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Intercultural Dialogue and Digital Culture
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Boombox to i-pod

How intercultural communication has turned from a shout to a whisper in the digital world

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This is a new environment for me. My background is in publishing, publishing education, and publishing development in Africa and Europe.

As I am new to this, I decided to tell some stories.

Context is not theoretical



- Personal or social context
- Digital culture - "high context" or "low context"
- Or one posing as the other?
- Does communication lead to community or to excommunication?

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All stories come from somewhere. They are told from a context, and basically context is not theoretical - it is real, it is personal and social.

What I want to bear in mind is Edward Hall's idea of high or low context cultures. There are questions here. Do we need to know the rules of a culture in order to make sense of it, to fit in with it, to communicate with it? Or is the culture low on context, can we fit in with it easily? Or, and I think this may be true of the context of much digital culture, are there sometimes:

1.cultures that appear to be anarchic and low on rules, but are in fact very structured (games culture for instance)?

2. and, conversely, cultures that appear to be very structured and to require an inside knowledge but which allow for easy communication by the newcomer/the outsider (blogging)?

I also wonder if communication always leads to a sense of community, or whether sometimes the point (or the result) of communication isn't to stress difference and to lead to schisms.

The importance of stories

"Capturing and sharing content, of course, is what humans have done since the dawn of man. It is how we learn and communicate."

Deuze (2006)

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In the publishing world, where I come from, there is a lot of talk about the importance of "content". The medium, platform, format is seen as far less important.
I am not too sure that this separation of form and content is valid, and I tend to see content in terms of "stories" (fictions if you like - which may be true fictions) that gain their significance from the context in which they are told and the medium through which they are shared.

"Capturing and sharing content, of course, is what humans have done since the dawn of man. It is how we learn and communicate."

On the street in the 1980s - or on the treadmill in 2008





Sharing the music or listening in isolation

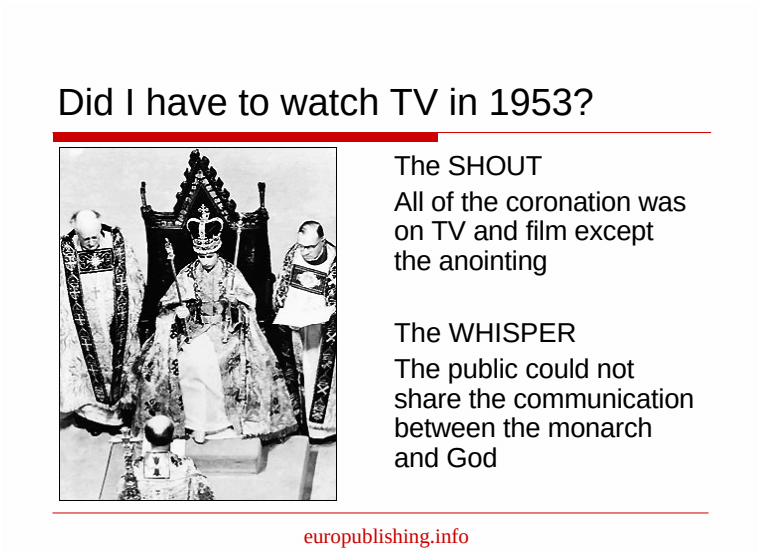
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The title for this talk relates to my own experience living in New York in the 1970s and 1980s. On the streets I noticed two simultaneous phenomena - both related to the way in which musical taste was communicated. On the one hand I heard music from a Boombox - loud music on the street. The Boombox meant to me that I had to "face the

music" and its vitality. I was given the opportunity to experience something new. But other people were beginning to wear/use Sony walkmans (walkmen - could anyone get away with this gender specific branding now). When I was confronted with this group, I had no idea whatsoever what was going through the mind of the person with the personal stereo. Often they just bumped into me (or a lamppost) because they were lost in their own world.

