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Transculturality in the internet: Culture flows and virtual publics

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Abstract

This article addresses the flows that criss-cross virtual space: flows of information, images and communication. These are cultural flows, or, to use the terminology of Schütz and Luckmann, intersubjective meaning-contexts consisting of values, social rules, world views and patterns of behaviour that are becoming increasingly dissociated from their national base thanks to digital media. They are articulated, passed on, qualified, rejected or transformed into something else in online discourse. The idea of culture as a 'self-contained sphere' has become obsolete in an age of digital media. Terms such as transculturality and transnationality reflect socio-cultural developments that are closely linked with the evolution of digital media. This article commences with a theoretical overview of how the social is formed under the influence of cultural flows, asking whether transcultural tendencies are emerging in new virtual publics and how such tendencies can be identified. Empirical findings drawn from a larger project on 'Subject constructions and digital culture' show how differences are dealt with according to the divergent tendencies of homogenization, particularization and hybridization.

The concept of 'flows' is used by Ulf Hannerz with reference to mobility and diffusion, relating to phenomena which are not localized in one place (Hannerz, 1997: 4).[1] Many different types of currents criss-cross present-day society, leaving their traces on a global scale in the movements of capital, migrants, commodities, information, images and

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communication (Hannerz, 1997: 4). In comparison with the past, these flows now exist more often concurrently, have intensified, are picking up speed and, thanks to modern media, are discernible all over the world.

In this article, I focus on research into those cultural flows which have arisen and spread in conjunction with digital information and communication technologies. As networked technologies, digital technologies not only provide a structural framework for the movement of images, texts and messages across national borders, they also ensure that these flows criss-cross.

Networks resemble interwoven threads, interconnecting paths or criss-crossing currents out of which a fabric or web emerges to give them a focus or direction. Digital networks mostly operate across international borders and can be accessed by people from different parts of the world. Inevitably, when network actors from across the globe meet up virtually, they juxtapose their varying value systems and norms. Thus digital networks stand for an architecture of cultural transition in contrast to an architecture based on concentricity. Transition causes the Here and the There to become fluid, pointing towards the possibility of cultural change and giving rise to the following questions. Does the potential for cultural fluidity already exist in cultural practices in virtual space? To what extent are virtual publics marked by this process? To what extent can transcultural traits be discerned?

Starting from a theoretical perspective, I first sketch out the concepts of culture, transculturality and public space which lie at the heart of my analysis; these conceptual tools will allow us to observe communicative events in social networks, to predict tendential developments and to define the necessary frameworks in which transcultural trends arise. Then I present some initial empirical results of the project 'Communicative publics in cyberspace' in the form of case studies and extracts from interviews used to illustrate the theory.

Culture is not a 'closed sphere'

How is culture to be understood nowadays? The way in which this question is formulated reflects a historical view of the concept of culture which I elucidate below with reference to Alfred Schütz, Thomas Luckmann, Andrea Harmsen, Ulrich Beck and Wolfgang Welsch. In the spirit of Schütz and Luckmann, culture can be understood as a conglomerate of interconnected meaning-contexts (*Sinnzusammenhänge* in German) which are composed of values, social rules, lifestyles and patterns of interpretation and behaviour. These are created, put into perspective, discarded and changed in intersubjective exchange (Schütz and Luckmann, 1975: 26). Built upon intersubjectivity, these interconnected meaning-contexts make up the everyday life-world (*Lebenswelt* in German) which individuals are born into, the world which they take for granted, the world which is the arena and also the ultimate goal for their actions (Schütz and Luckmann, 1975: 25). Individuals must understand their life-world to the degree necessary in order to be able to act in it. Understanding means that they have to be able to interpret it, or as Schütz and Luckmann put it, 'the world is already given to me for my explication' (Schütz and Luckmann, 1975: 25). As interpretation is absolutely necessary in the intersubjective process, it follows that culture cannot be a closed system

from the perspective of our life-worlds, an assumption that is also shared by Beck and Welsch.

As philosopher Wolfgang Welsch declared, culture is not a 'closed sphere' (Welsch, 2001: 258); indeed it is anything but 'closed' in a globalized and mediatized world in which constitutive communicative networking is paramount. Cultures which are thought to be homogeneous have no alternative but to clash with one another in cases of conflict (Welsch, 2001: 260). Welsch contrasts the traditional concept of culture with the conception of transculturality, hereby attempting to characterize current developments in which different cultures permeate each other (Welsch, 2001: 263). Harmsen expressly points out that cultural flows across national borders are certainly not restricted to movement from the Western industrialized world to countries in the Southern hemisphere (Harmsen, 1999: 90). Indeed, cultural elements also flow in the other direction, making it possible to speak of 'global intercultural interplay' in Harmsen's terms (Harmsen, 1999: 95). Migrants, tourists and the media are the impulses that make these cultural cross-currents flow.

