Research question: How to understand the Nick Couldry’s remark that “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)?

In response to a series of fundamental questions of cultural studies regarding the “method”, including what cultural studies does, what problems it faces as well as the individual’s place in the field, Couldry remarks, “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). This essay is an attempt to analyse this quotation critically with the help of the various methods we have learnt in the course, the readings we have done, as well as what we have gained in our group project.

Cultural studies is a broad idea, covering a large number of topics, just as some scholars argued “cultural studies can only partially and uneasily be identified by such domains of interest, since no list can constrain the topics cultural studies may address in the future” (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992: 1). “Cultural studies is not one thing,” Stuart Hall remarks, “it has never been one thing” (in Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992: 3). Then what is cultural studies? Nelson et al propos the approach to understand cultural studies from a traditional strategy: “by claiming a particular domain of objects, by developing a unique set of methodological practices, and by carrying forward a founding tradition and lexicon” (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992: 1). However, cultural studies is not something that can be described as a traditional disciple. According to Nelson and other scholars, cultural studies is not merely interdisciplinary, but often “actively and aggressively anti-disciplinary – a characteristic that more or less ensures a permanently uncomfortable relation to academic disciplines” (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992: 2). Cultural studies can be seen as a process for producing knowledge on the broad human culture, and it can be better described as an approach than a discipline. In terms of its methodologies, it is interpretive and evaluative. In terms of what it is doing, it does not equalize culture with high culture or distance away from everyday life culture. All the above-mentioned characteristics make cultural studies special.

Cultural studies is about research on the massive contemporary culture. It draws from various kinds of academic fields instead of one particular discipline, importing and reshaping terms and concepts in other fields, such as gender, text, power, representation and articulation. It studies not only culture, but also relevant issues in other fields, and therefore inevitably touches upon a number of disciplines such as literature, anthropology, sociology and linguistics, and adopts their research methods. It combines feminist theory, social theory, political theory, history, philosophy, literary theory, media theory, film studies, communication studies, and political economy to analyze various cultural phenomena. In this sense, cultural studies is a research into a massive complexity. In cultural studies, culture is understood and studied as that in everyday life instead of high culture and rejects the dualism of high culture and low culture. Fiske argues that distance marks the difference between high culture and low culture, between the “meanings, practices, and pleasures characteristic of empowered and disempowered social formations” (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992: 154). He thinks that distance may function to create differences between the experiences of the art work and everyday life, encourages people to ally themselves with certain values that are ahistorical and extreme, and thus distances them from the bodily sensations. In that case, mundanities of social conditions are distanced and discouraged. However, there is no distancing in the culture of everyday life, Fiske argues, “the culture of everyday life works only to the extent that it is imbricated into its immediate historical and social setting” (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992: 154). The culture of everyday life is “concrete, contexualized, and lived” (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992: 155), the cultural studies is addressing a massive complexity.

Power is an important issue in cultural studies. According to Foucault’s theory of power, power is relational and exists beyond the style of everyday language. In the fundamental issue of power relations, there does not exist a complete and ubiquitous dualism between the ruling and the ruled. Power can come from any direction – from top to bottom, from bottom to top, and etc. Therefore, the question is not who exerts power, but how to exert power and upon whom. Starting from Foucault’s theory of power, de Certeau focuses on the power relations in our everyday life – the power of the weak and its positive effects, and employs the theory to explain cultural phenomena. In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), he proposes the resistance theory. He believes that although the public cannot decide the production of culture, yet they can determine the consumption of culture. When using cultural products, they can make their own decision and have full decision making power, where lies the power of the general public. The public creatively employs their rights as consumers by acknowledging the interests of the control group on the surface while using other ways and methods to serve their own interests. These theories acknowledge the power in everyday culture as a power-laden complex.

