

QUESTION 2:

How have media shaped our sense of time and space in modernity? Discuss in detail in your answer at least two pieces of media research.

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MC71045A Introduction to Media and Communications Theory

MA in Media and Communications

The 20th century saw a continual acceleration in both the *speed* of media delivery and in the *amount* of media content delivered. Prior to the modern invention of the telegraph and subsequent electronic communication technologies, communication was contingent upon physical limitations of geography and transportation (Meyrowitz 116). Messages could travel only as fast as the person, horse, ship, *et al.*, could cover the distance between sender and receiver. The *volume* of information able to be delivered was similarly limited by physical practicalities – for example, it would be unthinkable for a settler on the Oregon Trail to travel with hundreds of books when there’s more pressing issues of food, water and clothing with which to be concerned.

Due to the inherently physical form of these pre-electronic forms of communication and also owing to the lack of a common standardised calendar, time and space were still very much bound together in pre-modern cultures. As Anthony Giddens notes in *The Consequences of Modernity*, “‘when’ was almost universally either connected with ‘where’ or identified by regular natural occurrences” (17). However, with the emergence of uniform world time and new telecommunication technologies in the mid-to-late 19th century, this connection between ‘when’ and ‘where’ began to unravel (Thompson 32). In the modern world of the telegraph, the telephone and the radio, where information could now travel across vast distances at rapid, almost instantaneous speeds, electric communication technologies fractured previous spatial and temporal boundaries and began to reshape society and our understanding of time and space in global, abstract terms rather than in a particular, localised context. Since the mid-20th century, a considerable amount of media theory and research has been devoted to examining the changes brought upon our sense of time, space and place by new information and communication technologies (ICTs).

In light of these technological developments and subsequent inquiries into their social impacts, what kind of changes can we discern in our relation to and understanding of time and space? Are human senses of time and space irrelevant or even possibly *annihilated* in a (post)modern world dominated by electronic and digital media technologies, as proposed by theorists such as Marshall

McLuhan? I will suggest that this totalised view is not completely accurate – that while ICTs have certainly reshaped traditional definitions of what is ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘then’ and now’, and ‘public’ and ‘private’, we still experience everyday life, mediated and otherwise, through many immediate temporal and spatial contexts – time and space are pluralised and redefined by ICTs rather than marginalised or destroyed. By examining the research of Claus-Dieter Rath in relation to television and Joshua Meyrowitz’ theorisation of ‘placelessness’ in electronic media, then turning to Marjorie Ferguson’s inquiry into the redefinition of time and space along with Shaun Moores’ concept of the ‘Doubling of Place’, and ending in an investigation of the role of Internet technologies in everyday communication and life, I hope to outline the ways in which media technologies can shape and influence *plural* experiences of intersections of time and space.

The Marginalisation of Space and Time in Media

The homogenisation or disappearance of ‘here’ and ‘there’ is a common notion among theorists of media technologies, especially those involved in the study of television as a social phenomenon. In *Live Television and Its Audiences*, Claus-Dieter Rath looks at the ways in which television events cut across geographical and social boundaries to construct new social realities over distance. For Rath, the power of television does not lie solely in its ability to *influence* reality and perception, but in its ability to *constitute* reality itself across the ‘space of the broadcast media’:

“New modes of ordering reality emerge at the push of a button: the world of television language, television geography, television community. Television thus can create social reality, an ability of a quite different order from merely improving family or community life” (89).

In Rath’s view, television constitutes a new form of community, in which ‘community’ no longer represents a contiguous group of people in a localised, physically proximate space with shared interests and common goals; rather, in the imaginary collectivity of the ‘television community’, physical proximity to the other or others becomes less important than the belief in community through shared

visual perception. The image of 'reality' becomes just as important as reality itself as the broadcast provides a sense of 'being there' and 'inscribes its audiences into the social order' through the simultaneous perception of its symbolic value, even if the event in question is happening thousands of miles away. Rath describes this symbolic ordering across distance as the "live aura" of televised events (89). It's interesting that Rath uses the term 'aura' here to describe the shared symbolic experience of a television event (which is always an act of reproduction and re-presentation), for I would argue that Walter Benjamin has a different understanding of the relationship between technological reproduction and 'aura'. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin suggests that contemporary techniques of reproduction actually act to destroy the 'aura' of a work, that a reproduction will always lack the unique, 'authentic' position in time and space that an original work possesses (50). But for Benjamin, this detachment from time and space through reproduction liberates art from its dependence upon traditional cultural heritage and ritual, which opens up a possibility for a function of art based in politics rather than in artistic function. The contrast between Rath and Benjamin's understanding of the aura in time and space is striking – while they both see a compression of time and dislocation from geographic and social space caused by media technologies, Rath views this shifting of time and space as a process through which the new geographic entity of the 'broadcast media' can create a powerful and simultaneous social reality by the constitutive effects of the 'live aura'. Benjamin, on the other hand, reads the loss of 'original' time and space through media reproduction as a way to include political agency in artwork by freeing art from its dependence upon cultural rituals and 'reactivating' the produced objects in new historical and political contexts.

