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N.B.: When citing this work, cite the original article.

Original publication:

Johan Fornäs, Digital Borderlands: Identity and Interactivity in Culture, Media and Communications, 1998, Nordicom Review, (19), 1, 27-38.
http://www.nordicom.gu.se/common/publ_pdf/38_plenum2%20fornas.pdf.
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Digital Borderlands

Identity and Interactivity in Culture, Media and Communications

JOHAN FORNÄS

Culture and *Communication* are closely connected. Culture is constituted by meaning-making practices, i.e. by symbolic communication. Communication is the sharing and transmission of meanings between people, i.e. the process that constitutes culture. Culture as communication has double effects: it gathers people around a set of shared meanings, i.e. creates identity, but it simultaneously also connects selves to others, i.e. constructs difference.

Late modernity is an age of intensified communications, shaping new communities but also spreading diversities. This process makes culture opaque, i.e. less transparently self-evident and therefore more visible as something in and by itself. The semantic, generic, aesthetic, formal, pragmatic or discursive rules of symbolic systems appear more often and come into focus, when people increasingly often have to cross borders between interpretive communities. When it is no longer obvious why the neighbour makes a certain gesture, dances in a particular way, or uses a specific phrase, one has to step back and think about how bodies, images, music and words make meanings. The difference-within-unity (encounters with alterity in globalized communicative streams) called diversity problematizes communication itself, thereby drawing it to explicit attention. Cultural forms and processes get reflexively thematized by culture itself – in everyday practices and popular media genres as well as in academic disciplines. A cultural turn has made meaning and interpretation a key issue, in research as in society at large.

This ongoing reinforcement of *culturalization* and aestheticization is thus closely related to an accelerating societal *reflexivity*, which affects everyday self-understandings as well as those of research. Reflexivity intensifies the need to mirror one's identity in the concepts, images and responses of surrounding others, including using media texts in self-mirroring ways. The media also pose demands that speeds up the development of such a reflexivity. Digital media are no exception to this spiral movement. They also contribute to modify basic conceptions of authenticity and originality, presence and intensity, as they are always and necessarily broken by distancing mediations and cultural symbolizations.

Culturalization and reflexivization are therefore closely connected to *mediatization*. Various technological and more or less institutionalized systems for mediating communications have become focal in most cultural practices. Meanings and identities are produced when mediated texts and subjects meet within specific spatial, historical, institutional, social and cultural contexts. Each situated interaction between people, symbolic networks and technological hardware is a constellation of subjects, texts and contexts which shapes intersubjectively shared meanings, collective and individual identities, as well as the complex life worlds embedding them.

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Cultural studies cor/respond to this process – they both answer to it and take part in it. They are not one, but a legion: I therefore stress the plural form of the term. Cultural studies are a very complex set of perspectives, currents and traditions, shifting from decade to decade and from country to country. They are studies of a cultural kind, scrutinizing how meanings and forms are constructed in all human spheres, analyzing culture as an aspect of all society and human life. But they are also studies of culture, with a special focus on those works, activities and institutions that are in our modern society marked as 'cultural', including the arts as well as popular culture and the aesthetical practices of everyday life. This is where cultural studies intersect with cultural politics.

Cultural studies are concerned with the *interpretation of meanings*, with two facets. On one hand, questions are answered, problems solved, meaningful but hidden patterns reconstructed behind that which appears chaotic, demystifying roots found to present symbolic forms. Cultural studies thereby reduce complexity in the service of the need for orientation in a confused and contingent era, thus in various levels and areas contributing to our sense of identity. 'Aha, that's the way raves/fundamentalisms/academics work!' On the other hand, cultural studies pose questions, problematize things by denaturalizing what seems self-evident, showing that simple everyday phenomena are really more complex, disclosing hidden contradictions and subtleties in the 'low' and profane, following and co-producing the routes of intricate meaning-making. They increase our capability of seeing things in a more complex manner and accept difference and otherness, in order to avoid false, reductionist totalizations or stereotypifying ideologies. 'Oh, so it wasn't quite as simple as I thought, then?' A hermeneutic spiral is developed, where a pendelum movement between distanciation and close studies, explanation and understanding, is utilized to gradually push cultural reflexivity further.

Cultural studies are intrinsically *critical*, from the Frankfurt school of 'critical theory' to the later French, British and American variants. They show how power and resistance interplay in culture, striving to take part in attacking and deconstructing all illegitimate forms of domination, whether related to state, market or the life-world, and whether connected to gender, sexuality, age, generation, class, race, ethnicity, nationality or religion. Critique in the service of emancipation has a crucial task to understand the other and to criticize the self. This double task is unfortunately too often reversed in actual research and debate, and therefore has to be repeatedly actualized in an ongoing struggle of interpretations.

