

Television and Internet in the construction of identity

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Abstract

My principal concern in this paper is that while traditional media, in special television, play an enormous role in the construction of collective identity, Internet influences the construction of individual identity, as individuals increasingly rely on their own resources to construct a coherent identity for themselves in an open process of self formation as a symbolic project through the utilization of symbolic materials available to them. The logic of Internet suggests a definition of self whose key quality is not so much being closed and isolated as being connected.

Introduction

The world of communications has changed radically due to the development of digital technologies. The multiplicity of Television channels and Internet and the access to information in all its formats from around the world has had a strong impact on traditional media and, at the same time, as Thompson (1997) points out, digital technologies have transformed the spatial and temporal organization of social life, creating new forms of action and interaction, new kinds of social relationship and new ways of relating to others and to oneself.

The new forms of social interaction allowed by Internet oblige us to reconsider the meaning of concepts as community or identity. The big impact of Internet on the expression and perception of social identities is relatively clear: it spans cultural spheres and geographical boundaries and allows communication from many to many. The real difference between the Internet and all preceding media forms is the role it gives to people: millions connected in many to many relationships and

interactions. In Internet, common space is a direct result of synergy and connectivity.

One of the most important factors for the development of collective identity is and has been communication. If we understand the concept identity not as a given reality but as a work in progress, we will appreciate the important role of communication as the cement of its building process.

There are two types of identity building which are relevant here: individual identity understood as the sense of oneself as an individual endowed with certain characteristics and potentialities, and collective identity, understood as a sense of oneself as a member of a social group. It is a sense of belonging, a sense of being part of a collectivity.

Both the sense of oneself and the sense of belonging are shaped by the values beliefs and forms of behaving transmitted from the past, but also highly influenced by symbolic materials transmitted by media. In this sense, some authors refer to media as substitutes of tradition.

Giddens (1991) tries to understand the persistence of national identities and propose to be considered by analyzing how citizenship is created and recreated in local situations in the context of the everyday uses and production of culture. During many years, Television has taken the place of vernacular literatures in the construction of a common imaginary and complicity.

My principal concern in this paper is that while traditional media, in special television, play an enormous role in the construction of collective identity, Internet influences the construction of individual identity, as individuals increasingly rely on their own resources to construct a coherent identity for themselves in an open process of self formation as a symbolic project through the utilization of symbolic materials available to them. This is an open process that will change overtime as people adapt new symbolic materials. This is a relatively easy process for individuals but much more difficult for collectivities who have tendencies to remain fixed in their traditional values.

The difference resides in the fact that the use of television in the construction identity is vertical, from one to many and opposite, the use of Internet in this process of self formation depends of the will of each individual. It is a horizontal use, from many to many.

The narrative of self identity, individual or collective, is continually modified in the process of retelling. The main issue here is to know who the teller is, especially in the case of collectivities. If we think that media in part are the teller, we will understand the importance they have in the process of self formation.

Individuals have gradually more access to what Thompson (1997) describes as non-local knowledge. It is interesting to point out the process of appropriation, because non-local knowledge is always appropriated by individuals in specific locations. The case of *Dallas* is a very interesting one. In Catalonia, *Dallas* has been a powerful tool for the normalization of Catalan language. I will return to this issue when analyzing the Catalan situation in terms of the role of media in the construction of Catalan identity. Now, children in Catalonia play in Catalan because they watch *Chin Chan* in Catalan. In my childhood, I used to play in Spanish when I was acting as a teacher, as a shopper or as a seller. I only used to speak in Catalan when I acted as a mother. Then, Catalan was forbidden, even for Hollywood actors.

My point of view is that the process of self formation as individuals and as collectivities becomes increasingly dependent on access to mediated forms of communication. How do Information Technologies, and specifically Internet, affect individuals and communities? What constitutes a community in the world of electronic mediation? What are the essential ingredients? Who are the new mediating forces?

As professor Cole writes in the introduction of his last version of the World Internet Project¹, a lot of academic studies have examined the impact of television on viewers' lives, but researchers now realize that we missed a golden opportunity by

¹[http:// www.digitalfuture.org](http://www.digitalfuture.org)

not looking at individuals and their behavior prior to their acquisition of television sets and going back to the same people year after year to see how exposure to the medium changed them and at the same time, I would add, society. In Catalonia we don't have a panel, we just have an important research program about the transformation of individuals and society due to the impact of Internet², but we have some empirical data that can help our attempt to answer these questions.

