Understanding and Studying Internet Culture(s)

Hybridity and Interdisciplinarity

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When I was asked to sit on this panel, my first challenge was to decide the subject of my presentation. I tried to get some guidance by looking at the title of the panel: "Culture and Media Technology". Although this title lends itself to several interpretations and understandings, I chose to focus on mediated culture, or more specifically, culture that is mediated through computer technology. Words commonly used for this are, for example, online culture, cyberculture, or, as I would rather put it, Internet culture. I will focus on two aspects here: "Internet culture: what is it and how should we understand it?" and "Studying Internet cultures: researchers and research traditions". The presentation will touch on theoretical issues insofar as I will discuss what concepts we use when we talk about Internet culture and what implicit assumptions about the technology these concepts bring with them. I will also touch on methodological issues, such as questions of reflexivity: Who are we as researchers, and what do our affiliations mean for what we bring to our studies? But above all, the presentation will address issues of what delimitations we make – especially in terms of choice of research subjects – and where we draw boundaries between and within our research traditions.

Internet Culture(s) – What Is It and How Should We Understand It?

What is Internet culture? If we start by looking at the first element that makes up the concept, Internet culture is something found on the Internet. Not so problematic, it may seem, but the fact is that it is not as simple as it sounds.

The Internet – a Hybrid Medium

The Internet, the way it looks today, is extremely multifaceted and diversified, which makes it difficult to define and label. Here we face a choice between different roads – or at least I do – concerning how to describe the parts that together make up the Internet. One approach is to describe the parts as different communication media, and the Internet as something that reflects its overarching structure. For example, the Internet has been called a "super-medium" (Jansson, 2002), a "meta-medium" (Fagerjord, 2007), or a "hybrid-medium" (Sveningsson, Lövheim, & Bergquist, 2003) in descriptions of a large and overarching structure that hosts many different underlying media forms. Others have argued that the whole of the Internet should be seen as one single overarching

medium, and thus understood the different underlying parts that make up the Internet as different communication modes, or genres (Finnemann, 2007).[1] Others still may have chosen not to enter into distinctions concerning whether the Internet should be seen as one or several media, but instead described the parts of the Internet as different places, environments or arenas.

These are but a few of the great number of sometimes partly overlapping labels that have been used to describe the Internet and its variety of constituents, and one could discuss which of them is best able to capture the Internet's essence. In fact this has been done, but in what I find to be quite tedious discussions. My experience, however, is that it is difficult to find a single notion that manages to include everything one might wish to describe within the Internet. If I turn to my own research in the field of Internet studies, for example, I have oscillated between different concepts depending on which aspect of the Internet I am trying to describe. I have used words such as *platform* when looking at the kind of technical solutions that make up a specific type of Internet medium/genre/place. I have often used words such as *places, arenas* or *environments*, for specific sites on the Internet, especially when doing ethnographic work on cultures found online. When I use the word *Internet medium*, I am more interested in the form of communication and its conditions, and I am looking at it through the lens of a media researcher.[2]

Of course all these concepts are overlapping and intertwined in each other. The point here is not to suggest the most appropriate term, as I do not believe there is such a thing. Rather it is to show that the terms we use to describe the Internet may reveal something about our ontological and epistemological baggage: Who we are as researchers (i.e., which discipline or research tradition we come from), how we understand the world (i.e., what perspectives we bring to our studies), and what kind of knowledge we feel is relevant to seek (i.e., what we focus on and how – our research methods). Besides the diversified character of the Internet, perhaps also the variety of research traditions, perspectives and methods of Internet researchers are part of the reason why it is so hard to find one or a few mutual concepts that manage to encompass all aspects of the Internet that Internet researchers may be studying.

