MeCCSA PGN 2014 Conference Special Issue

Introduction

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In June 2014, the School of Media and Communication (then known as the Institute of Communication Studies) at the University of Leeds had the privilege to host a MeCCSA PGN conference. At that time, the idea to bring the conference to Leeds had been brewing by Toussaint Nothias and Christiaan De Beukelaer for well over a year, and became a reality when the proposal was accepted by MeCCSA. Soon, what started out as the duo's idea was embraced by the School as a whole, with staff members, PhD researchers, alumni and guest speakers coming together under the theme of 'Global Interdependence: Knowledge, Experience, Theory'. In the behind-the-scenes paper that closes this issue, Beukelaer and Nothias explain that the topic was chosen "because it provided an interesting way to frame the conference of a national association" as it was "broad enough to be inclusive and specific enough for the conference to be experienced holistically as a themed event". Thus, the theme provided what they have called a common 'vibe' from which participants from different backgrounds could engage with each other and share common ground.

If the choice of theme can be understood as purposely flexible, the main idea behind the organization was clear: to create a friendly and engaging environment in which postgraduates and early career researchers could engage with each other and share ideas. Thus, the success of the conference is not limited to those warm summer days of June; and this edition of *Networking Knowledge* is proof of it, as seven participants have generously contributed full-length article versions of their conference papers, which are presented here in peer-reviewed and revised form. The wide range of topics in the papers echoes not only the inclusive values set by the conference, but, more importantly, the collaborative and collegial atmosphere generated by the participants. The topics and approaches presented in each of the articles are diverse, although interests in interdisciplinarity, interactivity and de-Westernising media research seem to be shared among the authors.

The issue opens with Judith Simpson's "'Upstairs now with Billy and Don': Spontaneous Memorials in the Footballing Community'. The article is a treat for fans of both football and communication, as well as a testament to the social force of sports teams as catalysers of community feelings and identity. In 2011, the death of former Leeds United player Gary Speed inspired many of his, and the club's, fans to create a 'spontaneous shrine', which honoured Speed as an 'ancestral' figure, and provided a communicative hub and site for fans' mutual support. The case study of Speed's memorial is carefully contextualized within theories and the history of public mourning in the UK, and argues that these football-related shrines differ in two significant aspects: the relative absence of religious items; and an abundance of shirts and scarves, effectively creating a 'sea of team colours'. Simpson theorises that the media has played an important role as it standardises public mourning practices, and that spontaneous shrines are 'becoming more popular and widespread because,

having been pieced together from a variety of pre-existent cultural resources the practice has been found to be helpful and healing’.

From public mourning to mediated distant suffering, Eline Huiberts and Stijn Joye’s contribution, “‘Bring in the Audience!’ Exploring an Interdisciplinary Approach to Investigating Audience Reactions to Mediated Distant Suffering’ turns our attention to theoretical and methodological matters. Drawing on cultural anthropology, the sociology of new media and social psychology literatures, the authors argue for the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to audience research in the field of mediated distant suffering. As well as broadening debate and identifying new theoretical, methodological and empirical questions that may be overlooked within particular disciplines, Huiberts & Joye contend that an interdisciplinary approach is also essential if research in this field is to be de-Westernised.

Echoing some of the epistemological concerns of Huiberts & Joye’s article, Emilia Sosnowska also encourages interdisciplinary research, as well as sensitivity to the cultural specificity of research objects, as she considers the adequacy of visual culture theory as a theoretical framework within which to understand digital art; in particular, in this case, those from East Asia. In the article, ‘A Japanese Approach to Haptic/Multimodal Art Practice and Perception’, she presents her analyses of a selection of interactive artworks from Japan. Discussing them in terms of the influence of technological development, as well as Shintoism and other East Asian traditions, she elaborates a multi-sensorial account of digital art – such as those artworks that are ‘creature-like’ or ‘nature-inspired’ – and ultimately argues for the need to see visual culture as more of a hybridised system than one that is simply visual.

In ‘Music for the Migrant’s Soul: Blending the Traditional with the Topical’, Madhusri Shrivastava analyses how recent trends in the Bhojpuri music industry deal with the tensions and anxieties of migrant workers in India. Shrivastava argues that new cultural texts fuse novelty with elements of traditional culture; thus, ‘ribaldry, rituals, folk themes and contemporary issues are melded in popular Bhojpuri music to create a world that is reassuringly familiar to the migrants in Mumbai’. The paper presents an overarching theme of displacement, both in cultural and geographic senses. Within this context of distance the analysis of media and mediated experiences, provided by Shrivastava, gains explanatory force. You can see an example as the author analyses ‘Englis-ispeaking’; in other words, how the use of English words in songs and movies created for migrants disclose anxieties about their difficulties of using the ‘language of upward mobility’.

As well as a focus on interactivity and audience participation, the final two articles also share a methodological interest in measuring how participants evaluate the benefits and challenges of their respective media forms.

In ‘Introducing Interactive Documentary in the Context of Critical Media Education’, Danai Mikelli focuses on the educational potential of New Media. Mikelli draws from Critical Media Literacy theory and the work of educator Paulo Freire to suggest that interactive documentaries, and the tools required to make them, can be used as part of an education to ‘raise critical consciousness’. Thus, interactivity, understood within the proposed critical framework, has the potential to ‘question the roles of media in society and the multiple meaning of messages’. In order to investigate the limits and benefits of new media as educational tools, she proposes a three-sided ethnographic approach: action research in the form of teaching the basic principles and skills necessary to create interactive documentaries for young users from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; interviews with the

participants; and observations. In the article, Mikelli discusses her preliminary findings about new media technology and explains the participants' evaluation of the benefits and challenges of the tools used to make the documentaries. The author's interest and engagement with critical education shines through the piece, and we are looking forward to hear more from the project and its findings.

Similarly, Wale Oni's article, 'The New Broadcasting Ethos and Motivations for Interactive Technology Use in a Nigerian Radio Station', examines the motivations of broadcast journalists for using interactive technologies for participatory programming purposes. In a survey of journalists at a particular radio station in a highly polarized state in Southwest Nigeria, Oni's research interestingly demonstrates that issues of low income, as well as ethno-religious sentiments and party politics, are seen as less of a threat to participatory programming than the relatively more mundane technical issues of internet connectivity and electricity shortages.

As already discussed, Toussaint Nothias and Christiaan De Beukelaer's blend of personal narrative and visual essay closes the issue, with a report on the conference from which these articles came. And we'd like to thank them, and all the conference organisers and participants, as well as the authors and anonymous peer-reviewers who made this special issue possible. The next MeCCSA PGN Conference will take place in July 2015 at Coventry University, with the theme of 'Transformative Practice and Theory: Where We Stand Today', after which work will begin on the writing, reviewing, revising and editing of the best conference papers for another special issue of this journal. In the meantime, we hope that whether this issue brings back nostalgic memories of June 2014 in Leeds, or whets your appetite for July 2015 in Coventry, you enjoy reading the following articles.