In the field of visual culture, Mitchell refutes one of the fallacies of power, “vision and visual images are expressions of power relations in which the spectator dominates the visual object and images and their producers exert power over viewers” (Mitchelll 2002: 172). This fallacy is shared by people who worry that the use of advertising and propaganda may control the general public and erode democracy. He points out that this topic is significant because it “exposes the motivation for the wildly varying political and ethical estimations of images, their celebration as gateways to new consciousness, their denigration as hegemonic forces, the need for policing and thus reifying the differences between the visual media and others, or between the realm of art and the wider domain of images” (Mitchell 2002: 174-175). He points out although there is no doubt that visual culture can be “an instrument of domination” (Mitchell 2002:174-175), it is not productive to pick image as the exclusive means of political tyranny and it is alarming to treat visual images as “all powerful forces”. In other words, he acknowledges that visual image can act as instrument and agency and image as “a tool for manipulation” while as “an apparently autonomous source of its own purposes and meanings on the other” (Mitchell 2002: 175).

As Couldry points out, culture is by nature complex and contested (2000: 2), and therefore cultural studies considers the issues of power in relation to culture: including who is represented or not decided by the power relations, who has the voice and who does not, what amounts to culture and what does not. These issues surely exist behind visual culture and account for a significant topic of cultural studies. Behind it are not only struggles for political power, but also consumers and producers confront to gain power. In the industry of popular culture, the producers exert certain influence and power through cultural products while the consumers do not take it all, which means consumers mold the products according to their own preferences and needs. Such power relations can be find widely in contemporary culture. With its characteristic of being massive, it amounts to a power-laden complexity.

Reflexivity is emphasized by Couldry since reflexivity and personal perspective “plunge us into the web of relationship out of which we are formed” (2002: 7). This does not mean turning the back on social science or being narcissistic; rather, it is to assess the researcher’s subjectivity objectively in the research. It means analyzing the process of individuation, which means how we each became individuals. Individuation affects our analytical perspective and approach, exerting particular influence on the research. As Haraway points out, knowledge is situated. In other words, our thinking is from a particular perspective and limited to our individuation. There is “no view from above, from nowhere” (Haraway 1991: 188). The relation between the object (the researched) and the subject (the researcher) exerts influence on the research and there is no complete objectivity. In visual studies, Rose points out the importance of reflexivity in visual culture, since it “entangles the researcher as much as anyone else in practices and performances of looking” (Rose 2012: 552). However, this does not our position as individuals in the research is completely unproblematic. The questions of belonging and detachment are worth considering, especially when taking the complexity of contemporary culture into consideration.

In the quotation from Couldry, empirical research is emphasized in the definition of cultural studies. Cultural studies, according to Nelson and other scholars, is never a theoretical practice despite the fact that it incorporates various notions of politics, power and context. (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992: 2) Instead, cultural studies provides a bridge connecting theory and material culture. If we take a materialist approach, regarding cultural products as the result of particular people at particular times with particular limits, then empirical research is the way to analyze cultural phenomena. Since cultural studies is a interdisciplinary subject combining theories from various fields, the empirical work should steer away from being trapped in some theoretical uncertainties.

In the process of doing the group research project on privacy of online social networking websites, we have experienced some of the above-mentioned characteristics of cultural studies. Our group conducts research on the construction of privacy on social networking website – Facebook. The research question is: What does privacy on Facebook mean to Lancaster University postgraduates? How do Facebook configurations and settings affect students’ practices of sharing information on its media platform? Privacy is a comparatively complex topic, for it can be a technical problem, an ethical concern or a legal issue. Moreover, because social media develops at a rapid pace and technical support improves, privacy is difficult to define and even harder to analyze. Different people hold different opinions and have different definition of what privacy is. Relevant literature is more than adequate, yet reading a lot about the particular issue discussed on other fields can sometimes be even more complicating. The privacy topic reminds us contemporary culture is a massive complexity.

We use social network theory as the theoretical framework. A person, as the participant, acts as the node of the social network. Relationships build between nodes and form strong or weak ties and information flows across nodes in the social networks. Strahilevitz points out that the flow of information from node to node is in accordance with how the person expects his or her information to be revealed in the network (Gross and Acquisti, 2005). However, due to the distinctive characteristics of online social network, online information flow through weak ties accounts for a larger percentage than offline social networks. This characteristic enables other participants of online social networking websites or even non-users to access people’s information, and therefore raises the concern over privacy on these platforms (Wordpress).

