Researching media through practices: an ethnographic approach

Elisenda Ardèvol (coord.)
Lecturer, Arts and Humanities Department, UOC
eardevol@uoc.edu

Antoni Roig (coord.)
Lecturer, Information Sciences and Communication Department, UOC
aroigt@uoc.edu

CONTENTS

Researching media through practices: an ethnographic approach

Elisenda Ardèvol
Lecturer, Arts and Humanities Department, UOC
eardevol@uoc.edu

Antoni Roig
Lecturer, Information Sciences and Communication Department, UOC
aroigt@uoc.edu

Abstract

Anthropological and ethnographic research on media has been largely focused on analyzing reception of media products (television, radio, press and film) and media consumption related to domestic appropriation of technologies (Rothenbuhler *et al.,* 2005). There is also a wide body of research devoted to the study of the political dimension of alternative and indigenous media (Ginsburg, 2002). However, there has been a separation between media and internet studies, and between the analysis of media reception and practices of self-production, such as family photography or home video. Current digital media practices urge reexamination of self-produced content and media flows from a broader perspective that cuts across divisions between public and private, corporative media products and people's releases, home production and cultural industry, political activism and domestic affairs.

Keywords

media, producers, cultural practices, ethnographic research

Resum

La recerca antropològica i etnogràfica dels *media* s'ha centrat en gran part en l'anàlisi de la recepció dels productes dels mitjans tradicionals (televisió, ràdio, premsa escrita i pel·lícules) i el consum relacionat amb l'apropiació domèstica de tecnologies (Rothenbuhler *et al*., 2005). També hi ha un ampli corpus de recerca dedicat a l'estudi de la dimensió política dels mitjans alternatius i indígenes (Ginsburg *et al*., 2002). Tanmateix, hi ha hagut una separació entre els estudis dels *media* i els estudis d'internet, i entre l'anàlisi de la recepció i les pràctiques d'autoproducció, com ara la fotografia familiar o el vídeo domèstic. Les pràctiques actuals en relació amb els mitjans digitals insten a reexaminar els continguts i els fluxos d'autoproducció amb una perspectiva més àmplia que difumina la frontera entre el que és públic i el que és privat, productes realitzats per corporacions i productes *amateurs*, producció domèstica i indústria cultural, activisme polític i vida quotidiana.

Paraules clau

mitjans, *media*, productors, pràctiques culturals, recerca etnogràfica

This monographic issue of *Digithum* gathers some of the most relevant contributions presented by young scholars to the workshop Media Practices and Cultural Producers, which took place in Barcelona in November 2008, an event marked by an intense exchange of experiences, methodologies and theoretical approaches to Media Studies.

The main objective of the workshop was to explore ways of doing ethnographic research on current media practices and their implications for the understanding of people's interaction with media. As an introduction to this monographic issue, we will present some of the main subjects highlighted by the keynote speakers' presentations – Dorle Drackle, Don Slater, Nick Couldry and Elizabeth Bird –, connecting them to the topics of the papers that will follow in this issue.

Who are the *cultural producers?*

Traditionally, Media Studies have centered their analysis on the formal aspects of text production and content. Later, theories of reception examined the way that text is "consumed" and received, focusing on how people appropriate and resignify the text, moving further from the Frankfurt School, which gives little choice to the audience for responding to the hegemonic discourses of institutional apparatuses. Recent Media Studies propose to look at current media convergence and social media on the internet as a way of empowering people and situate individual discourses at the same level as cultural industries and pubic institutions (Jenkins, 2008). The question is: what are the implications of understanding audiences as cultural producers? Are self-production and content sharing new cultural forms of media production? What are the cultural implications of people's media productive practices?

Dorle Drackle opened the workshop by challenging the term *cultural producers* as a way of understanding people's interactions with media. She argued that cultural producer describes what people do with digital technologies in terms of "content production" and "joining social networks"; a flat description that involves a cultural industry perspective and identifying people as audience or consumers, and people's products as commodities, seeing their activity as alienated or confronted with mass media hegemony. She claims that *producing* does not take into account other people's activities related to digital technologies, such as being presented to others, acting as mediators between worlds, acquiring literacy skills, being a social entrepreneur, connecting with friends and family, engaging people in common goals, bringing electricity to an isolated village as technological developers, relating people with artifacts and political issues, etc. All these activities are not understandable in the "classical" or "critical" paradigm of Media Studies. They might be better understood in terms of *cultural mediation*, understanding *mediation* in the sense of transformative practices (Latour, 2008). Digital technologies

are not passive intermediaries, but actants that are put into work in very different ways, creating heterogeneous networks and processes of cultural mediation, so people engaged with those networks' in-between activities could be better defined as *cultural mediators.*

As an ethnographic contribution to this topic of cultural mediation linked to social media activism, Virginia Melián discusses in this issue how the internet potentially enhances new social movements through the creation of alternative spaces for political action. Mellian explores the possibilities of networking on a global basis and the tensions between local, national and global forms of civil engagement through media production in the case of a social movement opposed to the installation of two mega paper mills on the border between Argentina and Uruguay. Media production engagement must be understood in relation to citizenship commitment and local activities that cannot be reduced to "cultural consumption".

In dialogue with Drackle's and Melián's understanding, an alternative view of online activism is found in Veronica Barassi's ethnographic research on how traditional trade union organizations in Britain cope with internet for their solidarity campaigns. Her data questions the fact that social activism and alternative Media Studies have not explored the challenges and frustrations people encounter in the everyday use of internet technologies for political action.

Disarticulating media and digital technology narratives

Don Slater discussed the main question of studies of the "impact" of ICTs on society and how they help or not to reduce poverty (see also Slater *et al.,* 2002). The idea was to reveal the narratives that involve development policy programs, arguing that such narratives are based on unequal North/South relations in which the North brings the theories and the South provides the data. The problem is then what are the "best practices of technology introduction" without questioning the narratives that articulate North/South relations and the "global" narratives of the so-called *information society.* He argues that the notion of *media* does not provide a sturdy frame for the study of people's worlds, as it carries with it the presupposition that media is the same in different cultural contexts. We must search for an analytical symmetry to disarticulate the language of legitimation of policies based upon the impact of ICTs in society. This has to be based upon an analytic language different from these performative narratives. *The media* is a Western term (Raymond Williams, 2003), it has to do with urbanization, with producer/consumer relations and also a political agenda. Instead of speaking about media, it might be better to speak about *communicative practices* or *communicative ecology*, understanding it as the whole structure of communication and information flows in people's ways of

life. The question then is: what are people assembling to make communication happen? And to look at the mundane *bricolage*, routines and stabilizations, to seek the actors know-how and to understand ecology as an orchestration of spaces. We must depart from studies that only measure the impact of determinate media in people's life or the frequency of exposure to it. Thus, he argues for an ethnographic research strategy with a conceptual reformulation of communication technology that eludes the topics of Western narratives to open an array of new possibilities to understand people's communicative ecology in different contexts and settings.

Tori Holmes explores, along these lines, the conceptual framework and methodological tools needed for studying the use of the internet in the favelas (shantytowns) of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Starting from the notion of *local content* and user-generated content, she argues that "digital divide" research has neglected informal, organic online interactions by non-elite groups on the internet (such as discussion forums or chat), and that viewing these as less political, less social, or less relevant has perpetuated a Western vision of the media. Following Slater, local content and internet use are also part of local "communicative ecologies". Communicative ecologies include not only media but also transport systems and networks. Mapping communicative ecologies therefore involves mapping people, practices, and places. Holmes also explores the implications of understanding media as practice proposed by Couldry (2004).

Media practices and "the media"

Two of our keynote speakers approached the very conceptualization of *media practices*. Nick Couldry defines media practices as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around media. He does not think that we must depart from "media" studies, but go further in developing media theory in a way that overcomes "media-centrism" and the collapse of media research after the current pluralization of media interfaces and trajectories. In his speech during the workshop, he urged for a search for new descriptive languages proposing to think of media as practice. He explained during the workshop that he initially had proposed to think of media from a theory of practice perspective (Schatzki *et al.*), but not to propose the concept of *media practice* as such, which has been so successful, indeed. Media as practice means to decenter text and media institutions – which claim to be "the" media – from the core of the scene and to look at what people do with media or do and say related to media. To study media as practice means, for example, to study a practice such as "keeping up with the news" and to look for the articulations and disarticulation of this practice with other practices such as "political engagement". It also implies looking at how media is crossing different fields of activity, for example, professional health systems, and which things are done through media and how. This new perspective promotes an expansion of the research field and new research questions related to how social orders emerge from practices.

For Elizabeth Bird, the question was how "the media" is incorporated into everyday communicative and cultural practices, such as popular rituals like weddings (Bird, 2003). She proposed to look at people's everyday life and how media scripts and genres permeate cultural practices, from special occasions to mundane moments. Like Mark Hobart (2009), she argues that we should focus on "media-related practices" rather than people's media responses and to analyze "mediated practices" and "mediated moments": how ritual and significant life moments are performed like media products, shaped by media scripts, forms or genres, and how moments of trivial life become "media content", as in the cases of popular YouTube celebrities "I like turtles" or "Don't tase me, Bro!". Our popular cultures, she argues, are interwoven with media scripts and texts. In "media-saturated" cultural contexts, cultural production cannot be explained by a clear division between producers and audiences.

Two papers from the dossier deal with the interwoven practices of media production and consumption. Bruno Campanella presents an ethnographic research on an online fan community of the Brazilian *Big Brother* focusing not only on the text reception, but also on the study of the "culture of the everyday" of this virtual environment. He shows that "audiencing" also involves cultural production, the emergence of an online community solidly shaped by a sort of social order and the articulation of cultural values and social norms around the narratives presented by the reality show, thus following Bird's notion of *mediated practices*. While Campanella examines cultural consumption, Rianne Subijanto explores ethnographically media production and the role of Islam in cultural, political and social transformation in contemporary society in Indonesia. Her work shows the interrelation of religious practices with the practices of television series production, not only regarding the final product but also – and maybe even more important – in the everyday routine of production, connected to the main actors' way of life.

Finally, we want to express our gratitude to all the participants of the workshop and to all the contributors whose papers could not be published in the dossier because of the limitations of space and schedule. All contributed to the exploration of the circulatory flows of media practices and, in particular, how digital technology development, use and appropriation is changing media culture, cultures of media circulation and the very definition of *cultural producer*.

References

BIRD, E. (2003). *The Audience In Everyday Life: Living In A Media World*. New York: Routledge.

COULDRY, N. (2004). "Theorising media as practice". *Social Semiotics*. Vol. 14, iss. 2, pp. 115-132.

COULDRY, N.; CURRAN, J. (2008) *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World.* Lanham (MD): Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

COULDRY, N.; MCCARTHY, A. (2004). *MediaSpace: Place, Scale and Culture in Media Age.* New York: Routledge.

DRACKLE, D. (2005). "*Media Anthropology and theory*". Paper. In: "EASA Media Anthropology Network Workshop: Using anthropological theory to understand media forms and practices".
<http://www.media-anthropology.net/lboro_drackle.pdf>

GINSBURG, F.; ABU-LUGHOD, L.; LARKIN, B. (Eds.) (2002). *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain.* University of California Press.

HOBART, M. (2009, forthcoming). "What do we mean by 'media practices'?". In: B. BRAUCHLER, J. POSTILL (eds.). *Theorising Media and Practice*. New York: Berghahn.

JENKINS, H. (2008). *Convergence Culture: la cultura de la convergencia de los medios de comunicacion*. Barcelona: Paidos.

LATOUR, B. (2007). *Nunca fuimos modernos: ensayo de antropologia simétrica*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI.

LATOUR, B. (2008). *Reemsamblar lo social: una introduccion de la teoria del actor-red*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Manantial.

MILLER, D.; SLATER, D. (2000). *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.

MORLEY, D. (2008). *Medios, modernidad y tecnología*. Barcelona: Gedisa.

ROTHENBUHLER, E. W.; COMAN, M. (2005) *Media Anthropology*. London: Sage Publications.

SCHATZKI, R. [*et al*.] (2001). *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory.* New York: Routledge.

SLATER, D.; TACCHI, J.; LEWIS, P. (2002). *Ethnographic monitoring and evaluation of community multimedia centres: A study of Kothmale community radio internet project.* Sri Lanka.
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/8701/1/8701.pdf>

WILLIAMS, R. (2003). *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. New York: Routledge.

Elisenda Ardèvol
Lecturer, Arts and Humanities Department, UOC
eardevol@uoc.edu

Estudis d'Arts i Humanitats
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
Av. Tibidabo, 39-43
08035 Barcelona

Elisenda Ardèvol is a lecturer in the UOC's Arts and Humanities Department and coordinator of the Social and Cultural Anthropology area. She has been Visiting Scholar at USC Los Angeles's Center for Visual Anthropology. She currently teaches on the interdisciplinary PhD and master's programmes on the Information and Knowledge Society at the UOC/IN3. She also participates in the master's degree in Theory and Practice of Creative Documentary at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and the master's degree in Visual Anthropology at the University of Barcelona. She has a PhD from the Autonomous University of Barcelona, 1995, with a dissertation on the audiovisual representation of cultures and technological mediation in ethnographic practice. Her current research interests are visual and media anthropology and the development of ethnographic methods for the study of social relationships and popular cultural practices with and through media.

Antoni Roig
Lecturer, Information Sciences and Communication Department, UOC
aroigt@uoc.edu

Estudis de Ciències de la Informació i de la Comunicació
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
Rambla del Poblenou, 156
08018 Barcelona

Antoni Roig has been a lecturer in the UOC's Information and Communication Sciences Department since 1999, and Director of the Audiovisual Communication programme since 2002. He is currently designing the Media Innovation postgraduate programme, which is scheduled to start in October 2009. He has a degree in Audiovisual Communication from Ramon Llull University, 1999, and a PhD on the Information and Knowledge Society from the UOC, 2008, with the thesis entitled *Cap al cinema col.laboratiu: pràctiques culturals i formes de producció participatives* (Towards Collaborative Cinema: Cultural Practices and Forms of Participatory Production). His research interests are linked to collaborative cinema, new cultural practices related to audiovisual media, cross-media strategies and new media formats and tools.

