# Critical Intercultural Communication and the Digital Environment

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# Historical data

Starting from early studies of cross-cultural similarities and difference, moving into critical studies of intercultural identity (Bardhan & Orbe, 2012), and continuing into organizationally-inspired accounts of global convergence and divergence (Stohl, 2001), the tension between identity and difference in intercultural communication has informed and shaped the field in very fundamental ways

> At that time critical scholars have also been very focused on understanding how the past has been constructed to serve different interests and the impact of those constructions on contemporary intercultural relations.
> For example, the master narrative of whiteness in the history of South Africa creates tensions with shifting racial relations in post-Apartheid era (Steyn, 2001; 2004).

❖ One of the first textbooks in the United States to incorporate social scientific or functionalist approaches with qualitative or interpretative and critical approaches to intercultural communication was titled Intercultural Communication in Contexts (Martin & Nakayama, 1997). Since then, additional textbooks have appeared and some of them focus exclusivelyon the critical approach such as Intercultural Communication: Globalization and Social Justice by Kathryn Sorrells (2013).

✓ Teaching and research in intercultural communication has been dominated by Western models of value orientations that focus on conceptual dichotomies, such as Hall's (1989) model that comprises high versus low contexts, or monochronic versus polychronic cultures, and the model by Hofstede (1980) that includes individualism versus collectivism, high versus low power distance, high versus low uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity versus femininity. These models have had a huge impact on intercultural communication teaching and research around the world.

✓ Scholars observed that even in highly individualistic Western cultures, the behaviour of most people does not fit the prevailing theoretical descriptions: they may not be self-reliant, self-confident, independent, and self-sufficient.

✓ For instance, Chinese culture is labelled as a collectivistic, high power distance, and high context culture. However, when Western researchers visit China and stay in China for a period of time, they realize that although the Chinese behave differently from Westerners in many ways, such as businessetiquettes, relationships, manners, they are not as collectivistic or polychronic as Westernized researchers, who come in attuned to difference, might think

# The history of human communication

❑ The history of human communication began with the oral or spoken tradition. Through the course of history, the dissemination of messages progressed from simply the oral tradition, to script, print, wired electronics, wireless electronics and finally digital communication.

❑ The greatest change in message dissemination in recent history occurred with the introduction of computers and the Internet in the early 1990s. Since then, this drastic change of communication medium has significantly affected humans' perception of the media, the usage of time and space, and the reachability and control of the media.

❑ In the present age of digital communication, time has been compressed by reducing the distance between different points in space, and the sense of space has led people to feel that local, national, and global space becomes obsolete (Harvey, 1990). In addition, the reachability of digital media can now extend to all people, instead of a limited audience.

- Thomas Nakayama discusses the importance of 'critical intercultural communication', i.e. an approach that he has proposed, defined and very substantially developed, with particular regard for interactions in an environment increasingly shaped by Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat.
- Since, despite the rise of the network society, overall little attention has been paid to the ways that social media influence intercultural communication, the chapter introduces examples that allow for an in-depth exploration of the ways that social inequality is reinforced in the digital environment, as well as the ways that people utilize social media to resist that inequality.

All these innovations in digital media, or so-called new media, have changed and continue to change the way we think, act, and live. For example, digitalization, as a hybridization of print and electronic media in a binary code, converts analog to digital that requires a completely different mode of production and distribution.

As Chen (2007) indicated, the impact of digital or new media on human society is demonstrated in the aspects of cognition, social effect, and a new form of aesthetics. Cognitively, new media demands a nonlinear nature and the creation of expectations for content, which directly influences the way people use media. Socially, the most manifested impact of new media is the effect of demassification, which denotes that the traditional design for a large, homogeneous audience is disappearing and being replaced by a specific and individual appeal, allowing the audience to access and create the message they wish to produce (Olason & Pollard, 2004).

# The Impact of New Media on Intercultural Communication

**1** With its distinctive features new media has brought human society to a highly interconnected and complex level, but at the same time, it challenges the very existence of human communication in the traditional sense. New media not only influences the form and content of information/messages, but it also affects how people understand each other in the process of human communication, especially for those from different cultural or ethnic groups.

**2** The emergence of the digital environment has influenced intercultural communication, but the digital environment is, of course, not monolithic. There are many different platforms and ways of communicating from Facebook to Twitter and Instagram to Snapchat. Each of these platforms has its own characteristics and strengths and weaknesses. The Internet was changing and influencing racial relations .

✓ Across these various digital platforms, one of the unique characteristics vis-à-vis traditional mass media is the role of user generated content.

✓ Awareness that the digital environment could be weaponized emerged as early as the claim that the *then-president of the United States, Barak Obama, was not born in the United States. Since the Constitution of the United States requires that only 'natural-born citizens' are eligible for the presidency, proof to the contrary would have made him an illegitimate president. While proof was never provided, Donald Trump popularized and gained widespread notoriety for related rumors on the Internet*

- ❖ The technical means of visual and audio transmission of information helped to create ideal cultural stereotypes on a global scale, which form the basis for the beginning of a new era - a metacultural period of economic development.
- ❖ The globalization of the main communication channels has given rise to cultural expansion, which is carried out by transferring cultural patterns at the information level, and unilaterally leveling socio-cultural processes in all countries of the world, forming cultural stereotypes.
- ❖ Universal cultural stereotypes do not reflect the objective socio-cultural, political and economic conditions of the present and the historical development of the culture of countries where this informational paradigm is currently created and modeled.