Ulrich Beck, too, is fascinated by processes of transformation within society, the nature of which he thinks can best be described by the term 'transnationality' (Beck, 2004: 98). For Beck, transnationality is 'the contrary of all concepts of social order' (Beck, 2004: 98) because it implies interdependencies for which the logic of the national has no name (Beck, 2004: 100). Transnationality emphasizes the dimension of territoriality in contrast with transculturality, which focuses on the dimension of meaning. Beck obviously believes, however, that transnationality also goes hand in hand with cultural interchange, as becomes clear from his characterization of the 'cosmopolitan vision' (Beck, 2004: 13). The transnational tendencies which he discerns promote a cosmopolitan perspective which he describes as reflexive awareness and a dialogic view of ambivalences in a milieu of blurring differentiations and cultural contradictions (Beck, 2004: 13). This definition implies that when members of different nations meet, different cultures potentially encounter each other as well.

Following on from the concept of the cosmopolitan vision, the transformation of society is broken down into a micro level, for the vision is to be adopted by individuals so as to help them 'shape [their] life and social relations under conditions of cultural mixture' (Beck, 2004: 13). This affiliation between the macro and micro levels is relevant for the topic under discussion insofar as the insights in this article focus on the possibilities of cultural mixture in digital online networks. The central question is whether forms of communication which are emerging in digital contexts that are accessible to people from different nations and cultural backgrounds bear transnational and/or transcultural traits. Posing the question in that manner implies a conceptualization of the subject which considers neither the subject nor culture to be a self-contained entity but rather to be of an essence that exists in an interdependent relationship with its social and material environment and which recreates itself anew in this relationship (Meyer-Drawe, 1990: 151ff.).

Both concepts – transnationality and transculturality alike – are compelled to follow the logic of 'not only but also'. Both Beck and Welsch characterize cultural mixtures as being typical of modern society. While Welsch assumes that cultural differences become blurred when cultures mix, Beck emphasizes that differences continue to exist and insists on the necessity of acknowledging these differences. According to Beck, the

cosmopolitan vision, which helps us to live successfully at the interface between the Own and the Foreign, is an outlook which is sensitive to those very differences and one which registers and respects the otherness of the Other (Beck, 2004: 13).

From one public sphere to a multiplicity of public spheres

Culture is public, based as it is on social consensus. The concept of public used here subscribes to Jürgen Habermas's view, but also includes insights from Nancy Fraser (1996). Metaphorically speaking, the public sphere is at home in the agora, the market place (Habermas, 1990: 56). This is where discourse is developed and disseminated (Fraser, 1996: 152). The public sphere is constituted through joint discussion, which can also appear in the form of counsel or justice, and through collective action (Habermas, 1990: 56). Habermas designates events as being public when they are accessible to all, in contrast to private functions – in the same way as we would speak of public squares or public buildings (Habermas, 1990: 54). In the 1990s, Habermas predicted that the public sphere would be transformed structurally when he claimed that the commercialization and concentration of communication networks would lead to a channelling of communication pathways, and opportunities for access to public communication would be subject to ever greater selective pressure (Habermas, 1990: 27). Public space would thus turn into a 'contested arena' (Habermas, 1990: 28).

Nancy Fraser, too, observes the exclusionary mechanisms of the bourgeois public sphere, but – going beyond Habermas – she sees them as having led to the creation of competing counter-publics such as working-class or female public spheres right from the start (Fraser, 1996: 157). Fraser criticizes Habermas's concept, which only relates to a single public sphere, as a 'masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule' (Fraser, 1996: 158). She pleads in favour of a multiplicity of public spheres. Particularly in multicultural societies, she writes – and these considerations are important for the subsequent analysis – public life cannot consist of an all-inclusive public sphere as that would 'be tantamount to filtering diverse rhetorical and stylistic norms through a single, overarching lens. Moreover, since there can be no such lens that is genuinely culturally neutral, it would effectively privilege the expressive norms of one cultural group over others' (Fraser, 1996: 166). For Markus Schulz, 'the public sphere always appears in the plural', a tendency which is accentuated as globalization increases (Schulz, 2001: 268). While Fraser already described the emergence of societies composed of people from different cultures in the 1990s with the creation of alternative public spheres to organize their coexistence, the notion of cultural mixtures as formulated by Welsch and Beck is alien to her.

