

Networked life world: four dimensions of the cultures of networked belonging

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Abstract

This paper discusses the possible building of a networked life world, using the power of sharing with others values and practices. It is argued that mediation practices are not just giving rise to networked communication, changing our media culture and our values and beliefs as citizens of a global network society. It is argued in this paper that changes in mediation are also creating the conditions to foster the creation of a networked life world. When we change the symbolic meaning of possession of property, production and distribution, while disseminating such practises and values through social mediated networks it is, at least, conceivable that we will face a growing disruption of old narratives ability to sustain lifeworld collective identity and its challenge through the adoption of new ones capable of reconstructing such identity.

Keywords: Networked Society. Lifeworld, Networked belonging. Piracy cultures, cloud cultures, openness cultures, social Networks

Introduction

The mediation practices giving rise to networked communication are changing our media culture and, in the process, our values and beliefs as citizens of a global network society (Castells, 2009) and creating our networked life world (Habermas, 1999) — that is, they are also changing the way in which we build our relationships with other people, with organizations, and with everyday life, by giving us the tools to design future institutions. As Jenkins (2006) suggests, the “traditional” convergence theory based on the birth of new technologies that will increasingly converge media does not find empirical support; rather than a convergence based on new patterns production, what we are witnessing are new patterns of consumption that foster a convergence culture. Such convergence culture is the product of old and new media intersection, a place where grass-roots and corporate media collide, where the power of the media producer and the power of the consumer interact in unpredictable ways (Jenkins, 2006). But this is also a space where the ways in which we produce fan and popular culture also seem to be influencing the very ways in which political and civic participation occurs. Such an influence can best be understood if we look, for example, at the *#18daysinegypt* project about the protests in Egypt, which led to the fall of Mubarak’s regime. This documentary, as the title suggests, is about the Egyptian protests occurring between January 25 and February 11, 2011. But what makes this documentary different is its crowd-sourced strategy—that

is, it is assembled from footage taken by the protest's participants or direct observers. This is possible only because of the proliferation of multifunctional handheld personal devices with video recording capabilities, such as cell phones. Furthermore, it is not based in just one collaborative platform, or on individual footage submission processes. Instead, it makes use of already popular websites such as Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr, by *hashtag* strategy. It seems clear that much of the experimentation being followed under the premises of fan and popular culture is being increasingly used as role models of practices for civic and political engagement toward social change. It is as if some of those unpredictable ways, as stated by Jenkins (2008), in which the power of media producers and consumers is increasingly interacting, are giving rise to some already well-defined traits of what we can call the *cultures of networked belonging*, all of them present in the case studies previously analyzed and whose action has been aimed at social change. The networked cultures of belonging are the array of four different dimensions of practices that have been reshaping our values and beliefs and in doing so have created a culture still anchored in network individualism but no longer centered in self-interest. Those practices can be clustered in what we can call "cloud cultures" toward how we currently conceive ownership, "openness cultures" toward the ways in which we expect goods and services to be produced, "piracy cultures" toward the ways in which we expect goods and services to be distributed, and, finally, and probably the most influencing dimension for the change in values and beliefs, the "social networking cultures" toward the ways in which we build identity by combining the mediated environment and non-mediated experience in networks of relationships.

Social Networking Cultures: sociability and identity building

In our daily lives, the sense of *belonging* shapes, at different degrees, our social and psychological processes of self and identity (re)construction. It describes not only social relationships but also a part of our contemporary relation with the media. In a social landscape where contemporary societies are increasingly characterized and produced by a communicational model built on the notion of network, networked belonging is a fundamental cultural trait of the experience of mediation. Networks can enhance, through mediation, social relationships and, consequently, nurture the sense of belonging in a community. In this scope, mediated belonging increases the extent of online imagined communities. We can find this sense of belonging both as a measure of communitarian involvement and as the fulfilment of personal needs for self-esteem. But belonging also stands as a descriptive possibility in framing the nature of our relation with technology, the ever more intricate forms of use that make it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the function of the medium and the social consequences of its appropriations. The cultures of belonging are expressed in many of the different social appropriations of mediation that occur in

our daily lives, ranging from participation in social network sites, participation in online communities, political or civic participation, user-generated content, and its sharing among participants in content-producing networks, fan culture interactions, file-sharing communities and networks, and so on. But the reason why it has become such an important feature of our social interaction derives from the growing use, and individual significance, given by us in daily routines to social network media such as Facebook, making *social networking cultures* a fundamental trait of the new networked cultures of belonging.