UOC
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
www.uoc.edu

Discussing the Life of the Others: Doing Ethnography in the Brazilian *Big Brother* Fan Community

Bruno Campanella
PhD. candidate at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ)
brunocampanella@yahoo.com

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present some of the initial results of ethnographic research conducted in early 2008 with the online fan community of the Brazilian *Big Brother* (BBB). After a brief introduction to some of the challenges faced by ethnographic work on television audiences in the last couple of decades, the current piece will explore some of the main characteristics constituting this new social space. Beyond the gossiping, and the more immediate talks about behaviors and game strategies of the *Big Brother* housemates, these forums sometimes trigger exchanges about Brazilian society at large, and the role of television broadcasting in general. Nonetheless, a closer inspection reveals how the debates found in the community are themselves permeated by the participants' struggle for status.

Keywords

Brazilian *Big Brother*, fan community, ethnography, dispute

. . . .

Resum

L'objectiu d'aquest article és presentar alguns dels resultats inicials de la recerca etnogràfica duta a terme al principi de 2008 amb la comunitat de fans en línia del programa *Big Brother* del Brasil (BBB). Després d'introduir breument alguns dels reptes a què s'ha hagut d'enfrontar el treball etnogràfic sobre el públic de televisió en les dues últimes dècades, aquest document estudiarà algunes de les característiques principals que constitueixen aquest nou espai social. Més enllà de les xafarderies i les converses més immediates sobre comportaments i estratègies de joc dels companys de la casa de *Big Brother*, aquests fòrums a vegades susciten converses sobre la societat brasilera i el paper de les emissions de televisió en general. Tanmateix, un examen minuciós revela com l'esforç dels participants d'aconseguir un estatus s'evidencia en els mateixos debats que podem trobar en la comunitat.

Paraules clau

Big Brother brasiler, comunitat de fans, etnografia, disputa

Introduction

Since its first broadcast in 1999 Endemol's *Big Brother* has drawn significant attention from both television audiences and academics around the world. The program, which still generates controversy and high viewing rates in many countries, has been host to a series of scandals, each one of them embedded in the values and morals of the local culture where it was being produced (Bazalguette, 2005). In spite of holding to its main idea of confining a group of people who, under permanent surveillance, are gradually evicted one by one through popular voting until a winner is left; the format has experienced several changes from country to country, and from series to series. Its capacity to adapt to different cultures coupled with a process of continuous innovation and adjustment has proven crucial to *Big Brother*'s longevity and even revival in some places.

In Brazil, for instance, the reality show seems to preserve much of the allure of the initial seasons. Its local adaptation borrows several structural elements from the national soap-opera tradition. After the first series, Rede Globo, its broadcaster, started to change how the routine of the housemates was being portrayed in the daily program. Instead of presenting a straightforward summary of daily events in the house, as it is done at least in theory by *Big Brother* productions elsewhere, the Brazilian producers started to develop a hybrid language that mixes reality television with soap opera.[1]

The Brazilian adaptation of *Big Brother* provoked an impact that exceeds the impressive financial result it generated for Rede Globo. The reality show also inspired a huge on-line fan community, the subject of investigation in this paper, consisting of various forums debating this multi-platform production. In the 2008 edition, five years after the creation of the first Brazilian *Big Brother* (BBB) fan blog, this online community has already created twenty-five blogs and one major forum. Just as an example, Tevescópio[2] – one of its most influential blogs –, received an average of six thousand comments a day during that same edition.

Beyond the gossiping and the more immediate talks about behaviors and game strategies of the *Big Brother* housemates, these forums sometimes trigger exchanges about Brazilian society at large, raising issues concerning transformations in gender roles, national identity, ethical dilemmas, and the role of television broadcasting in general. Nevertheless, an even closer inspection reveals how these debates are themselves permeated by the participants' struggle for status inside the community.

Issues on Audience Research

The research was based on an ethnographic study, which was designed to focus not only on the text reception, and all the different symbolic meanings that could be drawn from *Big Brother*, but also on the study of the "culture of everyday" of this virtual environment, in an attempt to capture how this was being lived by fans.

Nevertheless, the resource constraints of this research represented a considerable limitation in that respect. In any case, the impossibility of doing participant observation in the domestic environment of *Big Brother* fans made it unfeasible to pay closer attention to their private consumption of television content. Sonia Livingstone justly regarded this issue as the source of "moral anxieties" for the observer (Livingstone, 2004).

She reminds us that these anxieties have their origin in the early 20th century, period when the division between media-as-goods and the reception of media-as-texts became more pronounced. The invisibility of the moment of consumption, a consequence of a process of media privatization, made it more difficult for observers to "read" the reactions of the audience to cultural products. In previous times, on the other hand, it was much easier to follow people's reaction to theatre plays, music concerts or carnival festivities, as these events took place under the open gaze in public spaces (Livingstone, 2004, p. 84).

It was, however, the period after the Second World War that witnessed an acceleration of what Raymond Williams calls *mobile privatization*. This was the displacement of the individual to the most distant places of the planet without actually leaving the home; which was possible by the popularization of television (Williams, 1990, p. 26-27). Nevertheless, this trend began to undergo a transformation in the late 20th century when new digital platforms were developed, especially the more mobile ones, which allow further privatization of spaces different from the domestic environment. Hence, devices such as mobile phones, iPods, etc. are referred by David Morley as *privatizing technologies* (2003, p. 451).

The meaning of these changes, particularly for media ethnography, should not be underestimated though. In any case, more than the simple incorporation of newer technologies, this trend led to the creation of multi-platform contents, which significantly expanded the possibilities for consumption. As a consequence, the study of media use had to go beyond the domestic environment to reach new sites where these texts are being signified and discussed. The potential anxiety of the media researcher described above by Livingstone takes on new dimensions in this new landscape. In theory, a more complex

---

1. Annette Hill argues that this kind of fictionalization of factual programming is a contemporary trend. For her, this leads to a paradox where "the more entertaining a factual programme is, the less real it appears to viewers" (Hill, 2005, p. 57).
2. Visit: <http://tevescopio.blogger.com.br/>.

multi-sited ethnography would now be necessary to cope with the new challenges.

Likewise, this digital transformation also offers a different kind of promise: the promise of interactivity. Different from traditional mass media, where the audience is limited to reading the text, even if in varied ways, the modern modes allow them to create their own content. From a one-to-many model, we have now access to a many-to-many one. It is important to reinforce, though, as David Morley does (2003, p. 439), that this assertion does not mean that new media users are by definition more active than mass media ones, often depicted as *couch potatoes*. Many times, internet users are limited to a few trifling interactions, while reception researches have shown that television audiences can often articulate unexpected interpretations of media texts. More importantly, returning to the matter at hand, new media offer the possibility of a two-way interaction, where the user's views on a particular subject can be instantly shared with other people in locations far beyond their domestic environment.

Doing the Ethnography

This exchange provides material for our study. According to Manga,[3] a pioneer of the Brazilian *Big Brother* online community, the first discussion blogs were created in 2003 out of the controversy around Rede Globo's production conduct, and to comment on the housemates' actions inside the *Big Brother* house. The idea was to develop a channel where people could discuss different aspects of what was then considered a fascinating new television format. Over the years, an ever increasing number of fans joined this initiative either by creating their own blogs or just expressing their views on the reality show, forming, thus, the community now known as Net.BBB. Despite the lack of face-to-face interactions, these forums offer the observer the possibility of following the reactions and interpretations of a part of *Big Brother*'s audience; hence, giving some contours to the "invisible" moment of its consumption. Furthermore, the fact that these exchanges occur in a virtual environment has several implications not only for the observer, but, most importantly, on how these articulations are shaped inside the fan community.

In fact, this ethnographic research, conducted during the 2008 edition of the show, faced several initial challenges resulting from the intangibility of an internet based fan community, as opposed to a physically based environment.

As a recruiting method, I wrote a text containing my identification as a researcher and a brief summary of the study being carried out.

This was sent via email to the most important bloggers and also posted on a regular basis in the "BBB.Lua"[4] discussion forum as well as in some blogs. However, most of the few people that took the initiative of answering the message were suspicious about my intentions and real identity. Consequently, cultivating confidence among potential subjects through solely virtual means presented a challenge. Most of people interacting there use nicknames and avatars that deliberately sever any link to their real identities, citing the perceived stigmatization of *Big Brother* in Brazilian society. Like any other country where it is produced, this reality show is constantly portrayed by television critics and the media in general as trivial entertainment aimed at a mass audience. The fact that the research volunteers were, to my surprise, high-profile professionals including a post-graduate professor, a psychologist, an advertising executive, a TV actress, a bank manager and even a diplomat, just to offer few examples, was the general excuse for not wanting any of their personal details disclosed.

A link[5] to a government promotion agency for education containing my profile and academic history was then included in the recruiting message in an effort to overcome the initial lack of confidence regarding the legitimacy of the study. But even this measure was insufficient to shake the initial resistance of many BBB fans. It took a few weeks of daily interactions in the "BBB.Lua" forum to convince them I was trustworthy. Perhaps, more than that, this commitment was also necessary to demonstrate my own opinions on the issues discussed there. It was important for me to be seen as an individual with my own perceptions and ideas about *Big Brother*. I consciously chose the discussion forum with this intention in mind. *Big Brother* fans generally consider "BBB.Lua" as the on-line environment where the best debates on the reality show take place. Furthermore, contrary to the fan blogs, where a blogger, or group of bloggers, is responsible for publishing posts expressing points of view about varied topics related to the show, which other fans will then comment on, the forum is uniquely comprised of its visitors' comments. It does not have any kind of "editorial line" to be contested or defended.

The varied ways the reality show is interpreted by bloggers is one of the most important characteristics of the community. In fact, their posts are seen as a reflection of their personality and a fundamental aspect of a blog's success. Fans tend to comment on blogs where they feel more connected to the owners' points of view. Usually, the most regular commentators in a blog develop an affective bond with the blogger, sometimes lasting for many years (even if they never meet in person, which is frequently the case). During the interviews, bloggers very often referred to these fans as "their commentators". Indeed, the amount of regular

---

3. **Visit:** <http://manga-teleblog.blogspot.com/>.
4. **Visit:** <http://bbb.lua.com/>.
5. Visit: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/5749037979153144>.

commentators in a blog is an important measure of its success inside the community, and often a source of disputes. Susan and Dona Lupa, the two bloggers with the largest number of visitors, have been repeatedly accused by other bloggers of relinquishing to "mainstream" perspectives on the show, thus not expressing their true views about what happens inside the *Big Brother* house. These critics argue that this is a strategy designed to attract more visitors. Nevertheless, their concept of mainstream and independency is a subjective and often contradictory one, but frequently linked to the role of Rede Globo in regard to the show.

The "hybrid" language adopted by Globo commonly becomes a source of tension inside the community. The "fictionalization" of the daily summary implies development of plots and characterization of the housemates in ways that are sometimes controversial. For instance, a contestant can be portrayed through editing to appear conspirational, of questionable character, or, on the contrary, as an innocent victim of his companions' envy, without actually fitting in any of these categories in a clear-cut way. The advent of the 24-hour direct feed gave fans the possibility of accessing the rough material used by Globo to produce the daily summary. Most of the arguments related to claims of independence, or the lack of it, have to do with the way the broadcaster is judged by fans.

However, these contentions are only one aspect of what differentiates one blog from another. There are, in effect, a wide range of takes on the reality show. Some blogs make a point of constantly demonstrating humor and cynicism towards the production while others are devoted to an analysis of the "strategy" of each housemate in the game show. There are also those that tend to display a more passionate view of what goes on inside the house – overtly supporting a particular participant or, on the contrary, making loud campaigns against their chosen disaffection –, and finally there are bloggers, like the ones exemplified above, who try to position themselves as watchdogs of the audience by displaying a critical perspective towards Rede Globo and its way of conducting the production.[6] For all of them, *Big Brother* means different things: a simple entertainment show, a strategy game, a popularity contest, or even an excuse for starting critically engaged discussions.

These discrepancies make Net.BBB an environment marked by disputes. Therefore, concentrating my interactions in the "BBB.Lua" forum, a territory considered "neutral" by other bloggers, could also save me from being pigeonholed as someone's commentator. For example, Dona Lupa cancelled our scheduled interview after she learned about my previous encounter with Manga, one of her detractors in the community. She only changed her mind after Xuxu, her long time on-line friend and fellow blog commentator, whom I had interviewed previously, vouched for me.

Opinions on the *Big Brother*'s housemates also reflected a great diversity. Fans choose their favorite participant based on a variety of factors. Charisma, determination, authenticity, appearance, social skills and ethical behavior were some of the attributes considered when electing their pet housemates. These different preferences prompted a subtle division inside the community though. Those more interested in discussing housemate strategies and actions would often have disdainful opinions about fans engaged in a cult of personalities. They went so far as to pejoratively dub them *cattle people*. According to Xexéu, one of the most respected BBB fans in the community, *cattle people* refers to those who base their decisions related to *Big Brother* on emotion, instead of reason. They would support a housemate because of their charisma, appearance, or even class position (in order to, for instance, perform a sort of "social justice" through voting) rather than the content of their conversations or their articulation in the game dynamic. Moreover, the origin of their label stems from the belief that their alleged lack of rationale makes them more susceptible to external influence, as well as acting like extreme fanatics. When interacting in the forums, however, it was simply impossible to find a fan who would admit to fitting in this category. Even those who showed a more passionate support for a particular housemate would always attempt to rationalize their choice with justifications based in logic.

There was, however, one desired characteristic repeatedly mentioned by almost all of the fans: the participant's capacity to create controversial situations inside the house. They even developed a kind of mantra that was constantly uttered in all forums when approaching eviction day: "Ferns should leave first!" Fern[7] was the nickname given to all *Big Brother* participants who avoided taking stances inside the house or expressing opinions that could be viewed as controversial. A group of housemates lacking personality is the worst nightmare for a BBB fan. On the other hand, those participants that like to stir up the mood in the house, even if in contentious ways, always score some points with bloggers and commentators. The justification for that lies at the core of *Big Brother*'s on-line fan community *raison d'être*. After all, these forums are mainly used to debate the actions and points of view of those inside the house. If they don't create material to be debated upon, the community loses its fuel.

