

Chapter 8

The Mediation of Identity: Key Issues in Historic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Human identity, whether individual or collective, has always been conditioned by the mode(s) of communication dominant within any given society. Even in ancient times, the character of civilizations was closely linked to their affinity with particular media. However, self-identity remained largely coextensive with social interaction at the community level, and the oral transmission of knowledge. Throughout the modern period, social identity became increasingly abstracted from its original foundations in localized community and direct experience. The corresponding developments in media technologies have arguably empowered the individual subject, allowing for greater self-expression and social/political engagement. However, these technologies also enable new forms of social control. Digital media now facilitate the construction of identity outside the awareness of individuals. A present challenge is to clarify how identity, subjectivity, and agency are to be meaningfully conceived in the wake of these developments.

INTRODUCTION

Human subjectivity, as expressed through the world views, values, tastes, and self-understanding of identifiable persons, cannot be meaningfully conceived of as a property or expression of socially autonomous individuals. Rather, it represents the outcome of *inter-subjective* human interaction and communication through language. This is a basic

insight of the social sciences. It follows, therefore, that the formation of identity, whether individual or collective, has always been closely bound to the modes of communication and information storage dominant within any given society. And while it is true that communication media never act independently of other social/cultural forces, their role in the shaping of human environments, and hence individual subjectivity, deserves special

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consideration. As Marshall McLuhan (1964) famously stated, media are the “extensions of man” and as such they affect the scope, scale, pace and pattern of human affairs, while simultaneously conditioning the cognitive, perceptual and cultural orientations of individuals. This was as true in the case of ancient empires, or within the social networks of hunter/gatherers, as it remains within modern, information-based societies.

Throughout the modern period, an emphasis on the rational individual as the true arbiter of valid knowledge about the world has been paralleled by uncertainty about the very source and nature of authentic selfhood (Giddens, 1990). The origins of this paradox date back to the “print revolution”. With the increasing mediation of social life made possible by print technology, new forms of subjectivity emerged which were less grounded in local community and cultural tradition. The unceasing development of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) throughout the modern period has exacerbated this trend, with contradictory outcomes. On the one hand, new means for creative self-expression and social/political engagement continue to proliferate. In addition, governments have become better able to recognise and address the needs of their citizens, even as commerce makes a wider range of specialized goods and services available to consumers. Yet, the increasing role of ICTs in virtually all aspects of economic, political and social life has served to destabilize human identity in unprecedented ways, many of which now provide state and corporate interests with subtle new means of social control.

This chapter will address the issues touched upon above, with several specific objectives in mind. First, consideration will be given to some of the more significant and well-documented ways in which communication technologies, broadly construed, have always been implicated in the formation of human identity. Attention will be directed to key characteristics of “oral cultures”, and to examples of how media use was tied to

identity formation even in the ancient world. This will provide the backdrop for considering transformations to social identity associated with the introduction of print technology in Europe. While exploration of these issues will be far from exhaustive, contrasting particular aspects of pre-modern versus modern culture is useful for several reasons. On the one hand, it helps to underscore the fact that media never shape subjectivity independently of other historic forces. Even in the ancient world changing social conditions, including ongoing attempts by competing interests to monopolize the use of particular media, often had important implications for social identity. At the same time however, the changes associated with the print revolution were profound enough to usher in a new era, one marked by radically new conceptions of selfhood. Awareness of both of these points is vital for appreciating the dilemmas surrounding media and identity which confront us today.

In the final part of the chapter, emphasis will be placed on the ways in which the development and rapid proliferation of digital technologies have made questions of social identity increasingly problematic. Today, countless electronically mediated processes of surveillance, social identification, and human categorization work to shape human subjectivity and assign identity in ways not generally recognized by most people. At the same time, these processes depend on the information provided by consumers, citizens and workers in the course of their mundane activities. Coming to grips with this evolving reality is a daunting task, both in terms of devising theoretical concepts appropriate for a fuller appreciation of the significance of these changes, and because the processes in question often hold important implications for peoples’ lives (Lyon, 2003). In this light, I will suggest that while multiple approaches to questions of mediated identity will continue to be needed and while innovative approaches in this area have been forthcoming, more work is needed to address existing limitations in the literature. In particular, language should be developed which

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