



SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF CYBER SPATIAL INTERACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to study the role of Internet as a medium of interaction and its impact on the society from the social and cultural point of view. It outlines some major aspects of Socio-cultural theory relevant to cyber spatial interactions (CSI), in particular describes the main focus of analysis in the socio-cultural approach. The contemporary researches, books and articles available in the area are very much dispersed. The article makes an attempt to draw on some principles derived from literature in order to provide a theoretical overview of the socio-cultural approach to study Computer-mediated communication.

Key words: Internet mediated communication, Computer Mediated Communication, Information and Communication Technology, CSI

Introduction

Every media shares some responsibilities in its own way for changes in socio-cultural scenario all over the world and across society and cultures. The Internet has unique and transformational qualities as a communication channel or a meditational tool. As a symbol of the globalization era, the Internet is not only changing the mode by which people transmit and deal with information, but it is also establishing a new medium for communication. The worldwide debate about the Internet's impact on both societies and individuals is around both positive and negative criticism so far as the effects on society and culture are concerned.

The Socio-cultural approach: A general overview

According to Wertsch (56-75), the socio-cultural approach is a truly interdisciplinary perspective born out of the necessity to deal with changes and transformations in the globalised world. Wertsch also noted that traditional disciplinary boundaries in the human and social sciences forced researchers to organize their inquiry into specific areas of competence, in such a way that it is nearly impossible for these disciplines to communicate with each other or “to formulate integrative pictures of complex phenomena”. The socio-cultural approach attempts to address this “incommunicability” affecting the human and social sciences, contributing to the development of a common language.

The theoretical root of the socio-cultural approach goes deep into the history of the human sciences. Dewey (1938-1950) was the first to use the term “socio-cultural” when discussing issues of logic and inquiry. Wundt, the universally acknowledged “father of psychology”, claimed that the study of human social life represents “the higher task of psychology, and truly its proper completion” (201), (qtd. in Jahoda 133). Anthropology and cultural studies also played an important role in defining much of the theoretical and methodological assumptions underlying the socio-cultural framework.

Any discussion of the socio-cultural approach is incomplete without the work of Lev Vygotsky. According to Vygotsky, the social context mediates developmental processes at two levels. In the first place, there is the contingent dimension where learning takes place, that is, the specific situations in which the interaction with more experienced others or peers supports development. Secondly, the wider socio-cultural history provides the tools and the practices that mediate the relationship between learners and the objects of their learning; these tools include language, writing, mathematics, calculating devices and so on. The theme of cultural mediation had a great influence on the socio-cultural approach, defining its most basic assumptions about the relationship between individual and social context.

The basic assumption is that human can access the world only indirectly using cultural tools and artifacts. The relationship between these tools and artifacts and mental functioning is never linear and mechanistic, but always circular and mutually defining. Cultural tools have an impact only when individuals actively use them in their everyday lives, but once the tool is included in the behavioural process, it exercises a powerful transformative influence, altering behaviour itself in a dynamic process of mutual adaptation.

The importance of cultural mediation in Vygotsky's work, and its influence on later theorists, cannot be underestimated. The idea that our relationship with the world is mediated by physical and symbolic tools (e.g., language and writing) represents the very soul of the socio-cultural approach and has inspired the identification of a fairly specific focus of analysis, as elaborated in the next section.

The focus of analysis in the socio-cultural approach

Vygotsky's idea of mediated action was based on the assumption that once mediational tools such as language are introduced into the flow of action, they lead to a radical redefinition of that action. In this new type of act, the mediational tools, the people using them and the action's specific object are entangled in a mutually influencing relationship, and may not be studied in isolation. This relationship is usually represented graphically in the popular "triangle of action" (Engestrom, 133-156):

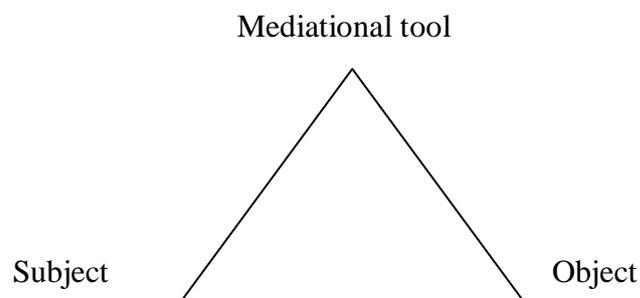


Fig.1: Vygotsky's model of mediated action (Engestrom. 134)

In this model, the line between subject and object refers to unmediated action, that is, to the direct, immediate relationship between sensory experience and the external world. The introduction of the mediational tool, on the other hand, redefines the interaction between subject and object in terms of meaningful understanding.

