground, which questions the place of actors in systems and devices. While the issues become clearer, a shift has occurred that leads to reconsider the nature and the role of information culture. The reorganization at work raises theoretical and methodological issues as evidenced by the recent research advances on which we base our thinking¹.

¹ We base our paper on the results of a research project conducted in French secondary schools during the period 2006-2010, as part of the “Technological Research Team in education (ERTé)” *Culture informationnelle et curriculum documentaire* (Lille 3, A. Béguin dir.). The purpose of this project is to study information practices

The aim of this paper is to consider the reconfiguration of information culture, and in particular which kinds of knowledge are necessary to learn, live and evolve in a world in permanent change. These points will be addressed by examining convergence phenomena and information culture through the idea of culture: first we will define the terms in order to then present the contexts of our reflection, specifically the sociocultural practice approach adopted here ; then we describe the dynamics of information culture between permanence and change, thus focusing on two dimensions, social development of knowledge and knowledge sharing through emerging participatory culture ; finally, we consider a few concluding perspectives.

2. CONTEXTS

In this paper, convergence phenomenon and information culture are questioned by the idea of “culture”, as defined by Guy Rocher, inspired by the work of anthropologists (Rocher, 1968) : “everything a person needs to know to live in a particular society” that is “a vast symbolic set, including knowledge, ideas, thoughts, rules, common to a plurality of social actors, considered in a given space at a given time”. Presented in this way, culture is action, it is a behavior related to appropriation (acquisition, learning), to the values and symbols that compose it, it corresponds to “ways of life” (“*manières de vivre*”) in a given society; human groups produce it to meet the needs they share. At the same time, culture is not static (to freeze practices leads to an essentialist view of culture), it is a dynamic set which entails relative plasticity.

By information culture, used here preferably to information literacy, in the orientation of the Technological Research Team in education (ERTÉ) “*Culture informationnelle et curriculum documentaire*” (Annette Béguin dir., Lille 3, 2010), we mean a set of shared skills and knowledge, social patterns of behaviors, norms and values, involved in defining the importance of information, and allowing a wise and ethical use of this information. Information culture is both the basis of a common heritage and an educational project taking information and media as an object of study in response to individual and collective needs. Unlike the prescriptive connotation of the term “information literacy”, “information culture”

which participate in the construction of individuals’ “information culture”. Four school librarians, in three secondary schools in Paris, were observed during training sessions, over time, in various situations.

is considered from an anthropological point of view, informed by experience, and rooted in social practices.

In the same manner, the phenomenon of digital convergence is much more than a technical process related to digitization and network deployment, it is primarily a cultural and media convergence: "*Inter-activity is a property of the technology [...] participation is a property of culture*" says Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, 2009). It brings to the foreground the social and human dimensions and gives a central role to the actors, considered in their interactions with other people and with artifacts in their information environment.

Describing a culture therefore consists in drawing its general outline, showing how it is being developed daily, showing the elements that define it, those that situate it in relation to other cultures, and those that give it thickness. The mere juxtaposition of elements is not sufficient to define a particular culture, it is necessary to determine which ones organize it into a more or less coherent set, which ones bind its components together, and to understand how it is worked by internal and external social relationships. Culture is a historical production, it is experiencing changes, transformations: it is in interactions that social actors create social rules, conventions, relations that give meaning to culture viewed as a collective process.

The comprehensive and constructionist approach that we advocate focuses on the phenomenon of "emergence of meaning", within the meaning of Pierre Paillé and Alex Mucchielli (Paillé, Mucchielli, 2003): information culture is studied in its cultural and social dimensions, with the purpose of identifying the dynamics that emerge (knowledge and meanings are built through dialogue and interactions).

3. BEYOND INFORMATION, A SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF KNOWLEDGE

According to this definition, information culture is considered in an inclusive and dialogical way, linking the culture of belonging of the actors (culture in a sociological sense: as the actors live, with their usual practices, their experiences) and the culture in a more academic sense (scholarly culture that school librarians and teachers want to transmit). And information is seen as a process, that comes as an instrument at the center of professional interventions and as a response to the needs or the curiosity of the actors. Considered as a relationship, in an act of communication, information takes its full value when a look is

placed on it (Jeanneret, 2000). In other words, information is made possible by document objects, and it happens on the conditions that actors react to these objects. Object of negotiations, bearer of knowledge, it is also a proposal for interactions; the actors are at the heart of the process of constructing meaning. Thus, being interested in the information and the knowledge implies not ignore human and social dimensions, as noted by Jean-Paul Metzger: the study of human and social practices in the development of knowledge is for him one of the three poles that organizes Information Science (Metzger, 2002).

