D I G I T H U M
The Humanities in the Digital Era

"Current perspectives in human and social science research. Current Research in the UOC's Arts and Humanities Department" Dossier

Mediaccions

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Abstract

This article describes the activities of the Mediaccions research group, which studies digital culture and changes in cultural practices as mediated by technology, focusing, in particular, on the internet and the new media. The study of digital culture covers a wide range of agents, practices and material and narrative devices linked to contemporary cultural production, all of which we examine from an empirical, qualitative and interdisciplinary perspective. Our current research includes analysis of emerging creative practices in which individuals participate in content creation; this covers anything from video and photography production to collaborative cinema and co-creation by users, artists and the culture industry. In terms of the culture circuit, we examine not only tensions in the fields of production, distribution, regulation and consumption, but also in identities, subjectivities and forms of sociability that arise in the relationship between users and the information and communication technologies. We explore embodiment and gender issues in digital interactions, the subjective experience of social agents in technological design and the generation of collective identities using technology, as happens with bloggers and activists who use the web as a tool for social change.

Keywords

digital culture, qualitative methodologies, theory of practice, content creation, user experience, materialisation, digital technologies

Mediaccions

Resum

Aquest article presenta l'activitat de recerca del grup Mediaccions sobre cultura digital i l'estudi de les transformacions de les pràctiques culturals per mitjà de les mediacions tecnològiques, especialment relacionades amb internet i els nous mitjans. L'estudi de la cultura digital, tal i com l'entenem, inclou un conjunt heterogeni d'actors, pràctiques, dispositius materials i narratives relacionades amb la producció cultural contemporània, a la qual ens acostem des d'una perspectiva empírica, qualitativa i interdisciplinària.

Les nostres línies de recerca actuals estan relacionades amb l'anàlisi de pràctiques creatives emergents vinculades a la participació dels usuaris en la creació de continguts, que inclouen des de les pràctiques productives en vídeo o fotografia fins al cinema col·laboratiu o les pràctiques de cocreació entre usuaris, artistes i indústries culturals. Atenent el circuit de la cultura, no només examinem les tensions en l'àmbit de la producció, distribució, regulació i consum, sinó també processos identitaris, subjectivitats i formes de sociabilitat que emergeixen en la relació entre els usuaris i les tecnologies de la informació i la comunicació. En aquesta direcció es tracta d'explorar els processos de corporalització i les pràctiques de gènere en les interaccions digitals, l'experiència subjectiva dels actors socials en el disseny tecnològic, o bé la generació d'identitats col·lectives entorn de la tecnologia, com en el cas dels bloguistes i les formes d'activisme que articulen internet com a eina de transformació social.

Paraules clau

cultura digital, metodologies qualitatives, teoria de pràctiques, creació de continguts, experiència d'usuari, materialitat, tecnologies digitals

D I G I T H U M

The Humanities in the Digital Era

Digital culture

The Mediaccions research group[1] studies digital culture and how cultural practices are transformed through technological mediation.

The spread in recent years of the information and communication technologies and the popularisation of audiovisual production and distribution tools and platforms has led to a creative explosion outside the institutional and industrial culture circuits. Such productions, made with limited means by individuals and groups regarded as 'non-professional', who usually use the internet as a base camp, are an emerging and growing phenomenon, part of what is called *user-generated content*. Our interest in this phenomenon is not merely aesthetic; we are also interested in the production and distribution processes that point to new forms of participatory social interaction in all fields of culture.

We define digital culture as a broad set of practices and material and narrative devices associated with contemporary cultural production based on the use of digital communication and information technologies. Digital culture is a complex object of study, given its multiple dimensions, contexts, practices and technologies. We deliberately avoid restricting our study of specific cultural forms or technologies examined from an excessively compartmentalised perspective. Our analysis of digital culture focuses on the cultural practices associated with visual production and digital technologies and their links to the internet. It can be defined as the study of creative practices in the digital media and of the emergence of new cultural forms that redefine the relationship between producers and the public and between everyday life, sociability and cultural creation fields. We do not, for example, specifically study video games, but we explore how they are related to other cultural forms and practices; nor do we study specific platforms like Facebook, rather we explore how Facebook mediates social interaction and new forms of social production and cultural exchange. We study specific cultural practices, but not blogs, video games, movies or specific social networks and digital platforms. Through dialogue and comparison between different research studies we analyse how symbolic production, material aspects of technology and the subjective experience of social agents are expressed and related.