In this late-modern age of millenary change, *computer-mediated communications* have posed new questions to cultural theory. I would like here to argue for the need to intensify cultural media studies in this area. One motive is to demystify the ideologies of digitality, by connecting these new machines and networks back to the established world of mediated communications, and by rejoining cyber-metaphorics to a less rootless virtual web of cultural theory traditions. However, my goal is not simply to reduce all the novelties to something old, but rather to make the creative impulses of new computer media discourses more effectively intellectually productive by pointing to ways in which they shed light on aspects of communication that have hitherto been underdeveloped in media studies. Thus, the critique is directed against some problematic limitations, blindnesses and contradictions within both digital and media studies. Cultural theory may balance the exaggerations of IT-debates by relating them to basic concepts of media studies, while using new digital ideas to activate well-needed revisions of the dominant media research paradigms.[1]

<0://change>

At first, the electronic networks seemed so magically *new* and exciting. Lots of previously unknown terms became fashionable, carrying ideas of a hitherto unimaginable resource for bodyless communication suddenly making all limits transcendable in the near future. This in turn made more conservative pessimists fear that this was the end of the human world, where all the age-old qualities of life and culture would erode and dissolve into streams of binary digits without soul.

These twin reactions were not unique. New media forms are mostly born into whirls of simplifying and mutually mirroring utopic and dystopic discourses, resulting from hopes and frustrations fed by earlier forms of communication. Most new media are much less revolutionizing than they first pretend to be. This was true for the telegraph and the telephone, film and records, radio and television, and definitely for the digital communication media that are often discussed under the somewhat misleading heading of 'information technologies' (or 'IT'). None of these are fully as different as is often supposed. Such misjudgement cuts both

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ways, and in two distinct ways. First, it may sometimes be useful to exaggerate by pointedly polarizing old and new, in order to catch sight of important but not always clearly visible tendencies, but such exaggerations can in the next moment have a dangerously blinding effect that blocks a more reasonable understanding of what's going on. Second, these are ambivalent reactions vacillating between utopian and dystopian extremes, but where both the optimists and the pessimists grossly overestimate the newness of the new.

Some few years later, the digital utopianism has begun to wear out and feel painfully out-of-date, under the combined pressure of a growing critique of the new computer-based communication technologies and the disenchanting routines of everyday life. Old power-structures and inhibiting mechanisms remain firmly in seat, and having worked practically with a modem for a while, it is hard to remember the feel of that utopian spark which once was so enticing. This is also a general pattern. After an initial euphoric phase, a process of routinization integrates each new media form in the everyday web of practices. In this process, that which first seemed totally different is domesticized, whereby it becomes obvious that it has long prehistories and many preceding parallels, and that established institutions and habits are extraordinary well capable of disciplining and delimiting potential breaks against the ruling orders of traditional communication patterns. One example is the way dominating cultural industries and institutions have rather effectively managed to contain the threats to private property and the commodity form posed by digital copying and sampling of music and photos, by complex modifications and reinforcements of established copyright laws and practices.

However, new media technologies do certainly also transform everyday life, sometimes in ways that are not immediately perceived. Also, unfulfilled emancipatory potentials in the first euphoric discourses surrounding them may remain in a latent state, to be reactualized in yet later historical phases. For example, the utopian ideas around railroads and telephones seem to echo again in the recent digitality debates, where suddenly the hopes for crossing borders and moving freely everywhere in ever-increasing speeds again come to the fore, after having sounded terribly outdated for several decades, since they were disenchanted during the period of world crisis, fascism and war from c. 1930 onwards.

Interactivity, cyberspace, virtual realities and virtual communities do not emanate out of nowhere. There are several lines of predecessors both to these communication phenomena and to the theories which analyze them. Both are mixtures of new and old. Some established cultural theories are needed to better understand what happens in the computer networks. But new media have also made some hitherto neglected aspects of culture and mediated communication more visible, and new concepts shed new light upon older cultural and communicative forms like literature, music and broadcasting.

Hitherto, at least Swedish media researchers have had surprisingly little to say about digital communication. They have difficulties in abandoning the old but increasingly outdated focus on press, television and to some extent radio and film, and tend to view new, computer-based media forms either as subordinated tools for these old media or as threatening competitors to them. In fact, many fundamental issues long neglected by traditional media research in spite of a continual critique from culturally oriented positions have been restated by the inventive theorizing caused by the new communication technologies.[2]

A renewed cultural critique might now be able to win back some of the key concepts that have been previously attacked as being closely associated with a problematic kind of technocratic view of communication as unidirectional chains of transmission of fixed contents from encoding senders to passively decoding receivers. The Latin origin of 'communication' for instance implies an intersubjective sharing that 'makes common' to the participants a set of meanings and thus joins them in an interpretive community, without necessarily making them uniform. Mediated communication is not only about complex techniques for transmitting fixed and packaged meaning-contents fromsenders to receivers, but also about social interactions where people gather around meaning-inviting texts to develop interpretations, experiences and relations. This 'ritual' view on communication is therefore a quite as important aspect as the 'transmission' view that has dominated much conventional mass communication research, such as quantitative content analysis or studies of media effects.[3] A 'medium' is something that exists 'in between' and thus mediates two (or more) subjects, poles or worlds. It is thereby a kind of messenger between them, but also a uniting link between them.[4] 'Information' indicates 'giving form to' something in an active process that cannot be reduced to unidirectional transmission of discrete units of content. In both common conversation and television

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broadcasting, much more than cognitive knowledge is sent, and it actually is no fixed message but a symbolic web whose meaning is continually developed in a to at least some extent potentially open process of interpretive media use, which creates both meanings, identities and communities. The model of linear transportation of significant packages from encoder to decoder is useful to catch some aspects of institutionalized mass communication, but tends to distort the picture of communication in general, and needs to be supplemented with a cultural view which is not in opposition to these old key concepts but rather in line with some of their significant roots.