Communication through Internet continues to be an integral part of the modern society. It includes sharing of knowledge, socializing new members, entertaining people, and gaining consensus through persuasion or control. The person or the institution responsible for carrying out the communication activities changes with time. With new forms of media emerging and the ICTs, the patterns of usage inevitably are undergoing rapid changes registering tremendous impact on society and culture.

Social Implications of CSI

No one today disputes that the Internet is likely to have a significant impact on social life; but

there remains substantial disagreement as to the nature and value of this impact. Several scholars have contended that Internet communication is an impoverished and sterile form of social exchange compared to traditional face-to-face interactions, and will therefore produce negative outcomes (loneliness and depression) for its users as well as weaken neighborhood and community ties. Media reporting of the effects of Internet use over the years has consistently emphasized this negative view (McKenna & Bargh, "Plan 9"57-75). As a result, a substantial minority of (mainly older) adults refuse to use the Internet at all. Others believe that the Internet affords a new and different avenue of social interaction that enables groups and relationships to form that otherwise would not have possible and thereby increase and enhance social connectivity and bring about a long term cultural practices.

Valkenburg and Soeters (652-675) report that children and the youth are generally enthusiastic adopters of the Internet for communication, entertainment and education.

Schramm affirms that communication through internet mode continues to be an integral part of the modern society. It includes sharing of knowledge, socializing new members, entertaining people, and gaining consensus through persuasion or control. With new forms of media emerging and the convergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the patterns of usage inevitably are undergoing rapid changes. Across the world, people from almost all sectors of society are communicating through internet for a variety of purposes, from everyday life and work to local, strategic and global issues (Dutton, 2013). Email and Internet access, especially through social media, allow people to communicate in new ways and contribute to a communication revolution.

Nie & Erbring argued that the Internet was creating a "lonely crowd" in cyberspace, because Internet use "necessarily" takes time away from family and friends. However, the evidence very consistently points in the opposite direction concerning the effect of Internet use on off-line community involvement. A random national survey by Katz et al. (405-19) showed that the more time Internet users spent on-line; the more likely they were to belong to off-line religious, leisure, and community organizations, compared to nonusers. Use of the Internet also was not associated with different levels of awareness of and knowledge about one's neighbors.

There are several viewpoints about the impact of the Internet on social relationships and social capital. Some scholars argue that it has a positive effect on participation in the social life, maintenance of relationships, and social capital (Lin "Computers"; Wellman et al. "The Social"; Hampton 213-231; Cole "Surveying"), while others state that it separates from social life and makes people lonely (Kraut et al. 1017-1031; Nie, Hillygus and Erbring 215-243).

This disagreement originates from the different methodology, question formulation, and orientation of the studies. The Internet can be interpreted both as mass medium and a possible channel of interpersonal communication while its use can be regarded both as a useless hobby for wasting time and an activity making everyday life more efficient by saving time.

On no issue has research on the social effects of the Internet been more contentious than as to its effect on close relationships, such as those with family and friends. Two studies that received considerable media attention were the HomeNet project by Kraut et al. (1017-1031) and the large-scale survey reported by Nie & Erbring, also Nie ("Sociability" 420-35). Both reports concluded that Internet use led to negative outcomes for the individual user, such as increases in depression and loneliness, and neglect of existing close relationships. However, nearly all other relevant studies and surveys---including a follow up of the HomeNet sample by Kraut and his colleagues---reached the opposite conclusion.