Conclusion

Although celebrity gossiping constitutes a notable share of discussions in Net.BBB, debates sometimes go beyond immediate *Big Brother* narratives, touching on themes relevant to the

---

6. However, there are blogs that don't fit neatly in just one of these categories.
7. *Samambaia* in Portuguese.

Bruno Campanella

UOC

DIGITHUM The Humanities in the Digital Era

formation of national society. In fact, several fans declared both in the interviews and during participant observation that they enjoyed more engaging in online discussions than actually watching the show. For them, polemics involving *Big Brother* houseguests were seen as a means to expose, and ultimately confront, their own prejudices and views. On a different level, BBB fans gave great importance to the way they were perceived by other fans. Gaining respect inside the community was crucial for their experience as such.

The complex relations encountered in the Net.BBB fan community serve as an example of how a media phenomenon such as the Brazilian *Big Brother* should not be analyzed only in terms of a media product designed to provide entertainment and pleasure for the audience. It should also be viewed as a valuable opportunity to understand how this audience articulates their values and social norms around narratives presented by the reality show.

References

BAZALGETTE, P. (2005). *Billion dollar game*. London: Time Warner Books.

HILL, A. (2005). *Reality TV: audiences and popular factual television*. London: Routledge.

KILBORN, R. (2003). *Staging the Real: factual TV programming in the age of Big Brother*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

LIVINGSTONE, S. (2004). "The challenge of changing audiences: or, what is the audience researcher to do in the age of internet". *European Journal of Communication*. Vol. 19 (1), pp.75-86.

MORLEY, D. (2003). "What's 'home' got to do with it: contradictory dynamics in the domestication of technology and the dislocation of domesticity". *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. Vol. 6(4), pp.435-458.

SILVERSTONE, R. [*et al.*] (1991). 'Listening to a long conversation: an ethnographic approach to the study of information and communication technology at home'. *Cultural Studies*. Vol. 5 (2), pp.204-217.

WILLIAMS, R. (1990). *Television: technology and cultural form*. London: Routledge.

Bruno Campanella
PhD. candidate in Communication and Culture at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ)
brunocampanella@yahoo.com

Rua José Linhares 14, ap. 110
Leblon - Rio de Janeiro
22430-220, Brasil

Bruno Campanella is a PhD. candidate in Communication and Culture at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), and a fellow researcher of NEPCOM (Centre for Studies and Projects in Communication). He also holds an MA degree in Transnational Communications and the Global Media from Goldsmiths College, University of London. The author has a number of articles published in academic journals as well as in books. At the moment, his main subjects of research are: *Big Brother*, reality shows, multi-platform content, media ethnography and fan communities. Earlier in his career, Bruno worked with documentary making, having one of his films (*Do Céu ao Solo*) broadcast by TVE, a Brazilian public television channel.

UOC

Universitat Oberta de Catalunya

www.uoc.edu

D I G I T H U M

The Humanities in the Digital Era

Dossier "Researching media through practices: an ethnographic approach"

Local content in Brazil: conceptual framework and methodological implications

Tori Holmes
School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies
University of Liverpool
v.holmes@liv.ac.uk

Abstract

This article presents work in progress from PhD research investigating the use of the internet in the favelas (shantytowns) of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with a particular focus on the internet content produced and shared by those who live there. The research proposes to apply the concept of *local content* beyond the scope of digital inclusion policy and projects, to content generated in everyday practices of internet use. The article presents an overview of internet access in Brazil and discussion of the conceptual and methodological issues raised by the interest in local content, understood as "the expression of the locally owned and adapted knowledge of a community – where the community is defined by its location, culture, language, or area of interest –" according to a definition proposed by Ballantyne (2002).

Keywords

Brazil, internet, local content, digital divide

....

Resum

Aquest article presenta el treball en curs de recerca de doctorat sobre l'ús d'internet a les faveles de Rio de Janeiro, al Brasil, i posa una especial atenció en el contingut d'internet produït i compartit per la gent que hi viu. La recerca proposa aplicar el concepte de *contingut local* més enllà de l'abast de les polítiques i els projectes d'inclusió digital, en el contingut generat en les pràctiques diàries d'ús d'internet. L'article presenta una perspectiva general de l'accés a internet al Brasil i la discussió de les qüestions conceptuals i metodològiques que ha suscitat l'interès en el contingut local, entès com «l'expressió del coneixement d'una comunitat posseït i adaptat localment –on la comunitat és definida per la seva ubicació, la seva cultura, la seva llengua o la seva àrea d'interès–», segons la definició proposada per Ballantyne (2002).

Paraules clau

Brasil, internet, contingut local, inclusión digital

Overview of internet use in Brazil

Internet use has expanded in Brazil in recent years as a result of economic opportunities as well as efforts by the public sector and civil society. The latest statistics (CETIC.br 2009)[1] show that 34% of Brazilians were internet users in 2008 (rising to 61% in the 16-24 age group).[2] Public access to the internet is common, with almost half (48%) of Brazilian users frequenting internet cafés, known as *lan houses*.[3] The falling cost of computers and special schemes to enable their purchase by those with lower incomes have led to an increase in home-based internet use; in 2008, 25% of Brazilian homes had a computer and 18% had an internet connection. However, the 2008 survey, carried out in rural areas for the first time, confirmed that striking inequalities remain in access to information and communication technologies (ICTs): between urban and rural areas, between regions, and between Brazilians with different levels of income or socioeconomic status.

Research into the use of the internet in Rio de Janeiro's favelas (shantytowns),[4] carried out in 2003[5] (Sorj *et al.,* 2005), found that 11.6% of those surveyed used the internet (3.3% had a connection at home). More than half of respondents (51.3%) said their reason for not accessing the internet was the lack of somewhere to do this (cost was cited by only 14.6%). There are indications that this demand for access points in favelas is now being at least partly met by the expansion of lan houses. For example, there are an estimated 150 lan houses in Rio's Maré favela complex alone, which has a population of 130,000 (Observatório de Favelas 2007b). Unsurprisingly, this development is attracting increasing attention from researchers and policymakers who see potential sites of digital inclusion (for example Ibict, 2008; Minuano, 2008; Carvalho, 2008), although others continue to argue that only projects such as telecentres can play this role (Gonçalves, 2007). In November and December 2008 Brazil's biggest television network, Rede Globo, broadcast a feature on lan houses in favelas or similar neighbourhoods on its *Fantástico* programme.

Beyond access, Brazilian internet users have shown a tendency towards the "intense appropriation" (Fragoso, 2006) of certain platforms, including notably their dominance on the Orkut[6] social network site. Global surveys of internet use tend to place Brazilians at or towards the top of country rankings for time spent online, use of social network sites, reading and writing blogs or uploading photos or videos (eg, Universal McCann, 2008). Bryan McCann (2008, p. 131) has called this *the Orkut Rule*, the idea that "wherever possible, Brazilians will avail themselves of the possibilities of digital media to create subcultural niches and crosscultural networks in ways that defy traditional hierarchies and the existing cultural canon". A number of sources (Viva Favela, 2005; Maia *et al.,* 2006; Recuero, 2007; Batista, 2007) and my own exploratory research identify uses of Orkut by favela residents which fit with this pattern, suggesting Orkut is likely to be a key fieldsite for the study of local content produced in non-elite practices of internet use in Brazil. The following section introduces the concept of *local content* and the issues it raises for research.

Defining local content

The need for marginalised groups to produce and access locally relevant content is now a key element of an area of policy and practice known as *ICT for development* (ICT4D) or *digital inclusion*. Local content is understood in my research as "the expression of the locally owned and adapted knowledge of a community – where the community is defined by its location, culture, language, or area of interest –" (Ballantyne, 2002, p. 2), an interpretation which applies not just to the internet, but also to "older" media such as audio, video and print. Indeed, Ballantyne notes that the internet may not yet be a major local content channel in many countries, and that calls for more local content on the internet by international policymakers may have been driven by a concern to give more global visibility to "southern voices", or e-commerce opportunities for local arts, crafts and music (Ballantyne, 2002, p. 7).

There are of course other ways of understanding local content, some of which are mentioned by Ballantyne: content produced in a specific geographic location; content intended for or relevant to a specific local audience; media programming that is not imported from abroad.[7] The key feature of his definition is that it understands

---

1. CETIC.br, the research arm of the internet governance committee, is the Centro de Estudos sobre as Tecnologias da Informação e da Comunicação, or Centre for Studies on Information and Communication Technologies. Since 2005, CETIC.br has produced indicators and statistics on ICT usage in Brazil (www.cetic.br).
2. Internet users are those who had used the internet in the three months before the survey.
3. Only 4% used telecentres, spaces providing free, public access to the internet (usually supported by government, private foundations or non-governmental organisations), down from 6% the previous year.
4. Note that favelas are diverse in their topography, demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, services, housing, levels of violence and the presence of the state (Perlman 2004; Valladares 2005; Souza *et al.,* 2002, cited in Observatório de Favelas, 2007a), as well as access to ICTs (Sorj *et al.,* 2005).
5. The situation is changing fast, at least in urban areas of Brazil. Sorj *et al.,* research was carried out before the recent expansion of lan houses, before the intensification of government digital inclusion programmes, and before the launch of Orkut and its popularisation in Brazil.
6. User statistics fluctuate, but in March 2009 Orkut's own demographics page showed that 49.7% of the site's users were from Brazil (Orkut, n.d). Of the 90% of Brazilian internet users who used the internet for "communication" in 2008, 70% used social network sites such as Orkut (CETIC.br, 2009).
7. Warschauer (2004) recognises that at least some locally relevant content can be provided by non-local groups, and a recent report by the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation (2008) defined local content as a service to be provided by governments.

Tori Holmes

UOC

local content as content *from* local groups or individuals (rather than produced *for* them) (Ballantyne, 2002, p. 5), which conveys "locally relevant messages and information", and provides "opportunities for local people to interact and communicate with each other, expressing their own ideas, knowledge and culture" (Ballantyne, 2002, p. 1).

Even in academic work, of which there is relatively little, with the notable exception of a body of work emerging from researcher participation in local content projects in Australia and South Asia (Bruns *et al.,* 2007; Humphrys *et al.,* 2008; Tacchi, 2005, 2007; Tacchi *et al.,* 2008), internet-based local content remains a concept mostly associated with policy and projects. In this article I argue that it is also useful in approaching content generated in everyday practices of internet use by non-elite groups.

User-generated content: literacies and appropriation

The scenario for local content creation has arguably changed – some would say opened up – in recent years as a result of overall trends in the development and use of the internet. The increased emphasis on collaboration, participation and interactivity in the current generation of platforms and tools, often known as *web 2.0* (O'Reilly, 2005), has led to a surge in "user-generated content". This can be seen in social networking, knowledge management, creative practice, multi-user online gaming, citizen journalism, collaborative filtering and open source software development, in which users are potential "produsers" (Bruns, 2007). When this user-generated content focuses on specific neighbourhoods it is often labelled *hyperlocal*.[8]

The potential or theoretical increase in the opportunities for "ordinary" internet users to publish their own content does arguably strengthen Ballantyne's proposition for local content. Humphrys *et al.,* (2008) note that web 2.0 platforms may now be more appropriate for storing, sharing and aggregating local content than stand-alone or purpose-built websites. Nonetheless, as well as the opportunities, there are many possible constraints on user-led content creation (Tacchi, 2007). It can be a time-intensive process (Hargittai *et al.,* 2008) and one that requires "very particular cultural competencies as well as creative and technological literacies that we cannot assume to be shared by the

majority of the population" (Burgess, 2006, p. 205). **The little work** that exists on the differences between those who post content online and those who do not (in the United States) has pointed to a participation divide in which socioeconomic status is a key factor (Hargittai *et al.,* 2008). Age may be another factor. As well as requiring certain literacies (including potentially foreign language skills), web 2.0 platforms are often difficult to use without reliable broadband connectivity (Van der Velden, 2008).

Beyond these constraints, there are also often conflicts or tensions regarding what constitutes local content in policy or projects. Policymakers or project leaders may define or limit local content as content (or information) relating to local problems or sectors considered to be crucial for the groups or individuals involved, such as health, education or the environment.[9] Content relating to entertainment and leisure may be less welcome in a project setting, reinforcing the idea that a gap often exists between the ideals of digital inclusion projects and actual user practices, as Schofield Clark (2003) found in the United States. Such a scenario can be seen in Brazil where the use of Orkut is increasingly being banned or limited in some telecentres.[10] However, there are also examples of Orkut being embraced by projects working with young people for networking, outreach and promotion. In addition, research has found that "the skills and capabilities […] learned through the use of Orkut are key elements in the development of cyberliteracies and sociotechnical capital" (Spence, 2007, p. 16).

The alternative to ruling what constitutes "appropriate" local content for marginalised groups is to pay attention to what Tacchi calls their "innovative, adventurous and pleasurable" appropriation of the internet and related technologies. In South Asia, she noted that users did not understand ICTs simply as "tools for accessing and circulating useful information", but rather engaged with them "in far more complex and creative ways, mixing information and entertainment, the learning of skills as a pleasurable activity in its own right and skills as a way of directly changing their circumstances" (Tacchi, 2005, p. 29). Similarly, Franklin (2004, p. 101) argues that academic research has neglected "informal, organic online interactions" by non-elite groups on the internet (such as discussion forums or chat), and that viewing these as less political, less social, or less relevant "perpetuates monolithic, monocultural and commodified representation of the Internet".

---

8. **The implication of the term** *hyperlocal* is that such content provides a level of local detail and knowledge which is not present in the media; however, the term is also used by the media for web-based projects which encourage reader or audience contributions.
9. Van der Velden (2008) has written about "how technological designs for web-based classification systems [of development knowledge] can become global hegemonic structures that may limit the participation of marginalised knowledge communities", suggesting instead that users should be able to choose their own categories for classifying knowledge, for example through the use of tags (user-generated keywords) which enable resources "to be categorised in diverse, even contradicting ways".
10. This controversial topic was recently discussed at the 7th edition of the Brazilian Digital Inclusion Workshop, held in Belém, Pará (Folha Online 2008). Amadeu (2008) also provides critical coverage of the ban on Orkut, MSN and the microblogging site Twitter in public schools in São Paulo.