In the human mind, under the influence of mass culture, a certain picture of the world is formed. As a result of the impossibility of implementing some ideas, a feeling of inferiority in relation to one's own culture may arise: loss of identity with one's own culture, lack of identification with the culture of the majority; loneliness ; violation of role expectations and sense of self-identification; anxiety turns to anger and disgust after realizing cultural differences, and as a result, death from anorexia in adolescents, alcoholism, drug addiction, frequent cases of seclusion, but these are nothing more than signs of acculturation and culture shock.

- The Arab Spring first brought attention to the need to better understand intercultural communication in the digital age, because it highlighted the increasingly important role of social media in a society without open and free media (Khondker, 2011). Some scholars have analysed the way the network was built and information flowed from media sources, as well as particular types of individuals involved in the uprising.

- User-generated content, in this case through Twitter, played a significant role. However, since that time, we have come to see that the Arab Spring did not fulfil all of its promises, Twitter is not necessarily a revolutionary and liberating force, and the power of social media in countries with free and open media has been increasing as well.

# Digital Media and the Resistance to Domination



❖ The digital environment also allows people to organize collective action to change contemporary cultural conditions, because social media tools are tools that empower people to organize resistance and social change. As critical intercultural communication scholars begin to explore the possibilities of the digital environment, many new ways of using social media for social change have become more evident.

❖ In August 2014, Michael Brown, an African American male, was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St Louis.In the ensuing aftermath, activists utilized a wide range of tactics, including social media, to criticize the relationships between the police and African Americans

# Digital Media and the Resistance to Domination

❖ In this case, the hashtag *#ferguson* began trending and reporting what was happening. The early initiators, who were everyday citizens, began to build this network and connect to other stories of police shootings of African Americans.

❖ By tracking the development of this network and its features in a longitudinal way, we can understand how the activists were able to frame the relevant issues (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016).

❖ This is an example of the ways that social activists used social media to build networks and effectively reach large audiences to inform them about what was happening in Ferguson.

❖ However, it should also be noted that this was not a stand-alone strategy: activists also organized marches and more traditional forms of protest to pursue their goals.

- ❖ The point here is that the digital environment also contains tools to resist the domination of certain groups and reject older ways of thinking about race, racial difference and racisms. The Internet and social media are tools that can be used for a wide range of goals.
- ❖ Unfortunately, the rise of digital media has led to a particularly substantial increase in the empowerment of hate groups and neo-nationalist racist discourses that challenge intercultural relations, and internet companies have been unable to do much about it (Rosen, 2018).
- ❖ This means that the digital environment at this stage is considerably more of a threat rather than a benefit to intercultural relations
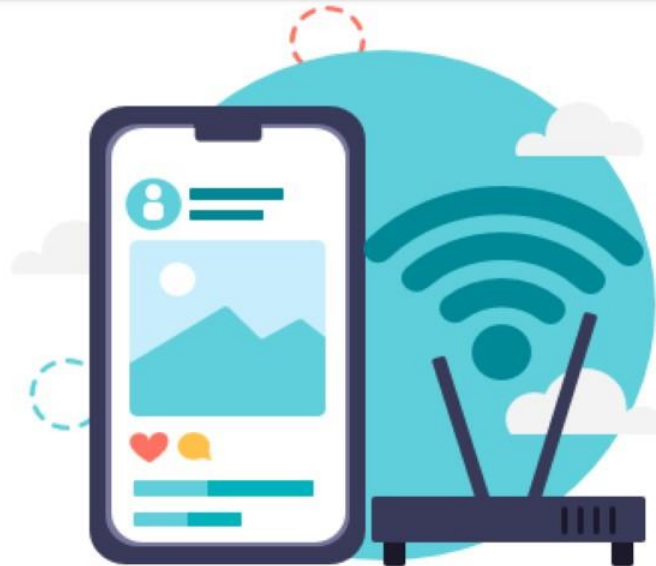
- The source of cultural conflicts in our society in the near future will be an increase in social differentiation and cultural alienation. For many decades, Soviet culture was subordinated to the idea of the behavioral and mental homogeneity of society, the idea of a single way of life for all. Cultural polymorphism is embodied today, including in various forms of life, cultivated in various social and ethno-cultural groups.

- The absence of traditions in the organization and regulation of life in new socio-professional groups, their lack of understanding of the normativity of everyday life, a rigid lifestyle of conformity, the level of style, quality of the state of life and stratification, ignorance of these norms cause problems of adaptation, psychopathology at the personal level of self-identification, and problems in the group communication and consolidation in the context of cultural change.

- The media should contribute to the development of intercultural dialogue and their role in this matter is growing. The media can get information, make it available to different cultures and peoples, which plays a huge role in shaping the identity of young people, in particular because of the rapidly growing Internet. The Internet gives people the opportunity to get in touch with each other regardless of the person's location. Thanks to Internet technologies, people can share their views and visions, social potential.

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