So the Boombox culture said to me - "this is who I am and what I do and like - LISTEN" (THE SHOUT) while the Walkman and the i-pod that has followed it say "It's my business what I do and like - it's my secret - my I-pod - my music (a lot of MY) - I might let my close friend use one of my earphones but the rest of you can KEEP OUT" (THE WHISPER).

It seems in the decades that followed this that digital production and distribution has not just made culture more transient - much culture is site specific these days (physical, social or psychological site or virtual web site) - but also less communicative (not referential to anything but the person or immediate group). Digital culture seems to exist in ghettos (poor) or gated communities (rich), and is increasingly not geared to communication at all - just tribe reinforcement. So we have to ask if the cultural experience is with others out on the street or on our own on the treadmill.

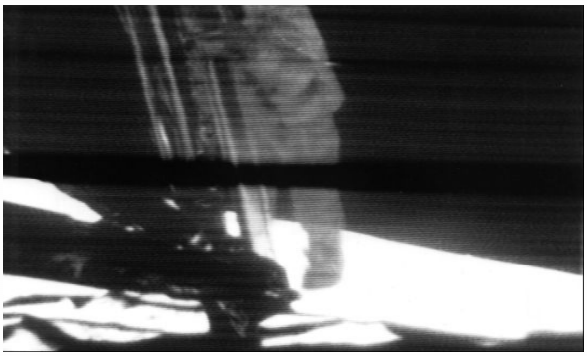


I want to step back to another story. I was 4 years old when the current Queen of England was crowned. My family, like many others in England, bought a television just for the occasion. While my parents went to London (about 300 kilometres) to see the event in real life and real time, my brother and I were left with an aunt and uncle to "enjoy" our first TV experience - also in real time - an innovation in a world that had been used to filmed news.

There are two things I want to mention about this. Firstly, the televising of the ceremony was a cause of great concern for the powers that be. Many in the ruling classes maintained that it was unseemly for this sacred occasion to be put on the new medium, but it was eventually agreed that it would happen, except that the public could not share the anointing, the moment when there was direct communication between the monarch and God. So there was a simultaneous SHOUT (because all of the coronation was on TV and film - except the anointing) and a WHISPER (the communication between the monarch and God).
The other things I can share is that at some time during the proceedings I asked my aunt a simple question “You don’t have to watch television, do you?”

It is a question I still ask.

What did I see and hear in 1969?



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Another key moment in TV history was this. The whole world watched, and heard the Armstrong message. The SHOUT was heard around the world. I do not know if there are any messages now that would have that universality.

And in 1997?



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And then this - the funeral of Diana. I thought I had avoided this one, but it was on TV in an airport in Africa while I waited for my flight. I had no choice but to watch. But it provides another story.

At some point a security guard came up and asked me where I was from. When I told him England, he stared at me. After a few minutes he asked me why I wasn't at the funeral. I told him, perhaps facetiously, that I wasn't there because I hadn't been invited. After another pause he said: "aah! I understand, you are from a different tribe."

In many ways he was right.

What do we see and hear now?





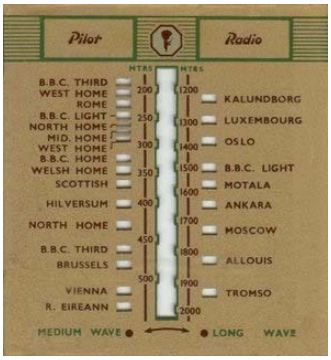
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My relationship with the radio began at an early stage, and continues into the age of internet radio and I-player which I use extensively. But again my radio usage has become a private affair, and the "intercultural

communication" I get from the radio is now little to do with my public self.

If I listen to a radio station from another country or culture, only I know. I do not share the whisper in my ear with anyone.