The *local* in local content?

It is claimed that the internet is becoming "more local" as more people use it worldwide (Davies *et al*., 2004, cited in Postill 2008, p. 414), and that a "global process of internet localization" is underway (Postill, 2008, p. 414). Given that internet users are involved in constructing the internet through the content they produce (Hine, 2000, p. 38), local content could represent a form of user participation in localising the internet. However, we need to bear in mind questions about the sites of internet localisation, how it manifests itself, who is involved, and in particular, to *where* the internet might be becoming more local. This last question is particularly important for anthropologically or ethnographically minded scholars, as Hammersley *et al.,* (2007, p. 138) caution: "Our historical preferences for face-to-face communities and intense, local sites of interaction should not blind us to the fact that contemporary forms of communication can transform our sense of what is *local* into widely distributed networks". In other words, we should not assume place, or at least not assume that "local culture" is to be found only in bounded social settings. This in turn raises challenges for researchers interested in objects of study which transcend such settings: when the focus is the internet, "finding a place to go is by no means straightforward" (Hine, 2000, p. 9). Postill (2008, p. 414) identifies complex methodological, conceptual and logistical challenges in the study of internet localisation, which requires that one "spends sufficient time in a local setting to get to know, both online and offline, those who live, work, and/or play there".

Ballantyne (2002) is apparently open-minded about whether the *local* in local content relates to geographical place or a culture, language, or area of interest that connects people in different places. This resonates with Ito's (1999, p. 5) consideration of "how people use networking technology as material for constructing alternatives to geographic localities, network localities driven by non-geographic forms of affiliation". Nonetheless, Ito insists that she is not setting up an opposition between network localities and physical localities, because even network localities are "grounded in concrete places, practices, and material relations" (Ito, 1999, p. 1). The ongoing importance of place in relation to the internet will be discussed below.

Ito (1999, p. 11) describes how members of SeniorNet, a network of senior citizen computer users spread across the United States, shared content via chat and discussion facilities and designated areas of the AOL system, knowing that their posts were "local to the site". People interacted on a daily basis in a "communal space", generating "community-produced content". Ito suggests this is an example of how locality can be produced "through and within media infrastructures" (Ito, 1999, p. 2), drawing among others on the work of Appadurai. Appadurai (1996, p. 178) emphasises that locality is *a property of social life*, "primarily relational and contextual rather than […] scalar and spatial", and "constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts". He differentiates locality from neighbourhoods, which he understands as "the actually existing *social forms* in which locality, as a dimension or value, is variably realized" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 179, emphasis added). For Appadurai, locality is also something fragile and its production is increasingly a struggle. It is useful to think about local content as a technique for the production of locality and to be alert to the struggles it might involve.

Sá studied the *Capao.com* website, set up by residents of the São Paulo neighbourhood of Capão Redondo, from a cultural studies perspective. She found that contributors were involved in forging an idea of place, or "their own idea of Capão" (Sá, 2007, p. 130), which included pioneering the written register of the oral language spoken in São Paulo. However, their use of the internet also contributed to producing locality, as a relational and contextual sense of social immediacy:

> The sense of belonging to a place does not come from a long line of ancestors or historically deep cultural connections. It comes from their own activities, from what they believe they are building at the present moment, from the networks of solidarity that they themselves are constructing. (Sá, 2007, p. 131)

Capao.com is also a way of achieving a new presence, "by appropriate use of one's voice to articulate the specific narratives and discourses about one's group or subculture" (Mitra, 2004, p. 492, cited in Sá, 2007, p. 127).

Despite such localised narratives, desired or actual audiences are not only local. Ballantyne (2002, pp. 6-8) proposes a taxonomy of local content audiences and flows based on a grid made up of two axes. One runs horizontally for the application of content, from local (left) to global (right); and the other vertically for its expression (generation or adaptation), from local (bottom) to global (top). Both *Capao.com* and *Viva Favela*, an NGO portal focusing on favelas in Rio de Janeiro,[11] were explicitly set up with the aim of presenting a positive view of such neighbourhoods on the internet (Sá, 2007, p. 126; Ramalho, 2007, p. 47), and both therefore fit at least partly into the "southeast quadrant" of Ballantyne's taxonomy, corresponding to locally expressed content gaining visibility or application among external local or global audiences.

---

11. **Most of the stories on the** *Viva Favela* site are produced by community correspondents in the favelas. Ramalho (2007) covers the process of content development in detail.

Tori Holmes

UOC

Local content: text and practice connecting online and offline

The discussion above implies that locality can be produced both online and offline. However, scholars have shown (Miller *et al.,* 2000, 2004; Leander *et al.,* 2003) that online and offline dimensions, contexts or spaces are not separate or distinct, but rather intersect and configure each other in a multitude of complex ways, which should also be studied (Slater, 2002). If we think of local content as text, then we should be aware, as Hine (2000) suggested, that content published on the internet often passes to the offline, undergoing transformations which merit attention from researchers. These transformations may affect the meaning and reach of the content. There is also a flow in the opposite direction, from an offline situation or event to its representation in internet content.

Hine also asserts that the sites of internet content production are dispersed (2000, p. 38), and I would argue that they potentially include not just the websites or platforms where content is published and accessed, but also the public access points, homes and workplaces where the internet is used, the spaces where the content originates (is inspired) and where it reaches, or leaves echoes. This would allow for the construction of a "networked field site", incorporating physical, virtual and imagined spaces, and "defined by the physical movements, places indexed in speech and text, and social imaginings produced by research participants", which the researcher follows and intercepts, as proposed by Burrell (forthcoming).

Connecting content to the multiple sites of its production, reception and (re)interpretation implies then that local content is more than a text, and can also be thought of as practice. Couldry (2004, p. 117) has proposed that media be approached "as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media", a paradigm which fits with my interest in investigating local content as part of the digital culture in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, or what people are doing with, or in relation to, the internet there. Local content and internet use are also part of local *communicative ecologies*, a term developed by Jo Tacchi *et al.* to refer to "the everyday, complex network of information and communication in an individual's life" (Tacchi *et al.,* 2007). Communicative ecologies include not only media but also transport systems and networks, "visits to neighbours, gossip, and public and private places where people meet to communicate". Mapping communicative ecologies therefore involves mapping people, practices, *and* places.

Towards a conclusion, towards fieldwork

Place remains crucially important for understanding the internet, which is "not a monolithic or placeless 'cyberspace'; rather, it is numerous new technologies, used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations" (Miller *et al.,* 2000, p. 1). Despite claims that ICTs would reduce or eliminate the importance of place and space, ethnographic work in Manchester, UK (Agar *et al.,* 2002, p. 283) found that on the contrary, "ICTs are always and everywhere *actively* embedded within the social networks through which place is constituted and histories made relevant".

As well as the growth of lan houses in the landscape of Rio's favelas mentioned above, the favelas are increasingly present on the internet through websites for NGOs, news agencies, tourism services, and samba schools – as noted by Valladares (2005) and confirmed by my own research. Beyond these "institutional" websites there are also many projects which involve young people from favelas in producing and sharing content through blogs and other platforms. Most importantly perhaps for research into everyday local content, internet users in the favelas are involved in uses of Orkut and other platforms that reference or relate to the neighbourhoods where they live. Although this research begins with a specific geographic place, it is connection, rather than location, which will help to define the object of research, and the local context of interpretation and use of the internet which will ultimately constitute the field (Hine, 2000).

References

AGAR, J.; GREEN, S.; HARVEY, P. (2002). "Cotton to Computers: From Industrial to Information Revolutions". In: S. WOOLGAR (ed.). *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyberbole, Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 264-285.

AMADEU, S. (2008). "Twitter, MSN e Orkut são proibidos nas escolas municipais de São Paulo". [blog entry]. In: *Blog do Sergio Amadeu* [Accessed: December 3, 2008]. <http://samadeu.blogspot.com/2008/09/twitter-msn-e-orkut-so-proibidos-nas.html>

APPADURAI, A. (1996). "The Production of Locality". In: *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis / London: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 178-199.

BALLANTYNE, P. (2002, May). "Collecting and Propagating Local Development Content: Synthesis and Conclusions". *IICD Research Report No. 7*. The Hague: International Institute for Communication and Development.

BATISTA, J. (2007). "A periferia está on-line: sociabilidade juvenil na 'web' e na 'lan'". Paper. In: *VII Reunião de Antropologia do Mercosul* (2007, 23-26 July, Porto Alegre) UFRGS.

BRUNS, A. (2007). "Produsage: Towards a Broader Framework for User-Led Content Creation". In: *Proceedings Creativity & Cognition 6*, Washington DC.

BRUNS, A.; HUMPHRYS, S. (2007). "Playing on the Edge: Facilitating the Emergence of a Local Digital Grassroots". Paper. In: *Internet Research 8.0, Association of Internet Researchers annual conference* (2007, October, Vancouver).

Tori Holmes

UOC

BURGESS, J. (2006). "Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling". *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*. Vol. 20, iss. 2, pp. 201-214.

BURRELL, J. (forthcoming). "The Field Site as a Network: A Strategy for Locating Ethnographic Research". *Field Methods*. Prepublished 18 February 2009 as DOI:10.1177/1525822X08329699.

CARVALHO, O. (2008). "Lan Houses - Interfaces Possíveis entre o Entretenimento e a Inclusão Digital". Paper. In: *Intercom, XXXI Congresso Brasileiro de Ciências de Comunicação* (2008, 2-6 September: Natal, Brasil).

CETIC.br. (2009). *TIC DOMICÍLIOS e USUÁRIOS 2008 - TOTAL BRASIL* [webpage]. [Accessed: April 30, 2009]. <http://cetic.br/usuarios/tic/2008-total-brasil/index.htm>

COMMONWEALTH TELECOMMUNICATIONS ORGANISATION. (2008). *Towards effective e-governance: The delivery of public services through local e-content.* Global Summary Report. London: Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation.

COULDRY, N. (2004) "Theorising media as practice". *Social Semiotics*. Vol. 14, iss. 2, pp. 115-132.

FOLHA ONLINE (2008) "Especialistas divergem sobre bloqueio de sites em telecentros". *Folha Online* [online news article]. [Accessed: 3 December 2008]. <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/informatica/ult124u465075.shtml>

FRAGOSO, S. (2006). "WTF a Crazy Brazilian Invasion". In: C. ESS, F. SUDWEEKS, H. HRACHOVEC (eds.). *Proceedings of CATaC 2006 Fifth International Conference on Cultural Attitudes Towards Technology and Communication*. Murdoch, Australia: Murdoch University, pp. 255-274.

FRANKLIN, M. (2004). *Postcolonial Politics, the Internet, and Everyday Life: Pacific Traversals Online*. London / New York: Routledge.

GONÇALVES, F. (2007). "Telecentros: o lugar certo para a inclusão digital" [online article]. *Agência Carta Maior*. [Accessed: 6 December 2008]. <http://www.cartamaior.com.br/templates/materiaMostrar.cfm?materia_id=14155&alterarHomeAtual=1>

HAMMERSLEY, M.; ATKINSON, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in Practice.* Third edition. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

HARGITTAI, E.; WALEJKO, G. (2008). "The Participation Divide: Content creation and sharing in the digital age". *Information, Communication and Society*. Vol. 11, iss. 2, pp. 239-256.

HINE, C. (2000). *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage.

HUMPHRYS, S.; BRUNS, A. (2008). «Collaborative Local Content Production through edgeX: An Evaluation». Paper. In: *Internet Research 9.0, Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers* (2008, 16-18 October, Copenhagen).

IBICT. (2008). *Ibict recebe representantes do MinC para apresentação da Pesquisa Mapa da Inclusão Digital no Brasil com o enfoque nas Lan houses* [webpage]. [Accessed: 6 August 2008]. <http://www.ibict.br/noticia.php?id=506>

ITO, M. (1999). «Network Localities: Identity, Place, and Digital Media». Paper. In*: 1999 meetings of the Society for the Social Studies of Science* (San Diego). <http://www.itofisher.com/mito/publications/network_localit.html>

LEANDER, K.; MCKIM, K. (2003). "Tracing the Everyday 'Sitings' of Adolescents on the Internet: a strategic adaptation of ethnography across online and offline spaces". *Education, Communication & Information*. Vol. 3, iss. 2, pp. 211-240.

MAIA, J.; KRAPP, J. (2006). "Cidadania cultural no Morro da Mangueira: a tecnologia como espaço de resistência" [online article]. *UNIrevista*. Vol. 1, iss. 3. [Accessed: 25 March 2009] <http://www.unirevista.unisinos.br/_pdf/UNIrev_MaiaKrapp.PDF>

MCCANN, B. (2008). *The Throes of Democracy: Brazil since 1989*. London / New York: Zed Books.

MILLER, D.; SLATER, D. (2000). *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.

MILLER, D.; SLATER, D. (2004). "Etnografia on e off-line: cibercafés em Trinidad". *Horizontes Antropológicos*. Vol. 10, iss. 21, pp. 41-65.

MINUANO, C. (2008). "FGV pesquisa as lanhouses" [online article]. *ARede*. Vol. 4, iss. 37. [Accessed: 7 August 2008]. <http://www.arede.inf.br/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1388&Itemid=1>

OBSERVATÓRIO DE FAVELAS. (2007a). *Legado Social dos XV Jogos Pan-Americanos Rio 2007: Diagnóstico social e esportivo de 53 favelas cariocas*. Rio de Janeiro: Observatório de Favelas.

OBSERVATÓRIO DE FAVELAS. (2007b). *Novas tecnologias adentram a periferia* [webpage]. [Accessed: 17 April 2008] <http://www.observatoriodefavelas.org.br/observatorio/noticias/noticias/4540.asp>

O'REILLY, T. (2005). *What Is Web 2.0* [webpage]. [Accessed: 3 December 2008]. <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/ews/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>

ORKUT. (n.d.). *orkut - news - demographics* [webpage; login required]. [Accessed: 30 March 2009] <http://www.orkut.com.br>

PERLMAN, J. (2004). "Marginality: From Myth to Reality in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro, 1969-2002". In: A. ROY, N. ALSAYYAD (eds.). *Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia*. Oxford: Lexington Books. Pp. 105-146.