These issues have been renewed in interesting ways by recent media developments that have made the reductive models even more obviously inadequate. In order to face the challenge of new computer-based communication technologies, media studies needs a series of transgressions and bridges between traditions and research fields. Some taken-for-granted borders have been problematized: they have hardly been erased, as some postmodernist utopians and dystopians have jointly imagined. Rather, these boundaries have been thematized and thus made more visible by, not least, the interactive moments of recent digital media, that often cross them and open up communicative borderlands. Let me mention some such borderfields, loosely grouped into five main sections.

<1://culture>

First, boundaries have been crossed between *genres and contexts of communication* having to do with *work and leisure*, usefulness and pleasure, seriosity and entertainment, instrumentality and play. New media forms cross over the borders between serious work and playful leisure. As computer technology fuses with mass media and popular culture, hybrid genres appear, like faction, infotainment or edutainment, uniting entertainment with education, work, politics and news, thus aestheticizing the serious while making pleasure more serious.

As already stated, *cultural studies* represent both a perspective and an area of research. On one hand, the growing interest in *cultural aspects* of modernity has put meanings and forms in focus, and asked how meanings, identities and relations are produced in various types of symbolic webs and interpretive communities. Even highly practical uses of information technologies at school or work presuppose and activate such aspects of design and interpretation, and can thus be studied culturally. On the other hand, the area of primarily *cultural practices* is particularly large and important in the digital world. The new technologies not only serve the distribution of information and news, education or (post-)industrial production, but have quite as much to do with entertainment and aesthetics. Such cultural activities are too often regarded as just a small special sector for fun and the arts in the margin of the more crucial issues of life – am embellishing appendix to the 'really essential' technical, economic, political and pedagogic activity areas.

But digital popular culture has a wide quantitative and economic spread, and plays an enormous political, ideological, social and psychological role for society and its individuals, by offering tools for the formation and reworking of individual and collective identities, for grasping the surrounding world, for democratic opinion formation and for the handling of conflicts. The whole initial development of information technologies have been motivated by technical, political and economic imperatives, but quite as much governed by factors within the area of culture: playful stylistic youth subcultures, aesthetic desires and intertextual influences from other genres within art, music and literature. Digital techniques are used within an expanding series of aesthetic practices, which have central positions in everyday life and in the media world, and are gradually strengthened by the ongoing 'culturalization' of late modern society.

The increased centrality of culture does not leave culture itself untouched. The cultural field is simultaneously affected by trends towards politicization, commercialization and technologization. If leading economists, state officials and scientists start to see culture as the societal basis of the fundamental goals of all human development, this culture is also increasingly often conceived in strategic, monetary or technocratic terms. Culture becomes regarded as a means of managing conflicts or enhancing integration, a form of capital to be accumulated, or a genetic resource to be breeded. The process of culturalization of society thus encounters another process of instrumentalization of culture, and each of the two affect the other. If culture becomes more central to leading international organizations, this culture has already been made more easy to accomodate into a goal-oriented world order.

In cultural theory, the work of the French cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu exemplifies this

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duality.[5] On one hand, he has shown how taste and aesthetics are essential to societal power and status relations. On the other hand, his concept of cultural capital and taste competition to some extent reduce culture to economic terms, thereby focusing strategic action instead of communicative action, to apply terms derived from the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas.[6] This definitely makes important things about culture visible, but it can also hide other facets of aesthetic practices. Similar problems arise on the political level, where culture tends to be elevated (to a factor of key importance) only at the cost of being reduced (to strategic games of investment). To see cultural research mainly as an instrument for collecting cultural indicators to be used in global resource planning implies a problematic reductionism that might altogether miss the crucial dynamisms of meaning-production and symbolic communication. Such cultural mapping can certainly be fascinating enough, but it only catches the most reified aspects of the true flux of cultural processes, which have to be studied in much more multi-dimensional ways, including close case studies, detailed ethnographies and textual interpretations.

A critical answer to the general tendency of culturalization is not to deny it but to emphasize the complexity and unruliness of culture, including digital culture. There are plenty of reasons to seriously study the cultural areas of digital media, instead of falling into the trap set up by the one-sided fixation of media researchers on news-services in combination with many IT researchers' focus on computers as aids to problem-solving in business and school. To study how relations, identities and meanings are created in late modern cultural public spheres is a quite as important task. Aesthetic forms and genres frame much of the recent communications development, and entertainment should be taken quite seriously in its dangers as well as its promises. Interpretive studies of how identities, communities, values, norms and worldviews are formulated by popular cultural media genres, and formed in their use, should therefore be of great priority. I therefore ask for cultural studies of digital cultural phenomena, studies that unite hermeneutics and critical theory, understanding and explanation, knowing that the contradictions and complexities of late modern everyday life make necessary reflexivity, interpretive work and cultural theory. *Culture is no marginal addition to society, nor is it only a strategic field: culture is central and multidimensional*.