Virtual spaces as constituted by digital media, which are the topic under investigation in this article, represent public space in Habermas's terms, as virtual space is also constituted through communication and action in which everybody, in principle, can take part. Virtual spaces also come close to Fraser's notion of the public sphere in which different contrasting publics emerge. However, claims that virtual public spaces are accessible to everybody disregard the fact that a lack of economic and technical resources as well as educational barriers (poor reading, writing and communication skills) still impede access to the internet.

Virtual public space is a *global* public space. For the first time in human history, thanks to digital media, people from all over the world who are not public figures offline are being given the opportunity to develop discourse, exchange arguments or participate in conflicts, notwithstanding the fact that economic resources as well as media and communicative competences are, as already mentioned, necessary prerequisites for taking part. Measured in terms of the frequency of use and the growing number of members in global networks, digitally aided global public space is becoming increasingly important. According to a worldwide survey carried out by the Miniwatts Marketing Group,[2] more than 2 billion people (34.3% of the world population) had internet access in 2012 and the number of internet users increased by almost 567% between 2000 and 2012. Age-wise, 16- to 24-year-olds are represented most strongly, with around 99% of the young men and women in this age group making use of it, according to an Austrian survey.[3] Thus in this age group, there are hardly any differences between male and female users while gender-related differences become very obvious in users aged 45 and over. For today's heavy internet users aged between 16 and 24, the digital media will continue to be taken for granted as technologies for communication and information. At the same time, the next generation will probably grow up 'digital', used to using digital media from a very early age. Should this forecast turn out to be true, virtual space will become an everyday living space for increasing numbers of people which they can access any time they want via a laptop or mobile phone.

Setting up virtual space as living space underscores the increasing importance of virtual space as a place for communication which, in principle, is not restricted in the least by geographical or cultural borders. This bestows especial urgency on the question as to the role played by differing cultural flows in digitally supported communication and subject constructions.

Transcultural/transnational ventures in online networks: Some results from the study 'Communicative publics in cyberspace'

In the following section I would like to illustrate my theoretical comments on transcultural/transnational public spaces with the empirical results of a study on 'Communicative publics in cyberspace'.[4] It is part of a larger, international research project on 'Subject constructions and digital culture' which was launched in autumn 2009 by the universities of Klagenfurt, Hamburg-Harburg, Bremen and Münster (Carstensen et al., 2013). The overall aim of the project is to investigate the way in which network actors between the ages of 8 and 30 constitute themselves as subjects in cyberspace and whether new types of subjects are emerging. In the spirit of Hannah Arendt (1960), we assume that we do not only participate in cyberspace in word and deed in order to create something but, inevitably, also to create ourselves (anew). In this research project, the 'act of creating oneself' is being investigated by three university research teams: in the context of web-based employment, in the context of digitally supported communicative publics and – as digital technology is becoming increasingly embedded in everyday objects – in the way people deal with and react to home-made technical artefacts, so-called smart things. This

article focuses on just one field of research, namely communicative publics in cyber-space and especially on the communicative practices of the up-and-coming generation in social networks (TakingITGlobal, Global Modules, Mideast Youth, Facebook, Netlog, StudiVZ, Knuddels, SWR Kindernetz and personal blogs).

Faced with the task of giving meaning and direction to their lives, the next generation is increasingly confronted with a need to reconsider the revered values of the present and the past and to reorientate themselves while establishing new meanings. Adolescents and young adults often prefer to use digital communicative spaces for that purpose.

Virtual stages of discourse

Opportunities for transculturality/transnationality arise when network actors from various nations and cultural backgrounds come into contact with each other. I would like to present two case studies from the first phase of the study in which online discussions were analysed with the help of a focused network analysis. People from various countries took part in both discussions, their contributions clearly signalling that they came from different cultural backgrounds or at least had different cultural leanings. The following questions were of interest in our analysis of the online discussions:

- What are the most important topics in the discussion forums we chose to investigate?
- How are these topics discussed?
- How do participants deal with cultural differences?
- Are forms of inter- or (trans)cultural consensus emerging?
- How do network actors constitute themselves in digital communicative spaces?