In *No Sense of Place*, Joshua Meyrowitz makes a similar case for the dislocation of time and space due to electronic media and also that previous boundaries between public and private spheres have become blurred and reshaped in a world awash with ICTs. For Meyrowitz, the inherent form of a communication medium leads to different types of information being conveyed. He argues that printed and written communications are communicative, discursive and digital, whereas electronic

communications are expressive, presentational and analogue. Print as a 'content' medium communicates through linear, abstract, symbolic language which can be turned 'on' and 'off' at will, but visual electronic media as media of 'feeling' rely on the presentational aspects of expression, emotion, gestures, vocalisations, movements, and speaking which are tied to personal experience. For example, when we watch a politician engage in televised debate or a close-up of an interviewee on a programme such as 'Panorama', we notice and remember "The sudden loss of breath, the welling of tears in the eyes, the voice that cracks with emotion or moves steadily through a difficult passage" (Meyrowitz 100). In the presentational expressiveness of television, as Meyrowitz' argument goes, the personal realm of face-to-face interaction is 'thrust' into the public arena. In addition to this blurring of the boundaries between public and private spheres, Meyrowitz also describes how the connection between physical and social space is apparently dissolved by the ubiquity of electronic media across time and space:

"Electronic media destroy the specialness of place and time. Television, radio, and telephone turn once private places into more public ones by making them more accessible to the outside world. And car stereos, wristwatch televisions, and personal sound systems such as the Sony 'Walkman' make public spaces private. Through such media, what is happening almost anywhere can be happening wherever we are. Yet when we are everywhere, we are also no place in particular" (125).

According to Meyrowitz, our physical location no longer determines the confines of our social position or with whom we may interact (115). We see echoes of Marshall McLuhan in Meyrowitz' claim that electronic media destroy notions of time and space. McLuhan wrote that "electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of 'time' and 'space' and pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men" (Ferguson 163), and famously described this informational shift in terms of a 'Global Village', his now-legendary prophesy of non-contiguous worldwide 'tribal' communities that would be formed with the electronically-induced compression of time and space (McLuhan 126).

While the relatively recent emergence of popular 'social networking' websites such as Myspace and Facebook appear to bear out McLuhan's prediction of a global information network connecting various 'tribes' of people around the world without concern for time and space, perhaps the actual effects of 'new' media on our sense of time and space in modernity aren't so cut and dried.

The Pluralisation of Space and Time in Media

In these media accounts thus far, we've seen a tendency toward a marginalisation of issues of space and time. According to Rath, live television events cut across geographic and social boundaries to constitute new 'television' communities based around the symbolic value of events rather than around physical contiguity. Benjamin also sees a loss of concern for 'authentic' time and space in the contemporary decay of the aura. For Meyrowitz and McLuhan, electronic media bring a non-linear, instant world of information in which 'everything can happen everywhere' while at the same time giving us a feeling of being 'no place in particular.' However, is our sense of time and space as truly marginalised in the (post)modern media world of all-pervading ICTs as these theorists suggest? Returning to Giddens, I would argue that the process of *disembedding*, in which social and cultural relations are lifted out of purely local contexts of interaction and realigned across and over contexts both local and global (21), is a better way to understand the complexities of the influence of ICTs on our sense of time and space. The *extension* and/or *compression* of the scope of time-space disarticulation by media is not necessarily equal to its *destruction*.

In *Electronic Media and the Redefining of Time and Space*, Marjorie Ferguson attempts to dispel the 'techno-orthodox' belief that time and space have become inconsequential in the age of electronic media and suggests that electronic technology has actually *magnified* concerns of time and space in many ways. Writing in 1990 (before the Internet boom but during a period of great expansion in telecommunications networks), Ferguson outlines several spheres in which temporal and spatial concerns are realigned and amplified because of ICTs rather than 'annihilated': in telecommunications, with the growth of international telephone traffic via fibre optic and satellite technologies

(157); in financial networks through the 'relativizing of time-space differences to the activities of economic institutions' (158)¹; in television production and consumption through the spread of 'live' 24 hour global coverage, scheduling innovations, and 'colonisation of global television space' by transnational media ownership (158-159); in work organisation through mobile technologies (cell-phones, laptops, etc) which allow for greater mobility but which also place individuals at the immediate disposal of their employers (159); and in household behaviour as people and families in the domestic space adjust to new technical skills and knowledge required to operate and interact with ICTs in the home. Clearly, one model of a 'marginalised' time and space is not sufficient to describe the myriad ways in which we interact with ICTs on a daily basis. Neither, according to Ferguson, can ICTs have the same influences and uses across diverse groupings of people and ideas:

"Just as they have differential access to new and old communication media, so do different cultures, social groups and institutional sources of power perceive, categorize and prioritize temporal and spatial boundaries differently" (153).

