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Integrative AV- und Online- Kommunikationsforschung

Perspektiven – Positionen – Projekte

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2.1 Sonia Livingstone: I don't know what it is going to be but we will be there following it!

Das Interview führten Sascha Trültzsch und Christine W. Wijnen im April 2011 in Zagreb.

From which fields of our discipline do you think the most important changes and challenges currently come from?

Livingstone: First of all, I do not call it a discipline, I call it a field. It's a multidisciplinary field with a common subject, which is all the forms of media and communication that exist, including face to face communication. We already intersect with many different disciplines and maybe we are becoming a discipline. Regarding the changes and challenges, I suppose I personally look more to the social sciences and especially to the development of social theory – it is where philosophy and sociology meet. So for me the most important ideas that stimulated our field come from the work of Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens or Jürgen Habermas: Ideas regarding the framing of the grand social changes within which we can understand the changes in media and communication. Especially in the last ten years the changes were not only posed by changing technologies, but social changes as theorized by people in the Arts and Humanities were also very stimulating and creative. I do not hear so much of it in most of the communication conferences, but many of the ideas of changes in text, in form, in genre, in how we think about modes in communication have been more theorized by Arts and Humanities, Digital Arts and other forms of creativity. From my point of view we are really a fusion of Humanities and Social Sciences. The technical changes are of importance, but as theorized by the concept of digitalization, the point is to examine more than just the technology so as to recognize new forms for communication. That's what I look at: so, there are things happening in the world of political science that I should know about, and I keep an eye on what's happening in psychology, where they have tools that are useful for us; but I don't see these as greatly challenging our field. More important is the influence from social theory and from digital arts.

What should/ must be the theoretical and conceptual consequences for the field of audiovisual and online communication because of these changes and challenges?

Livingstone: I am always looking in two directions: How is something within social theory being developed and thought about and what will be the point of purchase for us in media and communication. To give you a simple example: Having read Beck's "Risk Society" [Die Risikogesellschaft, 1986] several times, actually in parallel Anthony Giddens' "The Transformation of Intimacy" [Die Tyrannei der Intimität, 1992] because both of them seem to be writing about changes that I am

very interested in, namely how larger changes reshape personal relations – I see these issues as thoroughly mediated. Yet these scholars both underplay the media and neither of them writes about children or childhood. So here is a theory that raises lots of interesting questions, that challenges many of the assumptions that we made maybe thirty years ago about the relations between media and the public, but we have distinct ways of developing these theories within our field, so we can always ask: How can I extend this work and develop it into our field. Ideally, the converse would also happen: If they read the work in media and communication, would they say "Aha, now I have to develop my work. I have to understand the media in a more complex way." I think the challenge is over these disciplinary borders and we must both consider work from other fields credible but make sure the feedback flow is credible too. For me the challenge for media and communication is that it takes more than it gives back. We are very fascinated by the media being centre and we tend to forget all the other things going on. Let me give another example: I have been reading a lot in the sociology of childhood and the history of childhood which has a wonderful account of all the many big structural changes in labour markets, in movements of people, and in education systems as they position the child. This allows me to think about the child in relation to media. And yet, as in the afore-mentioned books of Beck and Giddens, when I look in the index there is no entry for media, no entry for television, no entry for books even or just occasionally. So there is the point of purchase and there is the argument to be made back: Media are quite important in children's lives now and even were hundred years ago. I am fascinated by these mutual blind spots and I think they are productive.

What are appropriate methodological approaches against this background?

Livingstone: I think we have to be quite creative when it comes to methodologies. As a field we are much given to multiple methodologies used in interesting mixes and triangulations. This is because we are always faced with a text, whatever medium we are talking about it is always complex and it is somehow always multiple – there are many many newspapers and TV-channels – so there are always interpretative challenges and contextual challenges that need complex and sensitive methodologies. The struggle is about standards of research: how do we know when we have done good research? How do we meet the very significant standards that quantitative social science sets, and what standards do we apply to our qualitative work or mixed method work? Yet we want to meet the standards of, let us say, survey analysis for the Journal of the American Political Sciences Association or the American Psychology Association: but then you could spend forever just testing the validity of your scales and never get out there in the world with your results. So despite our interest in contextualization and mixed methods we do, shall I say,

not always very high quality research. We seem to be far too satisfied to hear about pilot studies and small scale projects and things which are half way-through analyses that never see the light of day. Maybe it would help us as a field to raise our game methodologically. To me it is really important to maintain standards: The first question we should be asking ourselves regarding methodologies is, how do I know that I have done it well, how can I tell good work? Since our field welcomes people from very different disciplines as well, it does not set strict limits. Psychology, where I came from, sets very strict limits not only regarding what can be published in a journal. We do not say that, since we love to be open. But then we are not quite sure how to say what is good and what is less good and what is the best.