Cultural Implications of CSI

The cultural interpretation concentrates on the impact of information and communication technologies on human communications, community, and society in general. The contemporary culture is manifestly more information laden than any of its predecessors, and we have entered an information society.

--- cultural approach to the information society has its roots in the work of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan. The central issue in this perspective, stemming from the work of Innis and McLuhan, is about the impact of the shifting of a society from one that developed and functioned around print to one organized around electronic communications. Their emphasis on different communication and information technologies having powerful effects on the way human beings interact, consequently on the institutions that embody, reflect, and shape those interactions has defined this perspective of the information society, thus requiring a synopsis of their work and ideas.

Harold Innis noted that the use of a medium of communication over a long period will to some extent determine the character of knowledge to be communicated and will eventually create a civilization such that its pervasive influence in life and flexibility will become exceedingly difficult to maintain and that the advantages of a new medium will become such as to lead to the emergence of a new civilization. James Carey in a tribute to Harold Innis in *Communication as Culture* notes that Innis was everywhere intent on demonstrating the paradoxical nature of changes in the technology of communications and

argued that changes in communication technology affected culture by altering the structure of interests (the things thought about), by changing the character of symbols (the things thought with) and by changing the nature of community (the arena in which we developed). His work is highly valued and has influenced many current attempts within the cultural perspective of the information society to understand the present influence of electronic information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet, on contemporary culture and society. He states that a medium of communication has an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time and it becomes necessary to study its characteristics in order to appraise its influence in its cultural setting.

Marshall McLuhan has been extremely influential in the cultural perspective of the information society. McLuhan is best known for his famous phrase "the medium is the message". He argued that in each cultural era the medium in which information is recorded and transmitted is decisive in determining the character of that culture. He remarks: "this is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by new technology". He believed, before the advance of the Internet, that the linking of electronic information and communication media would inevitably create an interconnected "global village".

McLuhan's emphasis on the impact of electronic media on culture has greatly contributed to and underlies much of the current discussion in the cultural perspective of the information society.

The popular benign view of this cultural transformation is that it will create an information society, one where there is an unlimited access to information. The emergence of new modes of networked communication, such as the Internet, takes information and communication technology beyond computers and information and examines the effects and impact that this connectivity and capacity to participate in virtual worlds will have on individuals throughout society. Therefore, the cultural perspective of the information society focuses on the effect that new information and communication technologies have on people's lives, and how they affect a sense of community.

It has been claimed by Ess and Sudweeks that the Internet can promote a better understanding between cultures and cultural identities by enabling people from different

cultural backgrounds and with different social and cultural identities to come together and communicate with each other under conditions that are conducive to cultural exchange.

The social institutions of family and marriage bear the testimony of significant alteration due to the Internet. The supreme example of that is the various matrimonial websites. The online world plays a vital role for transcending both time and space while fruitfully contributing to the functions of society.

It is alleged that cyber spatial Interaction promotes cultural fragmentation by stimulating the formation of virtual communities and groups organized around specialized interests, themes or cultural identities (Winner, “Cyberlibertarian” 14-19).

Certainly, being a member of a minority or ethnic social group constitutes a stigma in many social situations. Racial, gender, or age-related features are easily identifiable and therefore not easily concealable within traditional venues. One potential social benefit of the Internet is to disrupt the reflexive operation of racial stereotypes, as racial anonymity is much easier to maintain on-line than off-line. For example, studies have found that African Americans and Hispanics pay more than do white consumers for the same car, but these price differences disappear if the car is instead purchased on-line. However, the continuing racial divide on the Internet (DiMaggio *et al.* 307-336, Hoffman & Novak 45), in terms of the lower proportion of minority versus majority group members who have on-line access, can only attenuate the impact of any such positive, race-blind interpersonal effects on society.

Conclusion

The Internet is a medium uniquely capable of integrating modes of communication and forms of content. Discussion on Internet’s social and cultural implications is focused in different domains such as inequality (the “digital divide”); community and social capital; political participation; and cultural participation and cultural diversity. Internet tends to complement rather than displace existing media and patterns of behavior. For a more balanced understanding of the impact of CSI, there is a need for research based on non-experimental methods and primary data.

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