Essay question:

Nick Couldry wrote in 2000: 'cultural studies is an expanding space for sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research into the massive, power-laden complexity of contemporary culture' (Couldry, 2000, 1). Critically analyse what he means. Drawing on the various interpretative, textual, visual, observational and participatory methods discussed in the course and the set readings of the course, describe some of the different ways your group research project activities have addressed the challenges of empirically researching contemporary culture. You will need to spend some time in your essay describing what your research was about, but this description should mainly serve to highlight your analysis of this definition of cultural studies. You should pay particular attention in your essay to the key quotes drawn from the weekly readings (see the Moodle site for these), and show in your essay that understand them and their implications.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural studies is an academic discipline encompassing many different approaches and perspectives. As Stuart Hall states, cultural studies includes multiple discourses, trajectories, and different kinds of work (1992: 278). The field of cultural studies has always been 'marked by debate, disagreement and intervention (Storey, 1996: 2). Along with plurality of theories, it is characterized by a variety of methods used in academic research: textual analysis, visual analysis, and ethnographic approach.

With the development of new media and digital technologies, followed by changes in the production and distribution of information, cultural studies has faced new prospects and problems in the research area. In particular, some problems might be related to 'empirical crisis' caused by the proliferation 'social' data which are now routinely collected, processed and investigated by a wide range of private and public institutions (Savage and Burrows, 2007). Thus, new reality requires from social scientists to be aware of new opportunities of

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data collection and analysis. During the course 'Critical Methods in Media, Film and Cultural Studies', we were focused on how cultural studies can respond to new challenges in contemporary empirical research through improving and taking up novel methodological tools and strategies.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA AND CULTURAL STUDIES

The starting point in our introduction with cultural studies methodology was the consideration of what space cultural studies occupies. In this respect, Nick Couldry writes: 'cultural studies is an expanding space for sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research into the massive, power-laden complexity of contemporary culture' (2000: 1). Crucially, he calls to think about culture as having 'the complex and contested nature' (2000: 2). In doing so, we come to recognizing the relations of culture with power. According to Couldry, this is a fundamental basis for studying cultural phenomena. As he explains, the power relations 'affect who is represented and how, who speaks and who is silent, what counts as 'culture' and what does not' (Couldry, 2000: 2). Thus, in doing cultural research, we should always think of what structures of power (in politics, business, mass media, or other social institutions) affect particular cultural events and developments.

One of the major principles of cultural studies is approaching culture as a 'space of multiple voices and forces' (Couldry, 2000: 4) that means to acknowledge cultural complexity. This is the only way for doing open-minded, impartial research. Another important principle, pointed out by Couldry, is the need for questioning and reflexivity. Thus, we should keep in mind that, without reflecting on how our own position is formed and shaped, our analysis might not be thoughtful enough. What is also significant is that we

should carefully elaborate our research plan, questioning our approaches and methods, and, if necessary, reformulating our goals and tasks during the research project.

Contemporary cultural studies are highly connected and intersected with media studies in many respects. The strong ties of culture with media can be explained by the importance of the media in transmitting our culture through different channels. Clearly, the media play a significant role in the production, distribution and consumption of cultural goods and services. What is crucial is that the media's potentials were enhanced by the development of new media technologies and practices. According to Martin Lister and others (2009), the term 'new media' has a 'broad cultural resonance' and 'offers to recognise some big changes, technological, ideological and experiential, which actually underpin a range of different phenomena' (2009: 12). As they explain, 'new media' age is characterized by new kinds of genre and textual form, entertainment and pleasure; new ways of representing the world; new relationships between users and media technologies; new experiences of time and space, and our place in the world; new conceptions of relationships between nature and technology, the human and the artificial, the real and the virtual (Lister *et al*, 2009: 12-13). By looking at new media in their variety and plurality, the scholars describe them as digital, interactive, hypertexual, virtual and networked (Lister et al, 2009: 13).