Theoretical and methodological approaches

The Mediaccions group is interdisciplinary, composed as it of researchers from disciplines as different as anthropology,

audiovisual broadcasting, the fine arts, design, sociology and social studies of science and technology. Our expertise in different research areas converges in our analysis of various aspects of digital culture. Group cohesion has been built on identifying shared research interests that have gradually shaped our research activities. This approach based on different disciplinary perspectives and experiences has led us to define a common object of study focused on cultural practices and digital technologies and that emphasises, in particular, the visual and creative aspects, the uses and appropriations of these technologies by different groups and the context of everyday life.

The study of social aspects of technology in recent decades has made the need for an interdisciplinary approach evident. Social studies of science and technology have shown the fruitfulness of multidisciplinary approaches originating in research characterised by its empirical focus. The same has occurred with communication studies, particularly reception studies, where interpretive text analysis and media impact studies have given way to alternative approaches based on ethnographic fieldwork and analyses of what people do with and through the media, but without dismissing the material processes involved. Social studies of the internet and the associated digital communication and information technologies are an interdisciplinary endeavour that has been nurtured by, among others, anthropological studies of the emergence of a digital culture, social, psychosocial, cognitive and linguistic studies of computer-mediated interactions and studies of the design, use and appropriation of cultural artefacts from the sociology and communication studies fields.

The study of digital culture as we understand it (that is, the analysis of a wide range of practices and material and narrative devices related to contemporary cultural production) implies cross-fertilisation between the three kinds of interdisciplinary social research described above. Our proposal is to guide the study of digital culture from an interdisciplinary perspective without getting lost in the attempt. That is, to gradually build a body of empirical work on different cultural practices, from concrete and partial research, that will allow us to develop a complex, critical and comparative vision of our object of study. Our hope is that the results will provide a new perspective on cultural production and innovation practices.

The need to equip ourselves with new techniques and analytical methods so as to obtain data for our study of digital culture reflects our concern to develop social science knowledge. Specifically, we are concerned with how it is possible to develop new forms of knowledge production through the digital technologies (Hine, 2006; Wouters *et al.*, 2009). Despite our interdisciplinary context, we share the same methodological approach, which is the development of empirical studies based on different cultural contexts and

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1. The Mediaccions group, formally recognised by the Generalitat de Catalunya since 2009, is composed of Elisenda Ardévol, Gemma San Cornelio, Antoni Roig, Begonya Enguix, Ruth Pagès, Edgar Gómez-Cruz, Adolfo Estalella, Jaume Ferrer and Débora Lanzeni. For further information, visit: <http:\\mediacciones.es>

forms (video games, blogs, photography, video, etc). We are particularly interested in technological mediation of production and transformation in the culture circuit (Hall, 1997) in a context of technological convergence and the media resulting from the emergence of new cultural means for participation and collaboration.

The qualitative and ethnographic focus of our research regarding the production of empirical data is based on the use of case studies and intensive fieldwork, the production of a range of data that is not easily parameterised and interpretation and analysis of data taking into account human and nonhuman agents. This means that the research design takes into account the different agents involved in the development of the object of our study and also how these agents participate in defining what we need to know, in the practical results that we want to obtain and in the ethical relationships that we establish. The potential of the multidisciplinary and plural focus of our methodology lies in the possibility for extracting elements for common reflection from research projects that apparently belong to different subject areas and disciplines.

One of our main concerns is to develop theoretical tools for multidisciplinary analysis of digital culture, departing from an approach based on studying practices and responding to the question: What people do with digital media and technologies? (Couldry, 2004). As a reference point, this theoretical approach is sufficiently well developed in the social sciences with the works of Bourdieu, Foucault and de Certeau, Knorr Cetina, Schatzki and von Savigny (after Wittgenstein) and in more recent media anthropology contributions by Couldry, Bird and Postill. Our approach to the analysis of practices aims to establish a common starting point between the different disciplinary approaches, avoiding 'media-centred' (media influenced), 'text-centred' and 'culturalist' stances, based exclusively on the interpretation of texts, and cultural and 'techno-centred' products (technological determinism). Besides, the practice-based approach unifies our research projects and allows us greater freedom of experimentation with different theoretical frameworks, while, at the same time, not forcing us to define *a priori* the analytical categories for each particular study. This has been helpful, for example, in questioning certain assumptions very much taken for granted. We have thus constructed our object of study through the development of methodological reflection and the search for new theoretical perspectives.