It's not like listening to Hilversum



- Chance encounters
- Unexpected discovery
- Hearing voices from other countries
- Becoming aware of other languages
- Finding the messages between the interference

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It wasn't always so. When I was no more than four years old, I remember turning the dial on our valve radio. My mother had to share this activity with me. It was exciting. I had what I now think of as chance encounters, I made unexpected discoveries, heard voices from other countries, became aware of other languages. I got used to the idea of finding the messages between the interference.

…and tuning in to Titograd!



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And tuning in to Titograd (or not!) - I think it was probably the same in this part of the world.

Now it's radio whispers



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Now radio has turned into a whisper, private, mostly on earphones, seemingly unlimited choice, but not as much random discovery.

Now Hilversum isn't on the dial, I have never searched for it on Google.

With friends like this, who needs …?

- Who needs to tell strangers all about themselves?
- Who needs to know what you're doing?
- Who needs to read, watch and listen to it all?
- What is being shared?
- And why does it matter?

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Another world I don't enter, but which is presented as part of the new open digital culture. The world of twitter, facebook, myspace. I wonder is it really so easy to have "friends"? Has digital culture changed the nature of intimacy? Is this really exhibitionism, egoism, a desire for belonging?

•Who needs to tell strangers all about themselves?
•Who needs to know what you're doing?
•Who needs to read, watch and listen to it all?
•What is really being shared?
•And why does it matter?

Real world communication about the digital culture of surveillance

" Advertising makes people feel inadequate and worthless. Graffiti doesn't do that. Graffiti doesn't emotionally blackmail you, graffiti doesn't make you feel fat and graffiti doesn't make you rush out and buy things, except maybe high strength cleaning products."
(Banksy 24-10-2008)



14-04-2008

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It is obvious to me that these "social spaces" and indeed most parts of the digital culture are primarily media for advertising, marketing and branding. Sport is now, as Silvio Belusconi once said, "software for television" and sport is reduced to an activity that leads the eye from one brand message to another around the TV screen.

It is interesting to me that provocative communications about this have to exist somehow in the "real world", like this Banksy artwork. Note his words: " Advertising makes people feel inadequate and worthless. Graffiti doesn't do that. Graffiti doesn't emotionally blackmail you, graffiti doesn't make you feel fat and graffiti doesn't make you rush out and buy things, except maybe high strength cleaning products."
(Banksy 24-10-2008)

Shouts are ignored …but other people listen to the whispers

- Over 4.2 million in UK (one for every 14 people)
- CC in CCTV means Closed Circuit not Creative Commons
- CCTV now "talkies"
- Is Google Earth CCTV?
- Is it targeted or is it indiscriminate?
- Spying and bugging are a big part of the digital culture



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In addition to advertising, other things that purport to be part of an open digital culture appear more like really surveillance.

•Over 4.2 million CCTV cameras in UK (one for every 14 people)

•CC in CCTV means Closed Circuit not Creative Commons
•CCTV now “talkies” - they listen and talk back
•Is Google Earth any different to CCTV?
•Is it targeted or is it indiscriminate?

Spying and bugging are a big part of the digital culture.

Surveillance and digital culture?

- Surveillance has become a part of the (digital) culture
- We watch people watching others - Michael Hannke’s “Caché” to von Donnersmark’s “Das Leben der Anderen”
- Video clips, webcams and Flickr may really be user-generated surveillance





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Certainly in terms of subject matter, we like to watch people watching others – e.g. Michael Hannke’s “Caché” and von Donnersmark’s “Das Leben der Anderen” .

I maintain that video clips, webcams and Flickr can be seen as user-generated surveillance.

If someone is watching everything I do (for free)…



“…once you've built something, you can easily begin selling it to other residents, because you control the IP Rights of your creations”

http://secondlife.com/whatis/create.php

…maybe it’s time to get (and sell) a (second) life?

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I think the second life movement is a response to this.

If someone is watching everything I do (for free)… …maybe it’s time to get (and sell) a (second) life?

Certainly Second Life encourages this sort of thinking - "…once you've built something, you can easily begin selling it to other residents, because you control the IP Rights of your creations".