As can be understood from the above, contemporary media studies are largely focused on exploring how 'new media' have changed and challenged the way we engage in social and cultural life. One of the aspects of this area of study is the investigation of new communication practices such as email, chat rooms, forums, blogs and social networking sites (SNS). The growing popularity of social media provides an opportunity for individuals to create and share information in cyberspace. Along with the great benefits of such activities, the disclosure of information in public might carry some risks. That is what my research group members and I have been highly interested in.

One of the first tasks for doing a rigorous academic research is to specify the research topic. Therefore, our research group started with reflecting on what exactly we would like to investigate. By discussing the ideas of how people represent themselves on social media websites, we ended up with the question of constructing the privacy by SNS users. As Imogen Tyler said in the interview, conducted in our class, when we talk about the effects of media, we should address the particular media, not 'the media' in general. It is very important to understand that different media can be created, developed and funded by different sources that influence how much power these media can have. Thus, in following the need to be specific, we chose Facebook as a particular media platform. Next, we selected the object of our research—postgraduate students of Lancaster University. This way, we came to a clear understanding of what group and what place our investigation should be based on.

By conducting a research on 'The Construction of Privacy on Facebook by Lancaster University Postgraduates', we aimed to reveal if the students concern about their privacy on Facebook, and what they do to protect it. We defined two aspects of our research, addressing the following questions: 'What does privacy on Facebook mean to Lancaster University postgraduates?' and 'How do Facebook configurations and settings affect students' practices of sharing information on its media platform?'

It should be mentioned that privacy on the social networking websites has been in a focus of different social disciplines, in particular, science and technology studies and psychology studies. However, this topic has not been deeply explored within media and cultural studies. Thus, what we aimed to do was to give a cultural view on this problem. Social networking websites can be treated as part of global digital media culture. The way people perceive privacy on social media websites, such as Facebook, influences, in a great measure, how they engage in social activities and interactions in digital space. Therefore, we

believe that the significance of our research project was determined by an attempt to look at privacy on the SNS from cultural perspective and to apply cultural methods.

During the course we were introduced to the key aspects of research practices in media and cultural studies, discussing various methodological approaches, issues and problems. What is important is that we were engaged both with academic works devoted to research methods and exemplary cases which demonstrated how different methods can be applied in practice. That helped us to get a solid basis of knowledge for planning and carrying out our own research. Apart from working with texts, we did the practical exercises in order to reflect on how we can deal with various challenges faced by contemporary cultural studies. Going forward in this essay, I will critically evaluate the key questions raised during the course and describe how we have approached them in relation to our research project.

The first part of the course was focused on textual analysis that is supposed to be an important method in cultural studies. Nick Couldry characterizes contemporary cultures by 'exceptional textual density and complexity' (2000: 67) and tries to explore how we can do an effective textual analysis in the context of such massive proliferation of texts. He criticizes the traditional literary model of textual analysis which deals with a limited number of selected texts and supposes value judgments made by a particular type of reader. What Couldry suggests is to analyze a textual environment: 'Instead of the discrete text-reader relationship, we are looking at a textual environment comprising complex patterns of flows: flows of meanings, texts and potential readers' (2000: 87). In order to see how this approach can work in practice, we have chosen an example from academic works relevant to our research, and tried to locate it in a textual environment, describing these three patterns of flows. At first, we looked at the flows of meanings of such concepts as online networking, online privacy, Facebook, privacy policy, personal information, privacy settings, profile, profile picture, and 'friends'. As we stated in our research group blog, different agents

working in media and culture spheres produce particular meanings to these notions, which are consequently accepted by social media users. Through this process, the meanings are standardized, or, in other word, naturalized. Secondly, we defined various 'texts' (e.g. personal posts, images, videos) that circulate due to SNS users' practices. And, finally, we mentioned different readers that can use and negotiate these texts and meanings: media workers, academics, media and culture researchers, SNS participants and Internet users. Through this exercise, we have learned to think about 'text' in a broader sense, as a 'social object' (Couldry, 2000) created by means of the activities of different social actors.