In a more recent essay published in 2004, *The Doubling of Space*, Shaun Moore touches upon some of the same topics as Ferguson and also argues for a pluralisation and amplification of space and time due to electronic media rather than a marginalisation. He takes issue with Meyrowitz' claim that we are 'relatively placeless' in modern electronic society and proposes instead that electronic media can possibly connect us to multiple places at once and pluralise our social relationships...quoting Nick Couldry, Moore suggests that media can perhaps 'multiply the interconnections between places' rather than reducing or weakening them (23).

¹ One recent example of the influence of ICTs on financial markets is how a fake internal email at Apple made its way onto the web and almost immediately led to a drop in stock value: On Wednesday, May 16th, 2007, an email was supposedly sent from an employee of Apple, Inc., detailing release delays to both their long-awaited mobile 'iPhone' and to Leopard, an update to Apple's Mac OS X operating system. The email quickly made its way onto Engadget.com, a popular technology and gadget blog, and from Engadget to the stock market. According to Kevin Kelleher, a technology blogger at Gigom.com, Apple's stock lost over 5% in just seven minutes: "In the volatile 23 minutes of turmoil between the minute the disinformation hit the stock market at 8:55 PST and Apple's announcement that the initial email 'is fake and did not come from Apple,' nearly 15 million shares changed hands. That's 60% of Apple's normal volume in well under a half hour" (Kelleher).

“There are opportunities in late modern life, at least for those with the economic and cultural resources to access relevant technologies of electronically mediated communication, for relating instantaneously to a wide range of spatially remote others, as well as to any proximate others in the physical settings of media use.” (23).

Moore provides an account of Lori Kendall’s reflections upon her experiences as a user in an Internet forum in order to explain how ‘online’ activities and socialisation intersect with ‘offline’ physical space in ways that overlap and overlay each other. When Kendall was ‘online’ and interacting with people far from her temporal/spatial locality, her activities are combined with the mundane tasks of everyday life – flipping through magazines, getting food, reading the mail, going to the bathroom – and just as she is speaking ‘from’ a physical place, so are the others with whom she is chatting via the Internet. As Moore points out, it’s valuable to realise that spaces of computer mediated communication exist as *a part of* everyday life rather than *apart from* it (27).

It is with an eye toward these sorts of ‘everyday experiences’ of Internet use, in the realm of the ‘mundane’ or ‘banal’, that I wish to enter into a final discussion of our sense of time and space in the modern media age. If we look at the popular examples of Myspace and Facebook, where user demographics span cultures, continents and time zones, temporal and spatial descriptions of social relations are still relied upon in order to define and develop individual and group experiences/identities. For example, Facebook organises its members into ‘networks’ based around a geographic region, a company, or an academic institution: “Join the networks that reflect your real-life communities to learn more about the people who work, live, or study around you” (“About Facebook”). Along with about 470,000 other people (as of 24 May, 2007: “London”), I’m currently a member of the ‘London’ network on Facebook, which means that I can view the member profiles of other Londoners, that I receive information about events happening in and around London, and also receive advertising and classified ads geared specifically toward my London location. I’m also a member of the ‘Goldsmiths’ network, which generates similar content based around my spatial and temporal

contexts – *when* I attended Goldsmiths and previous colleges, *where* I currently live (and where I’ve *lived* in the past), events that are happening *near* me, etc. Traditional and *plural* understandings of time and physical place are still very much in play in the everyday interpersonal interactions of Internet-based social networks.

We also see plural approaches to time and space in use of Instant Messaging (IM) technologies. In Rebecca Grinter and Leysia Palen’s paper *Instant Messaging in Teen Life*, they outline their research into everyday uses of IM by teenagers in the US and UK. Their research yielded intriguing results – teens use IM to “converse with friends outside the places and times that socializing is traditionally permitted,” and “made congregating with multiple people in such places and times easier than telephones permitted, simplifying their coordination and planning processes” (Grinter 24). The use of the phrase ‘outside the places and times’ might lead the techno-orthodox observer to conclude that these teens are ‘placeless nomads’ lost in a mediated ‘cyberspace’ of digital networks, but in reality, most IM use takes place in the realm of the everyday, the banal, the domestic – IM is used by teens to plan events such as shopping or going to movies, to collaborate on homework assignments, to chat about the day’s events, to catch up with friends, etc (25). For college students, IM also plays an important part in maintaining contact with family and friends ‘back home’ (24). While IM and other Internet technologies may help us to reconfigure and work around constraints of distance, time, domestic or office rules, and physical environments, we continue to rely upon concepts of physical place and clock time to describe and bring meaning to our lived interactions.

As these differing accounts of modern media help to articulate, it is somewhat difficult to develop an exact explanation of how our senses of time and space are changing in response to new forms of electronic media. While McLuhan and Meyrowitz claim that we are without sense of time and place in our global, electronically-mediated environment, there is also a strong argument to be made that temporal and spatial concerns still play an important part in our everyday lives and in our

interaction with media technologies. Communication may be becoming increasingly immediate and span a growing number of worldly boundaries, but immediacy does not equal annihilation.

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