The implication is that you do not control the rights to your real life! So should I feel freer to communicate something false than something real?

What does this do for communications between cultures, if neither is authentic in anyway? Just as reality TV has nothing to do with reality, perhaps we are creating and developing digital media where communication is exactly its opposite.



Let's move to another aspect of the move to the whispering culture - the mobile fiction available in Japan and elsewhere. Written by amateurs, in chapters three minutes long (the time between subway stops in Tokyo), these "cultural" products are reinforcing a "high context culture" - they are intra-cultural communication.

Note the gender bias of this mode of delivery. Men may turn first to other sorts of hand-held devices - computer games and the like. If these carry an inter-cultural message it is frequently a violent, warlike one. Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan play war games in both senses. Can they tell the difference?

Put microlit (like blogs) into print



- What role for editors and publishers?
- Can anyone really do it?
- Distribution channels determine form…and content?
- Adopting ways of reading that fit lifestyle/work patterns (commuting - consuming)
- Are there any surprises? Who's looking over my shoulder?

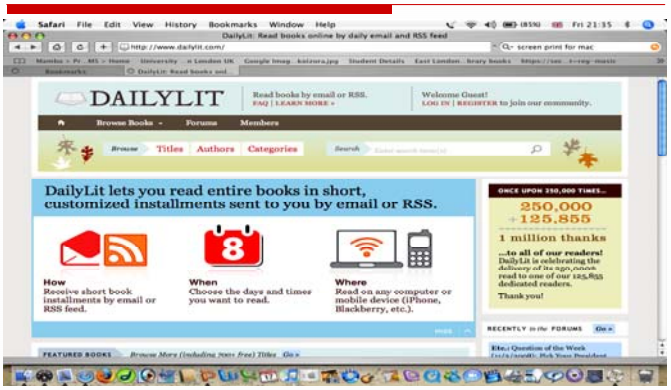
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From my background, I am interested in user generated mobile stories in terms of how they relate to writing and publishing.

What role is there for editors and publishers?
Can anyone really do it - write and publish these fictions?
Does the distribution channel determine form…and content?
Aren't these ways of reading really designed to fit the lifestyle/work patterns of commuting and consuming?

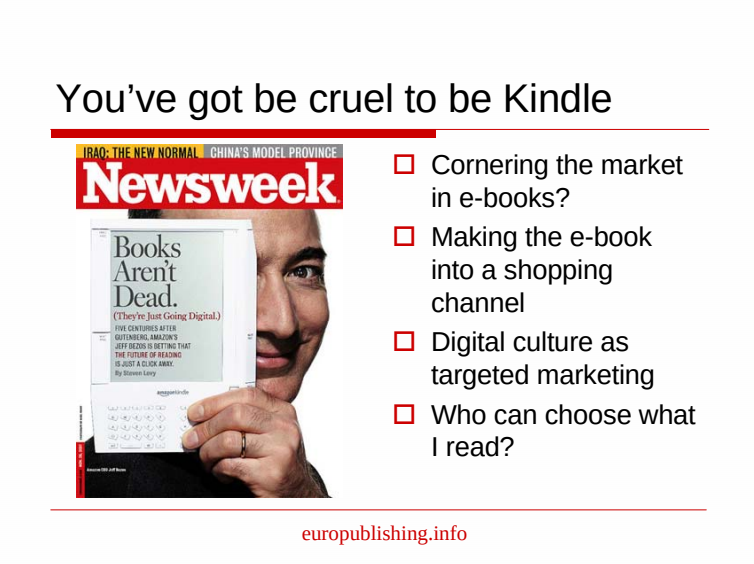
The mobile books are supplied on a subscription model - as are Mills and Boon e-books. This doesn't encourage discovery or serendipitous encounters.
To my mind intercultural encounters are more valuable when they are unplanned - then they have the power to surprise, to enchant and to invigorate. Also to some extent I believe choice (and privacy of choice) is important to preserve freedom of conscience and freedom of expression.