Regardless of which terms we choose to classify and label them, the various platforms, media forms or places on the Internet are very different from each other. My impression is also that the Internet landscape has grown increasingly diversified over the years. Until the early 1990s, before the advent of the World Wide Web, the Internet was entirely text based. Differences between Internet media were basically described in terms of whether they were synchronous or asynchronous (i.e., if the communication took place in real time or separated in time), possibly combined with whether the medium was intended for two-part or multiparty conversation (see, for example, Fornäs, Klein, Ladendorf, Sundén, & Sveningsson, 2002; Hård af Segerstad, 2002). Today, the Internet is more complex, and much has changed owing to the technical development that has taken place during the past decade. For example, we have seen the development of multidimensional software that allows for several types of communication (such as MSN and ICQ, allowing both synchronous and asynchronous conversations between two or several individuals, with or without the companion of video images). There has also been a development of Internet sites that host several modes of communication. These platforms are often referred to as portals or communities, and may include, for example, chat programs, guest books, discussion fora, mailing lists, personal profiles or personal web pages. Finally, many sites on the Internet include "bridges" to other communication media, such as Skype, which can be opened from a regular web page by clicking a link,

and then allowing for telephone or video conversation. Especially applications such as Skype make the increased hybridity obvious, as it deals with partly computer-mediated and partly telephone communication. The same holds for online computer games, which can be seen as partly games and partly sites for computer-mediated conversation.

The Internet seems to be increasingly spreading out into and colonizing traditional offline media. On the other hand, the same process is also occurring in the opposite direction, as for example in mobile phones that allow users to access the Internet. This multifaceted character is thrilling, but at the same time challenging, because the increased hybridity and intermediality makes it difficult to draw boundaries between the various Internet media, and also to describe and label them. Thus, if we take a closer look, the "Internet" part of Internet culture may not be so unambiguous after all.

…and What about the 'Culture' Part of It?

If we proceed to the second element of the word "Internet culture", the concept of culture is an admittedly tricky one. When I talk about Internet culture, I understand culture in the sense of "a whole way of life". This thus concerns culture in the sense of ways of living, ways of thinking, and having something in common – a mutual world of symbols and shared perspectives (cf. Storey, 1993). In my view, Internet culture is then about the shared values and perspectives that are created and maintained in various online settings, perspectives that guide norms and ideals for how to act and interact with other individuals. Consequently, doing research on Internet culture means studying these norms, ideals, values and perspectives – what people do online, what they think about what they do and what underlies their online actions and interactions.

In the same way as the Internet has become more diversified, so have its users. What was once a quite homogenous body of mainly technically oriented users is now a multiverse of an almost infinite number of different, partly overlapping online subcultures. So even if it once may have been possible to talk about one or a few Internet cultures, with a shared linguistic style and similar norms and values, this has become increasingly impossible. There is a multitude of different cultures out there, with the only common denominator being that they happen to be found online.[3]

So, Internet culture clearly poses some challenges. How are we to study something that is so diverse and multifaceted? The fact that environments and groups of users are so diverse probably means that we must assume different perspectives and use different research methods – and do research differently according to what kinds of material and users we are studying. We may also have to combine several methods in order to study different aspects of specific Internet sites. In other words, we need to be creative and make our own bricolages of methods. Being a hybrid medium, the Internet requires hybrid methods (Sveningsson et al., 2003).

Studying Internet Cultures – The Research and the Researchers

During recent years, Internet research has increasingly been addressed as a research field in its own right. Even if opinions are divided, there have even been attempts to create a separate Internet studies discipline, as has been done with gender studies, or, for that matter, media and communication studies. I will not go deeper into the discussions about this, although there are some obvious problems with organizing such a subject, not least with respect to the difficulties of drawing boundaries for what should be included in

such a subject. For example, should mobile phones be included? Or computer games? As stated earlier, these two examples fall partly inside the umbrella term Internet, and partly outside. Besides, as I will argue later on, I am not sure that the best approach is to form small and independent disciplines separated from each other – I would rather see a more open approach across disciplines and the research being done within them[4]. There are many things that unite Internet researchers, regardless of what disciplines they come from, be it sociology, ethnology, gender studies, computer science or media and communication studies. But instead of detaching ourselves from our mother disciplines and forming a new one, I believe creating and taking part in interdisciplinary networks is a better way to go.