The first case study concerns the online network 'Mideast Youth' which was founded in Bahrain in 1996. It is open to participants from all over North Africa and the Middle East, but also to network actors from the Western world. Mideast Youth's goal is already formulated in its mission statement 'to inspire and provide young people with the freedom and opportunity of expression, and promote a fierce but respectful dialogue among the highly diverse youth of all sects, socio-economic backgrounds, and political and religious beliefs in the Middle East'.[5] The discussion chosen to act as an example illustrates something it has in common with all of the networks we investigated, namely that differences constitute an obvious focus in networks; they are clearly recognized and explicitly mentioned. This is not to be taken as an argument against transculturality but rather as a prerequisite, in Christoph Wulf's terms, for discovering or developing common ground (Wulf, 2006: 40).

The discussion went under the heading of 'Women in Islam' and took place between 2007 and 2010. As far as we could tell, the participants came from Egypt, the Netherlands and Bahrain, the very nature of their religious sympathies making it clear that they came from very different cultural backgrounds. Deviating somewhat from the title, the focus of the discussion can be summarized by the following question: which religion offers women more rights and more freedom? It was initiated by a (male) network actor comparing Hinduism and Islam whose arguments were clearly in favour of Islam being the

religion which supported equality between men and women. In the ensuing discussion, some people agreed with his opinion but more often than not it was criticized and, most of all, modified, for example, by pointing out the gap between the rights of men and women as laid down in Islamic law and the actual situation of women in Islamic countries. Several network actors took up an opposing stance, by rebutting the attacks on Hinduism and putting forward Christianity as the better alternative, or by characterizing all religions as being patriarchal.

The online discussion turned out to be a place where discourse was produced and disseminated, and thus constitutes a public sphere in Habermasian terms. Gradually, the first signs of common ground started to emerge, both implicit and explicit. Attempts to deconstruct absolute truths can be taken as explicit onsets of common ground in that rigid value systems are broken down and the course is set for a more open approach. I would interpret one (male) participant's comment that 'the fact that women are now allowed to do certain things does not yet prove that they are free' as being one such attempt to deconstruct an absolute truth. Other endeavours to deconstruct can also be seen in postings which debate the advantages *and* disadvantages of Islam. Implicit common ground, on the other hand, is represented by the consensus, not specifically mentioned by participants, that freedom and rights are important values to which women and men are equally entitled.

We do not know whether the elements of the New and the Foreign which network actors were confronted with in this discussion permeated further into the Own in another context or at another point in time. However, as already intimated, the discussion we documented gives us insights into a world with a cosmopolitan perspective characterized by the fact that 'differences, contrasts and boundaries must be fixed and defined in an awareness of the sameness in principle of others' (Beck, 2004: 17). This underscores Beck's belief that, if it were not for the similarities, differences could not even be detected whereby, I would like to add, this then lays the foundations for creating new mixtures.

To sum up: despite their different cultural backgrounds and religious affiliations, participants are bound by their interest in religion and, at the same time, by their need to challenge absolute truths, such as those professed by various religions, and their desire to find their own approach to religion. Another aspect that they have in common is their agreement that freedom and personal rights are indispensible commodities for human beings. Against the background of what they have in common, differences can be negotiated. Indeed, this very conglomerate of common characteristics and differences could allow fuzzy margins to arise, or a border zone in which ambiguity and uncertainty prevail (Hannerz, 1997: 9). This gives participants more cultural leeway in which to combine viewpoints, values and lifestyles anew and where something can arise which cannot be attributed to one's own culture or to a foreign culture but is something in between, a perfect illustration of Wolfgang Welsch's concept of transculturality.

The second case study relates to the online platform 'Global Modules', which was created in a tertiary education context. Global Modules was founded at Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont in 2003, its declared aim being to establish contacts between students and faculty members from universities in different countries. In each of the four-week modules, a specific topic is discussed which encourages participants to

question their cultural assumptions, think critically and engage in collaborative learning (Scudder, 2008: 110).

The following analysis relates to a discussion which ran under the title of 'What makes you happy? What do you do for fun in your country?' It was initiated in August 2007 by Gary Scudder, assistant dean for global engagement and administrator of the modules, and continued until 2009. The contributions discussed here date from 2009 and were made by students from the USA, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, as far as we could tell. In this context we can speak of a subaltern counter-public (Fraser, 1996: 164) as only invited participants could take part in the discussions, but within those limits, the discussion was open to everyone. The rationale behind such debate is the initiation and diffusion of discourse in which personal opinions can be shaped, one of Habermas's characteristics of the public sphere.