<2://communication>

Secondly, formerly well-established borders between *types of communication* are relativized by the intensified forms of *interactivity* that are evolving. Interactivity is a notoriously polysemic concept, that may either emphasize the social interaction between media users, the technical interaction between users and machines or the cultural interaction between users and texts. Every medium is to some extent technically and culturally 'interactive', by inviting its users to an activity that includes an interaction both between the medium (both the machine hardware and the textual software) and its users and between those different individuals who are connected by the mediation in question. That interactivity consists of a series of choices – of commodities, channels, programmes, genres, texts, times, places and reception modes. It implies a co-production – of knowledge, meaning, experience, identity and even new cultural expressions in those words, gestures or songs that might spring from this media use. It also includes the shaping of specific intersubjective social relations – of interpretive communities and other interactions between different media users.

Some recent digital technologies have radically enhanced these kinds of interactivity by explicitly emphasizing the user's response and active assistance in the formation of the media text itself and installing particular tools to facilitate this. The whole 'cyber'-metaphorics stresses that individual steering by the media user, and thus puts interactivity at the core of reception. The increasingly evident interactive moments in many forms of mass media should not conceal the fact that such explicit interactivity is far from new. An old fashion paint-book with fields to fill in, or a common song-book with melodies to perform, are both interactive in this immediate sense: the activity of the user is needed to realize their 'texts' not only as meaningful works ('signifieds') but also as material artefacts ('signifiers'). Recent digital techniques are thus not the only interactive ones, but this rather amplifies the problematization posed by interactivity of some habitual boundaries in media research.

Interactivity resides more in the relation between media and their users than in the media themselves. Computer media explicitly offer so many different potential use modes that they cannot be abstractly classified as interactive. Some common ways to use them do not differ much from or-

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dinary mass media consumption, while other users and use forms intensely utilize their interactive potentials. According to any of the definitions of interactivity above mentioned, every medium and every text may or may not be used interactively. A book may be just read from beginning to end, or it may be worked through and filled with notes in the margins and across the printed text. A karaoke video may either be 'passively' consumed by a watching and listening audience or 'actively' used by a singer. Different technologies only have varying potentials for interactive use, just as different individuals are variously prone to be interactive in their use of media texts, or as different contexts are more or less inviting to such interactive practices.

The boundary between interactive and non-interactive media use is notoriously blurred. This makes the distinction between *production and reception* less sharp, both as communication moments, as institutionalized forms of practice and as research areas, in spite of the fact that some traditional media genres differentiate pretty strictly between them. Also, the transmission model of communication might fit communication in commodity form reasonably well, where production and consumption are separated by certain industrial apparatuses. But it is too limited to serve as a general model of communication, where reception cannot be reduced to consumption. Qualitative and ethnographic studies of how media users interpret the texts they encounter are necessary to explain how society is reproduced, with its democratic resources as well as its oppressive mechanisms. *Media reception is always productive, and media production always presupposes interpretative media reception.*

Another increasingly blurred distinction is between *mass media* and other (e.g. 'individual' or 'inter-personal') media. Mass reproduction exists to varying degrees and in varying forms in different media types. The Internet is a hybrid form that can some times function much like television or records, when home-page or 'netzine' producers distribute their texts to a wide, anonymous audience. In other ways, it much more resembles postal or telephone services, by offering MUD, on-line and e-mail tools for individual or small group communication. Its increasingly dominant existence makes it obvious that similar hybridity is true for many other media forms as well (including radio and telephone), so that this dichotomy is only a liminal case of a much more complex continuum. By a retroactive 'afterwardsness', IT studies can shed light on aspects of communication that were also valid for older media forms, but which media researchers have hitherto neglected.[7] Talking of media studies instead of mass communication research makes it possible to radically deconstruct the traditional hierarchy that prioritizes press, radio and television, and to open up for studies of a much wider media world where films, books, records, telephone, postcards and computers are equally important ingredients.

By 'narrowcasting', the cultural industries project media products to smaller consumer groups, answering to more differentiated and pluralized societal need structures. This interacts with the creation of new contexts for social and political discussion in more or less oppositional or alternative partial public spheres. Both these *fragmentizing* trends connect to an increasing societal *individualization*, where individual identities and lifestyles are in increasingly more cases and aspects experienced as one's own choice and responsibility.[8] With a growing amount of media channels and outputs, individuals are forced to more and more consumption choices. However, this does neither makes all individuals different, nor does it make everyone alike. Instead, the first step is generally that traditional social differences, for instance of gender and education, become visible as social patterns of media reception, when the mono-channel uniformity is shattered.[9] The intense interactivity and space for personal choice in digital networks will eventually also reconstruct similar dichotomies of high and low – legitimate art and vulgar popular culture – perhaps reserving the more advanced interactive genres for the educated elites while developing commercial game variants with considerably less social and aesthetic status.

Mediatization not only force consumers to choose (*selectivization*) but also to use media in conjunction with each other and with other acitivities, to which media are then an ever-present background, which may tend to make much media use more out of focus or distanced (*parallelization*). This has long been true for teenage music use or for the presence of TV in American homes, and it may be the case when new media technologies are stretched into already established everyday reception habits. In some cases, they might substitute certain older forms of communication, but they will most probably more often supplement these and thereby expanding most people's media repertoires.