Cultures of Production in the Network Society: openness of services and goods

The second dimension of the networked cultures of belonging can be found in the growing importance and visibility of *openness cultures*, products of three distinctive practices that are today central to the digital realm of production: remix and mash up; open source; and beta and updating practices. The combination of those three production practices has allowed the dissemination of a culture of production based on openness and by doing so we have increasingly taken for granted the fact that a significant part of production in our daily lives operates under such principles. This culture of production under openness has in turn influenced the way in which we design actions and events toward social change. It is as if the way in which digital culture products, such as video, music, or software, are produced has become one of the components of a given “normality” of how we conceive production and its design. That very conceptualization has virally contaminated how we expect production to occur not only under digital formats, but also for events and even hardware—for example, let us not forget Apple and its yearly expected hardware updates such as the iPhones. The openness dimensions of the networked cultures of belonging are ones where we find extremely low barriers of entry for whoever wants to join a given network of production with a common aim. It is also under such openness principles that we find a justification by which we can understand why such networks tend to be in such a permanent systemic mode of updating objectives and strategies for action. Openness as a core principle associated to production also means that these are cultures where continued innovation and the ability to surprise others and add novelty, while departing from previous experiences or concepts, tend to be a common signature.

Cultures of Ownership: from possession to networked access

The third dimension of the networked cultures of belonging can be found in the so-called “cloud cultures” and how their set of practices gave rise to beliefs and values that have been changing the way in which we currently conceive possession. Possession has been intimately related to individual or organizational

ownership, but, with the introduction of digital networks in our capitalist economies, the value of possession seems to have moved toward an increasingly high correlation with access. Such a trend was at first visible mainly in the establishment of global financial markets, where trade is performed in digital networks and where the success of operations is ascribed not to one's possession as a member of the network but rather to having permanent access and being able to trade permanently the financial assets globally. In financial networks, the viability of possession of assets is granted less by legal ownership than through the permanent access that allows sustaining value through real-time decisions, because only access and trade interactions are what allow for the gain of financial advantages—that is, money. If access has become a central piece in the definition of possession in financial networks, during the last few years we have witnessed a trend of business models that has led to the spread of this culture based increasingly on access as a needed condition for sustaining possession. Examples of such can be found in the way in which we appropriate mediation when we watch or listen to streaming media or when we access documents saved in distant computer networks or even when we use mail systems such as Gmail, Hotmail, or Yahoo. The use of computers and the storing of data have evolved from nearness to distance and in the process we have changed the way in which we perceive possession of digital data, be it personal communication or movies or music. We began by storing our data in local computer disks or keeping it close to ourselves, by using originally floppy disks and later USB sticks, but we are increasingly switching to storing personal data in data clouds far away from our physical locations. In a consistent cultural change in the perception of possession, we have moved from needing to see where data were stored, to believing that, as long as we can access it somewhere in the world, we own it. Such a trait is the product of cultural change precipitated by the nature of communication itself and the ability to build it under a networked communicational model. Clouds have become the foundations of digital network cultures: for business, they have allowed new business models; for individuals, they are increasingly seen as facilitators of collective action. So *cloud cultures* have changed the way in which we value possession, but in the process have also changed our culture of valorization toward access and have given us new foundations with which to view social mobilization as dependent on constant access of those involved. Cloud cultures and their valorization of access over ownership make membership to a given organization less important than permanent contact with others and with the digital contents that are stored far away from us in cloud computing facilities.

Cultures of distribution: adoption and rise of piracy cultures

The last dimension of the networked culture of belonging here analyzed are the so-called “piracy cultures” and the notion that, if something is available in the network it should be shareable, which primarily

questions under what circumstances, legal or other, can information be shared. Piracy cultures reflect the ways in which we expect to access digital goods and how such shared cultural construct influences our values and beliefs within society. In order to address what we are calling *piracy cultures* of networked communication, we need first to establish from where the very definition of piracy comes from. Usually we look at media consumption departing from a media industry definition. We look at TV, radio, newspapers, games, Internet, and media content in general, departing from the idea that access to those is made through the payment of a license fee, subscription, or simply because it is either paid or made available for free (being supported by advertisement)—that is, we look at content and the way people interact with it within a given system of thought that looks at content and its distribution channels as the product of relationships between media companies, organizations, and individuals effectively building a commercial relationship of a contractual kind with rights and obligations. But what if, for a moment, we turn our attention to the empirical evidence found not just in Asia, Africa, and South America but also all over Europe and North America? All over the world we are witnessing a growing number of people building media relationships outside of the institutionalized set of rules (Sundaram, [2001](#); Wang, [2003](#); Larkin, [2004](#); Yar, [2005](#); Athique, [2008](#); Lobato, [2009](#); Karaganis, 2010). The question presented by the building of these relationships toward access of cultural content and software is not so much whether we are dealing with legal or illegal practices, but how they are going to become fundamental to our understanding of a new view of entertainment media distribution and its consumption. Because we need a title to characterize those cultures in their diversity, but at the same time in their commonplaceness, we propose calling them “piracy cultures.” The main point is that distribution of fan and popular culture has moved from distribution channels dominated by corporations into an environment where individuals have a primary role. The corporations themselves deem a large portion of those individualized distribution channels of popular culture illegal, but they exist and have moved from a marginal economic cluster on the mass communication model into an alternative system of distribution on the networked communication model. Such a change in the growing dimension of individualized uses has led to the generalized perception in society at large that distribution channels no longer have to be dependent on organizations and can rely on the networking of individuals. The consequences of such a change are far beyond the economic losses of corporations with business in the popular and fan culture dimension. The generalization of the perceived piracy cultures’ core values—that is, “what exists is shareable”—also makes the idea of one’s participation in a network of sharing, not of files, but of ideas or the organization of events toward a common objective, much more plausible. Through the adoption of piracy practices one is also adopting the values of sharing and, in the process, the ethos of being part of a network of nodes within larger networks. Piracy cultures