In our research in Catalonia we assume that network society is not just the result of the impact of information technologies on social structures, but a new social form using communication as one of the central factors defining it, and becoming the emblematic figure of our current society. It is because of this that the study of the use of the communications media is essential to understand the transformation of social life and the creation of new forms of exercising power disassociated from the fact of sharing a common space. However, study of the practices that include Internet use and how this use has modified them, if it has, gives us elements of empirical analysis that help us to situate the levels of interaction and connectivity of Catalan society. On the other hand, questions such as communication practices in relation to the use of language, or to construction of meaning and, therefore, of identity, are also important parts of our analysis.

The Catalan case

In Catalonia, collective identity is central to the political debate. On the other hand, radio and television have been key institutions through which listeners and viewers have come to imagine themselves as members of the national community. It is not strange that the very first law approved by the Parliament of Catalonia in 1982 just as democracy was being recovered was the Law for the Creation of the Catalan Broadcasting Corporation with the purpose of linguistic, cultural and national normalization.

² Projecte Internet Catalunya: <http://www.uoc.edu/in3/pic/eng/pic1.html>

Catalan Television (TVC) began broadcasting on September 11, 1983, some months before Basque Television did as well, breaking the monopoly of television in Spain and, therefore, the centralist Spanish discourse. By 1990, eleven autonomous broadcasting organizations had been approved, seven of which had already begun broadcasting on a daily basis, in an outlaw situation due to problems with the Spanish State.

What did cultural normalization mean at this moment and in this context?

In 1975, data from the official census say that only 60% of people living in Catalonia could speak Catalan. In 1986, two years after the creation of Catalan Television, the census says that 64,2% could speak it; and in 1995, this percentage was 79,8%. In our research we observe that Catalan knowledge is currently almost universal, reaching a 97,7%. If we look at Catalan Television audiences in programs like *Dallas* or football in 1984 and 1985 we observe that a big amount of people watching these programs in Catalan were Spanish speakers who couldn't speak Catalan language. The growth in this knowledge is impressive in relation with the delay to reach it. In this way some linguists³ speak of it as a cultural revolution.

Catalonia is a nation that has always cultivated a strong desire to express and strengthen its identity on both cultural and national levels. From a Catalan point of view, cultural identity is not just a different language but a set of habits, traditions, values, beliefs, and ways of living, thinking and behaving, in other words, a certain style of life. In this sense, media play a very important role as an operational instrument.

In the field of communication practices in Catalan society, our Project Internet Catalunya of 2002 ratifies a well-known fact: the most frequent daily practice is watching television (90.8%). What is perhaps not so commonly known, and which we have considered to be a communication practice, is that the second

³ Francesc Vallverdú, *El català estàndard als mitjans audiovisuals*, CCRTV, April 1996

most common use of daily time is speaking with people at home, playing with children or similar activities (80.8%). Listening to the radio occupies the third place (64.3%), followed by listening to music (57.6%). Press and magazines occupy the sixth place (45.7%).

In 2002, Internet was used in Catalonia by 34,6% of the population. Currently, this percentage has grown to 39,7%.⁴

The communication practice most affected by Internet use in 2002 and certainly now is television. A 16.6% of people watched less television since they were connected to the Internet. Of this 16.6%, 61.7% were under 30 years old.

In a research done a year later in Portugal by the Centro de Investigaçao e Estudos de Sociologia in which our questionnaire⁵ was partly used, we can see that the situation was quite different. There was almost no difference between users and non users in their daily use of TV (98,9% and 99,4%, respectively). At this time, we were thinking about the possibility of networking Portugal and Catalonia to evaluate, in a comparative level, transformation in media use. Unfortunately, we didn't have the opportunity to pursue this in depth. Maybe some day we will be able to do it.

In the United States, the same year, users began to report spending less time with TV, newspapers and magazines (about 45 to 60' a week less than nonusers. Some users reported spending more time with on-line newspapers⁶. In 2005, the biggest gap in media use between users and non-users continues to be the amount of time they watch television. In 2004, internet users watched about 4,6 hours of television less per week than non-users.⁷ The majority of those who watch television every day are Internet non-users while, in contrast, the majority of those who watch it weekly are users and 40% of those who never watch it are also users.

