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# A media education perspective

## *Cultures of media practice and 'media-bildung'*

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**ABSTRACT** This contribution introduces, from a media education perspective, two concepts which may be useful for further theoretical reflection upon the rich empirical material provided in the other articles of this special issue. The first concept, 'cultures of media practice', refers to habitualized patterns of media practice collectively shared by members of a specific social group. The articles provide many examples of such cultures of media practices, including different 'experiential spaces' such as gender, ethnicity, social class and generation. The second concept, 'media-bildung', covers fundamental changes which people undergo in their attitude towards the subject-matter covered by the media and/or the media itself. In the contributions to this special issue such processes of 'media-bildung' can be identified along with processes of media learning in which people acquire new knowledge and/or develop new skills without transforming their orientations.

**KEYWORDS** *audience, cultures of media practice, learning, media-bildung, transformation of orientations*

**The 'War on Terror'** and terrorism itself are fought with more than weapons. Media too are used in order to win such 'asymmetric' warfare (Münkler, 2004). Disinformation, misinformation, deliberate omissions and blatant lies have helped to 'integrate' the Iraq War into the overall 'War on Terror'. Given that only politicians, terrorists and media people are attributed the role of actors in this media war, the research project on 'Shifting Securities. News Cultures Before and Beyond the Iraq War 2003' is an important tool to challenge this overarching concept of media. Based on this research project, the contributions to the present issue of *European Journal of Cultural Studies* depict the various facets of how the Iraq War has been perceived in such different communities as Bangladeshis in East London (Al-Ghabban), Scottish Pakistanis (Qureshi) or Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland (Herbert). They also 'examine



whether and how uses of media and responses to political discourse via the media, enable or impede political participation, democratic debate and multicultural citizenship' (Gillespie, 2006: 483).

The articles in this issue provide rich and fascinating empirical material on different news audiences, so rather than add further empirical data, I would like to highlight and scrutinize some of the terms used in these contributions and propose alternative theoretical concepts originating from media education and elsewhere.

### **Cultures of media practice**

In the light of the active nature of news audiences depicted in the contributions to this issue, the term 'audience' itself may be deceptive. 'Audience' derives from the Latin word 'audire', to listen. But the research subjects speak up and take part in political debate. The term 'media practice' (which does not exclude passive elements) seems more appropriate here. If one uses this term, the research project focuses on the (possible) link between media practices and political participation in different communities. As Marie Gillespie notes in her contribution, media practices or, as she puts it, 'audiences', 'are not always part of a public'. What then, in theoretical terms, are the fundamental differences between the public and the media practices inside communities?

The notion that media practices may vary between different communities is not unique to the 'Shifting Securities' project. It is commonplace in studies in media education that each social group will use media in its own way. Notwithstanding individual differences, members of a specific social group follow a collective pattern of media practice of which they may not even be conscious. This habitualized media practice constitutes the nucleus of what, drawing on a term developed by Burkhard Schäffer (2003, 2007), I propose to call a 'culture of media practice' (*'Medienpraxiskultur'*).

It is important to note that the term 'culture of media practice' is theoretical in nature. It may or may not overlap with the everyday concepts of 'community' or 'culture' used by research subjects. Everyday concepts of social entities to which people are affiliated (or are ascribed to be affiliated) generally tend to overemphasize their uniformity but blur their heterogeneity. As Schäffer's empirical analyses show, cultures of media practice are multidimensional structures constituted in the syncretism of different 'experiential spaces' (Mannheim, 1982; see also Bohnsack and Nohl, 2003). In cultures of media practice, such 'experiential spaces' as gender, ethnicity, social class and generation reciprocally overlap.

Most of the contributions to this issue are devoted to specific cultures labelled by ethnicity, yet the authors allude to the multidimensionality of cultures of media practice when they distinguish their research subjects according to other social dimensions too: gender, age and faith (Gillespie); and generation and educational background (Rizvi). The



multidimensionality of media practice cultures may, on the individual level, be reflected in ‘multi-layered identities’, as Yousuf puts it.

Media practice, which is both habitualized and specific for multidimensional cultures, has to be differentiated from communication in the public sphere. On the one hand, the knowledge used and generated in habitualized media practices remains implicit and is valid and self-evident only within the specific culture. On the other hand, public communication is based on generalized, commonsense stocks of rather theoretical and sometimes even stereotyped knowledge. Taking up a distinction made by Karl Mannheim, I would like to term the latter ‘communicative knowledge’, whereas practice-based, culture-specific knowledge may be called ‘conjunctive’, because it affiliates or conjoins people to cultures (cf. Bohnsack, 2005; Mannheim, 1982).

