RECENT PhD DISSERTATIONS IN CULTURAL AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES

EDITED BY

NICHOLAS W. JANKOWSKI

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Dr. N.W. Jankowski
Department of Communication
University of Nijmegen
P.O. Box 9104
6500 HE Nijmegen, The Netherlands
email: N.Jankowski@maw.kun.nl

SCHOLARSHIP

LYNN SCHOFIELD CLARK

IDENTITY, DISCOURSE, AND MEDIA AUDIENCES: A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE ROLE OF VISUAL MEDIA IN RELIGIOUS IDENTITY-CONSTRUCTION AMONG US ADOLESCENTS

Contact information: Media Studies, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Colorado, Box 287, Boulder CO 80309 0287, USA, Email: Lynn.Clark@Colorado.EDU

This dissertation argues that personal expressions of religiosity among contemporary US adolescents (both those self-described as "religious" and as "not religious") echo an emergent discursive conflict found in the expressions of religion in popular prime time television programs and in other conversations of religion in the public sphere. Among both today's teens and in popular programs such as *Touched by an Angel*, there is at once an embrace of a sensibility of tolerance that underscores a belief in a universal God, yet also an affirmation of a specifically Christian interpretation of divinity. Thus, the dissertation argues, Christian hegemony is reinforced in US discourse even as its formerly regnant institutions have declined in cultural authority and as a pluralistic and not solely institutionally-based religious culture becomes the norm.

The adolescent audience meaning-making practices analysed here stem from what this dissertation posits is a *flattening of religious symbols*. Religious symbols are not necessarily seen by adolescents as authoritative and "fixed" due to their reference to formal religious institutions, but are rather approached as somewhat autonomous and, like other commodified symbols of the post-modern condition of late capitalism, they must be "made useful." Analysing the interpretive strategies teens brought to the popular television program *Touched by an Angel*, the dissertation finds that adolescents embrace a variety of approaches to religion which are not solely attributable to race, class, gender, and religious affiliation, and also are not fully explained using formalistic categories of religion such as an affirmation of belief in "sin" or "transcendence." Analysing the patterns in discourse, the dissertation found that teens defined religion as equated with the institution (and accepted or rejected religion as a source of personal identification on that basis), equated with a moral code (religion as the foundation for determining right from wrong), as one category of a multidimensional life (religion as a functional choice like soccer or other after-school activities), as a sentimental feeling of goodness (religion as a source of positive emotions), or, particularly among those affiliated with a religious tradition other than Christianity, a key aspect of racial/ethnic identity (religion as inseparable from other cultural identifiers in Jewish, Arab, or other non-US traditions). Religion was found to be appealing for therapeutic reasons (as a source of self-betterment, support, and as a moral compass), and for its mystical and inexplicable elements, particularly of divine intervention. While parents also mentioned the appeal of religion as a source of tradition, ultimate meaning, history, social justice,

and community, the teens did not mention these attributes. Based on the fact that this generation has come of age with less experience in religious institutions than perhaps any previous generation, the likelihood of these young people developing an understanding of religion with these attributes is uncertain. Thus, the dissertation affirms the trend toward the rise in personal autonomy or the privatisation of religion and the subsequent importance of the mediated realm (as opposed to solely the realm of religious institutions) in determining religious identities.

In its analysis of approaches to popular media among teens, the dissertation also extends the metaphor of *negotiation* commonly used to describe the subject/text relation, demonstrating an interpretive approach here labelled *regeneration*. Subjects employing this approach negotiate a reading based on their social, gendered, racial/ethnic and other positions with reference to the text, yet *regeneration* implies that the interpretation gleaned also informs the individual's larger system of beliefs, thus resulting in a subtly changed belief system. In this way, the role of the text in the ongoing personal and public formations of discourse is affirmed without overdetermining the intentions of the message's producers.

Employing a critical/cultural studies approach, this dissertation is founded upon the assumption that religious identity-construction is helpfully understood as the nexus of public discourses and individual subjectivities, thus challenging much of the identity literature in the US-based solely on the assumptions of developmental psychology. This approach draws upon the work of Stuart Hall, Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, arguing that the role of media in the identity-construction of the individual subject requires an analysis of both the themes of discourse that are available in mediated texts and echoed throughout the culture, and the various social, political, economic and other contexts that frame the individual adolescent's identity narratives and practices.