Group production

So far, our research has materialised in specific studies of digital culture, including analyses of changes in different cultural practices —whether film, art, games, amateur photography and video production, activism, citizen journalism, gender and the body— in different technological environments —virtual communities, websites, blogs, social networks. Below we briefly outline the

collective research projects and doctoral theses implemented within the framework defined by the group.

Creative practices in the new media

Henry Jenkins (2003, 2006) describes the contemporary cultural creation context from the standpoint of the complex and sometimes conflicting interactions between the corporate perspective and the participatory culture perspective. Our research explores creative processes in the new media in general, but especially focuses on new forms of production taking place in the intersection between industry and amateur, independent or artistic creators. We critically analyse the concepts of co-creativity and the participation of public and audiences in audiovisual production, while endeavouring to understand how all these phenomena are shaped in the contemporary culture context.

Our track record of research into emerging creative practices and user participation in media content creation —both through the individual researchers in the team and through the *Mediaccions* research group— departs from theorising regarding video games in the audiovisual culture context, taking the methodological approach of the theory of practice and the concept of the game as the basis for and a feature of the new media (Roig *et al.,* 2009; Ardèvol *et al.,* 2011). On the one hand, we have studied the phenomenon of self-productions in the context of media practices associated with the new media (Ardèvol *et al.,* 2007), exploring video productions on the internet in a more localized way through online representations of the Madrid underground. This preliminary work has enabled us to define a methodology that combines different qualitative methods, such as video analysis, observation and analysis of the display and production context (internet) and the perspective of the creators themselves (as gleaned through interviews). On the other hand, we have also explored collaborative forms of web audiovisual production and its relationship to the culture industry (San Cornelio, *et al.*, 2007). These initial investigations raise many questions about specific forms of video self-production on the internet and the linkage between these creations and local reality in a highly globalised internet.

This theme is currently being developed in the framework of an R+D project, regarding creative practices and participation in the new media (HAR2010-18982), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation. We address, among other issues, collaborations between artists and industry (Pagès, *et al.*, 2009), collaborative film production (Roig, 2009) and the co-creation practices of a community of modders, which is right now under development.

Presentation of the body on the internet

The interweaving of bodies and identities is central to personal interaction through social networks. The study of personal identity

in connection with the body as presented through images is an issue that interests us as a key element in digital culture. This line of research is part of an R+D project on the presentation of the body in public spaces (SEJ2007-60792). We explore embodiment strategies and mechanisms in digital interactions and also examine internet gender practices, understanding that it is crucial to analyse the intersections between gender and body in computer-mediated communication.

We have thus launched a comparative study based on fieldwork in Match.com, a global dating network that is predominantly heterosexual in orientation (Ardèvol, 2005) and extensive fieldwork on the subject of gender (Enguix, 2010). In our project, the latter has been extended to the analysis of the Bearwww.com website for homosexuals. Our aim is to analyse how images of the body in the internet relate to everyday social practices and how the internet constitutes a privileged space for studying new strategies for presenting the self and for considering the interactions of users and the effects of these interactions on strategies (Enguix *et al.*, 2010*a*).

The objectification of interpersonal relationships and identities is a relevant practice in an environment that, in theory, is believed to enhance anonymity, render the body invisible and dissolve the unique relationship between body and identity. Internet personal relationships do not represent a dematerialisation of identity or a transformation of body type. However, they do amplify cultural trends on the representation of masculinity and femininity and, in some cases, contribute to the visibility and legitimacy of identities and resistant sub-groups, as happens with 'bears' in the gay community. But, just as the body is staged as a consumer object, so too do personal relationships tend to be organized from market models (Enguix *et al*., 2010b).