⁴ IDESCAT 2004

⁵ da Costa, A.F.; Cardoso, G.; Gomes, MdoC; Conceiçao, CP (2003), A Sociedade em Rede em Portugal, Lisboa, ISCTE

⁶ The digital future report, www.digitalcenter.org

⁷ op. cit

Nevertheless in Catalonia, television is still the reference media for information (74.6%). This percentage in Portugal is 97,8%. For local events the second most frequent method is personal communication. In Portugal, we observe the same situation but, even if personal communication occupies the second place, the distance between Television (86,3%) and "falando com familiares, amigos e conhecidos" (5,7%) is huge.

In contrast, in 2002, Internet was used as an information source by just 1% of the Catalan population and only to find out about international events. General population mainly trusted radio, while Internet users trusted printed media.

As far as language related to communication practices is concerned, Spanish dominates the printed media, far ahead of Catalan. On television, in contrast, both languages are almost even, with 47,6% of the population watching television in Catalan.

In Internet the dominant language is Spanish. On one hand, this is due to a question of the amount of contents in this language, yet on the other hand, to a question of choice.

In general, among Internet users, 89% do not habitually use English, 53,7% do not habitually use Catalan and 20,5% do not habitually use Spanish.

The next practice that has very slightly diminished is watching videos or DVDs, followed by reading books and listening to the radio. It is always the youngest group that has the highest tendency to migrate towards the Internet. In contrast, the communication practice that has increased most is listening to music (5%), possibly due to the Napster phenomenon, followed by playing computer or console games.

In short, Catalan population had and still has two main communication practices: watching television and talking to people in their immediate environment, specifically within the family environment, corresponding, as we shall see, with the dominant, overall major feeling of identification, the family.

In the 20th century, "home" has been a breathing space from work and public life, a place where one can pull back from the world, enjoy one's personal privacy, build familial relations and individual objectives. Increasingly, however, people are able to work, learn, shop, participate in civic events and campaigns and even vote from home. The separation of work and leisure evaporates and the meaning of privacy, home and community is changing significantly.

Therefore, television is still the reference communication medium, yet in contrast, people trust radio more. From the point of view of consumer confidence, radio occupies the first place as 29.6% trust it more, compared to 25.8% who have more confidence in the printed press and 20.8% who trust television. If we analyze consumer confidence levels in the Internet, we see that those who trust it a lot are mainly users (89.3%), although 67% of those who say they trust it very little are also users.

Identity and communication are language, but so are emotion, sentiment and individual and collective representation. In this sense, Catalonia, in spite of the great leap forward that Catalan Television represents, has a serious control deficit in its own representation. In the process of construction of meaning, or of a certain creation of collective consensus, we should ask what the role of communications media should be and, specifically, that of Internet as a tool for social and collective cohesion, because identity is a source of meaning and sensibility, but it is also shared sensibility, and the communications media are the creators of sensibility.

As important as History itself is the history that the community is able to explain to its fellow members, the history of myths and beliefs created as an element of cohesion. If this statement is correct, we should agree with the importance and the influence of the communications media in the construction of a common discourse and collective representation.

Finally, a key question for our research is, what role does Internet use or non-use play in building Catalan identity?

Because if identity is a network of interactions where the true importance lays not in simple existence but in transformation, in representation and construction of meaning, in difference and not in negation, and if collective identity is furthermore the capacity to communicate, what role does Internet play in the transformation of this identity? Is it simply a transmission tool in which the only significant factor is the level of use, or does it in some way conform to a differential model? What relationship is there, if any, between population profiles, identity practices and Internet uses? What shared values are there between elements of dominant identification, identity characteristics and the values of the new social structure based around the web, such as individual freedom or open communication?

Building Catalan identity in the network society

In our research in 2002 we arrived to an initial conclusion: the perspective of identification, the traditional referents for identity construction such as language, culture or one's country change and we find new dominant identification referents such as the family or the individual, which are also basic elements of collective identity construction and key aspects for cohesion in a network society.

A key differential factor in Catalonia as a network society could be the search for a collective, complex strategy of adaptation to the change produced by the characteristic phenomena of economic, cultural, social, demographic, political and, in general, structural globalization. If this has a social visibility, it could constitute a powerful construction element for meaning and representation of collective will. That is, to go from a differentiated project of unity, natural to a resistance identity needing the element of dominion to construct a meaning and aspects such as language, territory or history on which to support itself, a network node with its own personality and will to exist, a new definition is needed. Our data show us that the period of resistance identity was overcome because there are certain basic aspects of what we could call "being

Catalan", the most significant of which is language, which has been normalized. In this scenario, it is normal for resistance to tend to dissipate.