Instead of a simple dichotomy of mass vs. individual media, it is thus more fruitful to operate with a continuum. On one pole, some 'macro media' are mainly based on the dissemination in com-

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modity form of texts created by centralized producers among the cultural industries and then distributed to a wide and in principle open range of consumers, who use them to shape their own interpretations and experiences, and sometimes modify them interactively. In the middle, 'meso media' are niched products circulated locally or within alternative public spheres, with a less sharp separation of producers and consumers. The other pole is occupied by media forms where communicators not primarily read pre-fabricated texts but jointly create their own dialogues, for instance in e-mail, MUDs and Usenet discussion groups.

There are no sharp borders between these kinds, and the same communication technology can often be used in many different ways, dependent on its social organization. Studies combining several perspectives are needed to clarify the connections, similarities and differences between the various types of interactivity enabled by these forms. IT studies can thus help transgressing dated dichotomies between media studies (and studies of popular culture) and dialogic studies of personal communication. Mass mediated popular culture needs to be studied interpretively as a symbolic realm closely integrated in more delimited or interpersonal media practices. *Traditional mass media are only a very special case of communications media, and they are often not as simply 'mass' media as has often been believed.*

A strict division between *mediated and direct communication* is also relativized, as media are increasingly integrated in everyday discourses. In forms like karaoke (which is based on the digital technologies of television and the laser disc), mediated and direct moments can be interwoven in highly complex ways. Processes of mediatization also make media continuously present in even the apparently most 'direct' interpersonal dialogue.

In a certain sense, all communication is doubly mediated – by material signifiers such as artefacts, sound and light waves, but also by the intersubjective, socioculturally and conventionally based symbolic code systems of language, music, pictorial and other expressive forms necessary for each single communicative act to function. Critical cultural media studies can counter widespread naive ideas of unlimited immediacy and community in cyberspace, by pointing at those necessary symbolical mediations through which all communication has to make a detour. The hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur has consistently argued that this detour of interpretation of textualized meanings is the sine qua non of intersubjective communication and understanding of the world, the other and of oneself.[10] Written texts make the necessary mediation between subjects obvious that already exists in speech, only hidden under the appearance of immediate presence. Instead of falling back to beliefs in the Internet as a way beyond textual mediation, it should be used to better understand the complex distanciations involved in all communication. Interpretive conventions, generic frames and lifeworldly preunderstanding is presupposed in each seemingly straightforward talk or image-use, and only the familiarity with a medium and the belonging to a certain culture can make people believe that understanding evolves naturally.

However, the term 'mediated communication' usually refers to those human interactions that utilize mediating apparatuses or linkage systems that are technologically produced within formally institutionalized social organizations. Communication can be more or less mediatized in this more narrow sense of the word, but there is in fact no quite sharp dichotomy between mediated and face-to-face interaction. Culture cannot be fully understood without accounting for the inherent 'textual' distanciation in all dialogue, in opposition to all ideologies of pure, unmediated presence. *Mediation is everywhere*.

Aspects of interactivity have implications for issues of democracy, power and freedom of expression. Computer media offer new means for different individuals and social groups to take active part in key issues for societal development, concerning politics and economy, human rights and obligations, ethics, norms and ideals, world-views, identities and cultural traditions crucial to people's well-being and self-esteem. But these new media may also become organized in such a way as to confine acting subjects in pre-programmed structures that block changes and consolidate hierarchies of domination. Critical cultural media studies are crucially interested in discerning such ambivalent complexities, by discerning both emancipatory and authoritarian potentials of various communicative forms.

<3://combination>

Thirdly, *communication elements* are mixed. Different symbolic modes of expression are not only added to each other but also fused into creative hybrids. E-mail letters problematize the assumedly fixed border between *speech and writing*, by combining characteristics of telephone talk and correspondence. Chatting becomes a strange brew of

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formerly more sharply separated modes of verbality. Also, while digital media are still highly verbocentric and scriptural, words are here encountering several limits: towards graphic design and pictoriality as well as towards non-verbal sounds and musics. Unfortunately, many information technology studies have hitherto been quite as logo- or verbocentric as mass communication research used to be. Where media research forgot images and music in their focussing of printed or broadcasted words, studies of the Internet likewise are sadly silent about non-verbal sounds and visuals.[11]

Increasingly complex, multiple and interactive forms of hypertextual communication further make it even less clear than in broadcast media how the analyzed *text* is to be delimited. Distinctions between statements, works, flows and channels are not erased in the crossing streams of interaction in digital networks, but they have to be carefully rethought.

All in all, traditional borders between symbolic modes are often crossed. Cultural studies need to beware of the academia's inherent verbocentrism. *Digital communication forms combine speech, writing, music and image in ways that call for interaesthetic interpretations.*

<4://cyberspace>

Next, the distinction between *representation and reality* is made unstable, as it reappears in the polarity between *cyberspatial virtuality* and what exists *IRL* ('in real life'). Old 'realist' views of how language or media images represent or relate to the real world have long been challenged by hermeneutic and constructionist ideas, that emphasize how symbolic forms are always interfering in our interaction with the external as well as the internal world. Representations are in an important sense real, and we can only understand reality indirectly, through such representations. Media images can therefore not so easily or meaningfully be measured against real facts. Mediated constructs are as socially effective as are economic data, and statistics or any other presumably 'objective' measure of reality is also a result of symbolizing communicative mediations.