As the discussion progressed, two perspectives started to crystallize. On the one hand, in answer to the original question posed by the administrator, participants mentioned what could be done or what they did to make themselves happy, like shopping, travelling, doing something with friends, watching a good film, working in the garden, getting good grades, working hard. On the other hand, there were many comments which contrasted with the original question, pointing out that happiness is not achieved by doing things but is rather something that is always in us or near us, something which we only have to become aware of. As one (female) participant from Jordan explained, 'I believe that happiness is always near us, but we are the one[s] who decide to use it or not', a viewpoint which a (female) participant from the United Arab Emirates agreed with, saying 'Happiness comes by itself!! I can't force myself on someone to feel HAPPY!!'

It seems as though the network actors from Arab countries were more strongly in favour of a contemplative vision of happiness while the American participants considered individual happiness to be something which could be attained by doing and achieving something. Whether this differentiation holds in general, however, is not clear because we do not know whether the Arab or American participants had only ever lived in the countries of their birth and were only mirroring valid cultural norms in their respective countries.

Nevertheless, both positions can be attributed to different cultural traditions. The position mirroring the slogan 'happiness can be created' reminds us of the Protestant ethic, albeit not just in relation to work, as formulated, for example, by Max Weber (Weber, 1920: 166ff.): 'Neither indolence nor indulgence but accomplishment alone serves to celebrate His glory as is God's unequivocal will' (Weber, 1920: 167). If you want to be happy, you have to do something about it, is what Weber would have us believe. The contemplative viewpoint, in contrast, defines happiness as something which exists and which is available to everybody, and not as something which has to be acquired.

Neither in this discussion nor the previous one is it clear whether the participants start to take on each other's perspectives or relativize their own positions, but one thing is certain: differences are clearly identified as such and the participants see them as individual differences, which are, however, embedded in different cultural traditions, as outlined above. In the course of the discussion on happiness, not only the differences become

clear but also the similarities, namely that all participants consider happiness to be some-thing worth pursuing. Only once such similarities have been established does it make sense to point out the differences in how happiness may be achieved. Once again, the interweaving of differences and similarities becomes apparent which could lead to a cultural mixture typical of transcultural developments.

From the perspective of network actors, network activists and bloggers

Interviews with network actors and bloggers are another source of insights from the research project 'Communicative publics in cyberspace', proving that virtual public spaces have the potential to be transcultural/transnational. In all, 32 thematically struc-tured interviews were carried out with participants from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Slovenia, the USA, Canada, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. As was the case with the online discussions, the interviews were evaluated fol-lowing the principles of grounded theory.

My examples are taken from two interviews, one with a 26-year-old architect from Saudi Arabia who makes use of Mideast Youth and has his own blog, and the other with a 26-year-old photographer of Swiss nationality and Lebanese descent who used to live in the USA and is based at present in Saudi Arabia and who writes several blogs.

Both of them see the internet as an infinite space which is relatively free of restric-tions and which encourages people to open up to the outside world. Both, too, empha-size how they want to take advantage of the opportunities the internet opens up to them. The photographer puts the emphasis on free communication when he explains, 'When you have something like blogging, where you have no limitations … you don't have someone above you saying "No, you can't write this" ', while the architect promotes the idea of opening up when he describes the internet as being the medium 'where interac-tion between Saudi Arabians and [the] international community started to happen'. Both of them emphasize that they can easily imagine an interweaving of perspectives on an equal footing, one of the core elements of transculturality/transnationality. While they also try and come to grips with events in the Western world and let themselves be inspired by the West, they are principally interested in showing the world the way they see things. 'I'm trying to allow people to look into things especially in Saudi Arabia', is how the architect explains it, 'and especially when they look back to Saudi Arabia through Mideast Youth or through my blog, to see the social and intellectual fabric of what makes Saudi Arabia Saudi Arabia', knowing full well that censorship is prevalent in his own country and that Western journalists are subject to it as well. His intentions further the goal of enabling cultural perspectives to intermingle in the first place because one of the prerequisites for that is equally balanced perspectives. Otherwise it would end up with the weaker perspective being colonized by the stronger one. It is a matter of personal concern to both network actors/bloggers that the country and culture they are reporting about online should find recognition all over the world without asserting its dominance in the process. That becomes quite clear in their conceptions of them-selves as expressed in the interviews. Here they see themselves as being part of a world in which different cultures engage with each other, even if that engagement is only in the internet to start with. As one of the two puts it, 'In real life I'm a Saudi guy living in

Saudi Arabia and talking within [the] one kilometer radius that is around me … . But online I'm multinational, I'm multi-geographical.' And the other sees himself as a cosmopolitan with social contacts all over the world: 'I'm a citizen of the world. My friends are from different parts of the world.'