POSTILL, J. (2008). "Localizing the internet beyond communities and networks". *New Media & Society*. Vol. 10, iss.3, pp. 413-431.

RAMALHO, C. (2007). *Notícias da Favela*, Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano.

RECUERO, R. (2007). "O Orkut e o Digital Divide". *Social Media* [blog post]. [Accessed: 12 April 2008]. <http://pontomidia.com.br/raquel/arquivos/2007_12.html#003446>

SÁ, L. (2007). "Cyberspace Neighbourhood: The Virtual Construction of Capão Redondo". In: C. TAYLOR, T. PITMAN (eds.). *Latin American Cyberculture and Cyberliterature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. Pp. 123-139.

SCHOFIELD CLARK, L. (2003). "Challenges of social good in the world of Grand Theft Auto and Barbie: a case study of a community computer center for youth". *New Media & Society*. Vol. 5, iss.1, pp. 95-116.

SLATER, D. (2002). "Social Relationships and Identity Online and Offline". In: S. LIEVROUW, S. LIVINGSTONE (eds.). *Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs*. London: Sage. Pp. 533-546.

SORJ, B.; GUEDES, L. (2005). *Internet na Favela: Quantos, Quem, Onde, Para quê*. Rio de Janeiro: Gramma.

SPENCE, J. (2007) "Orkut: a catalysis for the Brazilian internaut". Paper. In: *Internet Research 8.0, Association of Internet Researchers International Conference* (Vancouver, Canada).

TACCHI, J. (2005) "Supporting the Democratic Voice through Community Media Centres in South Asia" [online article]. *3CMedia, Journal of Community, Citizens and Third Sector Media and Communication*. Iss. 1. [Accessed: 12 April 2008]. <http://www.cbonline.org.au/3cmedia/3c_issue1/index.shtm>

TACCHI, J. (2007, November). "Ethnographic (per)versions and creative engagement through locally created content". In: *Proceedings CMS Symbols - Symposia on Communication for Social Development*. Hyderabad, India.

TACCHI, J.; FILDES, J.; MARTIN, K. [*et al.*] (2007). *Ethnographic Action Research Handbook*. [Accessed: 8 December 2008]. <http://ear.findingavoice.org>

TACCHI, J.; WATKINS, J. (2008). *Participatory Content Creation for Development: Principles and Practices: Research from the Finding a Voice project*. New Delhi: UNESCO.

UNIVERSAL MCCANN. (2008, March). *Power to the People: Social Media Tracker Wave 3* [online report]. [Accessed: 15 April 2008]. <http://www.universalmccann.com/Assets/wave_3_20080403093750.pdf>

VALLADARES, L. (2005). *A invenção da favela: do mito de origem a favela.com*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV.

VAN DER VELDEN, M. (2008). "Organising Development Knowledge: Towards Situated Classification Work on the Web" [online article]. *Webology*, Vol. 5, iss. 3. [Accessed: 6 December 2008]. <http://www.webology.ir/2008/v5n3/a60.html>

VIVA FAVELA. (2005). *Expansão virtual* [online article]. [Accessed: 12 April 2008]. <http://www.vivafavela.com.br/publique/cgi/public/cgilua.exe/web/templates/htm/principal/view_0002.htm?editionsectionid=2&infoid=43114&user=reader>

WARSCHAUER, M. (2004). *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide*. Cambridge (Mass): MIT Press.

Tori Holmes
School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies
University of Liverpool
v.holmes@liv.ac.uk

Cypress Building
Chatham Street
Liverpool L69 7ZR
UK

Tori Holmes is a PhD student at the University of Liverpool and the holder of a studentship linked to the Latin American Cyberculture and Cyberliterature project (<http://www.liv.ac.uk/soclas/research/lacyberculture/>). Her doctoral research looks at the production of and access to local content by Brazilian internet users from the urban shantytowns or favelas.
Tori previously researched the emergence of cabinas públicas (internet cafés) in Peru as part of an MA in Area Studies (Latin America) at the University of London. She also has professional experience in the UK and Brazil as a project coordinator, freelance researcher/consultant and translator specialising in information and communication technologies and local content, with a particular focus on Latin America.

UOC
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
www.uoc.edu

DIGITHUM
The Humanities in the Digital Era

Dossier "Researching media through practices: an ethnographic approach"

Mediating Political Action: Internet related Beliefs and Frustrations amongst International Solidarity Campaigns in Britain

Veronica Barassi
PhD Candidate
Anthropology / Media and Communications Goldsmiths, University of London
v.barassi@gold.ac.uk

Abstract

The terrain of media activism today has become an internet connected one; one that is primarily constructed through online networks or platforms; one that is gradually transforming the way in which political action is imagined, experienced and organised. The following article explores the effects of internet related beliefs and frustrations on contemporary forms of political action. Drawing from the ethnographic context of international solidarity campaigns and the trade unions in Britain, the paper argues that activists' relationship to internet technologies is a complex one, which is embedded in a double tension of empowerment and frustration. It is by ethnographically exploring this tension, the paper contends, that scholars can gain important insights on the ongoing social conflicts and negotiations created by the techno-historical transformations of the last fifteen years.

Keywords

social movements, internet technologies, alternative media, political activism, ethnographic imagination

....

Resum

El terreny de l'activisme en els mitjans de comunicació avui s'associa a internet; s'ha construït sobretot per mitjà de xarxes o plataformes en línia i, a poc a poc, va transformant la manera d'imaginar, experimentar i organitzar l'acció política. Aquest article explora els efectes que tenen les creences i frustracions relacionades amb internet sobre les formes contemporànies d'acció política. Partint del context etnogràfic en què se situen les campanyes de solidaritat internacional i els sindicats britànics, el treball proposa que la relació que mantenen els activistes amb les tecnologies d'internet és complexa i s'insereix en una doble tensió entre l'apoderament i la frustració. Tal com sosté l'article, és mitjançant una exploració etnogràfica d'aquesta tensió que els especialistes poden arribar a entendre més bé els conflictes permanents i les negociacions socials creats arran de les transformacions tecnològico-històriques dels últims quinze anys.

Paraules clau

moviments socials, tecnologies d'internet, mitjans alternatius, activisme polític, imaginació etnogràfica

Introduction: Context of the Research and the Quest of Ethnographic Thickness

The Cuba Solidarity Campaign – a British organisation embedded in the trade union movement and involved since 1984 in the publication of a glossy magazine called *CubaSí* – was the central site of this research. The organisation, previously known as British-Cuba Resource Centre, was born in 1978 out of a grassroots movement of individuals who were interested in Cuba's socialist achievements. In 1992 the group changed its name into Cuba Solidarity Campaign (CSC), and by binding economic networks with the major trade unions in Britain, it largely increased its membership size and political influence. Consisting of 4,000 individual members, 450 trade union branch affiliates, 28 local groups on national territory and two sister organisations in Northern Ireland and Scotland, CSC is today the leading solidarity organisation in Britain with a focus on Cuba and Latin America.

The headquarters of CSC are based in a small office in North London. However, the reality of the organisation develops on a variety of networked levels and is embedded in a social world of great interest. This is the world that is composed by all those multilayered social relations that bring together trade unions, campaigning organisations, the Labour Party, the Communist Party, the *Morning Star Daily* and numerous other factions, which are commonly identified as British Left. It is a world that is a profoundly British, white, middle aged, middle class reality, where people have fought against the Thatcher government and have seen the rise of New Labour "hoping and praying that what Tony Blair was doing was just talk to get the conservatives out of power".

However, as it emerged from this research, this is also a world that has been shaken by disbelief before the policies and actions of Tony Blair's Government, and is today deeply affected by a profound sense of disillusion in British politics. This sense of disillusion is counteracted by practices of international solidarity and identification with Latin America. The people involved in this social world believe that Latin American countries represent an example, an alternative reality – based on collectivism, revolutionary politics and political participation – that highlights the contradictions of the political system in Britain. In order to persuade the British public that countries such as Cuba or Venezuela represent a viable alternative in the current neo-liberal global economy, and to counteract the negative representations of these countries present in corporate media, the organisations that define this social world have relied on the production of their own *alternative media* forms, long before the advent of the internet.

In media studies, alternative media are broadly understood as small scale media, which are linked to the realities of social movements (Downing, 2001), defined by horizontal communication, participatory practices (Atton, 2002) and counter-hegemonic content (Downmunt, 2007). In the last decades, due to their proliferation caused by internet technologies, there has been a growing attention towards these newly empowered media forms (Meikle, 2002). However – although insightful – analyses of alternative media in media studies (Downing, 1998; Atton, 2002; Curran *et al.*, 2003; Waltz, 2005; Coyer *et al.*, 2007) are marked by a certain degree of "thinness". They are thin on the internal politics of the groups involved in alternative media production; thin on the cultural richness of these groups, on the intentions, desires, fears and projects of the people involved (Ortner, 1995, p.190).

This research project brings Media Studies and Anthropology together, and aims to offer a thick description of the frustrations, desires, projects and feelings of the people who engage in the everyday mediation of political action. This theoretical and methodological approach is especially important at a time in which the advent of the internet has deeply transformed activists' relationship to media activism (Manning, 1998; Meikle, 2002). As this paper will show, the relatively long history and media involvement makes the Cuba Solidarity Campaign (CSC) and its social world a rich and insightful site of research; a site where the impact of contemporary technological developments can be analysed by looking at people's personal histories, and political understandings.

Veronica Barassi

UOC

DIGITHUM
The Humanities in the Digital Era

Internet Technologies and Political Action: A Complex Relation of Empowerment and Frustration

When in 1996-1997 the Cuba Solidarity Campaign launched its first website, enthusiasm and expectation towards the "world-wide" potential of new technologies was prevalent within the organisation. In the autumn 1996 *CubaSí* issue – for instance – *immediacy*, *efficiency* and *world-wide* direct online action were key words used in the articles to highlight the advantages the net would bring to their cause. Following the launch of the website, mediated platforms have multiplied within the organisation, and today – a part from distributing 5,000/6,000 printed magazines – CSC also relies on an online newsletter, a Facebook group, mailing-lists, message boards and a YouTube account. Testimonies collected within CSC document the way in which the implementation of online technologies has been experienced by the people involved. Overall, activists believe in the opportunities offered by the internet, contend that new technologies have empowered their networking abilities and facilitated their capability to "get their message across" to institutions and governments.

The beliefs in the possibilities brought about by internet technologies have redefined activists' political priorities and strategies. People within CSC – today – prioritise media action over other more traditional forms of political solidarity, such as demonstrations or sending aid material. Therefore, by enhancing people's confidence in their own networking and media strategies, internet technologies seem to have "empowered" media action and amplified the emphasis on the importance of strategies centred upon media technologies. This argument fits well with first observations on the relationship between internet technologies and political action found in the literature on new social movements at the end of the nineties. At the time, scholars argued that new information and communication technologies were becoming a privileged terrain for social and political struggles across the world, because they were enhancing people's networking strategies and enabled political minorities to transmit their messages on a global scale (Melucci, 1996; Castells, 1997; Ribeiro, 1998; Slater, 1998; Diani *et al.* 2002).

As scholars anticipated – in the last decade – the beliefs in the possibilities of the internet have redefined the terrain of political action. However, this social process is giving rise to a series of questions, contradictions and conflicts amongst the people involved. This is better expressed in the following conversation between Sian (a researcher for AMICUS and member of both Cuba Solidarity Campaign and the Venezuela Information Centre) and Matt, her boyfriend (full-time employee at VIC and member of CSC), both in their mid-twenties.

S: I think it is noticeable in the last years, amongst the different campaigns and the trade unions, things have changed. Today people think that having a Facebook group is a level of political activity and they concentrate on online media action a lot. But then things are deteriorating. Members start to think that merely joining a Facebook group shows that you are committed. But actually it doesn't mean anything…, it doesn't change things.

M: You are right, but I think it's also useful for networking and doing counter-information…

S: I mean, it's useful in terms of advertising and promoting what we do. But you also want lobbying, you want demonstrations, you want protests. Facebook, like other online spaces, is useful in terms of promoting these activities, but cannot be perceived as a substitute. But that's what's happening now…

As it emerges from the above conversation, activists' relationship to the internet is an ambivalent one, which is defined by both a recognition of the opportunities they have been granted and a feeling of frustration for the "lost promises" of the web. To theoretically conceptualise this ambivalence, we must trace the history of the World Wide Web, and following Castells we need to understand that the internet is not just a technology, but a cultural construct that is constructed upon ideological discourses of "freedom" and "openness" (2001, p. 33). Castells (2001) noticed that – as a cultural construction – the internet is an ambivalent one which offers as many opportunities as challenges. Whose freedom are we talking about? How are we to understand the contradictions between the democratic potential of new technologies and the commercial one? (Castells, 2001, p. 275).

In this framework, therefore, activists' ambivalent relationship with internet technologies is not surprising. Indeed, ambivalence is always present within ideological constructions especially when they influence everyday practices and dynamics. Real life experiences always clash with ideal understandings. Within the literature of social movements or that of the alternative media, however, there is little exploration of the challenges and frustrations people encountered in the everyday use of internet technologies for political action. When there is (Atton, 2004; Meikle, 2002), it is not ethnographic. But what are the challenges, the fears and frustrations embedded in activists' relationship to internet technologies? If the internet related beliefs have redefined the terrain for political action, what are the effects of internet-related anxieties?

In addressing the above questions my research explored different forms of internet related anxieties and their impacts on people's understanding of political and media activism. In particular, I looked at how internet-related anxieties and frustrations are challenging people's understanding of the effectiveness of their online media action and transforming their relationship towards printed media. Here, however, there is only space for a short reflection on one internet-related anxiety, namely the fear of lack of control over the messages produced.

