

Session 3: Digital technologies, cultures, values and lifestyles

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Two preliminary remarks

When we analyze intensive users of ICTs we should always be aware that, at least for the moment, they have a specific social profile compared to the general population, being younger, more often living in urban areas and belonging to the middle and upper classes.

We should neither forget that ICTs coexist with more “traditional” media in terms of uses, but also in terms of production of contents with the vertical integration of cultural industries and telecommunication operators.

Does a continuous use of ICT affect cultural patterns and values as to challenge those prevalent in education?

If we think of “institutional” education –schools, universities- the answer is certainly yes and for several reasons. First, “academic” education is very much funded on book culture and more generally on modes of knowledge and learning that are very different and sometimes even antagonistic from the forms of knowledge one might get from the Internet. Academic education is grounded on a specific knowledge architecture, that stipulates historical continuities, the existence of hierarchies and a directory structure going from general to peculiar. Knowledge available on the Internet is quite far from this humanist model:

- There is a “flattening” effect due to the multiplicity of types of information available that erases the *historicity* of knowledge.
- There is no author or publisher’s responsibility for the information given as there is with books.
- There is no specific certifications nor formal education requirements to put information on the net, which is the opposite of the expertise required for teachers.
- Last but not least, we may observe among young people a “Babel syndrome”, -cf the short story by Borges about this library that contains all the worlds- i.e. the feeling that ALL knowledge is on the Internet and they just have to go there to find a ready made piece of information.

Those particularities might have a strong influence on ICTs users’ relation to knowledge, especially young people. It might lead to the decrease of vertical modes of cultural transmission (from parents, from teachers) and therefore strengthen horizontal modes

(between peers transmitting information got by other sources, such as web sites). Nowadays this is a major problem for teachers in high school: how to take in charge the gap between the type of knowledge needed for school's programs and the one that their pupils and students get from mass media and Internet? (Pasquier 2005)

But we could also hope that Web 2.0 and wiki technologies might help developing new and interesting forms of learning and relation to knowledge, based on a more active individual participation.

Is there a global convergence of lifestyles because of the influence of digital contents?

Researches tend to show that the globalization of lifestyles is, first, a complex question (it may for example reactivate local senses of belonging, the "glocal") and, second, that traditional mass media such as television probably have a more direct impact on the homogenization of life styles than Internet, through TV fictions or musical clips as well as through information programs.

Still, one should not underestimate the role played by the opportunities of communication with many people Internet offers. Chats, forums, MSN are places where to elaborate a common culture by interacting, but I would never adopt a technical determinist perspective and think that at a distance communications might have a stronger impact on lifestyles than do daily life exchanges in primary groups.

Does physical isolation tend to be reinforced or civic engagement avoided?

This question has been the focus of a huge amount of researches that lead to divergent conclusions. For example Kraut and al, 1998, strongly argued for the isolation hypothesis (but their findings were refuted by the Pew internet study of 2000). Putnam (2000), Nie (2001), Wellman (2001), and others support the idea that electronic sociability is contributing to weaken civic engagement, especially on the local level. But those conclusions are challenged by the strong development of Internet use by political activists and the rise of citizen blogs.

My own researches tend to show that the isolation hypothesis is difficult to make, as a general statement, when studying the practices of communication by 15/20 years old French people: on one hand contacts through the Internet are often used to talk more freely, especially for boys, than during the day at school under peer groups' scrutiny. But on the other hand intensive use of on line video games might lead to a gender specialization of social networks

for boys and to some forms of social isolation. In that sense one should evoke a transformation of sociability rather than a decrease. More over, several researches made by French sociologists indicate that a very large part of exchanges on the net are made with people users know and often see in their daily life (the same was shown about phone calls, “the more you see, the more you call”)

Does digital-related activity is extended longer and tends to cover time spans previously devoted to rest?

The answer to this question is depending on families’ regulations, whether there is or not a control by parents on bed time hours or on time spent on the Internet in general. Observations show that children tend to loose some sense of the time they spent on the Internet chatting on MSN, and even more when playing video games. As a matter of fact, this is a specific problem with the Internet, since it does not offer a scansion of time by programming as on television or radio. More over, playing games requires long sessions to get to a good level in the game and most players are not aware of the number of hours they have been playing on a row since they are too involved in the game itself. My own research shows that when playing, girls are much more aware of the time spent than are boys. On the contrary, they less acutely perceive time spent on MSN.

Are immediate responses and quick reaction speeds seen as the norm in personal communication?

By young people yes, and this evolution was initiated by –and still very much associated to– mobile phones (with another new norm of being reachable almost all the time). But this norm is not accepted by all young people with the same enthusiasm: in my research among 15/20 years old, part of the upper classes kids criticized it a lot and referred to the better temporality of correspondence. We should note also that most of those secondary school pupils evoked occasions that require less immediately interactive modes of exchange (such as someone’s death, a post rupture period etc.). Last, we should remind that “immediate response and quick reaction” has always been the norm for face-to-face interaction and is in no way an ICTs’ invention!

Is multimedia content considered to be, by its very nature, of higher value than mere text?

A young interviewee, 7 years old, told me he disliked books because they were “in black and white”. The younger generation, all statistics prove it, are more and more used to a mix of

images and texts and often reluctant to mere texts. This is, partly, why they prefer to read magazines rather than dailies, and abandon books reading. In that sense we might answer yes to the question. But at the same time, a large part of Internet contents is mere text, and they don't mind reading it. Moreover, we might consider the development of written exchanges on the Internet (even if it is with a simplified language) as a re-affiliation to written culture and text.

As a conclusion I would like, as a sociologist, to remind how difficult it is to give answers in general to all those questions. Even if they mainly address a same age group, there are still large differences in practices and symbolic representations by the social backgrounds, family modes of education, and the sex. This latter variable is more and more predictive of some cultural patterns such as book reading or relation to new technologies, which are essential to the themes of this session.

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