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Presentation

Apresentação

Contemporary culture, media and identities

Cultura contemporânea, mídia e identidades

Civitas is pleased to publish this collection of essays on contemporary culture written by sociologists from different countries and continents. At the origin of this publication was the sessions organized by the International Sociological Association – ISA Research Committee 14 “Sociology of Communication, Knowledge and Culture” (entitled *Sociological research and transformations in communication*) for the 1st Forum of Sociology which took place in Barcelona in September 2008.

The idea was to publish some papers focused on the above interesting and important topic for communication studies in a way also to make more visible the Research Committee’s preparations for the forthcoming World Congress of Sociology (that will take place in Gothenburg, Sweden, in July 2010) on the subject of *Communication, Knowledge and Culture on the Move*. Thus, in accordance with *Civitas*’ Managing Editor, Emil Sobottka, who supported the idea since the beginning, Barcelona participants were invited to submit their communications for publication; the selected articles constituting this volume are published in the language in which they were presented to the audience, either in English or in French.

The main idea supported by the Research Committee works is that contemporary Everyday Life seems to refer towards a sort of global cultural homogeneity. The mass media have been enormously internationalized culturally and structurally; they seem to be the primary messenger about (rather than agent of), globalized information and they function in accordance to globalization (describing the changes in international relationships particularly in economics and international trade but also in society and culture).

One of the claims made for global media (especially television and the internet) is that they have the potential to spread democratic values and opportunities to empower and to encourage the participation of marginalized

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groups. But there is interference of the global “values” concerning the very meaning of “democratic participation” (one version of “democracy”); there are also examples which illustrate the difficulties of the nation-states to regulate or to control media given technological and institutional change and of course, media products are treated as commodities: their success or failure is determined by the market.

It is often said that media have altered our world. All questions about cause and effect as between technology and society are intensely practical, because until we have begun to answer them we really do not know whether we are talking about a technology or about the uses of a technology about a content of about a form: this is a matter of “social practice”; *cultural politics, social sites of production and social life of media technology seem to be of utmost interest for our questioning concerning “transformations in communication”*. The eleven following articles (giving contemporary experiences from Brazil, Colombia, France, Greece, Italy, Puerto Rico, Rumania, Spain, Turkey, United States of America and Ukraine) try to deal with these questionings on transformation of communication, knowledge and culture and the construction of “identities” in the contemporary everyday life.

The question of the “*public domain*” (seeming to disappear in spaces and assemblies) is important as it is still to be found in the media (television, newspapers, magazines, photography and finally the internet “blogs” which seem to represent the contemporary “public sphere”). Thus, six of the authors of this volume (L. Ortiz-Negrón, E. Said Hung, P. Georgopoulou, A. Ergur, G. Taddeo and G. Ricordeau) referring to digital media technologies deal broadly with this question. The explosive emergence of the Internet as a major worldwide distribution channel for goods, services and jobs (e-commerce) is profoundly changing economies, markets, products, services and structures. Contemporary everyday life seems to manage in different ways with all this: popular culture is usually cited as a terrain on which postmodern changes are to be most readily found. What is at stake, are questions of agency, empowerment and access, and questions of discursive effectivity in shaping the terms in which media culture is understood.

A strong flow of ideational, social and material impulses is incessantly crossing the borders from the outside, affecting the internal processes of change always at work in any society. Sometimes, the “external” inflow brings about changes not only in, but of the system. It is quite interesting to compare both levels and structures of media use during radically different structural conditions (as it is attempted in this volume). On the other hand, every culture constructs its own metaphors for psychological well-being. Not so long ago, stability was

socially valued and culturally reinforced and consistency was central to health definition: but this stable social world has broken down and what matters more now is the ability to adapt and change (to new jobs, new career directions, new gender roles and new technologies...).

When identity was defined as unitary and solid it was relatively easy to recognize and censure deviation from a norm. A more fluid sense of self allows a greater capacity for acknowledging diversity. It makes it easier to accept the array of our (and others') inconsistent personae – perhaps with humour, perhaps with irony. We do not feel compelled to exclude what “does not fit”! On the other hand, without a deep understanding of the many selves that we express in the virtual, we cannot use our experiences there to enrich the real. If we cultivate our awareness of what stands behind our “screen personae”, we are more likely to succeed in using virtual experience for personal transformation.

In this context, it is very interesting to perceive the role of the mass media (in relations of cultural dependency between nations); new communication technologies have made it possible for media giants to establish powerful distribution and production networks within and among nations; whereas previously media systems were primarily national, in the past few years a global commercial-media market has emerged and that is why there is great need for an emphasis on case analysis of media impacts on specific societies and individual levels to engage with and to illuminate the emphasis on media and multinational structures. Responding to this need, N. Kostenko and C. Schifirneţ analyse the mass media realities in two “ex Eastern” European states (the cases of Ukraine and Rumania). On the other hand, without referring explicit to the use of media, H. Santos discuss some of these issues, focussing on the analysis of narratives on biography and on everyday life, which are turning to be relevant considering those increasing challenges with which individuals are confronted to in contemporary societies.

How the functions of the media relate to one or more definitions of “regional development” and how the media serve as channels for inter-cultural discourse (eventually for cultural dependency)? Two related themes are relevant: the first deals with questions regarding the power of the mass media and the second concerns the understanding of the role of mass communication. Mass-mediated symbol systems (news, popular music, television and film) are (at one level of analysis) the work of individual or small groups of media professionals. At another level of analysis, however, they are the products of complex organizations; at still another level they reflect the economic arrangements of media industries and institutions. The work of individual mass

communicators cannot be understood outside these organizational, industrial and institutional contexts.

Popular music being a very potential symbol system, two of the following contributions analyze some aspects of its implications to the contemporary “identifications”; “fandom” could be a key to understand J. Kostarba’s and F. Bousson’s essays referring to various aspects of popular music nowadays. Media fans are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, and spectators who also participate. These claims seem counter-intuitive. We tend to think of fans almost exclusively in terms of relations of consumption rather than production. For many critics of mass culture, the fan has been emblematic of the most obsessive and slavish forms of cultural consumption, consumption which has been understood primarily in terms of metaphors of addiction, religious zealotry, social aberration or psychological imbalance. Journalistic accounts of fan culture tend to give primary attention to the exchange of mass-produced commodities, often at excessive prices, and to the worshipful approach the fans take to media producers! On the other hand, only a fan can appreciate the depth of feeling, the gratifications, the importance for coping with everyday life that fandom represents. Yet we are all fans of something: we respect, admire, desire, we distinguish and form commitments; by endeavoring to understand the “fan” impulse, we ultimately move towards a greater understanding of ourselves. The cultural criteria of fans differ from official standards.

“Of all things communication is the most wonderful” has written John Dewey¹ long ago: here follow some cases for examining the content of communication and the meaning of symbols (not only the motives that originate them or the purposes they serve); this is an attempt to enlarge the human conversation by comprehending what “others” are saying.

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¹ J. Dewey. *Intelligence in the Modern World* (collected works). New York: Modern Library, 1939.