Intercultural Dialogue and Digital Journalism

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Abstract

Living in 'modern and advanced societies' where an endless cycle of consumerism takes place, makes an individual forget and ignore the less privileged. As a result, the adoption of an intercultural attitude is imperative since only by such an attitude one can be led to the understanding of difficulties encountered and experienced by individuals following much different paths of life or living in third world countries. Promoting intercultural dialogue contributes to the core objective of the Council of Europe, namely preserving and promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law. This paper examines how the use of the digital media and especially the use of interactive blogs contribute to intercultural dialogue. Special focus is laid on the sense of community created by the use of interactive blogs and the elements it is composed of .The way in which individuals of different cultural backgrounds interact via the internet and the benefits of such an interaction are also examined with emphasis on issues like the devotion of time to digital dialogues which can be characterized as either 'monochronic' or 'polychronic'.

Key words: Council of Europe, intercultural attitude, cultural diversity, internet, interaction, sense of community, monochronic, polychronic.

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Living in 'modern and advanced societies' where an endless cycle of consumerism and immorality takes place, makes us forget and ignore the less privileged. From this perspective, the adoption of an intercultural attitude is imperative.

An intercultural attitude is an indispensable tool in contemporary multicultural European societies and each and every one of us has to be open to the rest of the world in order to stand alongside an open cultural environment; at a national level, alongside citizens of different cultural backgrounds and third world countries' immigrants and at a European level against the rest of the Europeans.

It is today a must for Europeans to get to know each other more, to focus on common cultural attitudes and trends without ignoring special features and differences which add to the wealth of a common European culture.
Respecting and honoring cultural diversity is the core value of the principle of intercultural dialogue. The term "intercultural" includes the notion of a strong dissemination of culture and cooperation among different peoples.

The Council of Europe and Intercultural Dialogue

Promoting intercultural dialogue contributes to the core objective of the Council of Europe, which is namely: preserving and promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

The First Summit of Heads of State and Government of member states (1993), which affirmed that cultural diversity characterised Europe's rich heritage and that tolerance was the guarantee of an open society, led to the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995), the establishment of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and the launching of the European Youth Campaign against racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and intolerance with the slogan: "All Different – All Equal".

The Third Summit of the Heads of State and Government (2005) identified intercultural dialogue (including its religious dimension) as a means of promoting awareness, understanding, reconciliation and tolerance, as well as preventing conflicts and ensuring integration and the cohesion of society.

Later that year, a White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue was prepared. In the White Paper, 'Intercultural dialogue' is defined as 'an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals, groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It operates at all levels – within societies, between the societies of Europe and between Europe and the wider world'. This paper examines how the use of the digital media and especially the use of interactive blogs contribute to intercultural dialogue. Special focus is laid on the sense of community created by the use of interactive blogs and the elements it is composed of.

With the emergence of the phenomenon of the dissemination of information digitally new challenges have arisen in the field of journalism. The digital model of information allows the media to appear everywhere and at any time, eliminating the dimensions of space and time. Fluidness in speech is activated by immediate interaction among readers who are constantly engaged in dialogues that are formidably enhanced with the element of people of different standards being brought together as they take part in the same dialogue.

The comment section, in which a post can be taken to the next level and have new layers of depth added to it, as readers share their thoughts, ideas and experiences on a topic is where the real action takes place in most successful blogs.

1. Creating a Sense of Community

The word "community" is derived from the latin word "*communitas"* , a broad term for organized society.
How can the internet lead to the creation of a sense of community? The internet can be characterised as a platform that offers information related to social responsibility in a less expensive setting, both timely and fashionable, if compared to the traditional media. When information is disseminated via the internet feedback is obtained and interaction is enabled. If such interaction energises participation by large numbers of readers, the sense of community is created**.** Interaction amongst readers is somehow triggered by the enthusiasm and the spontaneity of comments which in turn make others wish to observe why people have bothered to take part in the discussion.