In our research project, we have planned to do a textual analysis by looking at the posts and comments of Lancaster Postgraduates on Facebook. This method seems to be important in order to collect useful data to see what kind of information students disclose in public. Do they post about their personal and family life? Do they discuss their intimate relationships? These questions would be in a focus of our investigation.

In the second part of the course, we spent time working with visual analysis. We started with discussing the key issues and problems surrounding visual studies, mapped out by William John Thomas Mitchell. He describes the role of visual studies in relation to other social and humanitarian disciplines, and questions some ideas and myths about visual culture. In particular, he critically approaches the question of the power of visual images to work as instruments of domination and persuasion. Without neglecting their potentials for manipulation, he offers a broader context for the analysis of visual images:

> I propose what I hope is a more nuanced and balanced approach located in the equivocation between the visual image as instrument and agency, the image as a tool for manipulation, on the one hand, and as an apparently autonomous source of its own purposes and meanings on the other. This approach would treat visual culture and visual images as go-betweens in social transactions, as a repertoire of screen images or templates that structure our encounters with other human beings (Mitchell, 2002: 175).

Crucially, Mitchell treats visual images as 'filters through which we recognize and of course misrecognize other people' (2002, 175). This way, they become mediations for face-to-face interactions, which constitute fundamental social relations. That makes him to conclude that visual culture is not just 'the social construction of vision', but also 'the visual construction of the social' (Mitchell, 2000).

A challenging part of this section was to describe an image using the 'showing seeing' method offered by Mitchell for analyzing visual images in the educational process. The idea of this exercise was to explain what we see to the imagined audience that is not familiar with the notions of visual culture, such as color, line, shape, mirrors, glasses, clothes, etc. Describing a usual photograph from Facebook by 'showing seeing method' made me think that cultural things, which we take for granted, can be really complicated for explanation.

What was also important for understanding visual methods in cultural studies was Gillian Rose's (2012) discussions of the implicit and the practice-based methodology that we have tried to apply in practice in relation to our research topic. As Rose states, the implicit methodology is focused on meaning and interpretation, while the practice-based methodology deals with practices of looking (Rose, 2012). She gives much attention to a practice described as 'consistent way of doing something, deploying certain objects, knowledges, bodily gestures and emotions' (Rose, 2012, 549). Through the notion of practice, she approaches how seeing happens:

> Different ways of seeing are bound up into different, more-or-less conscious, more-or-less elaborate, more-or-less consistent practices. Visualities are one practice among many, and in their routinization and place-specificity they make certain sorts of things visible in particular ways (Rose, 2012: 549).

As can be seen, Rose emphasizes the role of specific spaces in which visual practices take place. It matters because the way we feel, behave and move in particular places influences the way we look at visual objects and events.

An important part of the practice-based methodology is a moment of self-reflection. Drawing on Bal's definition of reflection as 'thinking of interpretative practices as both "method and object of questioning" (Bal, in Rose, 2012: 551), Rose points out the need to critically think how we interpret a visual event. Thus, it is necessary to make our own position visible; otherwise our analysis is in danger to become inaccurate.

As a weekly exercise, we have used visual culture studies' methodology, described by Rose, to analyze a profile picture of a Lancaster university female student on Facebook. By applying the implicit methodology, we were focused on the meaning of that image. What we found remarkable was that it was almost impossible to recognize a person's face in the photo (she is doing aerobics in the photo). As we presumed, by choosing this photo as a profile picture, the student wanted to pay public attention to her activity and demonstrate her skills. Thus, it can be treated as a way of self-representation in the social media. Drawing on the practice-based methodology's postulate that 'the practices are always embedded in specific places' (Rose, 2012: 549), we tried to think how that image had come to appear in a virtual space. It was evident that such a photo would not be appropriate for official documents or job application; but it was acceptable for social media websites such as Facebook. We also emphasized the importance of 'likes' and comments of the student's friends about the photo.