In contrast, elements that generally are not considered in traditional identity constructions like projects for personal autonomy have, in Catalonia, a positive association to construction of identity.

If, as we have seen, one of the clearest differential factors in Catalonia, today, is language, and a second differential factor is level of personal autonomy, the possibility opens before us for construction of a project identity going beyond the traditional elements of identity construction and one that integrates others that are much more in agreement with the economic, social and political structure of the information society.

In summary, then, one of the basic ideas emerging from our research, clearly demonstrable in empirical terms, is that once we have analyzed the different dimensions of the projects for personal autonomy, we have verified that on one hand, the more autonomous people are, the more Catalan identity they have and, on the other hand, the more autonomous people are, the more they use the Internet and with more intensity.

If we demonstrate that the Internet is a clear agent for construction of personal autonomy and that for cultural reasons, the younger the population, the more they use it, we could conclude that, although in Catalan identity practice, age works *in contra*, when a project for personal autonomy exists alongside Internet use, identity practice is strengthened in general, but specifically among the young.

This also confirms our hypotheses about the importance of personal will in identity construction that has materialized in a project, the reflection of a collective strategy we discussed above, and which we have also called project identity. Project identity can be built not on the basis of difference, but on a basis of shared beliefs and values, or on personalized patterns of behavior.

Television is a territorial medium, broadcasting in the same space at the same time. Internet is not. The territory of Internet is the language you know, the language you are able to understand. Let's remind here that in Catalonia 89% of Internet users never use English in the net, 53,7% never use Catalan and 20,5% never use Spanish. That gives us a first picture of the Internet territory for Catalan users. Perhaps the main contribution of Internet in the construction and reconstruction of identity and community is the break down of the old idea of a territorial based community and belonging. Today territory is still relevant but there are other important factors to be considered, for instance, connectiveness and cooperation.

Television, a mass medium, has been a space of influence but by definition, vertical and passive: one to many. Internet, a many to many medium is horizontal, a space of participation, a space of connection. Increasingly we must think in terms of spaces of transmission.

Could we affirm that we are in a transition time from collective identity to cooperative identity, from passive identity depending on third parties to active identity building processes depending just on a one self project?

What it seems clear is that identities are constituted within a system of social relations and require the reciprocal recognition of others. If this is true we can say that Internet facilitates the recognition because facilitates a bidirectional communication. Today, identity is not only influenced by what you see but by how you look.

The creation of new social and politico-economical geographies requires new strategies of community self conceptualization and identity. In modern societies, much of this sense of shared identity is communicated through media technologies. These technologies help to transmit shared symbolic forms, a sense of group culture and, at the end, to foster what de Tocqueville called "Fellow feeling, Renan commandership and Anderson deep horizontal commandership. Some authors claim that modern societies are defined by the degree to which the transmission of fellow feeling to symbolic forms is no longer restricted to

contexts to face to face interaction. Other authors, such as Robert Putman⁸, think in terms of social capital as features of social life -networks, norms and trust- that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives that permit cooperation among them.

We observe important differences between project identities, with clearly defined shared objectives involved in the horizontally membership building and the legitimating identities using vertical authority. The study of the maintenance of identity in diasporas and the cultivation of a virtual home, using Internet and being connected with the motherland and with fellows on the world, is a good example of horizontal community building.

How does the cultural use of Information Technologies differ from the cultural use of Television? I don't have still empirical evidence of it I hope that my research in progress about the time management of the population concerning the use of media and information technologies in general is going to illuminate my way.

Currently, I can affirm that the use of Information Technologies in Catalonia is transforming the construction of identity from a concept of given destiny where television has played an important role as a tool of cohesion and representation, to a much more dynamic concept involving collective and cooperative action, where the role of Internet, mobile phones, and Information Technologies in general is central.

We are just at the starting point of a two years research program about transformations of media in Catalonia because of the impact of Information Technologies. At the same time, we will analyze the transformation of identity building because of this new influence. We will be able to compare the central role of Television on this construction during the last twenty years and observe what happens now with young people migrating to Internet. We hope to go deep in our data from our first research and to proof the use of Internet as an empowerment tool connected with the birth of a new kind of identity construction

based in the individual will and in the capacity to formulate projects, not just to resist but to cooperate.

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