The net terminology is no less inconsistent. *Virtuality* denotes something artificial or simulated, which imitates a more genuine reality. Talking about something that is *almost like* something else further tends to imply that it is *not real*. A dichotomy of virtual vs. real is usually presupposed in net argot. This conflates several distinctions that ought to be kept carefully apart.

Often, the virtual is seen as in some way immaterial or at least inauthentic. However, computerized fantasy worlds have a fully physical and tangible basis: computer chips are as material as are recorder pickups, and while the electrons they process are not palpable, they are no less 'real' than book pages or sound-waves. The real world definitely consists of much more than can be seen or sensed. And that which is humanly created is not necessarily less 'real' than what is not.

At other times, 'virtual' just denotes 'computer-based'. But if it then still is conceived in polar opposition to 'real', that 'real' becomes computer-free, which seems problematic. Where then to place telephone calls or books and their 'contents'? Does the phone talk or the novel also construct a virtual world? Is a surface letter a virtual or an IRL contact? And what about the face-to-face dialogue? The border between communicative forms is in this respect again notoriously blurred.

I would argue that the signifying interpretive work of each use of a mediated text comprises a kind of *virtualization*, where phonems, letters or combinations of units of sound or light trigger off a creation of an imaginary world, shared between the involved actors. All media have always offered imagined spaces or 'virtual realities' to enter, opened up symbolic worlds for transgressive experiences. Any literary novel lets its readers reconstruct and temporarily 'inhabit' a whole world of its own – 'the world of the text' itself, interrelated to 'the world in front of the text' or, which it refigurates and points at.[12] Such imagined worlds are no more nor less virtual than the space a computer game lets its users experience. Hermeneutic reception theory has developed a series of relevant ideas about how readers, listeners and viewers by 'disappearing acts' (Tania Modleski) enter textual webs of meaning, filling out their open 'gaps' (Wolfgang Iser) and constructing 'virtual space' and 'virtual time' (Susanne K. Langer) within genre-related 'interpretive communities' (Stanley Fish and Janice Radway).[13] Even an effective critique of late modern media culture has to engage in interpreting the complex ways in which it is thus made sense of, including the utopian or dystopian symbolic worlds it invites us to experience. *Virtuality is not confined to computerized communication, but appears in all cultural genres*.

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Gendered hierarchies may be active in the reluctance of digital discourses to accept the relevance of such older cultural models for computerized media use. Like the word 'virtuos', 'virtual' has an ethymological root in 'vir', signifying 'man'. Yet, all efforts to secure cyberspace as a male refuge from the often femally coded fantasies of other cultural forms need to be firmly opposed by feminist critics. A closer interrelation between IT research and theories of popular culture would also in this respect be fruitful for both sides.

In spite of all ideologies of the pure incorporeality of computer-mediated communication, *the body* remains an inescapable element. With tools and technologies, we can reach further away, but our physical bodies still remain the first and the last step of each communicative act.[14] Digital networks remain dependent upon human bodies, both in their practical functioning and in their symbolical metaphorics. Without a body, one cannot even reach the PC keyboard, the screen has to be seen by human eyes, and the virtual world created in cyberspace remain bound to bodily metaphors if it is to be at all intelligible and useful to us: even a cyborg or a robot is generally given some kind of limbs and sensory organs. An interesting example of this body-dependence is the film *Terminator 2*, where a robot is said to have unlimited capability of appearing in any arbitrary shape, but still repeatedly return to an easily recognizable human form. Had that not been the case, the robot would have lacked all identity which would have made impossible its narrative identification and thus collapsed the whole plot of the film. The same is true in the audial world: even synthesized music continues to incorporate human sounds recognizable as individual voices, even though their electronic manipulation just as well could have made them 'inhuman', just as most instrumental voices in modern pop continue to remind of familiar IRL-instruments, in spite of the fact that such sounds could as well have been made completely alien. Communication retains a bodily dependence, on all levels and contrary to a widespread belief in its disembodiment.

Digital communication thus repeatedly thematizes precisely that physical and sensory body that is so often said to be eliminated in cyberspace. It constructs 'mental bodies' and 'written voices', since all interaction and narration demands some kind of recognizable embodiment of its interacting (imagining and imagined) subjects. Intersubjective dialogicity may well be the primary ground of society and culture, but it cannot avoid reproducing some form of internally diversified and embodied subjectivity. Cultural media studies cannot escape theorizing the embodied subject of intersubjective communication, and psychoanalytical or other theories of subjectivity must therefore not be excluded from its field. Feminist gender studies and postcolonial ethnicity studies have made this particularly clear. *The body is never far away, and imagination respects no limits, while often playing with them.*

<5://communities>

The sliding between imagined and real world finally problematizes the concept of *virtual community*. Again, *all* text-users develop interpretive communities where they 'gather on distance' to share certain works, tastes and ways of understanding. This is true both for pen-friends and press readers, book lovers and pop fans. New technologies connect on to such older forms, offering more extensive, fast, intense and effective means, as well as a wider combination of different communicative options within the same technological framework. That communities do not presuppose physical simultaneity and co-presence has been known for ages: already the early civic public sphere in the late 18th century centred not only around bourgeois salons, but also around press and book publishing.[15]