Veronica Barassi

UOC

Within the context of international solidarity campaigns in Britain, the net is seen as a space where – thanks to Goggle – the messages produced by activists are easily tracked, decontextualised and appropriated by others. The anxiety stemming from the lack of control over the messages produced is a strong one and is deeply affecting people's relationship to alternative media production in counter-progressive ways. Ten years ago the *CubaSí* magazine, represented a "collective space for debate, where members contributed freely and discussed controversial topics concerning the island". This characteristic relates well to Downing's (2001) or Atton's (2002) definition of radical and alternative media, as being based on participatory practices and horizontal communication. In the last ten years, however, alternative media production within CSC has changed dramatically and has undergone an "ideological" turn. Today, the campaign's national office has reduced people's participation in the production of the magazine and other media forms. Furthermore, editors and contributors concentrate merely on the dissemination of "uncritical and positive news" about Cuba.

The "ideological turn" and focus on positive news is giving rise to discontent amongst members and local group leaders, who at times criticize *CubaSí* for being too ideological. Despite discontent, however, people seem to understand why the national office needs to focus on such strategies and justify the "ideological turn" by referring to the internet-related anxiety of lack of control over the message produced. In fact, in contrast to the past, today CSC's magazine is interconnected to various online platforms, in a process of news production for which all media texts enter the online domain. In this context, debate is no longer possible, because – as the communication officer of CSC suggested – any critical stance can be appropriated by people of other media organisations who would use CSC's criticism for their own agendas and claim that "even the Cuba Solidarity Campaign says that…".

The understanding of the "ideological turn" in alternative media production within the larger framework of internet-related anxieties raises important questions on a paradox embedded in the relationship between activists and internet technologies. Indeed, it seems interesting that the "technology of freedom and openness" (Castells, 2001) is actually provoking counter-progressive processes that affect the internal politics of the people involved. As this paper has shown, the pervasive use of the internet is affecting people's understanding of what they do and the internal politics of groups. By highlighting these complexities, anthropologists can challenge cultural constructed understandings that see the internet merely as an empowering tool for political activists.

Conclusion

The possibilities and beliefs attached to the structure of the World Wide Web have deeply affected the way in which people understand political action and opposition. By improving the possibility of networking and "getting the message across", internet technologies have empowered activists' understanding of media action and have transformed this into a privileged mode of oppositional politics. Far from perceiving the internet as an unproblematic and empowering force for social change, however, activists' relationship to new technologies is defined by everyday frustrations, anxieties and questions on what media action really means.

As this paper has shown, the relationship between activists and internet technologies is a complex and ambivalent one, which is deeply transforming people's understanding of political action and media activism. To consider these complexities is of central importance for anthropologists. Indeed, as McLagan has argued, "computer-mediated political struggle is being negotiated piece by piece from the people involved and a discourse that allows us to critically address the complexities and implications of this form of political action is a major priority of our time" (McLagan, 1999, p. 187).

References

ASKEW, K. M. (2002). "Introduction to the Anthropology of Media Reader". In: K. M. ASKEW, R. R. WILK (eds.). *The Anthropology of Media: a Reader.* Malden (MA) / Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

ATTON, C. (2002). *Alternative Media*. London: Sage.

ATTON, C. (2004). *An Alternative Internet: Radical Media, Politics and Creativity.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

ATTON, C (2007). "A Brief History: The Web and Interactive Media". In: K. COYER, T. DOWMUNT, A. FOUNTAIN (eds.). *The Alternative Media Handbook*. London / New York: Routledge.

CASTELLS, M. (1997). *The Power of Identity*. Cambridge (Mass): Blackwell.

CASTELLS, M. (2001). *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.

COULDRY, N.; CURRAN, J. (2003). "The Paradox of Media Power". In: N. COULDRY, J. CURRAN (eds.). *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World*. Lanham (Maryland) / Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.

DELLA PORTA, D.; DIANI, M. (1999). *Social Movements: An Introduction.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

DOWNING, J. (1990). "Alternative Media and the Boston Tea Party". In: A. SREBERNEY-MOHAMMADI, A. MOHAMMADI (eds.). *Questioning the Media.* Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

DOWNING J. (2001). *Radical Media*: *the Political Experience of Alternative Communication.* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

DOWMUNT T. (2007). "Introduction". In: K. COYER, T. DOW-MUNT, A. FOUNTAIN (eds.). *The Alternative Media Handbook*. London / New York: Routledge.

HERZFELD, M. (2001). *Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers.

MANNING, P. (1998). *Spinning for Labour: Trade Unions and the New Media Environment.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

MARCUS, G. E. (1998). *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin*. Princeton (New Jersey): Princeton University Press.

McLAGAN, M. (1999). "Computing for Tibet: Virtual Politics in the Post-Cold Era". In: G. E. MARCUS (ed.). *Connected: Engagements with the Media*. London / Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

MEIKLE, G. (2002). *Future Active: Media Activism and the Internet*. London / New York: Routledge.

MELUCCI, A. (1996). *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ORTNER, S. B. (1995). "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal". *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Vol. 37. Iss 1, p. 173-93.

RIBEIRO, G. L. (1998). "Cybercultural Politics: Political Activism at a Distance in a Transnational World". In: S. E. ÁLVAREZ, E. DAGNINO, A. ESCOBAR (eds.). *Introduction: The Cultural and the Political in Latin American Social Movements.* Boulder (Colorado): Westview Press.

SLATER, D. (1998). "Rethinking the Spatialities of Social Movements: Questions of (B)orders, Culture and Politics in Global Times". In: S. E. ÁLVAREZ, E. DAGNINO, A. ESCOBAR (eds.). *Introduction: The Cultural and the Political in Latin American Social Movements.* Boulder (Colorado): Westview Press.

WALTZ, M. (2005). *Alternative and Activist Media.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Veronica Barassi
PhD Candidate
Anthropology / Media and Communications Goldsmiths, University of London
v.barassi@gold.ac.uk

New Cross, London
SE14 6NW, UK

Veronica Barassi is PhD candidate, working jointly with the Anthropology and the Media Departments at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Her research project is funded by the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) and looks at how alternative media are used by campaigning organizations and trade unions in Britain as powerful tools for self-definition and political action. As internet technologies have permeated the everyday levels of political activism, the aim of her research is to provide an original and cross-disciplinary reflection on the changing relation between alternative media, imagination and political action.

Veronica was part of the organizing committee of the Mending the Gaps: Rethinking on Media Theory and Practice Symposium, held at SOAS in May 2008. She was also a member of the executive committee of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network and is currently the only student representative of the Media Studies Subject Centre of the Art, Design and Media - Higher Education Academy. She worked as a casual research assistant for the Goldsmiths Media Research Program and has recently become a Research Associate of the Institute of Contemporary European Studies (iCES) at the London Business School, Regents College.

DIGITHUM

The Humanities in the Digital Era

New media and protest in hybrid societies

Virginia Melián
PhD candidate
JMK
Stockholm University
virginia@rymden.com

Abstract

The relationship between new social movements, especially those located in the global South, and their online media has often been discussed in terms of empowerment via a newly achieved global reach and subsequent extended networking capabilities beyond the locality. Less frequent is the analysis of the relationship between internet and social movements within societies characterized by a digital divide, product of unequal social, economic and political conditions. In this paper I explore the tensions between local, national and global forms of civil engagement in the online media produced by a new social movement opposed to the installation of two mega paper mills on the border between Argentina and Uruguay. The analysis shows that the relationship between this movement and its online media practices draws on "glocal" forms of civic engagement with empowering impact within the locality.

Keywords

internet, new media, empowerment, activist media, global, local

Resum

La relació entre els nous moviments socials, especialment els que estan ubicats al Sud Global, i els seus mitjans en línia sovint ha estat objecte d'estudi en termes d'apoderament, gràcies a un nou abast global i les subsegüents capacitats de xarxes esteses més enllà de la localitat. Però l'anàlisi de la relació entre internet i els moviments socials dins de societats caracteritzades per la bretxa digital, producte de condicions socials, econòmiques i polítiques desiguals, és menys freqüent. En aquest article analitzo les tensions entre les formes locals, nacionals i globals de participació civil en els mitjans en línia produïts per un nou moviment social que s'oposava a la instal·lació de dues grans fàbriques de paper a la frontera entre l'Argentina i l'Uruguai. L'anàlisi mostra que la relació entre aquest moviment i les seves pràctiques mediàtiques en línia se serveix de formes «glocals» de participació cívica amb impacte d'apoderament dins de la localitat.

Paraules clau

internet, nous mitjans, apoderament, *media*, activisme, global, local

Several media scholars have explored how the internet potentially enhances new social movements by the creation of alternative spaces for political action and the possibilities of networking on a global basis (Atton, 2004; Bennet, 2003; Couldry *et al*., 2003; Downing *et al*., 2001). Academic research on activism has argued that the internet potentially facilitates oppositional discourses that seek to challenge dominant discourses by bringing excluded issues and identities to the fore (McCaughey *et al*., 2003; Meikle, 2002; Webster, 2001).

Bennet has further argued that the internet has been conductive to enhancing the power of global activist movements. He signals that the flexibility, diversity, and scale of these leaderless and inclusive networks are suited to the multidirectional capabilities of internet. Downing *et al*. add that the internet "gives a more rapid dissemination and exchange of ideas and interpretations than ever before in the history of grassroots movements" (Downing, 2001, p. 203). The internet provides a "set of processes that supplement and multiply opportunities for sociality, community, knowledge construction and direct political action" (Atton, 2004. p. 133).

The Zapatista movement has often been taken as an example of one of the first potent demonstrations of autonomous electronic communication. Castells called it the *first informational guerrilla movement* (Castells, 1997, p. 79). According to Downing *et al*., the case has shown the potential of "radical internet communication" for social change and the emergence of "new spheres of communicative action by people's movements" (Downing, 2001, p. 201). Beyond the case of the Zapatista movement, there is not much written on social movements and the internet in Latin America in English. Pitman, however, signals the existence of a longer history of "grassroots internet" in the region before the Zapatista case (Taylor *et al*., 2007).

The reawakening of civil society and social movements in the region in the past two decades (Feinberg *et al*., 2006) along with certain expansion of internet usage, especially in the wealthier Southern Cone, makes relevant the rather unexplored issue of internet practices of civil society actors in the context of post-authoritarian democracies, characterized by unequal social, political and economic factors, including unequal internet access patterns.

In this paper I explore the tensions between the representation of local, national and global forms of civil engagement on the website of the civil and environmental movement called "Sí a la vida / No a la papelera" (Yes to life / No to the paper mill)[1]. The movement surges against the installation of two mega paper mills

on the Uruguayan border of the Uruguay River. I have analyzed the variations in the webpage from 2005 until February 2008.

Drawing on Atton's definition of *alternative media*, I understand the creation and maintenance of the analyzed website as the mediated outcome of a flexible process with communication goals fed by members of the movement. It provides a contestant vision, a form of representation of "popular oppositional culture" and in that sense is a form of "alternative media". The mediated output of this movement represents a mediation of a contesting vision. Although there are no studies on how mainstream media in Argentina and Uruguay have dealt with the issue, previous media studies in the region indicate they tend to privilege dominant discourses, giving less space to dissenting or minority voices (Lawson *et al*., 2005) like the ones represented in this website.

Empirical studies are needed on the relationship between the mediated content and the local, national and global dimensions involved. This is relevant especially when considering that "the significance of internet use proceeds not from a solipsist and technocratic desideratum of value […] but from 'locally contextualized (practices of) consumption and production'" (Tacci, 2000, p. 293 in Atton, 2004, p. 150).

Mixed internet use patterns

A "digital divide" framed by general socio-economic inequalities is the first thing that comes to mind when trying to explain the lack of academic studies on the relationship of internet and new social movements in the region. Despite a usage rate growth of 342.5% between 2000 and 2005, the internet does not reach the majority of the people.[2] Still, more than 79 million people had internet access in South America, Central America and the Caribbean in 2005.[3] The Southern Cone has the highest internet penetration rates with Argentina having an internet penetration rate of over 26%, (ten million people) and Uruguay of 21% (680,000 people, almost one third of its population)[4] in 2005.

Moreover, grassroots organizations have been making use of internet from early stages contributing to a nuanced picture of internet practices (Taylor *et al*., 2007). Usage has also been facilitated by free *telecentros* and cyber cafés, a widespread cheaper option in the Southern Cone. Finally, the recent launch of the Ceibal program in Uruguay that provides a laptop with internet access to every child in public schools takes the issue of usage to a new dimension.

---

1. My translation.
2. Internet World Stats Internet Usage and World Population Statistics updated for March 31, 2006. (<http://www.internetworldstats.com>) [Accessed: November, 2007].
3. Idem.
4. Internet World Stats. South America Internet Usage and Population Statistics. Chile had the highest internet penetration rate of 35.7% or 5.6 million people in 2005. (<http://www.internetworldstats.com>) [Accessed: November 2007].

Virginia Melián

UOC

Taking social protest online

The construction of two mega paper mills on the East coast of the Uruguay River, the geographical and political border between Argentina and Uruguay, gained general public awareness through mainstream media in both countries when 30,000 people on April 30, 2005 blockaded the General San Martín international bridge. Since then, a conflict has grown defined by opposed visions on environmental, social, economic and legal aspects by different social and political actors within and across national frontiers. After failing to achieve a diplomatic solution, these countries have involved the International Court of Justice of The Hague, the Mercosur and the King of Spain, Juan Carlos de Borbón, in order to solve their differences. The conflict is framed by a larger discussion on the economic, environmental and labor impacts of the forest production model implemented in South America in the last decades (Merlinski, 2008, p. 2).

Although the street blockade tactic, *corte de ruta* or *piquete*, has been a typical instrument of protest used by Argentinean new social movements in the last decade, associated with lower rates of trust in the established political system (Merlinski, 2008, p. 4), this was the first time Argentineans and Uruguayans blockaded an international bridge. It also signalled the birth of a particular social movement against the installation of two pulp mills by the Finland-based company Botnia and the Spain-based Ence. The movement is generally inscribed in the logic of protest groups that have emerged since the 1990s with no formal, but temporary, memberships that come together for a specific purpose. Grouped in the catchall term *new social movement*, they tend to have a loose or network type of organization and no leaders or hierarchy (Atton, 2004; Bennet, 2003).