Taking in account the human and the social is central to the ERTé *Culture informationnelle et curriculum documentaire*. The objective of the project, through immersion into school contexts, is to observe information culture in the process of being built, day after day, between formal and non-formal practices: the way actors seize information and appropriate it as a tool for action, the social interactions (interactions between actors, actors-environment interactions), the moments of negotiations around the documents, but also the way these practices are embedded in social, cultural, organizational contexts which are involved in their definition and in the definition of their logic (Maury, Etévé, 2010). This approach constitutes a complete break with the traditional standards of information literacy based on information retrieval and generic skills, applicable independently, regardless of the context (Bruce, 1997; Tuominen *et al*, 2005).

The observations lead to grasp the full measure of the weight of social constraints and cultural norms, of the limits of the ability to act they may constitute, and of the power relations tied around the qualification of information. With the introduction of new resources (tools of web 2.0 in particular), informational practices change very quickly, being the reflection of a generation imbued with the screens. Personal information culture is dynamic, not stable, collaborative, it introduces uncertainty in school, in a world characterized by stability peculiar to academic knowledge. Pupils arrive at school with an experience of information-documentation, showing their ability to make “small arrangements” with technology and information. Empirically acquired, influenced by the family context, these practices are a mixture of improvisation and adaptation. But they are also source of misunderstandings that highlight the need of an accompanied conduct when it comes to leave the “space of the doing” and to construct meaning (Maury, 2009). It is not enough to know individually how to seek, select, evaluate and have a fair use of information. To be operational, while tools and methods recognized as intellectual technologies and mediating tools are integrated into schools, it is necessary to gain height relative to usual practices and to learn how to navigate through several worlds and formats of information: formal and non

formal information systems, traditional information structures with their controlled vocabulary and new emerging resource, multimodal, with more chaotic forms. The objective is to control one's own world of information, in order to act independently and contribute positively to the community.

Isolating the steps and objects of intellectual work is out of the question, the question rather consists in overflowing from an individual and cognitive approach to address the cognitive tools and objects in a process of thought production, at a collective level, by approaching this knowledge on an integrative mode as answers to the questions from pupils. And this, with a dual concern, by identifying the structuring dimensions of information and by developing an epistemological culture: situating the concepts and major figures of information-documentation in a genealogy (Frisch, 2008), developing a matrix curiosity that fosters links past-present-future (Freire, 2001), integrating a support and technique thinking (Serres, 2009). Beyond the local, the contingent, the specific, and the piecemeal acquisitions, while this culture is initially a field culture, it is to provide tools for thinking in a generic and comprehensive way in order to give meaning to the situations and to construct an "informational view" on the world.

The real question is "that of a state of mind, of a culture" wrote Jean Michel as early as 1993, with an emphasis on the social and cultural dimensions of information culture (Michel, 1993). Embedded in practices, built through dialogue and interactions, information culture appears thus as an initiatory process, an introduction to the world of information-documentation (in the sense of "becoming a member"), informed by experience and oriented towards the acquisition of a common language promoting mutual understanding and facilitating transfers.

4. A PARTICIPATORY CULTURE IN THE NEW INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

In the new informational ecosystem that is taking place, information culture - whose evolution from individual to collective is affirmed - can entirely be interpreted in terms of communication and social interactions. This is especially justified as the phenomenon of digital convergence is marked, beside the social and cultural dimensions, by a rise of the participatory and communicative dimensions.

The focus is here on another pole of Information Science, the digital technologies, considered both within a logic of knowledge development and knowledge sharing. As

communication tools, bearers also of knowledge, the technologies give to see, beyond new forms of publication and exchange, new ways of organizing knowledge and new forms of "recorded knowledge" (Metzger, 2002).