From your point of view: Which research projects/ empirical studies in the field of audiovisual and online communication do meet these requirements at the moment (and therefore can be seen as 'groundbreaking')?

Livingstone: Of course there are many interesting and significant projects ongoing in our field. May I say something about my own project EU Kids Online and from there come to a more general answer?

Actually I think EU Kids Online is groundbreaking not because it is my own work but because it attempts the integration of an account of risks and opportunities and allows the ambiguity between them, whereas much previous research has drawn a line by studying either the risks or the opportunities. In our network, we are exploring the fertile ground between the two. Also, we are developing an area of research which has been either done in a kind of a naively global way, as if children's internet use were a universal phenomenon, or researchers in each of their own countries have struggled to see beyond. But here is a global phenomenon moving in an uneven and complex way across different cultural contexts. So we need to take a systematic but contextually sensitive approach recognizing the differences that cultural contexts bring but also having a legitimate way of recognizing the commonalities as well. Last, our network is working very hard to do something that we do not do so often in our field, which is to create a mode of critical engagement with policy makers to make the work useful but not in a way that just fits into their institutional agenda but in a way that can critically challenge and rework their agenda.

Additionally, I think that there are several areas of work that meet the above challenges. I just went to a great conference session on social networking and I was just struck by how the phenomenon of social networking is both so old and so new. Social sciences have always tracked social networks but I think there is groundbreaking work in developing an analytic repertoire for thinking about networks and

network relations and then seeing how different kinds of digital possibilities are underpinning and reshaping that.

If I ask myself what work has set in train a new and valuable sort of studies, sometimes it is a problematic piece of research. For example the notion of the "digital native" is a rather irritating short essay by Marc Prensky. But, it usefully crystallizes a concept which sets in train a new and I think significant set of studies and arguments about changing illiteracies and changing skills. What it means to be a literate communicator is transformed by the digital affordances but also by the social changes. But the study itself wasn't groundbreaking – it was a polemic. Or for example Axel Bruns' notion of the 'produser' – this is a much more clever book based on research. From an audience point of view there was a theoretical vacuum, since it seemed that some audiences were active (say, for television) and some were even more active (say, as internet users). Suddenly there was an idea, a word, a concept that captured the moment and suddenly there was the 'produser' and everyone could identify a distinct stream of work that recognizes a burgeoning practice, that wasn't really visible before we had a word for it. These kinds of things are groundbreaking because they set off a new flow of work.

What is the meaning of these tendencies in the field of audiovisual and online communication for the scientific discipline of communication studies in the next few years?

Livingstone: Well, I have one fear that out there in the (unrelated) fields of sociology, psychology, political science, geography and so on, where they are also studying at least the most recent medium of the internet, they will be heading forward and not see the field of media and communications as a useful intersection and particularly not see the legacy of ideas that we developed in the past hundred years. So we will become somewhat sidelined.

Although my perspective tends to be a British perspective, it is interesting to see in different countries that the field is becoming more and more institutionally established. That is useful and we should be glad about that and build on that. It might sound snobbish, but I think it's important that there are departments in the more prestigious universities that study media and communications and I see some signs of that in the United States as well. Each European country has such a distinct tradition of whether the media and communication studies are in the social sciences or in the humanities, whether it is marginalized in the 'lesser institutions' or valid in the 'core'. So it is very hard to generalize, but insofar as I see signs, student demand and the evident embedding of media in every sector of society means that there is more money for research, there is more chance of getting networks like COST IS 0609 Transforming Audiences – Transforming Societies, there is more

recognition within the universities and that should make for a stronger and higher quality work.

I have a fear of maintaining the intellectual high ground, of maintaining the place where the new theories really come from rather than us being the recipient of other theories. But I am much more confident in relation to both the student market for institutional places and in relation to the media phenomenon itself, which is not going to go away and will change at increasing pace – there will always be something valuable for us to do. Of course we will have to carry on tracking the latest technologies: We will have *Facebook* conferences and *iPad* conferences and conferences on things that haven't been invented yet. In that way we will provide a critical lens to look at the new and we bring a legacy of debating what was new before, and so we can illuminate something about which the rest of the world is saying "Oh my god, that's a shock"; we can say that we have been here before and can say that this is something we can understand this way or that way etc. I don't know what it is going to be but we will be there following it!

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