The study employed ethnographic interviews with 70 adolescents and their parents, five in-depth case studies of adolescents, three focus groups with parents of teens, and three peer-led discussion groups. In the latter, some of the adolescents involved in case studies were trained to lead focus groups without the primary researcher present, tape-recording the conversation and assisting in both the construction of the interview guide and in the analysis of the transcribed discussion. Over a hundred persons participated in the research, although the five case studies and the six focus groups provide the in-depth material that is central to the final analysis.

JAN FERNBACK

THE WIRED COMMUNITY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE CULTURAL PRACTICES OF THE CITIZENS OF CYBERSPACE

Contact information: School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Colorado, Box 287, Boulder CO 80309 0287, USA, Email: fernback@rintintin.Colorado.EDU

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has captured the public imagination, and much of the popular discourse about CMC and our culture has addressed the concept of cybercommunity. In an era in which we publicly lament the loss of community, cultural prophets fascinated with new communication technologies have heralded CMC as a social corrective. To some virtual community is authentic and meaningful, but how does this authenticity apply to society at large?

This research compares actual practices and interpretive strategies used by on-line community participants with a construct of the real social relations that emerge from the data. Through observation and interviews, this study problematises the debate between the virtual communitarians who argue for the legitimacy of cybercommunity, and the popular wisdom which claims that community resides in "place." This study finds that the metaphor of community is indeed used by people on-line to describe their interactions in cyberspace. But this metaphor is one of convenient togetherness without real responsibility. Virtual community members speak of mutual respect and caring, but demur at the notion of true closeness that romanticised ideals of community evoke. Moreover, as a society, we might do well to more critically examine how desirable that closeness is in an era of private sensibilities. Some scholars of community have argued that Americans generally want to be "left alone" in their private lives — left alone to contemplate the benefits and responsibilities of communal existence when convenient. The precarious balance between wanting to be left alone with our individual freedoms and wanting to find supportive intimacy of a communal nature endures as a theme of public debate. And, the enchantment with social interaction in cyberspace allows us to continue the debate without resolving it. Virtual social relations provide us with the opportunity to explore new avenues of community building, but few have committed deeply enough to the endeavour to move beyond that metaphor of convenient community.

Nevertheless, the study finds that three types of virtual communities are socially constructed by the users of on-line forums: (1) self-consciously constructed communities of interest; (2) physical communities that stem from on-line gatherings; (3) a "virtual collectivity" of sorts, which is a collectivity of users driven by the principles of democracy and egalitarianism in the use of CMC, not necessarily in terms of the content of postings in cyberspace. This virtual collective is bound by concerns about censorship and other restrictions in cyberspace; thus, in order to promote the desire for cybercommunity, the collectivity is constituted not by issues of caring and mutual support, but by formal issues of free speech, lack of regulation, egalitarianism, and the common good. Virtual communities do have a place in the larger fabric of our culture. But, just

as the emergence of other communication technologies have encouraged polemical social forecasts about their impact on society, utopian and dystopian speculation surrounds the public's embrace of CMC.

This study raises issues about the logic of this speculation and suggests that virtual community must be studied in a context that is historically informed about the nature of the social consequences of new communication technologies. Much of the dystopian literature on cybercommunity employs an essentialist rhetoric about the nature of community. The dystopians tend to regard community as a homogenous social aggregation not unlike the ideal types of Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft* or Durkheim's mechanical solidarity. Thus they conclude that virtual community will isolate its proponents from the fellowship of genuine community. The utopian perspective on community is more flexible, less essential, although it remains too polarised to be of great use in the analysis of cybercommunity. The utopians believe that virtual community can enhance and encourage physical community; they tend to have a greater sense of the diversity of the American collectivity as well as the means by which community can be achieved.

This study is about those means. The continued relevance of studying cyber-community will be assured when researchers recognise that the urge to develop formalist or essentialist definitions of community is not a wholly productive avenue from which to examine the process of creating on-line community and its resulting manifestation. There is a "there" in cyberspace, and it has both an essential nature and a manifestation in the social practices of its proponents. But it is not identical to our pre-existing social constructs of community.

This study shows that the phenomenon of community in cyberspace has many facets and is experienced quite differently by its members. But it is not identical to our pre-existing social constructs of community. We can make this same assertion with regard to the study of other hard-to-define social phenomena (such as religion) within cyberspace. As scholars of cyberspace more willingly embrace the uncertain, the interpretive, the uncharted, perhaps the "place" of cybercommunity within the corpus of theories of community will become more certain.