While disseminating contents is an accelerating process and while new media are affirming themselves as spaces of interaction, the communication relations and the role of actors are displaced, overflowing of local context (and school context): logic of creation and circulation of information on a planetary scale, communication from the mass to the mass (Proulx, 2006) supported on individual mass media (mass produced and individually felt, according to Manuel Castells), emergence of new hierarchies, new rhetoric on a narrative mode (Peraya, 2011), network approach with shared knowledge based on a link and a leak mode. New forms of participation are developing that bring deep changes in thinking information culture, as it is apparent from field observations: information culture appears as a participatory and contributive culture, bridging the gap between social practices and academic knowledge, and questioning the role of actors who are placed in the heart of the system (and no more at the periphery). "Knowledge is not located in texts as such – or in the individual's head. Rather it involves the co-construction of situated meanings, and takes place in networks of actors and artifacts" (Tuominen *et al*, *op. cit.*, 2005).

Developing a common language on communication, participation, and merging knowledge, accompanying it with a reflection fostering a critical and distanced view on information and technology can be the conductive thread of this new territory of information culture. In order to characterize this vocabulary around the "consulting-confronting-participating-sharing", Olivier Ertzscheid speaks of a "new universal documentary grammar" in reference to the social web. This amounts to emphasize the universality of tools and methods of information-documentation, following Paul Otlet who situates these tools and methods at a collective level, to serve a "universal information culture" (Mustafa El Hadi, 2012). The challenge is then intercultural as well as cultural.

Behind the "consulting-confronting-participating-sharing", as shown by the observations, the objective is to think about the issues related to the use of new media and their operating modes: worldviews these media are carrying, value systems they convey as communication systems, at the opposite of the idea of neutrality of technology, transparency of tools, or immediacy of information. The aim is to go beyond an adaptation speech turned towards consumption-production to take into account the choices made and their implications:

- the way in which the tensions are managed between traditional worldview concerned about ethics and worldview of social utility, as the case expressivist, anti-hegemonic, or citizen aware;
- the socio-technical dynamics and its effect on the knowledge organization and management, the options adopted influencing the relationship of place in communication;
- the new discursive configurations drawn by the networks and their impact on the communication process: rise of narrative knowledge (Peraya *et al*, 2011), permanence of an anthological trend, remodeling the function author (Doueïhi, 2011);
- the increasing circulation of contents and its impacts on the uses that are diversifying, causing some interference: the transmitter is also receiver, the sender, recipient... (Maury, 2012)

In this configuration, information culture is developed at the articulation between "the space of knowledge" and "the space of being in the world" (Baltz, 2012). Granularity of media (social networks, blogs, micro-blogs ...), levels of usage (consultation, documentary activity, creation ...), levels of interaction and their issues (with collectors, joiners, creators...) are some of the main categories around which this emerging vocabulary in the process of being built is organized.

But if these developments invite to a re-conceptualization of information culture to meet new needs and expectations - social practices constantly questioning existing configurations – it is more in the sense of an expansion of knowledge than of a substitution of new knowledge to old knowledge. The dynamics is integrative: the community and social dimension of the web acts as a catalyst, renewing and/or reactivating old problems and issues. Milad Doueïhi, about digital culture, speaks of conversion rather than revolution, to account for the ongoing changes (Doueïhi, 2011). Similarly, a sociocultural approach to information culture puts into evidence the reinvention of informational knowledge, between permanence and change, at the time of the participatory practices of the web 2.

5. CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVES

So, (re)defining the information culture in the context of digital convergence amounts to register into a logic of continuity rather than into a logic of rupture, integrating the evolutions of a given society. Access the full meaning of information culture implies taking into account several orders of knowledge that are stratified, referring to representations of the

culture at a time instrumental, cognitive, social, cultural and today contributive and participatory...

Finally, we would emphasize that (re)defining information culture in a more socio-cultural and holistic way (with a critical distance towards an instrumental and methodological approach) is not the exclusive preserve of the Francophone reflection. If the cultural approach has always found a special echo in France, while the Anglo-Saxon tradition promotes "skills" to access sources of information (Sérieyx *et al.*, 1993), these questions are becoming more present in the Anglo-Saxon literature, concerned about societal changes and mutations occurring in the media. At the occasion, the question is often posed of the relevance of the concept of information literacy as it was so far defined (Bruce, 1997; Tuominen *et al.*, 2005; Spiranec 2012). A new vision of information literacy is proposed then, as a social practice, shaped by the culture and the context, breaking with the traditional standards, in a sense close to the definition of information culture.

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