If we look at theories of Psychological Sense of Community, we find the following definition by McMillan and Chavis (1986): "the sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together." The two writers also suggest that the sense of community is composed of four elements:

1.1 Membership

McMillan and Chavis (1986) identified five attributes after looking at the relevant literature on particular dimensions of membership: boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, a common symbol system.

Boundaries, that are marked by such things as language, dress and ritual, indicating who belongs and who does not, "emotional safety" or willingness to reveal how one really feels, "a sense of belonging and identification" and in other words acceptance by the community, "personal investment" and "a common symbol system." Regarding this fifth attribute, the authors quote Nisbet & Perrin, asserting that understanding common symbol systems is a prerequisite to understanding community. "The symbol is to the social world what the cell is to the biotic world and the atom to the physical world.... The symbol is the beginning of the social world as we know it" (Nisbet & Perrin, 1977, p. 47).

1.2 Influence

McMillan and Chavis (1986) also point out that influence in a community is bidirectional: members of a group must feel empowered to have influence over what a group does (otherwise they would not be motivated to participate), and group cohesiveness depends upon the group having some influence over its members.

The authors refer to a review by Lott & Lott (1965) in which the major finding was a positive correlation between group cohesiveness and pressure to conform. On the other hand, the authors also discuss the "consensual validation" research, which "demonstrates that the force toward uniformity is transactional -- that it comes from the person as well as from the group" (McMillan and Chavis , 1986, p. 11), providing members with reassurances that they are experiencing things similarly to other group members.

Similar experiences establish rapport among individuals, as they feel that they have things in common. Rapport is vital in enhancing the sense of community; there are several other ways that add to establishing rapport in digital dialogues, ways that can also used in establishing rapport in face to face interactions like a) matching the words used by other people; if one uses similar words and phrases then he/she is better understood by the recipient of his/her meanings, b) the way people deal with information, whether they are detail-oriented or they prefer brief information c) common backgrounds as well as interests help individuals to build rapport. However one has to be a good observer in order to notice the aforementioned qualities in the writings of people. Rapport building leads almost anyone and any group in the direction one wishes.

1.3 Integration and fulfillment of needs

McMillan and Chavis (1986) employ the word "needs" to mean more than survival and to include also that which is desired and valued. Members of groups are seen as being rewarded in various ways for their participation, which Rappaport (1977) calls person-environment fit. Cited research indicates that this would include the status of being a member, as well as the benefits that might accrue from the competence of other members. "Shared values" is discussed as a concept that can give direction to the issue of which "needs" beyond survival will be pursued. Sarason (1974, p. 157) originally conceived nearly this same construct as "an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them."

Another aspect discussed by Rappaport (2000) later on in his writings, is his suggestion that community psychology is "to help turn tales of terror into tales of joy". He was referring to the potential of social change with the use of community psychology particularly in schools. The shared feelings of a group over an issue or the similarities in their feelings create a sense of common support thus alleviating the distress or even the pain it may have caused to specific individuals. Alternatively such similarities enhance enthusiasm over joyful issues.
McMillan's 1996 update cites several studies showing that perceived similarity to others and homogeneity contribute to group interaction and cohesion, and McMillan in the same update confessed that he had become convinced he should give greater weight to the "search for similarities" as an "essential dynamic" of community development (p. 320-321). He also restated this element as "creating an economy of social trade" (p. 322).

1.4 Shared emotional connection

McMillan and Chavis's summary statement on shared emotional connection includes the assertion that "it seems to be the definitive element for true community" (1986, p. 14). They mention the role of shared history (participation in or at least identification with it). In 1996 (p. 322) McMillan adds that "shared history becomes the community's story symbolized in art" (in a very broad sense). McMillan and Chavis (1986) list seven important features of shared emotional connection, citing relevant research for each.

a. Contact hypothesis. Greater personal interaction increases the likelihood that people will become close.

b.Quality of interaction.

c. Closure to events. Ambiguous interaction and unresolved tasks inhibit group cohesiveness.

d. Shared valiant event hypothesis. Increased importance of a shared event (i.e.a crisis) facilitates a group bond.

e. Investment. Beyond boundary maintenance and cognitive dissonance, the community becomes more important to someone who has given time and energy to it.

f. Effect of honor and humiliation on community members. Someone who has been rewarded in front of a community feels more attracted to that community, and if humiliated feels less attraction.

g. Spiritual bond. The authors admit that this quality is difficult to describe, but maintain that it is "present to some degree in all communities" and give the example of the concept of "soul" in the formation of a national black community in the U.S.