Developmental tendencies

Where is this journey leading us? What influence do processes of mixing up cultures and recombining them in virtual networks have on lifestyles and attitudes towards life? It would not be far fetched to assume that precisely those intercultural encounters in the internet are intensified which have already become everyday reality outside digital networks for many in the world. These days, lifestyles no longer stop at national borders but extend into other cultures (Welsch, 2001: 264). Whether we are talking about managers working in international companies, academics participating in global networks, or skilled labourers who are deployed to other countries, migrants generally organize their social and economic points of reference across national borders, often living in several places at the same time (Hess and Lenz, 2001: 23). They create a transcultural space in which information, images and goods circulate along with them (Hess and Lenz, 2001: 23). Lifestyles in which unambiguity and clear 'either-or' relations dominate are giving way to *hybrid lifestyles.* In virtual space, it is not only diversity and cultural encounters that multiply, but also the opportunities for weaving lifestyles and identities from various cultural threads, making the need for unambiguous cultural classification obsolete, as the network actor from Saudi Arabia put it when he described himself as being 'multinational and multi-geographical'.

In association with the hybrid lifestyles acquiring new stages on which to act thanks to digital media, the question arises as to the feeling of belonging. Where do digital *flâneurs* belong, Wolfgang Welsch's so-called 'cross-cutting people' (*kulturelle Mischlinge* in German) (Welsch, 2001: 268), as they draw on the unlimited resources of the pool of cultural diversity for their self-image and personal strategies? Do they see themselves as being part of the worldwide internet society, as a digital avant-garde, as upholders of the society of the future, or do hybrid lifestyles ultimately make them lose out on a homeland? There are empirical indications for both perspectives but the phenomena are still too new for reliable predictions to be made. Beck does not only advocate cosmopolitanism, he also warns against postmodern multicultural arbitrariness (Beck, 2004: 92). 'What kind of connection can be made between the recognition of diversity and the compulsion to act?', he asks (Beck, 2004: 93). Beck believes that the solution is to be found in taking heed of the conflicts which inevitably arise at those points where cultural flows criss-cross and the walls are broken down that protected 'my' world. Conflicts have to be detected, named and processed if they are to encourage us to open up our own world rather than retreat into the Self.

In the discourse of social sciences and cultural studies, the positive connotations of culture prevail, in the form of countless voices and multivalent dialogues taking place between and beyond generations and cultural milieus (Benhabib, 1999: 68). But these countless voices must also be allowed to speak. Certain conditions are necessary for this, which I would like to elucidate in the final section of my article.

The conditions for transcultural lifestyles

I would like to discuss the necessary conditions on three levels: education and socialization, media ethics and political affiliation. This section is normative in character: against the background of theoretical argumentation and the exemplary results of the empirical study, I formulate the necessary socializational, ethic and political conditions for a transnational/transcultural society. In doing so I lay no claim to naming all conditions of transculturality/transnationality on a macro or meso level, or mentioning all opportunities on a micro level.

Education and socialization

If cultural mixtures, as experienced in global, digitally aided public spheres, are to be more than just endured and are not to lead to conflict, it is important that cultural differences are recognized and not suppressed, on the one hand, and that individuals take a clear stance on these differences, on the other. A vision which has been sensitized to differences is interested in the otherness of the Other and as such, distances itself from a universalistic vision which emphasizes the similarity of the Other (Beck, 2004: 76ff.).

At this point I would like to mention Emmanuel Lévinas in whose works the otherness of the Other plays a central role. I do not agree with Lévinas's viewpoint completely as both my theoretical argumentation, taking a 'porous Other' as a starting point, and the empirical examples only confirm Lévinas's assumptions to a certain extent. One of his central tenets reads: 'The Other exists in relation to itself and not in relation to a system' (Lévinas, 1998: 26). This standpoint contradicts the assumption made in this article that the Other exists in relation to the Self and the Self in relation to the Other. Consensuses arise out of the one influencing the other and vice versa, and systems arise out of these mutual influences which then become points of reference for the Self. This does not mean, however, that a system cannot be influenced by the Self – or many Selves.

But even if we do not proceed from the assumption of an independent Other, the Other is still otherwise. This other Other can call me into question – as Lévinas would also claim – and, above all, his/her presence challenges me to reply by virtue of his/her Otherness (Lévinas, 1998: 224). As Beck would claim, and as the analysis of the online discussions revealed, the difference is the starting point for transcultural/transnational processes.