The movement has a horizontal structure as important decisions such as the blockades have been made in assemblies by direct vote. Yet, there is a smaller group of people that perform different tasks and are more visible in the mainstream media. The movement is neither formally linked to any political party nor other established group. It was formally born right after this first blockade. With roots in the Argentinean border region of Gualeguaychú, the Asamblea Ciudadana Ambiental de Gualeguaychú has been the driving force supported by the NGO Grupo Guayubirá, part of the Uruguayan Environmental National Network (Red Nacional Ambiental), and two similar Asambleas in the Argentinean border cities Colón and Concordia. The international NGO Greenpeace has also supported the movement (Merlinski, 2008, p. 3).

As with other similar protests in the region, traditional "micro-mobilization" tactics consisting of face-to-face communication, flyers and meetings were used to raise awareness (Merlinski, 2008, p. 3). However, the early publication of a website and its active updating during the years to come shows the incorporation of the internet in the toolbox of the movement from its early stages. This is not the first time, as alternative channels of information spread in the form of email with contesting messages, followed by forums and websites during the institutional crisis of 2001 (Pietro *et al*., 2007). Yet, this is the first analyzed website of a social movement in the region. The website was created on April 6, 2005, a few weeks before the first blockade and is still online as of the writing of this article. As the official media of the movement, it has been regularly updated, although more frequently during 2006 and 2007 when the campaigning was more intense. After the opening of one of the plant mills in December 2007, it has been updated somewhat less frequently.[5] It has involved an important number of people. The number of visitors has ranged from 337,991 in April 2006 to 539,430 in November 2007, according to the website's counter. The internet traffic information website Alexa counted 156,000 visitors in September 2008 when the conflict was declining; among them 43.3% were logging on from Argentina, 6.7% from Uruguay and 50.0% from other countries.[6]

The website has gone through three main different formats in terms of structure, functions and look, probably as a consequence of varying degrees of engagement practices and in relation to the development of the conflict. This is an indication of the changing character of the media practices of the movement's members in terms of involvement.

"Glocal" civic engagement

The analysis of the website shows practices of online engagement or activism that rely on and are supported by the potential global reach associated with internet. For instance, the webpage provided a list of e-mails of the heads of Botnia and Ence and of World Bank employees responsible for granting loans to these companies in order to build the pulp mills, which was used to "email bomb" these people as a means of protest. In addition, digital postcards available on the website were used by people to send information to others on the issue in a clear way of promoting a digital form of raising awareness among those interested in spreading information beyond territorial constraints. Also, the page called *Communicate the campaigns*, added later on, offered pre-structured text ready to be emailed in order to raise awareness.

The inclusion of a debate forum in the early version of the website exemplifies how global and local dimensions have intertwined in specific ways. During the first months the website had a forum for discussion where people could publish their opinions and debate on the construction of the pulp mill. It could potentially have been used by anyone interested and able to read

---

5. Visit: <http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.noalapapelera.com> [Accessed: Sept. 16, 2008].
6. Visit: <http://www.alexa.com/data/details/traffic_details/noalapapelera.com.ar> [Accessed Sept: 15, 2008].

Virginia Melián

UOC

and write Spanish. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the forum was actually not developed by the movement itself but by a local radio station. In effect, the website used the forum developed by a local radio station by linking to it. The latest comments were shown on the main portal and those who wanted to make a comment clicked on a linked to the actual forum published on the radio's website.

Another way in which the movement represents its transnational relationships is the publication of encouraging messages from organizations with similar concerns in other countries. For instance, in the early version of the website, the publication of a supporting message from the Asociación por la Defensa de la Ría, a NGO concerned with the environmental consequences of a paper mill in Northern Spain, exemplifies how the movement makes explicit its relationships with organizations with similar concerns in other regions of the world via its website. Another example of this sort of legitimizing practice by the recognition of other similar organizations is the page *Observatory* where information on similar organizations in Spain and Chile are published. Beyond the actual linkages with these organizations, which are actually a way to represent closeness in the distance, it also has a legitimating effect for those reading about these connections.

Another example of how the website serves as a platform to reproduce and document the movement's forms of civil engagement is the use of clickable images, designed as digital posters, instead of being glued on the walls of buildings, published on the website. These provocative illustrations appeal to life risk feelings within the locality, such as, for instance, the image of a pregnant woman carrying a baby wearing a gas mask or the one with a face divided in two, with a smiling, blond child surrounded by a green valley on the one side and a skull immersed in black fumes and chimneys on the other. These clickable images are provocative invitations to action and to encourage debate associated with feelings of life risk within the locality. However, one may even look at them in their glocal polarity as they provoke debate, action or both within a potential global platform (see images below).

Images 1 and 2. Sample of digital posters of the campaign.

Finally, the question of the potential global reach of the messages published by the website, at least in terms of what is thinkable to publish, is exemplified by a press release published in 2006 addressed to the Presidents of Uruguay, Argentina, Finland and Spain. Beyond the actual content of the text, the imagined possibility that this kind of message could actually be read by national authorities becomes suddenly closer than if published in a paper-based magazine distributed hand to hand within the locality.

Offline civil engagement supported by the website

From the practices performed or supported via the website that imply civil engagement within the locality, it can be firstly named the uploading of images, such as photographs, illustrations and films made by non-professional people living in the area. There are hundreds of images published in the website, seen by thousands and even commented on by some. The documentation of the different manifestations by activists with non-professional cameras is a form of engagement and also of empowerment, at least regarding the representation of an alternative mediated vision of the activists, different from the one produced by mainstream media institutions. Associated with this is the way the website is used on several occasions to respond to accusations voiced through mainstream media.

The digital invitation to blockade the bridge on December 30, 2005 and join in a massive *peña*, a well-known local popular fest that involves food and music, represents one of many other examples of this linkage between how the digital content not only seeks to promote online engagement, but a physical one within the locality. Even the associated information on transport facilities, arranged by supporters borrowing buses and trucks to get to the physical protest, signals the importance of the website for the offline protests, transforming it into a sort of billboard, but easier to update and distribute among many.

Final remarks

The movement's online media has used online civic engagement strategies that fit previous academic discussions. The use of internet expands the possibilities of civil engagement beyond the local. However, the movement's media practices also show its importance as a means of empowerment within the locality both by online and offline civic protests addressed and generated locally. Based on this case, theories of empowerment due to multiplied global reach and networking capabilities do not solely account for explaining the relationship between internet and social movements' media in the context of these particular societies.

Virginia Melián

UOC

References

ATTON, C. (2004). *An alternative internet*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

BENNET, L. (2003). "New Media Power. The Internet and Global Activism". In: N. COULDRY, J. CURRAN (eds.). *Contesting Media Power*. Lanham (Maryland): Rowan and Littlefield.

CASTELLS, M. (1997). *The information age: economy, society and culture. The power of identity*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell. Vol 2.

COULDRY, N.; CURRAN, J. (eds.) (2003). *Contesting media power: alternative media in a networked world*. Lanham (Md.): Rowman & Littlefield.

DAHLBERG, L. (2007). "Rethinking the fragmentation of the cyberpublic: From consensus to contestation". *New Media & Society.* Vol 9, iss. 5, pp. 827-847.

DOWNING, J.; VILLAREAL FORD, T; GIL, G. (2001). *Radical media: rebellious communication and social movements*. Thousand Oaks (CA.): Sage.

DURÁN PIETRO, J.; RICO, E. J. (2007). "Producciones digitales anónimas. De nuevas formas de visibilidad hacia la construcción de un enunciador colectivo anónimo". In: M. LEDESMA, P. SIGANEVICH (eds.). *Piquete de ojo. Visualidades de la crisis: Argentina 2001-2003.* Buenos Aires: Nobuko. Pp 83-102.

FEINBERG, RICHARD E., WAISMAN, CARLOS H.; ZAMOSC, LEÓN. (eds.) (2006). *Civil society and democracy in Latin America.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

GARCÍA CANCLINI, NÉSTOR (2001). *Culturas híbridas: estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad.* Mexico: Nueva ed. Grijalbo.

LAWSON C., HUGHES, S. (2005) "Latin America's Postauthoritarian Media". In: R. A. MAY, K. ANDREW (eds.). *Un-civil societies: human rights and democratic transitions in Eastern Europe and Latin America.* Lanham (Md.): Lexington Books.

McCAUGHEY, M.; AYERS, M. (eds.) (2003). *Cyberactivism: online activism in theory and practice*. New York: Routledge.

MEIKLE, G. (2002). Future active: media activism and the Internet. London: Routledge.

MERLINSKY, MARÍA GABRIELA. (2008, January). "Nuevos repertorios de acción colectiva y conflicto ambiental: una cronología del conflicto por la instalación de las plantas de celulosa en el Río Uruguay" [online article]. In: "Cuestiones del tiempo presente". *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* [Accessed September 16, 2008].
<http://nuevomundo.revues.org/index16412.html.>

TAYLOR, C.; PITMAN, T. (eds.) (2007). *Latin American cyberculture and cyberliterature.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

WEBSTER, F. (2001). *Culture and politics in the information age: a new politics?* New York: Routledge.

ZOOMERS A. (eds.) (2006). *International migration and national development in sub-Saharan Africa. Viewpoints and policy initiatives in the countries of origin.* Migration and Development Research Group. Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands. (Working papers of the Migration and Development series. Report no. 15.)

Virginia Melián
PhD candidate
JMK
Stockholm University
virginia@rymden.com

Stockholm University,
SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden

Born in Uruguay, she got her first degree in Communications from Universidad de la República. She has worked as a journalist for several years in Montevideo and as a media consultant in Stockholm. She got her master's degree in Communications and Media at Stockholm University and is currently doing her PhD there.

UOC
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
www.uoc.edu

DIGITHUM
The Humanities in the Digital Era

Dossier "Researching media through practices: an ethnographic approach"

Religious TV Series: The Making of Popular Piety Culture in Indonesia*

Rianne Subijanto
Researcher
Department of Media, Culture and Communication
New York University
rianne@nyu.edu

Abstract

In the last few years, Indonesia's post-Suharto's era has been marked by a proliferation of popular piety culture in the media. This proliferation is situated within the political transition from authoritarianism to democracy, the industrialization of media and the emergence of Islam as one of the important keys to unlocking the ongoing transformation of the political, social and cultural spheres of contemporary Indonesian society. My thesis, in general, is a study of the role of Islam in this transformation and how popular culture is an integral part of it. Through my study case of the production of a religious TV series, I want to explore the complexity that makes up religious practices when the piety movement takes up secular/capitalist media to further their movement. In other words, this paper asks: when the logic of the piety movement and the logic of the media industry converge, what kinds of practices in terms of religious practices and film-making practices are maintained, negotiated, and challenged? Building my methodological framework on theories of media practices (Bourdieu, 1977 and 1993; Couldry, 2004; Hobart, forthcoming; Rajagopal, 2001), I divide my analysis into how and why practices and standards are constructed, affirmed and challenged in two foci: on-site and off-site.

Keywords

popular culture, Islam, piety movement, cultural producer, Indonesia

....

---

*   This is an excerpt from my master's thesis.

Resum

A Indonèsia, els anys posteriors a la caiguda del règim de Suharto han estat marcats per una proliferació d'una cultura devota popular en els mitjans de comunicació. Aquesta proliferació se situa en el context de la transició política d'un règim autoritari a la democràcia, la industrialització dels mitjans de comunicació i la irrupció de l'islam com una de les claus essencials per a entendre l'actual transformació en els àmbits polítics, socials i culturals de la societat indonèsia contemporània. A grans trets, la meva tesi analitza el paper de l'islam en aquesta transformació i com la cultura popular n'ha format part integral. Per mitjà del cas pràctic de la producció d'una telenovel·la religiosa, m'interessa explorar la complexitat que impregna les pràctiques religioses quan el moviment de devoció religiosa s'apropia dels mitjans de comunicació laics/capitalistes per a promoure el culte. En altres paraules, aquest article es pregunta el següent: quan la lògica del moviment de devoció religiosa i la lògica de la indústria mediàtica convergeixen, quin tipus de pràctiques religioses i cinematogràfiques es mantenen, es negocien i es qüestionen? Partint d'un marc metodològic basat en les teories sobre les pràctiques mediàtiques (Bourdieu, 1977 i 1993; Couldry, 2004; Hobart, propera aparició; Rajagopal, 2001), he estructurat en dues dimensions la meva anàlisi sobre com i per què es construeixen, ratifiquen i qüestionen les pràctiques i els estàndards: dimensió interna (*on-site*) i dimensió externa (*off-site*).

Paraules clau

cultura popular, islam, moviment religiós, productor cultural, Indonèsia

In 2005, inspired by a Malaysian magazine called *Hidayah*, the first *sinetron*[1] *religi* (religious TV series) named *Rahasia Ilahi* was broadcast on Indonesian TV stations. Within a short period of time, not only did it increase the popularity of TPI – the TV station that screened the series – but more importantly, it engendered the proliferation of this new genre of TV series, which has continued to the present. For example, during the peak period of its popularity, 2005-2007, almost all ten private TV channels in Indonesia broadcast different kinds of *sinetron religi* produced by different production houses as their prime time program. Not only did these series suddenly become a site of contestation of religious teachings, but they also interpellated the public and triggered public debates and criticism of the media. Most of the criticism of the majority of the religious series lies in the themes "marketization of Islam", "commodification of Islam", "gory Islam" and "misleading teaching of Islam" (Sasono, 2005; Azra, 2008).

The broadcast of a TV series with a religious theme actually dates back to the early 1990s when Deddy Mizwar, a senior actor, producer and director in the Indonesian film industry, established his production house called PT Demi Gisela Citra Sinema (DGCS). In the spirit of *da'wa* (piety movement), he strove to obtain a space to represent the life of the Muslim majority on the television screen, which was at that time inundated by more secular shows. Starting from 1992, despite the fact that most television content was still under the control of Suharto's regime, Mizwar was successful in bringing religious stories to the screen.[2] Although since then he has consistently produced several religious series, his series became much more appreciated as an ideal *sinetron religi* by the public during the burgeoning period of religious TV series,[3] 2005-2007, when the term *sinetron religi* (religious TV series) itself was coined.

Although the Islamic revivalism started in early 1984 was characterized by the emergence of political Islam, Islamic revivalism in terms of the emerging visibility of Islam in Indonesian contemporary society only occurred after the downfall of the regime in 1998. Rock songs, movies, talk shows, youth magazines and, most importantly, TV series, suddenly showed an Islamic influence. The media industry is thus indispensable to this emergence of the visibility of Islam.