However, even if I do not want Internet studies, or new media studies as it is more often referred to, to become its own discipline, I find myself more often defining myself as an Internet researcher than a media or communication researcher. Doing research in an interdisciplinary field may sometimes mean becoming isolated from other researchers in one's mother discipline. In the international and interdisciplinary field, one has access to other researchers who work with similar materials and research questions, although perhaps from other perspectives. In one's mother discipline, on the other hand, one has access to shared theoretical and methodological traditions, although one's fellow researchers may have less understanding of one's research material and its relevance. During my almost 12 years as an Internet researcher, there have been times when I have felt quite marginalized because of my choice of research subject. When discussions were held within media and communication studies in Sweden in the late 1990s about the core of the subject, in my opinion, there was often quite a narrow frame drawn around what was to be included and studied within the discipline – it was media. But, then again, what is a medium? Surprisingly often, media was defined as the mass media, and communication was consequently seen as what was sent out through the mass media. Now and then, one could also see studies of what was sent in, or occasionally even about the reciprocal exchanges between people who communicated with each other. However, the Internet was largely ruled out from these definitions, like other media forms that found themselves partly within and partly outside what was seen as the core of media and communication studies.

During recent years, the Internet has become increasingly widespread, and the media landscape so hybridized that one can hardly exclude the Internet as a medium, without at the same time also excluding the "good old" media forms. The number of researchers from various disciplines who do Internet research, or who collect their material online, has also increased. Finally, the Internet has gained wider acceptance as a relevant subject to study within media and communication studies. Being an Internet researcher, of course, I see this as a good thing. However, all too often, researchers who are new to the field of Internet studies have little access to and knowledge of the research that has already been done within the field. During the past few years, I have seen several examples of what I would call typical studies of Internet culture, done by researchers from various disciplines, where the researchers seem to be unaware of key references and ground breaking research that has been done in the field during the past 20 years. Isn't this typical? First, Internet researchers are marginalized by being defined out of the core of media studies. And when other media and communication researchers finally begin to see the Internet as a medium, they fail to acknowledge our work. Maybe they simply do not know that there exists a body of research out there – as stated above, one often has little access to networks outside one's mother discipline. More importantly,

some researchers may not see the point in reading and referring to researchers from disciplines and research traditions other than their own. But the fact is that there is an established research field out there, which has existed for quite a while. And in my opinion, it would be a good idea to take a look at existing research, instead of continuing to re-invent the wheel, even if the wheel in question was first invented by someone working in another discipline.

Conclusions

To conclude: I do not believe it is possible to talk about Internet culture in the singular; we must address the different Internet cultures, because the online environments, as well as their users, are so diverse and multifaceted. This diversity and hybridity of Internet arenas requires that we pursue different perspectives and research methods – we must proceed in different ways depending not only on what our research questions are, but also on what kind of material and users we are studying. Finally, studying Internet cultures is an interdisciplinary business, meaning that researchers who do Internet research have to keep open to what is being done and what has already been done within the field, even though the research may have been done by researchers from other disciplines and research traditions. In brief, I argue for a more open approach to research on Internet and Internet cultures, such that we employ a fruitful mixture of diverse methods, theoretical perspectives and, not least, are careful not to draw too narrow boundaries, but are open to research and researchers from disciplines and research traditions other than our own.

Notes

1. In providing us with two different definitions of the word 'medium', Marie-Laure Ryan (2003) gives a useful clue to how we can understand these disagreements in perspective. From the definitions given by the Webster dictionary, she extracts the meanings of a medium: 1) as a channel or system of communication, information or entertainment (which she calls the transmission definition), and on the other hand 2) as a material or technical means of artistic expression (which she calls the semiotic definition). My interpretation is that proponents of the Internet as a medium containing several genres use the term medium in the first sense, while proponents of the Internet as a meta-medium containing several underlying media use the term medium in the second sense.
2. On the other hand, I realize that I rarely, if ever, use words such as *Internet genre*, because I personally find the different parts that make up the Internet to be too different from one another to be described as parts of one and the same medium. This means that I personally side with the view of the Internet as one overarching umbrella, hosting several different communication media within it.
3. See also Livingstone (Livingstone, 2005), according to whom the element 'Internet', too, should be addressed in the plural, because of its diversity.
4. For a similar, although more drastic, perspective, see Nordenstreng (2007), according to whom even the discipline media and communication studies is too small and too fragmented, thus arguing for a return to the roots that make up media and communication studies, for example sociology.

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