In our research project, we have proposed to analyze visual materials such as pictures and photos uploaded by postgraduate students on Facebook. In our case, a visual method would provide additional data for understanding how student represent themselves, and what kind of information they share (e.g. photos demonstrating their working environment, parties with friends, or intimate relationships).

The final part of the course was focused on ethnographic methods in contemporary cultural studies. Crucially, with the development of technology, new methodological tools

and devices have emerged for doing an ethnographic research. Thus, we have attempted to analyze how they work and facilitate a researcher's ethnographic project. In particular, we have looked at the methodological tool of 'configuration' applied by Lucy Suchmun in her work that addressed the question of 'how humans and machines are figured together – or configured – in contemporary technological discourses and practices, and how they might be reconfigured, or figured together differently (Suchman 2012: 49). As she states, the device of configuration 'orients us to the entanglement of imaginaries and artefacts that comprise technological projects' (Suchman 2012: 57). The term 'cultural imaginaries' implies collective forms of imagining, and refers to structures of anxieties and desires exist in the public imagination. As for 'artefacts', they are cultural products of human activity. In order to understand how imaginaries and artefacts can be entangled, we have tried to find some examples relating to our research project. Thus, we defined imaginaries about Facebook and, then, suggested that they could be materialized through such artefacts as digital devices, software programme and browser enabling to connect to Facebook, and the website's settings and options. This exercise has helped us look at the relationship between imaginaries and technologies from ethnographic perspective.

In the light of the great media and technological developments, Les Back and Nirmal Puwar (2012) offer to recognize some new 'live methods' emerging in contemporary social sciences. As they argue, modern digital devices and media platforms provide novel opportunities for conducting social research:

> The tools and devices for research craft are being extended by digital culture in a hyper-connected world, affording new possibilities to re-imagine observation and the generation of alternative forms of research data. Part of the promise of live methods is the potential for simultaneity in research and the possibility of re-ordering the relationship between data gathering, analysis and circulation (Back & Puwar, 2013: 7).

An attempt to explore and use new digital research tools for 'real-time' and 'live' investigation was highly relevant to our research project because it was connected to digital space. We have reflected on what opportunities for carrying out digital ethnographic research on Facebook we can use: to observe the activities of a large number of Facebook users at once; to have access to huge archives of data; to look over a long period of time; to see the time and the date when postings were made.

We have proposed to carry out participant observation for our research project on the construction of privacy on Facebook. By term 'participant' we mean here that, as researchers, we are part of the field we study. Without having our personal pages on Facebook, it would be impossible for us to engage with activities of users. Facebook has privacy settings enabling users to choose what information to make public or hide. Thus, by observing users' Facebook pages, we can see some settings student use to construct their privacy.

In my opinion, exploring new research tools for digital ethnographic observation is necessary for understanding new methodological approaches in contemporary media and cultural studies. However, what is very important is that we should avoid excessive optimism and remember that new devices 'produce new kinds of methodological problems as well as opportunities (Back, in Back & Puwar, 2013: 7). Thus, we should always critically evaluate research methods we use.

CONCLUSION

The scholars working within media and cultural studies do not tend to argue what method is better for doing cultural research. Instead, they often combine different methods as a good way of gathering various data for comprehensive analysis. Such an approach can be even better understood in the context of the hybridity of media. As Mitchell asserts, 'all

media are mixed media, with varying ratios of senses and sign-types' (2000: 170). In our research, for instance, a student's profile photo is not just a visual empirical material. What is significant is not just an image itself, but also surrounding 'texts': a person's description of the photo, friend's comments on it, and so on. Thus, in our research project, we have decided to combine the methods discussed during the course: participant observation, textual analysis and visual analysis. In order to complement and specify the data, we have proposed to conduct interviews with those students whose Facebook pages we chose for analysis. While doing our pilot research, we realized that this strategy is really useful to see what students say and what they actually do. Thus, I believe that the combination of various cultural studies' methods has made our research project more thoughtful.

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