This paper, in general, is a study of the role of Islam in the cultural, political and social transformation in contemporary society in Indonesia and popular culture as an integral part of that transformation. Through my study case of the production of Deddy Mizwar's religious TV series, I want to explore the complexity that makes up religious practices when the piety movement takes up secular/capitalist media to further their movement. In other words, this paper asks: when the logic of the piety movement and the logic of media industry converge, what kinds of practices in terms of religious practices and film-making practices are maintained, negotiated, and challenged?

---

1. **The term** *sinetron* in Indonesia refers to soap operas, melodrama series, or TV series. Although these three have some differences, for instance in terms of aesthetics and storylines, in Indonesia both non-melodramatic series and melodramatic series are categorized as *sinetron.* In general, *sinetron* means serial stories that are screened on TV that consist of a number of episodes.
2. **Based on my interview on Thursday, June 5, 2008**
3. **Public appreciation of his series can be easily accessed in blogs, newspapers articles and magazines. But, one symbolic form of appreciation that was given** to Mizwar and crews was when in 2005 the president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, invited them to come to the presidential palace as his acknowledgement of their success in producing good-quality series.

For this study, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Deddy Mizwar's production house located in the Eastern part of Jakarta from May 30 - June 22, 2008. I spent every day at the production site of their latest sequel series *Para Pencari Tuhan 2* (from now on, PPT, 'God's Seekers 2').

On Methodology

Although I cannot flesh it out in detail here, my methodological framework is drawn from Pierre Bourdieu's, Nick Couldry's, Mark Hobart's and Talal Asad's theory of practices. Each of them focuses on theory of practices, media as practices and religion as practices respectively. While Bourdieu sees practices as ordered and governed by a systemic mechanism, Couldry, in his article "Theorising Media as Practice", contributes to the dearth of theory on media practices by calling for a study of media not as an object of political economy analysis or text analysis but as "the study of the open-ended range of practices focused directly or indirectly on media" (2004, p. 117). However important the former two are, he shifts the question to the notion of "media-oriented practices" asking "what […] are people *doing* in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?" (2004, p. 119). Seeing media as practices helps us to decenter the study of society from a mere focus on "media effects", something that is also called for by Arvind Rajagopal through his work, *Politics after Television* (2001).

While Couldry is interested in studying system, hierarchy, categorization and rules, Hobart is cautious in their tendency towards generalization, which has the potential to deter us from seeing more complexities of practices that are, according to him, "not just historical and cultural, but situated and so partly contingent" and "sometimes coherent, sometimes contradictory, sometimes unrelated and largely uninvestigated" (Hobart, forthcoming).[4]

Through the combination of these theories, I structure my foci in two dimensions: on-site and off-site. While Couldry's term, *media-oriented practices* is useful to understand the ways these systems *govern* the practices on-site in that the term presupposes an *awareness* of the practices oriented toward media production, in this case of TV series, I would like to use Hobart's caution to the possibility of ruptures to discuss the off-site practices, which I call *the off-site effects.*

These foci of on-site and off-site fit nicely to my definition of *popular piety culture* that is to see the condition of the production

of "what is visible/invisible, sayable/unsayable, and knowable/unknowable about public piety in Indonesia". More importantly, it is also in accordance with Talal Asad's proposition of studying religious practices to understand religious phenomena. According to him, "we must examine carefully the part played by religious *practices* in the formation of such experiences and that their possibility *and their authoritative status are to be explained as products of historically distinctive discipline and forces"* (1993, p. 53-4; 2001, p. 131). He also pleads to integrate "secularism" into the analysis of religion "for examining secularism not merely as a political ideology that structures the modern liberal state, but as an untidy historical complex that includes behavior, knowledge and sensibility in the flow of everyday life" (2001, p. 131-132). Studying religion as practices helps us to decenter from a mere "reification of religion" and to see more of its roles in constituting the everyday life.

Part I: *da'wa* movement: on-site practices

The structures of the field and the modes of dispositions

Let me start by mapping the players in the TV series industry in Indonesia. In general, TV series/soap operas/melodrama series are produced by the big production houses. They are established mostly for seeking profit. In a year, for example, these production houses can produce up to 100 different series consisting of 100 episodes or more (Labib, 2002).[5] When religious TV series gained popularity, these production houses started to use religious themes for their products. Like the name *sinetron religi* entails, they adopt typical Islamic symbols, like veils, religious wordings and Islamic stories, yet they are wrapped in typical melodramatic aesthetics and stories (for a discussion on melodramatic aesthetics see Rajagopal, 2001, ch. 2) that are intended to act on viewers' emotions and thus make it more saleable.

DGCS is a non-mainstream production house. With very limited economic capital, it only produces 2 TV series per year with 30 episodes each. Unlike the big production houses, they are not merely intended for commercial purposes but more as a realization of *da'wa*. Therefore, they can be categorized as the small-scale industry while the mainstream one is categorized as the large-scale industry. One main characteristic is that their

---

4. I am thankful for Mark Hobart's inputs on the theory of practices. My use of this theory emerged from the discussion with him.
5. Labib's (2002) field study on the Multivision Plus company, one of the largest production houses that has produced melodrama series since the 1990s, is very useful in informing my work. In his research, he seeks to analyze whether melodrama series produced by the big production houses use the aesthetics of its similar art form, ie, theater. He investigates the mechanism, the quality measurement, and the ethics of the way the production house works.

aim is not merely for entertainment but to spread social criticism through entertainment. The production is also done in a long cycle. Therefore, they maintain an aesthetic ideal. Although not totally disavowing commercial interest and profit, DGCS's "interest in disinterestedness", using Bourdieu's term (Bourdieu, 1993), is realized through Mizwar's main motivation for *da'wa* and thus all practices are done in accordance with Islamic ethics. By producing "alternative" shows, he offers a more pious product than the big industries.

For example, unlike other houses, he is not interested in taking up issues on how God punishes a sinner, which can certainly be emotive and therefore attractive for the audience.[6] It is because he does not think visualizing God's wrath is allowable. We can simply take from this account that the motivation is born from the imaginary of God. Moreover, believing in the afterworld and that all good and bad deeds will be counted in the hereafter, which then determines whether one will go to heaven or hell, serves as a technological disposition to reach God. This symbol of heaven and hell construes a disposition to do good and avoid evil. This is realized in a form of ethics (code of conducts based on the fear of punishment and the hope of rewards in the afterworld), including the making of a film. "Symbols" are then embodied in the practices of filmmaking. As Mizwar says, making bad films means sinning.

Applying religious principles in the house's routinization

While the story of PPT is centered on the mosque, the production activities are routinized in *sholat* (prayer) timing.[7] When it is time to pray, the activities are automatically stopped and the producers will take a break or pray in congregation. This system of activities routinized in prayer "clock cycle" (cf. Giddens as quoted by Postill, forthcoming), is an important characterization of this house's production activities. Like the principles of *sholat*, people are not segregated based on their economic, cultural or political status. At dinner time, for example, Mizwar will sit together on the floor with the lighting crews. Moreover, the same food is served to everyone. This commingling of producers regardless of different classes, ethnicities and backgrounds create a familial atmosphere and ambience. This makes the series produced by a web of producers with different backgrounds who are all united in one system, Islamic, and familiar one.

Part II: "The off-site effects": the paradoxes of practices of piety

The realization of Islamic teachings in the everyday life of the producers is undoubtedly more complex than the series portray. But, what does this complexity look like when we complicate the situation with other issues, such as gender and modernity? How do the "non-religious practices" work in constructing their practices and understanding of Islamic religiosity? I would like to turn our discussion now to the "media-related practices" (Hobart, forthcoming) in the fieldwork and by this I would like to look at the proximity and distance of the life of the producers and the one they portray in the series. I will discuss this from my close observation and intense conversation with Zaskia – the lead female character in the series.

Coming from a religious family, Zaskia has been taught in Islamic schools all her life. She said that "my mom is very strict about religion and all her kids go to Islamic schools since kindergarten up to college". Zaskia started to don veil in 2005 when she realized that, using her words, "apparently it is compulsory". She learned religion from school but after going to ESQ, a workshop on religion in Indonesia usually attended by middle-upper class society because of its expensive fee, she realized that it was time for her to struggle to be *a better Muslim*.

Veil has played a very important role in constituting Zaskia's identity. Since her first appearance in Mizwar's religious series, her popularity skyrocketed and magazine headlines once called her "a new icon of a young Muslim woman". When I introduced myself, her first question was: "do you really wear veil everyday?" Indeed, she finds a common ground with me as a young veiled Muslim battling and trying to accommodate Islam in the modern life we are in – me living in New York and she in her middle class and celebrity life style. She recounts about her principle of donning veil:

> For me personally, *veil* is just a cloth. This is just an *additional cloth* on my head. This is nothing. *Taqwa* (piousness) should not be measured from veil. This is only our *choice* in life. So, when I smoke and people say "why do you smoke?" it does not seem like that (that you are not pious). This is an additional cloth on my head to *protect* me.

As smoking became a part of the routine of the producers, it was also difficult for Zaskia to not adopt that habit. Although it is not prohibited in Islam, a veiled woman is not expected to smoke. It is not about health, rather, the fact that it is seen in society as

---

6. Based on our informal conversation on Thursday, June 5, 2008.
7. Muslims are obliged to pray five times a day: 1) before sunrise (*fajr*), 2) noon time (*zuhr*), 3) in the afternoon (*ashr*), 4) in the dawn time (*maghrib*), and 5) an hour after the dawn time (*isya*).

a symbol of a "bad woman", demands a veiled woman, who is expected to be a "good woman", not to do so.

Donning veil also raises an issue. When one dons veil, they are expected to wear it "properly". When I first met Zaskia in the production site, she was wearing a *ciput,* that looks more like a cap covering her hair but still reveals her neck. One day, somebody told her, "a neck is like a thigh for a veiled woman," and told her to wear a proper veil. It is clear that collective community requires conformity to Islam in totality.

But, it does not mean that she was totally compromising about practicing Islam. She told me about her insights on piety. She said:

> *Taqwa* ('piety') requires *istiqamah* ('consistency'). And I do that by consistently choosing only those series that fulfill my standards about a good quality series and also of wearing veil. *Taqwa* is also my *relationship to God*. If the crews go to the mosque for prayers, I pray in the costume room because in the *Prophet's time* the wives pray in the home.

Despite her seemingly too modern lifestyle as a Muslim veiled woman, she also shows us a sound knowledge about Islam. She told me that one of the challenges of being an artist is when a scene requires her to hold hands with the male characters. She also has problems that as an artist she usually goes home late at night. For her, going home late at night is "not appropriate for women". While before we assume that she is very compromising about modern life style, at the same time here we see how she also demonstrates practices conforming to the standard teachings of Islam. After all, Zaskia's saying that she "struggles to be a better Muslim" presupposes that there are contradictions.

Conclusion

In general, my paper demonstrates that the on-site and off-site practices work as a microcosm where religious standards are negotiated, affirmed and challenged through congeries of practices. It also shows the *condition* which causes such negotiations or resistance to occur. On-site, the systems are set to create the condition to produce the visible themes and symbols that go toward clearly dividing and explaining what is Islamic and un-Islamic and resonates and conforms to the teachings in the Koran and Hadith. When negotiations or resistance occur, it is to direct the "misguidance" or the quasi-religious to the "straight path".

Film-making practices, in this case, are carried out to be in line with religious standards. Because the clear centrality of the *da'wa* and profit-seeking systems set in the production site, negotiation and resistance of practices are usually done in accommodating religious teachings in secular norms such as media production.

On the other hand, off-site, we witness a rupture of different kinds of negotiations and resistance. After all, it is in a non-public area where these negotiations happen. But negotiations and resistance should not be seen as a "subverting" action to power but more as, using Abu-Lughod's term, *diagnostic of power* (discussed in Mahmood, 2005). With the many ruptures we witness off-site, it is clear that the different systems/powers off-site are multi-layered and multi-faceted. Thus, the preference of one to conform, resist or negotiate a certain rule or even modify the established practices is highly arbitrary, contingent and ephemeral. It also depends on the "visceral modes" (Mahmood, 2005) of each individual. Religious practices, therefore, go beyond conformity to the circulating symbols, rituals and standards in public.

References

AZYUMARDI, A. (2008, September, 11). "Komodifikasi Islam". *Republika*.

BOURDIEU, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature.* New York: Columbia University Press.

COULDRY, N. (2004). "Theorising media as practice". *Social Semiotics*. Vol 14, iss. 2, p. 115-132.

HOBART, M. (2009, forthcoming). "What do we mean by 'media practices'?". In: B. BRAUCHELER, J. POSTILL. (eds.). *Theorising Media and Practice*. New York: Berghahn.

LABIB, M. (2002). *Potret Sinetron Indonesia: Antara Realitas Virtual dan Realitas Sosial ('The Reflection of Indonesian Melodrama Series: Between Virtual Reality and Social Reality').* Jakarta: PT Mandar Utama Tiga Books Division.

MAHMOOD, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

POSTILL, J. (2009, forthcoming) "Introduction: Theorizing Media and Practices". In: B. BRAUCHELER, J. POSTILL. (eds.). *Theorising Media and Practice*. New York: Berghahn.

RAJAGOPAL, A. (2001). *Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

SASONO, E. (2005, October). "Religiositas Layar Kaca". *Tempo*. Iss. 9.

Rianne Subijanto
Researcher
Department of Media, Culture and Communication
New York University
rianne@nyu.edu

NYU Steinhardt
Department of Media, Culture, and Communication
239 Greene Street
7th Floor
New York, NY 10003

Rianne Subijanto is a Fulbright student grantee from Indonesia and a master's student at the Department of Media, Communication and Culture at New York University. Her research interests center on media, popular culture and Islam. She has presented her papers on these areas in conferences and workshops in several countries including Brazil, Spain, Singapore and the United States. One of her papers entitled "Indonesian Islamist Media: A Struggle Against or a Legitimacy of the Dominant Ideology?" is forthcoming in *Critical Discourse Analysis: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (New York: Nova Publisher, 2009).

UOC
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya
www.uoc.edu