Under this theory, we use methods of participant observation, textual analysis, visual analysis and interview to study postgraduate students online behaviour related to privacy. The first step is to look through the interviewees’ main pages on Facebook, noting down important information including name, profile picture, personal information and posts. The second step is to analyse their photos posted, engagement in activities, likes and comments, and group photos. In this step, we employ the methods of participant observation, textual analysis and visual analysis. The observation of a number of people at the same time is made possible by the technology and this can be called “live method” (Back and Puwa, 2012). We observe as a participant since we have to have our own Facebook account and main page to investigate others’. Despite the fact, online technology enables us to view the persons’ information without their knowledge. This characteristic makes our online participant observation slightly different from traditional one.

In our study, the materials of textual analysis include students’ posts and comments on Facebook. According to Couldry, we need to study: “(a) how far stable meanings and associations are produced; (b) what texts are produced and how they circulate; (c) the various ways in which people use, or negotiate, the vast textual resources around them” (2000: 83). As for stable meanings, it is worth noticing that the notion of “friend” on online social networking websites is significantly different from offline situation, where in the former instance it almost means somebody that you have followed online. These texts including comments and posts are widely circulated among the user’s friends and can be accessed by other non-friends depending on the user’s privacy settings. We employ the method of visual analysis on students’ photos. Persons who appear on the photo, whether the person is recognizable and the background of the photo all reveal to a certain extent how the person construct his or her privacy online.

In the third step, we design the interview and list the questions. We ask questions about the interviewee’s reasons to join and use Facebook, whether they provide true information, whether they become “friends” with strangers, and whether they are aware of the privacy problem on Facebook. According to the pilot research we have done, users tend to provide true information although they are concerned about their information revelation and privacy. On the one hand, they are aware that the default privacy setting provides lower protection of privacy; however, not all of them change the default setting. It should be noted that Facebook, as a social networking website, tends to encourage people to show their information including “likes” and photos to a large number of users by setting the default private setting as the lowest level of protection. Also, Facebook reserves the right to reveal users’ information to its advertising partners and customers. While at the same time, the vast number of users and consequently the large amount of information Facebook boasts is where its strengths lie. This phenomenon, to a certain extent, proves Couldry’s comment on contemporary culture as a power-laden complexity.

Our project is basically an empirical study, employing methods of cultural studies including participant observation, textual analysis, visual analysis and interview. Since our perspectives and way of thinking are influenced by individualization, it is significant to be self-reflexive in our project. We, as researchers, are users of Facebook ourselves. On the one hand, our personal experience of Facebook gives us background knowledge and better equips us with useful information to conduct the privacy construction of Lancaster postgraduate students on Facebook. On the other hand, however, our double identity both as the user and as the researcher inevitably shapes our dispositions and opinions on the privacy issue. Our attitude might be reflected in our interview questions and the style we conduct the interview, and therefore affects the interviewees’ answers. Also, whether it is textual analysis, visual analysis, or interview, the research is of interpretative nature. In other words, our own understanding inevitably influences the result and the conclusion.

In this essay, I attempt to use the reading materials, the course content and our group project to illustrate my understanding of Couldry’s comment that “Cultural studies is an expanding space for sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research into the massive, power-laden complexity of contemporary culture”. As cultural studies is an inter-disciplinary subject, it draws from various kinds of academic fields and imports theories from other disciplines. Besides, contemporary cultural studies regards not only high culture but also low culture as the research area. These features all make the materials of cultural studies complex and massive. Behind the ever-growing consumer culture market, there exists the subtle struggle for power between the producers of cultural goods and the consumers. Although the producers make efforts to shape cultural goods to their interests, the effects may not be satisfying. In the case of our project, Facebook may have vested interests in making the default setting of privacy as the “visible to everyone”, the user/ consumer change the privacy setting to protect his or her privacy and gain more power. Both as a researcher and a Facebook user, we are also entangled in the privacy issue as our interviewees and our interpretation of texts, visual images and interview answers are influenced by our own perspectives that are the products of individuation. In conclusion, Couldry’s comment clearly describes some of the features of cultural studies and defines the non-traditional discipline.

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