are constitutive of social change because they allow for the social construction of the value of being part of a wider network, where common values can be shared and autonomy is constructed.

Network Lifeworld

As John B. Thompson suggests on his reading of Habermas (1988: 1–4) “system is a self-regulating order of purposive–rational action in which actions are coordinated by certain mechanisms or “media,” such as money and power. A lifeworld, by contrast, is a symbolically structured space of taken-for-granted meanings in which cultural traditions, social interaction, and personal identity are sustained and reproduced.” (Thompson, 2012: 61-62).

The argument made in this paper is that we are observing a change in how our lifeworld is perceived. Through changes in social interaction, namely the increasingly domestication of mediation (Silverstone, 2000) and its networked organizational form (Castells 2009; Wellman 2012), our symbolically structured spaces are witnessing a change in meanings. Such changes in meanings can be found on the ways in which we culturally define sociability, production, possession and distribution being their common denominator the use of mediated networks for social reproduction and social sustainability. This change of the of taken-for-granted meanings of our lifeworld is also product of the current perceived identity crisis in our societies (Habermas 1988, Thompson 2012, Castells, Caraça & Cardoso 2012). An identity crisis occurs when one perceives a major social disruption and that their collective identity is put into question (Thompson 2012). The current 2008-2012 crisis is one of such moments when one perceives that the narratives that gave sense to your lifeworld no longer hold credibility. The system anchored in trust in banks and markets collapsed in its ability to sustain trust (Castells, Caraça & Cardoso, 2012) and influence our taken-for-granted meanings in the lifeworld, putting in question the cultures of networked self-interest based on the ability to give meaning to our life's through the exacerbation of values such as individual gain and success fostered by the global financial markets over sharing and social trust (cardoso and jacobetty 2012). But, given that, the basis for the building of our lifeworld has been increasingly shaped through networks and that our mediation within those networks anchors, to a large degree, in symbolically structured practises - that differ from the values of markets and banks - we are faced with the rise of new values that might have a fundamental influence in the ways our lifeworld is perceived in contemporary societies.

When we change the symbolic meaning of possession of property, production and distribution, while disseminating such practises and values through social mediated networks it is, at least, conceivable that we will face a growing disruption of old narratives ability to sustain lifeworld collective identity and its challenge through the adoption of new ones capable of reconstructing such identity.

The networked cultures of belonging are the products of the radical change of the media system from what Merton called in the late 1950s “reference groups” (1957) into “belonging groups,” emulating social functions that for a long time were only an attribute of face-to-face interaction with family, friends, or school. The change in mediation (Silverstone, 2000) and the building of a new communicational model of networked communication (Castells, 2009; Cardoso, 2011) is allowing mediation, not only to play the role of reference group or organizer of actions toward autonomy, but to foster belonging as well. The overall premise present in this analysis is that, if mass communication and mass media fostered mainly the integration of the individual in already existing institutions, networked communication fosters the building of new institutional settings through the social networking of individuals.

What the case studies here have analyzed and what other events—such as the “Occupy Wall Street/We are the 99%” movement in the USA, Tent City in Tel Aviv for better housing and living conditions in Israel, or Chile’s demonstrations by students and families to change the education system—seem to tell us is that people are questioning the status quo. In doing so, they also seem to be culturally valuing social trust more and the promotion of self-interest less. The role of the cultural changes in possession, production, distribution, and socialization, produced by the appropriation of network technologies and digital products, seems also to have had a fundamental influence on the way in which such movements and groups of people have decided to become, or have accomplished being, heard. We seem, therefore, to be at a time when people, rather than being interested in proposing alternatives to the current political and economic system, are more interested in understanding how can they improve their living conditions as a society or group. People are in search of places where they can ask new and old questions, in order to try out different answers. By doing so we are, through mediation, changing the cultures of our network society and fundamentally creating new departure points that might lead us toward new lives in the aftermath of this crisis—whenever it happens. We are witnessing the building of a networked life world, using the power of sharing with others values and practices as a common ground for building a future to which people might feel they belong.

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