From Tokyo to New York



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And it's not just in Japan and China - digital culture in US and Europe is increasingly either created as chunks for distribution in the context of work - or existing texts are adapted and delivered in bespoke units. Dailylit will send you a fragment to read each day on the way to work.



And then a few words about the most successful e-book reader so far, The Kindle. This is really a marketing tool.

It is "always on", constantly connected to Amazon. Its intention is to corner the market in e-books, making the e-book reader into a shopping channel, seeing digital culture as targeted marketing.

In this digital book world, can I choose what I read?

Does this focus on distribution again indicate that digital culture is not about content (as we are constantly told) but about control of channels - so that the content I get is chosen by others?

A question of choice



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My “choice” to send and receive “intercultural messages” can easily be stopped now, particularly if I rely heavily on the digital culture.

•Internet censorship is real - and affects my production and consumption of cultural output (political, sexual, religious controls).
•Someone is watching and can control who I share ideas with.
•There is an increased concentration over who owns/controls content, and what I may have to pay for it.
•Others can stop me making (or offering others) a choice.

One interesting aside. Why do computers in movies always display messages like this, they never use Windows or OSX???? Computers on film are NOT real, just like no one on television soaps ever watches television soaps.

Who’s making digital culture?

> “There is no such thing as ‘the’ digital culture, as having culture means making culture”
>
> Deuze, M. (2006)

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Who’s making digital culture?

“There is no such thing as ‘the’ digital culture, as having culture means making culture”

What seems to me is that the makers of digital culture (in the broadest sense) are not really in charge of their creations because the channel is under increasingly tight economic and political control by states and corporations. Sure I have the freedom to use software on my computer, to put a creation “on the internet” - but so what? It will be very difficult to SHOUT about it - the major channels are not run for the likes of me, and if I WHISPER to like-minded internet users, others will be watching, not as part of an intercultural communication, but either to make sure that no subversive communication takes place, or to work out a way of converting my content into a commodity or a vehicle to attract eyeballs for advertising.



Searching for resources, I came across this new publication, and I was not so interested in reading the book as looking at the title. Digital culture, play and identity. I wondered how play connected with digital culture and identity? I looked at definitions for the word PLAY and the same word without the A - PLY. Definitions from the Chambers 20th Century Dictionary.

Playing is defined as:

=taking part in a game
=acting a part in a play
=behaving without seriousness
=moving about irregularly

Plying is:

=working at steadily
=directing one’s course
=making regular journeys over a route

This second activity seemed to me to be more likely to create both significant cultural creations and intercultural communication that might lead to understanding and solidarity.



So what might all this mean?

Digital culture might mean that:

•We need to work out if intercultural communication is loud or quiet - a shout or a whisper
•Discovery, serendipity and the unexpected are important elements of intercultural communication
•Surveillance may have become a part of intercultural communication and we may need to work against this tendency
•Digital culture may be carrying unexpected and unwanted messages - it might be *intra*-cultural rather than *inter*-cultural
•We might communicate better if we stopped playing so much and started plying more - there is no substitute for long-term commitment, hard work, and a sense of direction.

Now you can choose to shout *and* whisper with the i-pod boombox



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But it can be difficult to work out what is a shout and what is a whisper. It could be said that whispering can never really be intercultural because it implies a pre-existing intimacy. Intercultural communication is always likely to be SHOUTY, strident because the need for communication comes from the recognition of difference.
Perhaps we need to do both, and at least now you can choose whether to shout of whisper with an I-pod boombox.

Watch out for cars when using headphones



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If, though, we stay in the world where we only listen to the whispers, where everything is going on inside our own heads, or in the heads of people just like us, then WATCH OUT. Something big and noisy, something that isn't afraid to SHOUT may come and get us.

Some references

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