It can again be asked if such scattered communities are not quite as 'real' as those that happen to placed in the same place. A married couple is no less a married couple if they happen to live in two separate towns. A subculture needs not be an imaginary community only because it is carried by individuals who never meet. Truly 'imagined communities' do only exist as such in the symbolic realm, and subcultures or interpretive communities surely might have such imagined aspects, but they can simultaneously be 'real' configurations of actual people sharing certain characteristics, tastes and self-understandings.[16] The social world of digital media users is inhabited by a range of differing communities that are not only virtual but also real, both imagined and existant. Some remind of alternative public spheres, building their own communicative networks outside of more established mass media and institutions. Others are more like subcultures, sharing certain stylistic traits and activities that distinguish them from other citizens. Some hacker groupings can even develop into countercultural movements aiming for societal change. By far the most of them are probably con-

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siderably much looser webs of people, more like those found among fans or ordinary consumers of genres in other media forms.

Just like the object of textual analysis is becoming harder to delimit, the same goes for *media ethnography*. If the informants ordinarily use to interact only digitally, digitally mediated forms of participant observation and interviewing on the Internet might be as legitimate for ethnography as is face-to-face-interaction. This then further problematizes the distinction between *ethnography and textual analysis*, in that interpretions of on-line transcripts can be conceived in both ways.[17]

A clarification of the term 'virtual community' is thus needed, and I propose that it is used to denote not dispersed but imagined (or imaginary) communities. Both of these are in no way confined to the realm of computer media users. Cultural studies investigate how communities are formed in media use, through mechanisms of identification and differentiation, inclusion and exclusion. *As imagined or imaginary communities, virtual communities exist both on- and off-line, and so do the temporally or spatially dispersed communities that in fact may be quite real.*

<6://crossings>

In order to understand the ambivalent and often hybridizing communicative borderlands of digital media, a renewed crossing of communicative and cultural perspectives is needed. Just like new media always connect on to older ones, studies of computer media need to integrate media and cultural studies in order to catch what is really bravely new in this digital world. At the same time, analyses of new media phenomena can enrich cultural theories by elucidating aspects and elements of communication that are hitherto deficiently conceptualized. Through processes of digitalization and convergence, computer media have given rise to new hybrid forms, and renewed interdisciplinary crossings may likewise help us better understand both the old and the new.

Interdisciplinary cultural studies make critical interpretations of elsewhere neglected phenomena of popular culture, of aesthetic distinctions and transgressions, and of processes of cultural modernization. They ultimately aim to support the further development of an open and polyvocal public sphere, anchored in the lifeworld of civil society and relatively independent from both the market and the state system, but also critically reflexive towards its own hierarchies and limitations. Their critique thus runs in three directions: against commercialization, against bureaucratization, and against unjust social dominance along dimensions such as class, gender, sexuality, age, generation, race, ethnicity, nationality or religion. Studies of how meanings and identities are formed in the interactive and interpretive practices around combinations of digital communication media and traditional media types and cultural genres need to be developed in such a perspective, in order to elucidate and counteract the authoritarian potentials upheld by profit interests, institutional control and dominating social groups, while discerning and empowering the emancipatory potentials inherent in this widened and diversified communicative scope.

The crossings and dialogues I call for are therefore no smooth synthesizing integrations, but must make critical juxtapositions to highlight how opposing paradigms differ, in order to see in what way they might be able to be fruitfully brought together. Cultural studies – like this very study of digital borderlands – interpret concepts as they are used in discursive practices, searching for their meaning potentials, ambivalences and tendencies, thereby reaching for insights that cannot yet be rigidly measured but are needed to understand what is genuinely new and emergent in late modern culture.

This discussion of some central distinctions within mass media research and information technology discourse has been aimed at clarifying how cultural studies may explore those digital borderlands of media and communications where identities are interactively reborn. It is also an argument for the need of critical cultural studies to communicate with other research perspectives in order to retain and further develop their own interactive identity.