A vision oriented towards differences is not exclusively interested in empathy and acceptance; aggression, too, can be triggered when the Own is threatened or social consensus is revoked, such as the consensus on abiding by human rights. It is not a question of understanding in the sense of accepting, but of reciprocal responses, which can, of course, include contradictions and which are anything but free of emotions. It is not clear where these reciprocal responses are leading us. Christoph Wulf appeals for a move towards openness (Wulf, 2006: 142), allowing for the existence of a Third sphere that would otherwise remain hidden with a strict division between the Own and the Foreign.

Media ethics

Faced with a global public sphere for the media, Nick Couldry points out the necessity for global media ethics (Couldry, 2006: 101ff.). Couldry formulates his notions of media ethics in relation to global media institutions. Digital networks can also be viewed as global media institutions and in some cases they pursue similar commercial objectives to traditional media institutions. I do not wish to relate Couldry's views on media ethics to the entrepreneurship of network actors, referring instead to their communicative behaviour and the contribution they could make to transcultural/transnational ethics.

Ethics, which Couldry defines as an 'open-ended process of reflecting on how we need to act so that we live well, both individually and collectively' (Couldry, 2006: 102), is also an important topic for network actors in global networks, and they are well aware that it is a question of clarifying the relationship between the Self and the Other, between the Own and the Foreign, as the statements from the two network actors cited in the earlier section clearly demonstrate. Couldry reacts to this need in his operationalization of the concept of ethics, which can be expressed in two fundamental questions:

   - How should *I* [author's emphasis] live?
   - How should *each of us* [author's emphasis] conduct our life so that it is a life any of us could value? (Couldry, 2006: 110)

It is not a question of the Self or the Other but of the Self-and-the-Other, whereby the Each-of-Us already signals consensus as a long-term goal.

Couldry goes one step further, delivering ideas as to how we can achieve these notions of media ethics, demanding that 'we must open up a space where we can hear others with whom we may on some things profoundly disagree but with whom we may share at least a commitment to the greater value … of living together' (Couldry, 2006: 140). Such a space can be offered in the virtual spaces of the internet by dint of its networked structure, which is able to assemble people from different countries and cultural backgrounds. The examples of online discussions presented here illustrate that virtual spaces – in accordance with Couldry – are used by participants to expose themselves to the diversity of the Other. Network actors do not only get involved with such diversity, the very act of getting involved is a conscious and important step, as shown by the reply given by the founder of Mideast Youth to the question as to what would happen if Mideast Youth no longer existed, namely 'I would miss out [on] the opportunity to hear diverse opinions from people all over the region'. Couldry does not talk of a transnational or transcultural ethics but rather of a global ethics, but his explanations reveal that he takes an intensification of intercultural processes in a global world as his starting point.

Political affiliation

Transcultural public spheres constitute new possibilities of collective identification across national borders and, thus, new forms of belonging: online and offline. These forms of belonging collide with long-established forms of political affiliation based on the concept of the 'citizen' (Benhabib, 2008: 13). For Seyla Benhabib, the proliferation

of sub- and supranational spaces calls the traditional concept of citizenship into question (Benhabib, 2008: 13). In most countries, citizenship rests on the three principles of territory, ancestry and consensus (Benhabib, 1997: 7). In view of our increasingly networked world, territoriality and ancestry seem to have become anachronistic criteria for belonging, based on the fiction of a closed society (Benhabib, 1997: 11). Communities are not only emerging across national borders thanks to global organizations, cooperation and mergers in the physical world but also online with the support of digital media in countless virtual communities with different objectives and interests. Due to the deterritorialized reality of online networks, territoriality is a particularly anachronistic way of demarcating space (Benhabib, 2008: 15). According to Benhabib, virtual communities could be regarded as 'postnational communities' (Benhabib, 2008: 28), emerging on the principle of consensus, according to which an association of voluntary members makes up the actual community (Benhabib, 1997: 9). She is thus in favour of 'transnational citizenship' (Benhabib, 1997: 13) due to the increasing number of such communities reaching far beyond national affiliation. Her plea does not only raise many questions in connection with political organizations, social security systems, health care and jurisdiction but also in connection with how the implications of belonging online and belonging offline should relate to each another.