Hence, in order to study the link between cultures of media practice and the public sphere, it is crucial to answer two questions. First, how is the public, communicative knowledge used in media coverage (e.g. of the Iraq War) processed within the frame of the conjunctive knowledge specific to cultures of media practice? Second, how do members of specific cultures of media practice transfer or translate their conjunctive knowledge (e.g. concerning the Iraq War and its media coverage) into a more general, communicative language, which allows them to take part in public political debate?

The first question involves the problem of whether and how specific cultures of media practice are able to reframe the communicative knowledge disseminated by media within their own stocks of conjunctive knowledge. Are members of cultures of media practice overwhelmed by the media coverage of the Iraq War, or are they able to translate it into their own culture-specific concepts and frames? Is the irony and satire depicted by Qureshi among Scottish Pakistanis a form of such translation, situated within what Herbert calls ‘communities of interpretation’?

The second question pertains to the capacity of media practice cultures to make their voices heard. Are members of these cultures able to translate their conjunctive knowledge (e.g. of the Iraq War) into the concepts used in public communication? Are they able to introduce their own concepts into the general debate, perhaps with the assistance of regional television? Which features are lost during this translation process?

The cultures of media practice, investigated in the ‘Shifting Securities’ project, have usually remained marginalized in the public debate on the Iraq War. However, some other (equally multidimensional) cultures have succeeded in influencing and even shaping the way in which the media cover such news. This shows that, although the media has to formulate its message – literally, word it – at the level of public, communicative knowledge (that is, to put it into words which can somehow be understood by literally everybody), media coverage is not universalistic. It depends on dominant cultures or, to be more precise, on dominant dimensions



(e.g. middle class, male) of some (e.g. western-based) cultures. What is covered in the Iraq War and how it is covered is decided upon by persons who themselves belong to specific cultures of media practice.

Hence the media, like the public realm in general, is a zone of constant combat in which different cultures of media practice struggle to have their culture-specific concepts and perceptions conceived as general concepts and perceptions. As far as cultural studies involves political participation, the contributors to this special issue may be understood as aiming to introduce the concepts of the cultures that they have studied (and their own concepts) into this combat zone.

### **'Media-*bildung*': transformation of media orientation**

The term 'culture of media practice' enables us to depict the culture-specific frames of orientation which structure the media practices of different news audiences coexisting synchronically. Yet it is also important for media education theory to grasp diachronic changes in media practice, be they changes in individual biographies or in multidimensional cultures. Such diachronic changes, although sometimes only marginal, are deciphered in some contributions to this special issue: Qureshi, for example, analyses changes in perceptions of (mediated) (in)security.

Closer analysis of such diachronic changes might show two different modes of change: what I will call 'media learning' and 'media-*bildung*'. In the former, people acquire new knowledge (e.g. on Abu Ghraib) and/or develop new skills (e.g. acquire vocabulary in a foreign language), but the given frame of orientations structuring their media practice remains in place. In the latter, the very frame of orientations is transformed and attitudes and perspectives towards the media profoundly change. Following Marotzki (2004), this may be termed 'media-*bildung*'.

'Media learning' refers to both learning through media and learning about media. Media learning provides the individual with enriched insights into both specific subject-matter (e.g. the Iraq War) and the way that the media works (e.g. how the war is covered). All the empirical cases presented in this issue involve such media learning, although this is not always made explicit.

In 'media-*bildung*', the people concerned undergo fundamental changes in their attitude towards the subject-matter covered by the media and/or the media itself, as newly-acquired knowledge takes on an 'orientating function' which includes 'critical reflection' (Marotzki, 2004: 64). When young people search for alternative news sources, as Al-Ghabban observes in this special issue, their identities undergo transformations; Rizvi provides further illustrations. Young people also go through processes of media-*bildung* when they produce their own news (see Noor's contribution).



The German term '*bildung*' is widely used as a rather normative concept. '*Bildung*'— usually translated as 'education' or 'formation'— is the stated chief goal of the German education system. However, in empirical research, '*bildung*' and '*media-bildung*' should be used as concepts which describe a process of transformation without evaluating it. First, processes of *media-bildung* need to be empirically investigated; they may then be evaluated according to pedagogical, ethical or political criteria. Hence readers may use the contributions to this issue of *European Journal of Cultural Studies* as a rich and thorough empirical basis for their own discussions regarding the Iraq War, how it is (or was) covered in diverse media, and what this has to do with *media-bildung* in different cultures of media practice.

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## Biographical note

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