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Notes

1. I am grateful for discussions with colleagues at the departments of journalism, media and communication at Stockholm University, communication studies at Linköping University, and ethnology at Lund University. In particular, these ideas have been developed with my co-researchers from Linköping (Jenny Sundén and Malin Sveningsson) and Stockholm (Göran Bolin and Martina Ladendorf) in our collective planning of a project called 'Digital Borderlands: Cultural identity and interactivity in new communication media'.
2. See Brenda Laurel: *Computers as Theatre*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley 1991/1993; George P. Landow: *Hypertext. The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Baltimore, MD / London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1992; Howard Rheingold: *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley 1993; Gretchen Bender & Timothy Druckrey (eds.): *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*, Seattle: Bay Press 1994; Allucquère Rosanne Stone: *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, Cambridge, MA / London, UK: MIT Press 1995; Steven G. Jones (ed.): *Cybersociety. Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, Thousand Oaks: Sage 1995; Sherry Turkle: *Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1995/1996; Nicholas Negroponte: *Being Digital*, New York: Vintage Books 1995/1996; Rob Shields (ed.): *Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies*, London: Sage 1996; Lance Strate, Ronald Jacobson & Stephanie B. Gibson (eds.): *Communication and Cyberspace: Social Interaction in an Electronic Environment*, Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press 1996; George E. Marcus (ed.): *Connected: Engagements with Media*, Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press 1996; Gunnar Langemark: "Computerspillet som tegn" in Kirsten Drotner & Anne Scott Sørensen (eds.): *Øjenåbnere. Unge, medier, modernitet*, København: Dansklærerforeningen 1996; Ture Schwebs (ed.): *Skjermtekster. Skriftkulturen og den elektroniske informasjonsteknologien*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget 1994. Swedish IT-cultural research has been developed by research groups within the Departments of Ethnology at the universities of Lund and Gothenburg (cf. the special IT-issue of the journal *Kulturella perspektiv*, 6:2, 1997) as well as in the Departments of Communication Studies and of Technology and Social Change, both at Linköping University (cf. Magnus Karlsson & Lennart Sturesson (eds.): *Världens största maskin. Människan och det globala telekommunikationssystemet*, Stockholm: Carlssons 1996; Elisabeth Sundin & Boel Berner (eds.): *Från symaskin till cyborg. Genus, teknik och social förändring*, Stockholm: Nerenius & Santérus Förlag 1996).
3. James W. Carey in *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, New York / London: Routledge 1989/1992, sets these two views as oppositional. Like many others, I prefer to see them as two co-existing aspects of what communication is, rather than to choose one and reject the other.
4. While 'message' is clearly something sent, the German 'Mit-teilung' and the Scandinavian 'med-delande' is ethymologically something 'shared with' others, and not only transported from producer to consumer.
5. E.g., Pierre Bourdieu: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London / New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1979/1984, or *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structre of the Literary Field*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1992/1996.
6. Cf. Jürgen Habermas: *The Theory of Communicative Action*, (2 volumes), Cambridge: Polity Press 1981/1984 and 1981/1988.
7. The concept of 'afterwardsness' ultimately derives from Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, which has been fruitfully discussed by the French psychoanalytic Jean Laplanche in *Seduction, Translation and the Drives*, London: ICA 1992.
8. Cf. Ulrich Beck: *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage 1986/1992, Thomas Ziehe: *Zeitvergleiche: Jugend in kulturellen Modernisierungen*, Weinheim / Munich: Juventa 1991, or Anthony Giddens: *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1991.
9. This has happened when national broadcasting monopolies have been lifted and opened up the airwaves to commercial enterprises, as has been shown by Bo Reimer: *The Most Common of Practices: On Mass Media Use in Late Modernity*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International 1994.
10. Paul Ricoeur: *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press 1976; *Oneself as Another*, Chicago / London: The University of Chicago Press 1990/1992.
11. In the collective project 'Digital Borderlands', my contribution is to study musical interactivity in digital media like karaoke, CD-rom and the Internet. In these, the user not only directs her/his reception (speed, place, interpretation etc.), but also the sounds themselves, in dialogue with the mediated textual raw material (video, disk etc.) but also with other users/interpreters. This invites studies of how identity positions, social and intertextual relations are opened and used. Cf. Johan Fornäs: 'Karaoke. Subjectivity, Play and Interactive Media', in *Nordicom Review*, 1/1994; 'Meningsskapandets korsvägar. "My Way" i karaokeversion', in *Filmhäftet*, 88 (1994); 'Filling Voids Along the Byway: Identification and Interpretation in the (Swedish) Use of Karaoke (and other interactive music media)', in Tôru Mitsui & Shûhei Hosokawa (eds): *Karaoke Around the World: Singing Culture in the Era of Digital Technology*, London: Routledge 1997.
12. Cf. Paul Ricoeur: *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981;

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Time and Narrative, (3 volumes), Chicago / London: The University of Chicago Press 1983/1984, 1983/1987 and 1985/1988.

13. Tania Modleski: *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, New York / London: Methuen 1982; Wolfgang Iser: *Der implizite Leser. Kommunikationsformen des Romans von Bunyan bis Beckett*, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 1972; Susanne K. Langer: *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, New York Charles Scribner's Sons 1953; Stanley Fish: *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1980; Janice Radway: *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, Chapel Hill / London: University of North Carolina Press 1984. Cf. also Johan Fornäs: *Cultural Theory and Late Modernity*, London: Sage 1995; 'Mirroring Meetings, Mirroring Media. The Microphysics of Reflexivity', in *Cultural Studies*, 8:2, 1994; 'Listen to Your Voice! Authenticity and Reflexivity in Rock, Rap and Techno Music', in *New Formations*, 24, 1994; 'Do You See Yourself? Reflected Subjectivities in Youthful Song Texts', in *Young. Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, 3:2, 1995.
14. Cf. Marshall McLuhan: *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*, London / New York: Ark / Routledge 1964/1987.
15. This is clear already when Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1962/1989 emphasizes the crucial role of the post and the press in the genesis of the early civic ('bourgeois') public sphere. The presence of mediatizing processes is no late invention, though they have accelerated and multiplied in late modernity.
16. Benedict Anderson: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (2nd edition), London: Verso 1983/1991.
17. The necessary interrelation between ethnography and textual analysis has already in the mid-1980s been emphasized by some anthropologists inspired by deconstructionism (e.g., James Clifford & George E. Marcus (eds.): *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1986), as well as by media researchers like Kirsten Drotner (e.g., "Ethnographic Enigmas: 'The Everyday' in Recent Media Studies", in *Cultural Studies*, 8:2, 1994).

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