Conclusion

The question posed at the start concerning the extent to which virtual networks are becoming spaces for transcultural publics has been answered by pointing out that neither digital culture nor cultural life beyond the screen can be envisaged as a 'closed sphere' (Welsch, 2001). As a structure which extends beyond national borders, the network structure of digital spaces is amplifying a global trend which has been designated as transculturality by Welsch and as transnationality or cosmopolitanism by Beck. So far the cultural mixtures predicted by Welsch are potentially or only rudimentarily present in digital public spheres but it is the very differences which emerge in online networks and which are perceived as being important that signal that potential. Differences only appear when commonalities already exist and, above and beyond this, the perception of differences is a prerequisite for developing further commonalities. When network actors from different socio-cultural backgrounds come into contact with each other, it is likely that the commonalities that may develop will take on the character of cultural mixtures in which the Own enters into novel alliances with the Foreign. The extent to which transcultural and transnational trends might develop into formative social trends depends on the framework, however, and this will not be determined in the virtual world. Instead, the frameworks have to be established by socio-political institutions in the 'real' world. Whether this will happen or not depends on the extent to which a society is willing and able to change.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1. Page numbers refer to the literature as given in the References list; quotations and paraphrases were translated by the author when published translations/original texts were not available.
2. www.internetworldstats.com/stats.html (accessed 8 July 2013).
3. www.statistik.at/web_de/statistiken/informationsgesellschaft/ikt-einsatz_in_haush-alten/024571.html (accessed 8 July 2013).
4. Research team: Univ. Prof. DDr. Christina Schachtner, Mag. Nicole Duller, Mag. Heidrun Stückler and Diplom-Kommunikationswissenschaftlerin Katja Osljak.
5. mideastyouth.com/about-us/ (accessed 30 March 2010).

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Christina Schachtner is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Klagenfurt, Austria. Her fields of research include subject constructions and digital culture, transculturality in cyberspace, virtual communities, digital media and education, knowledge and gender in the internet and digital narratives. Among her recent publications are 'Digital media evoking, interactive games in virtual space', *Subjectivity* (2013), 6(1): 33–54; 'Wissen und Gender: Der Cyberspace als genderrelevanter Wissensraum', *Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft* (2009), H.4: 500–519; and 'Novas tecnologias exigem a renovação da educação', *Educação Unisinos* 2013, 17(1): 66–74.

Résumé

Cet article examine les courants dont l'espace virtuel est entrecroisé : Flux d'information, d'images et de communications. Grâce aux médias numériques, ces courants culturels ou, pour employer la terminologie de Schütz et Luckmann (1975), ces contextes de sens intersubjectif consistant en des valeurs, règles sociales, opinions mondiales et modèles de comportement se dissocient de plus en plus de leur base nationale. Ils sont articulés, communiqués, approuvés, rejetés ou transformés en quelque chose d'autre lors du discours en ligne. L'idée de la culture en tant que « sphère autosuffisante » est désormais obsolète à l'âge des médias numériques. Des termes tels que transculturalité et transnationalité reflètent des développements socio-culturels qui sont étroitement liés à l'évolution des médias numériques. L'article débute par une vue d'ensemble théorique de la manière dont le social est formé sous l'influence des courants culturels, la question étant de savoir si des tendances transculturelles sont en train d'émerger au sein des nouveaux publics virtuels et comment de telles tendances peuvent être identifiées. Les données empiriques tirées d'un projet à plus vaste échelle intitulé « Construction du sujet et culture numérique » montrent comment les différences sont traitées en fonction des tendances divergentes d'homogénéisation, de particularisation et d'hybridation.

Mots-clés

Réseaux numériques, culture, transculturalité, publics virtuels

Resumen

Este trabajo aborda los flujos que atraviesan el espacio virtual: flujos de información, imágenes y comunicación. Estos son flujos culturales o, para usar la terminología de Schütz y Luckmann (1975), contextos significativos intersubjetivos que consisten en valores, normas sociales, visiones del mundo y patrones de comportamiento, que se disocian cada vez más de su base nacional gracias a los medios de comunicación digitales. En el discurso en línea son articulados, aprobados, calificados, rechazados o transformados en algo más. La idea de la cultura como una "esfera autónoma" se ha vuelto obsoleta en la era de los medios de comunicación digitales. Términos tales como

transculturalidad y transnacionalidad reflejan los desarrollos socio-culturales que están estrechamente vinculados con la evolución de los medios de prensa digitales. Este trabajo comienza con una visión general teórica de cómo se forma lo social bajo la influencia de los flujos culturales, preguntando si las tendencias transculturales emergen en los nuevos públicos virtuales y cómo se pueden identificar tales tendencias. Los hallazgos empíricos extraídos de un proyecto más amplio sobre "construcciones del sujeto y cultura digital" muestran cómo las diferencias se manejan de acuerdo a las tendencias divergentes de la homogenización, la particularización y la hibridización.

Palabras clave

Redes digitales, cultura, transculturalidad, públicos virtuales