This sense of community in digital journalism and the four elements it consists of, membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connection, represent in other words a unity in diversity, a unity in the comparison and acceptance of differences as people from different geographical, socio-economic and educational backgrounds meet together. One can argue that this conciliation of so many different ideas contributes to the building of universal peace. As Michael Gorbachev in his Nobel Prize Award speech said, peace is not unity in similarity, but unity in diversity and peace is a movement towards globality and universality of civilization.

2. The Use of the Online Media by Young People and Media Literacy

Regarding the use of the online media by young people, which is an issue that concerns educators most, in the sense that they expect to disseminate their teaching through the internet, things are not as simple as they appear to be. The aforementioned sense of community created by digital journalism extends to all ages as young people use the internet to interact socially. They also use it to play games and watch videos rather than to gather information for research and learning purposes. In other words, the young people's use of the internet is entertainment-centred and not as creative and adding to knowledge as expected by educators/teachers. Thus media literacy and its instructional practices is an issue that has to be deeply examined and further developed. Quoting Hobbs and Jensen (2009), "There is a real need to support the work of those who are formulating, creating, refining and testing curriculum theory and instructional methods, practices and pedagogy, in ways that connect to students' experience with mass media, popular culture and digital media, supporting the development of their critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication skills".

3. Monochronic and Polychronic Allocation of Time to Digital Dialogues

Another aspect that demonstrates cultural differences in attitudes through the use of the internet is the devotion of time to digital dialogues which can be characterized as either be "monochronic" or "polychronic". In the "monochronic" sense, time devoted to digital interaction is viewed as valuable and sacred and interaction has to take place directly. In the "polychronic" sense, time is not scheduled as strictly and a more relaxed and fluid idea of devoting time to digital dialogues is adopted. And there is a whole way of life and culture underlying "monochronic" and "polychronic" attitudes. Raymond Cohen (1997) argues that in "polychronic" cultures, what really matters is tradition rather than tasks in contrast to their monochronic counterparts. The author goes on to note that "Traditional societies have all the time in the world. The arbitrary divisions of the clock have little saliency in cultures grounded in the cycle of the seasons, the invariant pattern of rural life, and the calendar of religious festivities. Instead, their culture is more focused on relationships, rather than watching the clock. They have no problem being "late" for an event if they are with family or friends, because the relationship is what really matters". As a result, polychronic cultures have a much less formal perception of time. They are not ruled by precise calendars and schedules. Rather, "cultures that use the polychronic time system often schedule multiple appointments simultaneously so keeping on schedule is an impossibility" as Cohen (1997) adds. Monochronic culture examples include The United States of America, Canada, Switzerland, Germany and Scandinavia, whereas polychronic culture examples are those of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Mexico, The Philippines. The way time is spent in digital interactions can thus reveal a lot regarding their participants' life patterns and tendencies.

Such life patterns are as already stated no separate from the cultural background of the participants in a digital dialogue, so participants send out messages about their own culture contributing to intercultural dialogue among an already unified group.

4. Conclusion

Such is the power of participating in digital dialogues. It is today possible for different ways of living and customs to spread from country to country just by pressing a button, nullifying distance and time and opening up new worlds to all of us. Social media strengthen links among people across the world, creating an environment for learning and understanding. Let us take advantage of this wonderful opportunity then and realize that nobody is residing in the centre of the world, but the world belongs equally to each and every one of us.

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