Subjectivity in digital photography

The creative practices of internet users not only alter the pace of the culture industry, but also point to new forms of sociability and subjectivities. Within the group, doctoral research by Edgar Gómez describes how the relationship between digital image production and the online platforms currently used for their dissemination generate new forms of sociability and subjectivities. The social function of photography —as expressed in canonical anthropological and sociological studies by Bourdieu and Chalfen and phenomenological studies by Barthes— seems inadequate to explain phenomena created by digital photography. Ethnographic fieldwork, whether in the classroom or online, focuses particularly on the practices of a group of photographers using the Flickr platform so as to describe and explain digital photography practices and how the 'web image' constitutes a key element of digital culture. Whereas analogue photography is characterised primarily by its representational character, web images are characterised by their potential for connecting and capacity as an interface.

Images on the web are studied in two broad analytical categories: *a)* the relationship between digital photography and the formation of subjectivities —in order to understand, and act in, the world— constituted through photographic practices in everyday life and socialisation in interactive groups (Gomez, 2008); and *b*) changes in the cultural field of photography arising from these individual and collective practices. Two particular cases are self-portraits —a practice once reserved for art photography and now a paradigmatic practice in digital photography— and the distinction between professional and amateur, which traditionally characterised photography but is blurred by digital photography.

The materialisation of hope in blogging

Another digital culture research topic is the practice of blogging, the social and political transformations associated with the digital technologies and the nature of these discourses in relation to daily life. More specifically, Adolfo Estalella's doctoral research deals with expectations regarding the internet as a tool for social transformation. The fieldwork focuses on a group of Spanish blogging enthusiasts who have blogged intensively and for a prolonged period of time. Actively involved in building the blogosphere, they aspire to transforming society through the internet and digital technologies and achieving greater democratisation, especially in the fields of culture and politics.

One of the main methodological strategies was the use of a 'field blog', which enabled the researcher to make contact with bloggers, study the significance of blogging first-hand and participate in face-to-face meetings. Bloggers bring into play many devices and artefacts, such as images, videos and favourite links, which all form part of everyday blogging practice. The face-to-face encounters make clear the link between political discourse, blogs and a whole range of material stratagems, for example, photos taken specifically to be published online and in a blog. The production of a blog is not limited therefore to just writing, but involves other practices such as photography, reflection on the usefulness of blogs, etc (Estalella *et al.*, 2007).

In monitoring these intensive bloggers ethnographically, we explore the emergence, dissemination and materialisation of hope, noting the close temporal relationship between intensive blogging and a particular focus on the future —two dimensions of hope inscribed in the material infrastructure that makes blogging possible (Estalella, 2008).

Design experiences,
virtual reality and locative media

Some authors generically define the *new media* as a set of technologies, devices, practices and trends that connect phenomena

as diverse as technological innovation, social transformation, communication and design. The digital technologies that characterise these media have given rise to a comprehensive set of interactive artefacts, not all based on the internet and not all online applications. Some current examples are the development of what are called *locative media*, «augmented reality» projects and other interactive systems based on virtual reality models. Jaume Ferrer's doctoral project, concerning virtual reality systems as shared experiences, includes an ethnographic analysis of interactive device design and the expectations of designers regarding use experiences, in contrast with the experiences of people who have not directly participated in the design —usually a much larger number of people with very different profiles (Soler-Adillon, *et al.*, 2009).

Along similar lines, we aim to research social and cultural transformations in the conceptualisation of space and the experience of place in the digital technologies associated with geolocation. This research topic will be focused from an initial reflection on artistic projects with a strong experimental and social commitment component that use these technologies (San Cornelio, 2008, 2010).

In short, the Mediaccions group's research lines are open to different kinds of analysis of digital culture and to explorations of the growing overlap between technology, cultural production and social transformations, as we believe that this broad focus in the study of everyday practices enables us to move towards a better understanding of cultural innovation.

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DIGITHUM The Humanities in the Digital Era

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The group is made up of researchers with differing backgrounds and from a range of disciplines, including social and cultural anthropology, sociology, communication departments, the fine arts, design and science, technology and society. It includes lecturers from the UOC's Arts and Humanities Department and Information and Communication Department.

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